

Sahl Returns, Unsheathes Wit

By RICHARD F. SHEPARD

Humorous insight, which seemed to have gone the Judge Crater route in recent years, returned to New York Monday night in the guise of Mort Sahl.

Mr. Sahl, dark blue sweater, open-necked shirt and smilingly earnest countenance, is making a two-week stand at the Upstairs at the Downstairs and it should be a felicitous fortnight for New Yorkers. He was last on a local platform here three years ago, in 1968, but he has been an all too rare visitor in the last decade.

"Are there any groups I haven't offended?" he asked, summing up toward the end of opening night. There weren't and the customers, offended or not, were the better for it.

Mr. Sahl, who is appearing with Kelly Garrett, a comely and expressive singer, did not go on with his scheduled second show opening night. He said that only a dozen customers were on hand. In a way, this was social commentary in itself, since it follows a pattern of get-home-early that has been afflicting New York night life increasingly in recent years.

Mr. Sahl is a humorist not a joke-teller, a commentator not a purveyor of routines. His humor is hot off the press, taken from the headlines, biting—often bitter—and the laugh more often springs from one of his frequent asides than from his main theme.

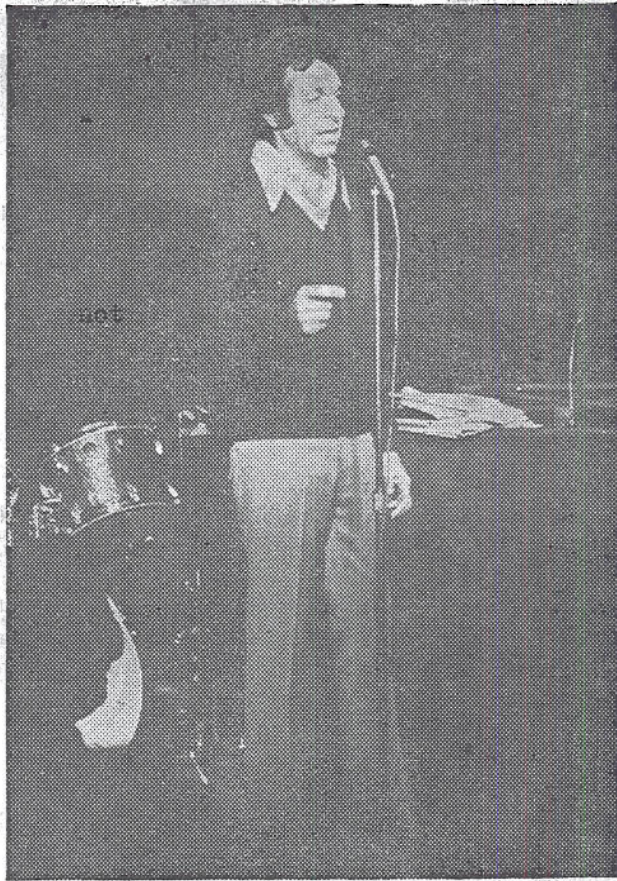
"All these years I thought he was an anti-Communist," he observed, alluding to President Nixon and the China trip. "Even that's not genuine."

He has found that everything in New York is blamed on Mayor Lindsay and says, "He's coming in at the airport tomorrow, but they can't guarantee his safety."

He describes Senator Edmund S. Muskie's hair and face and says, "He's beginning to look like Nixon the closer he gets."

He is an "advocate" of J. Edgar Hoover: "There's a great deal of comfort in knowing that the man who's chasing your son today chased your father in the Palmer raids."

They are winding down the war in Vietnam: "They're pulling out Bob Hope and Martha Raye." And he goes on to say that we "should



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Mort Sahl at Upstairs at the Downstairs

accept the war" as a part of our life and appoint a Secretary of Escalation. While we're at it we should have a Secretary of Poverty—Nelson Rockefeller, maybe?

Mr. Sahl kept at it for more than an hour, attacking Women's Lib ("all leaders, no followers, just like the blacks"). And doctors ("Stalin carried it a bit too far, killing doctors; no wonder they don't make house calls"), while he commends his audience: "I'm glad you all think more of relevance than of having a good time."

On only one topic did he seem more the pleader than the pleader than the involved observers. This was in an attack on the credibility of the Warren report, on President Kennedy's assassination, a theme on which he has sounded off before and the only subject about which he gave evidence of being uptight. This is one step more than being committed, which Mr. Sahl is on most things and it comes over splendidly.

In an interview after his first night, he discussed, among other things, the state of humor.

"There is a lack of intellect on the part of comedians," the 44-year-old humorist said. "Comedians have failed to report the mood of the country."

He spoke, bemusedly, on the respect comedians and politicians accord him for his political views—which he forms like most people, from what he reads in the papers or elsewhere—and pay him little attention for his value as an entertainer.

"They never question my competence as a soothsayer," he observed. "Yet, I only go at these things by the Braille system, like anyone else."

For the last 10 years, during his dim-out in commercial appearances (he attributes it to the humorlessness of liberals when humor strikes at them), he has been doing shows at colleges.

"Humor? That's not a string on their violin," he said of the students. "Music is their entertainment. Yet they have a sense of reality. As far as telling jokes goes, I don't think Bob Hope would do well. Their laughter is a form of recognition, it has an underbelly of cynicism."