

Mort Sahl, still speaking out

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By Jefferson Graham
USA TODAY

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — Mort Sahl hasn't had a TV home since a Los Angeles TV station fired him in the 1960s.

But now, the comedian, controversial in the '60s for his outspoken views and contention that John Kennedy was murdered by the CIA and the Pentagon, (the reason KTTV axed him) finally has a TV arena where he can speak his mind, 38 years after starting his show-biz career.

Sahl now has a no-holds-barred hourlong monthly show for the Monitor Channel, *Mort Sahl Live*, airing Saturday, 9 p.m. EST/6 p.m. PST.

Sahl, 64, first gained fame for being the first comedian to deal with topical, political material with an edge (he predates Lenny Bruce), as he stood onstage in his red sweater, holding the newspaper and commenting on current events.

He still has the sweater and the paper, and he still speaks out. This week he tackles the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings, Oliver North's book tour and the recession. Next month, he'll talk about Oliver Stone's *JFK* movie and the presidential campaign.

After some lean years, Sahl's career is picking up again, thanks largely to a 1988 PBS documentary about him. "It stirred everyone's conscience," he says. "It reminded people of how they once felt."

Sahl is a favorite of many comics. Woody Allen says it was Sahl who influenced him to get up onstage. "He was the best thing I ever saw," Allen told biographer Eric Lax. "Like Charlie Parker in jazz."

"Mort stood up against everybody," says comic Jonathan Winters. "Mort's a fighter, and he's as articulate today as when I met him in the '50s, standing in a red sweater at the (club) hungry i."

On Dec. 23, 1953, Sahl made his debut at that now-defunct San Francisco club.

When other comics were telling wife jokes, Sahl talked about things younger audi-



By Lynn Houston

MORT SAHL: His brand of political humor and his career are on the upswing with a new cable show.

He's no fan of 'JFK' film

When Mort Sahl began questioning the Warren Commission's findings that a lone gunman killed President Kennedy, work dried up. They said he wasn't funny anymore.

But Sahl was obsessed with finding out what really happened in Dallas. He quit show business and moved to New Orleans, where he volunteered as an investigator in District Attorney Jim Garrison's case against a local businessman he said was in on a conspiracy to kill Kennedy.

That case is the subject of director Oliver Stone's new *JFK* film. But Sahl, who's read the script but hasn't seen the movie, has nothing good to say about it — even though it would appear to vindicate what he said in the '60s.

He cites a joke about a guy who comes to see Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, and says, "The good news is that Oliver Stone wants to do a movie on your life. The bad news is that Kevin Costner is going to play Hitler." And that about sums it all up.

JFK is too fictionalized, says Sahl. "Having been there, I can tell you that the real story is so much more interesting. Why aren't the facts enough?"

ences could relate to: politics, jazz and sports cars.

Sahl's formula is "to approach people as if you were talking to them one on one, with more intimate conversations."

Time called him "Will Rogers with fangs," and Sahl became friends with John F. Kennedy, writing speeches and jokes for the new president.

His career nose-dived once he began speaking out on the

assassination conspiracy, but he feels Watergate and the Iran-contra affair vindicated his assertion that the government doesn't always tell the truth.

Now, he counts former President Reagan and President Bush among his friends, after appearing at a charity function with Reagan when he was the governor of California. Nancy Reagan invited him to dinner, and they became friends.

Has Sahl sold out?

"I stand for the same stuff today that I did then," he says, denying he's a Republican. "I'm a radical."

Sahl still makes a steady living working political functions, occasional concerts and the Monitor show.

"The thing is not to bend, keep your point of view and survive on your own terms," he says. "Look at what I went through and look at what I have now. I've got myself, and my principles were not put into escrow."

► 'JFK,' the movie, 1D