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A serious comic, profitable fires, Texas murder

Heartland

By Mort Sahl
158 pp. New York:
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
\$7.95.

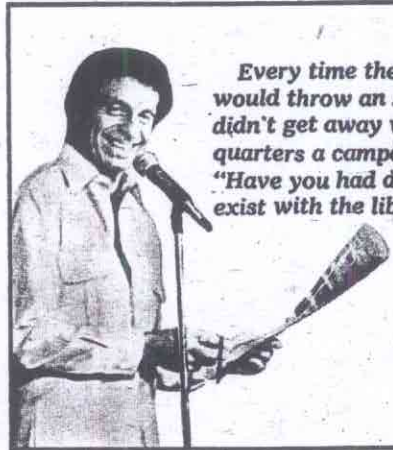
By JEAN SHEPHERD

Some book nut in a dusty Buy-Old-Volumes-by-the-Pound warehouse on some obscure Fourth Avenue of the future, in say 40 years or so, will come across a battered copy of "Heartland" and, leafing through a few pages, will wonder just who the hell this Mort Sahl was.

Well, anyone who was slugging it out in the entertainment world of the middle 50's and early 60's would certainly know. —When I first started my own career as a humorist, paying customers would come up to me after the show in nightclubs in Cincinnati or Philadelphia and ask me, "Have you heard this guy Sahl?" He almost immediately thereafter became the hottest thing in the business, toasted by Presidential candidates, movie queens, and even Paul Newman. Ponderous old Henry Luce put him on the cover of Time, which in those days was about like being canonized. He was forever enshrined among the hallowed greats of history along with Chiang Kai-shek and Thomas E. Dewey.

Those were Sahl's salad days, when The New Yorker did a worshipful profile of the sort reserved only for Indian statesmen or 90-year-old Wall Street billionaires who planned to leave their money to Dartmouth. In short, Sahl was the dream of every scurrying agent at William Morris, and the jobs rolled in on a golden flood. In fact, according to "Heartland," at one point he earned about a million dollars in one year. This was back in the late 50's and early 60's when it was inconceivable to us in the business that any comic could spin off that kind of bread, unless he was Bob Hope, who had his own printing press. Ironically, Sahl was continually described as "uncommercial." A million dollars a year buys plenty of integrity.

There were detractors, of course, who maintained that Sahl had merely mastered the trick of stringing together one-liners that seemed to be



Every time the Russians threw an American in jail, Nixon would throw an American in jail to make sure they didn't get away with it. . . . when I went into Wallace headquarters a campaign worker, this young lady, said to me, "Have you had dinner yet?" That plain humanity doesn't exist with the liberals. They've forgotten who they are. . . .

there are murderers among us, killers of the dream. You know what they did. I know some of you don't want to get involved, but you began your involvement when you began life. —From "Heartland"

cutting and revealing of an inner truth, the sort of one-liner that goes like this: "Eisenhower promises to

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lead a black girl into a Little Rock school. I wonder if he'll use the overlapping grip." The fact that Ike did send troops to Little Rock to bust the segregation battle in that city was never mentioned. One-liners don't allow much room for grays of meaning, or even contradictions.

Eisenhower left office; Kennedy was elected, and Sahl was there. He claims that during the campaign Joe Kennedy contacted him to write one-liners for J. F. K. campaign speeches, which he did. Curiously, at one point in the book Sahl states that he likes politics in the theater but not theater in politics, but apparently writing one-liners for a Presidential candidate doesn't seem a partisan act to Sahl. He maintains his posture of non-partisanship continually, yet I'm curious what his reaction would have been had John Ehrlichman gotten in touch with him to write blurbs for Nixon's speeches. Never mind.

In the first half of this book, Sahl crackles along in his typical staccato anecdotal nervous style. The only thing lacking is the old Sahl wit. Big Names are everywhere; Sahl and Steve McQueen, Sahl and Newman, Sahl and

Brando, Sahl and Adlai Stevenson, and on and on. The vignettes almost always end with Sahl's betrayal by whoever the friend is. Newman doesn't return Sahl's call, nor does Hugh Hefner. Few of his ex-friends will enjoy what he says about them. I share with Sahl many of the friends that parade through this part of the book and his experiences with some of these people coincide almost exactly with my own.

Abruptly, it all changed. And so does "Heartland," both in style and substance. It's almost as though you are beginning another book: Nov. 22, 1963, and That Day in Dallas. Kennedy's assassination and The Great Conspiracy becomes Mort Sahl's Moby Dick. Like Ahab, Sahl has become a haunted man. He sees conspiracies everywhere: the C.I.A., of course; the Army. His involved, passionate reasoning doubles back and forth, crawls in upon itself, connecting hundreds of

apparently unrelated incidents into one vast network of evil. Sahl goes back even further than most conspiracy zealots, to Harry Truman, the Marshall Plan, and beyond. Sahl even went to work for Jim Garrison in New Orleans, convinced that Garrison was a lone voice standing against a tide of cover-up and Government treachery. His nightclub act changed drastically. Here I quote from the book: "Make no mistake. My audience had one hell of a time wrestling with the material, because I didn't let them up. It was not by their laughter

that I knew them, but by their anger. The anger was proof that they believed me."

The anger might, in actuality, have been over that \$25 minimum for a lecture. Sahl's TV shows on the Coast became endless forums for the Mark Lane School of Assassination Scholars. His income plunged from well over a million a year to about \$13,000. Sahl's belief is that there is an invisible network of media execs who simply will not put him on the air. It is not my purpose here to argue the pros or cons of Sahl's thesis, but there are many in the industry who feel that Sahl simply stopped being funny and became an impassioned lecturer. A satirist is, after all, funny whereas a polemicist, regardless of the rightness of his cause, becomes a bit tiring. What you'll accept readily in a church or on the editorial pages is galling in a nightclub.

Along the way, Mort makes some astounding statements that should be challenged. "There is no humorist working who goes to colleges except me." Mort was never known for his modesty. However, this simply is not true. There are dozens of humorists regularly playing colleges across the country who have done so for years: Robert Klein, Dick Gregory, Al Capp, Art Buchwald, dozens. I myself have played universities since the early 50's, and still do. Sahl claims to be the first comedian to cut comic records, in direct contradiction to the fact that some of the earliest, most popular records were comedy records: e.g.,

"Cohen on the Telephone." Will Rogers, W. C. Fields and others all cut records successfully.

There are countless other broad, self-serving generalities that Sahl blandly slaps at you like Jimmy Connors practicing overhand smashes. Nevertheless, Sahl has written a distinct social document, half-scream, half-whimper, but who is to judge? One man's madness is another man's vision of truth. He ends with two questions: "Is anybody listening? Does anybody care?"

All working martyrs have been haunted by the same questions. However, as another great American humorist, George Ade, once put it: "Don't pity the poor martyrs. They like the job." ■