

Watergate Comics Find the Joke Is on Them

By ROY REED

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CHICAGO — Watergate just isn't a laughing matter for most of the nation's stand-up comedians.

"When they subpoenaed the President, that's not comedy," said Ken Barry, a comic, after his show at Mangam's Chateau in suburban Lyons here. He tried a Watergate routine, then dropped it. "It's like when they killed President Kennedy."

In Houston another comic explained why Watergate jokes were a no-no on his nightclub circuit:

"You might get away with Watergate jokes in New York, but not here. The Houston area is pretty conservative and our crowd is over 30. We tell risqué jokes but our audience would really be offended by political jokes."

But in New York City audiences are not offended by political jokes. They thrive on them. Sometimes the jokes are funnier over a drink than they are when repeated at work the next morning, but the comics are making an attempt.

Marty Nadler, performing at Catch a Rising Star, a club on First Avenue, tells this one: "Did you hear about the new Watergate watch? Both hands always point to Nixon."

Richard R. Aurelio, a former New York deputy mayor, now owns Jimmy's, a nightclub, with Sid Davidoff, another former city official. Mr. Davidoff's name was on the celebrated Administration "enemies list" with the added notation: "A first class S.O.B."

Just the "B" List

When customers ask Mr. Aurelio why his name was not on the list, Mr. Aurelio replies: "That's just the 'B' list, there's an 'A' list that I'm on that they haven't even uncovered yet."

Watergate jokes have hit Off Broadway as well. A show called National Lamppoon Lemmings includes a skit called "Mission Impeachable" that ends with the line: During a mock Senate hearing in the show, a Senator asks a witness, "What did the President know and when did he stop knowing it?"



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At the Second City in Chicago, Doug Steckler, foreground, portrays President Nixon, Alan Wittert has the role of Senator Sam J. Ervin Jr. and Marilyn Shreffler interprets.

Variety, the entertainment journal, reported the same story; the nation's major political scandal just doesn't bring laughs for traditional comedians.

At the Second City in Chicago, a revue club where the audience is likely to be younger than at a more traditional spot, a comedian impersonating the President confessed, "Oh, what the hell, I was responsible for the whole thing." The mock Senator Ervin answered, "Well, we're going to let you off with a warning this time. But I don't want it to happen again."

Or Sammy Shore, at the Comedy Store in Hollywood, who in a long Watergate bit recently said in tones of Senator Ervin Jr.: "The committee and myself know someone somewhere higher up gave your your orders. Would that someone have been Mr. Liddy of Mr. Young or Mr. Krogh or Mr. Dean, Mr. Ehrlichman, Mr. Mitchell, Mr. Nixon or someone even higher up like Frank Sinatra?"

But even he's a bit twitchy about such jokes. "I've seen other guys do lines about it and the people seemed to get uptight about it," Mr. Shore said. "I was a little uptight myself about doing it. It upset me to think that possibly our President and people in such places in our country might really do such things."

Mr. Shore's dying-bull fighter routine brought more laughs than his Watergate jokes.

The Icy Stares

Other comedians in Chicago, San Francisco and Miami acknowledge that Watergate jokes are likely to bring icy stares. They figure people are tired of the subject and don't want to hear about it when they go out.

Even scarcer than anti-Nixon Watergate jokes at the clubs are pro-Nixon jokes. Indeed, an informal nightclub survey didn't turn up one of them.

Watergate books and records have also proliferated. Philip Roth's 1971 novel

"Our Gang," a satire on President Nixon, has just been reissued in a special "Watergate Edition." The book includes a new preface by Mr. Roth in which he "apologizes" to the President for writing the book before the Watergate revelations.

Another book is Gerald Gardner's "The Watergate Follies," a series of candid pictures of the President and his men with balloon-enclosed comments supplied by the author.

In David Frye's new album, "Richard Nixon: A Fantasy," Mr. Frye imitates the President's voice and says in a mock address to the nation:

"Today I have regretfully been forced to accept the resignations of 1,541 of the finest public servants it has ever been my privilege to know. As the man in charge, I must accept full responsibility, but not the blame. Let me explain the difference. People who are to blame lose their jobs; people who are responsible do not."