

Chicano Comedians and Their Impact on U.S. Culture

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Abstract

Laughter, smiles, and happiness are all feelings that transgress through cultures and can be portrayed by comedians. This paper will be discussing the impact that the Chicano population has on today's comedy. A brief history of Chicanos in the comedy business will also be discussed. The fine line between racially offensive and stereotypical jokes will be evaluated as well. This paper will also highlight some of comedy's most famous Hispanics, and analyze their comedic routines and childhood to learn how their culture and customs have influenced their sense of humor. Finally, the concept of how, through humor, Chicano culture can be introduced, accepted and brought closer to others, specifically Caucasian culture, will be dissected.

Key Words: Comedy, Latino/Chicano, Cultural Transgression

Paralleling the struggle faced in gaining equality and respect in United States' society, Chicano comedians have faced an uphill battle to reach fame in their respective industry. This journey to equality for Chicano comedians has not only earned them their own category of comedy (Latino comedy) and produced a handful of true comedic legends, but influenced, informed, and impacted American culture as a whole. In researching everything from the rough beginnings in film and comedy, to the present day success; race, culture, stereotypes and how they are addressed are a common theme.

Early history of T.V. and movies show that racism was rampant. It wasn't just African Americans that faced Hollywood racism, it was virtually every color and culture. Infant Hollywood portrayed Chicanos as savages, thieves, burglars, gangsters, and even helpless immigrants. There were virtually no Latino movie stars. Once stand-up comedy gained popularity, the discrimination continued and Chicano comedians received no attention. In most cases they weren't even given the opportunity to tell their stand-up routines.

It wasn't until the early 1970's that a Chicano gained fame as a comedian. Richard "Cheech" Marin earned comedic success alongside his stand-up partner Tommy Chong. Did Cheech embrace a lot of stereotypes and racist assumptions that America had of Chicano to gain success? Probably, but he did so in a light hearted way. He broke down the walls that held back Chicano comedians from achieving mainstream success and used the stones to pave a way for future artists. Since Marin, Chicano comedians began to get their foot into the comedic doorway

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even more. Paul Rodriguez starring in sitcoms and even hosting the game show *The Newlywed Game* was a huge step in the right direction for Chicano in comedy. Progress took a giant leap when ABC ran five seasons of the series, *George Lopez*, a sitcom about a working class Hispanic family, starring George Lopez himself as the father of the household. This put Chicano comedians on the map for good. In the 2000's, Comedy Central began airing stand-up specials with Chicano comedians, even broadcasting a two hour special titled, "Latin Kings of Comedy" that included appearances by Paul Rodriguez, George Lopez, and Cheech Marin. It is safe to say that Chicano comedy has reached new heights and continues to soar.

With the emergence of Chicano comedians, many household names have established themselves in the world of comedy. I think it is important to highlight some of these comedic pioneers and future innovators. Also, by learning more about the comedians themselves, one can learn a lot about their culture and the way growing up as a Chicano has influenced their humor.

Richard "Cheech" Marin is the forefather for Chicano comedians. He was born in Los Angeles, in 1946. He was raised in a solid family situation; his father was a police officer and his mother was a secretary. Richard grew up in Granada Hills and was making people laugh and singing in bands from an early age. He attended California State University and almost earned a degree in English Literature before moving to Vancouver, Canada to escape the Vietnam draft. While in Canada, Cheech met Tommy Chong and they formed a stand-up/musical comedy act, dubbing themselves "Cheech and Chong". The comedy duo had much success in the 1970's, reaching their peak in 1978 with the cult-classic stoner movie, "*Cheech and Chong: Up in*

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Smoke". After a few more years of success and some movie sequels, Cheech and Chong broke up in 1985. Cheech went on to act and voice characters in multiple movies from 1987 to the present day, including, "*The Lion King*", "*From Dusk Til Dawn*", "*Spy Kids*", "*Once Upon A Time In Mexico*", and "*Cars*". In 2008, Cheech and Chong reunited and continue to tour with new material on their trademark culture and stoner humor. In 2014, Cheech Marin is widely recognized as one of, if not the, most respected Chicano comedians, and a true legend of comedy.

When analyzing Cheech's humor, you see that there is an influence based on his Hispanic culture. Cheech and Chong often used racial comedy in their stand-up routines. They both played up their heritage, making entire comedy skits about common stereotypes (Cheech being Mexican and Chong coming from and Irish-Scottish Chinese roots). Cheech would often talk about stereotypical life situations that he experienced as a Chicano growing up in southern California. The group of Cheech and Chong is mainly known for their "stoner" comedy which is all about the lifestyle of smoking marijuana and being a pot head. This is somewhat of a stereotype among Hispanic culture, and Marin embraces it to the fullest. Even though the subject material wasn't necessarily the most advanced, Cheech's intelligence and college education is apparent in his humor because a lot of his jokes are witty and clever. Cheech is also known for his extremely stereotypical Mexican accent that he uses in movies and T.V. alike. While you have to give Marin credit for breaking many barriers that Chicanos faced in the comedy world, he, in a sense, played up the stereotypes that Hollywood and much of American society have on Chicano culture to gain that fame.

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George Lopez is another pioneering Chicano comedian. George started from humble beginnings. He was born in Mission Hills, California but grew up in Los Angeles. George was raised by his neglective grandmother because his maternal mother abandoned him at a very early age. By the late 1980's, he was gaining fame as a comedian, making appearances in comedy clubs and on television. He made the leap to minor roles in movies in the early 1990's, but his fame reached new heights with his ABC sitcom, *George Lopez*. This series ran from 2002 to 2007 and was about a working class Chicano family where George Lopez played the father of the household. The sitcom addresses some issues that occur in Hispanic households that were previously unseen in the mainstream spotlight. With this sitcom, George Lopez garnered much respect as a Chicano comedian and actor. Since then, he has had two stand-up specials on HBO, voiced many characters for animated films, and even has a new sitcom airing in 2014 called "*Saint George*".

With George Lopez's style of humor, you can see the influence of being a Chicano and growing up as a poor, second generation U.S. citizen. He is famous for harnessing his troubled time and painful experiences as a youth to create material for his stand-up routine. Many of his jokes are a humorous outlook on his stereotypical Mexican youth. He uses other Latino stereotypes very frequently in his comedy routines as well. George is not afraid to say his mind, even if it offends both Chicanos and Caucasians alike. It's safe to say his humor is a double-edged sword. Sometimes he helps to break down barriers and dispel stereotypes, but he also does his share of perpetuating. George has been known to encourage some negative stereotypes and

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use them to generate laughs, which generate profit. All that aside, today George Lopez is quite possibly the most famous Chicano comedy with an estimated worth at 25 million dollars. He is a pioneer in comedy and his contributions have lead Chicano comedy into the mainstream light.

Gabriel Iglesias is a Hispanic comedian on the forefront of Chicano comedy. Gabriel was born in 1976, in San Diego, CA. He and his mother moved around southern California before finally settling in at Long Beach. Growing up, his dad wasn't always in the picture. Gabriel made a lot of scarifies early in his life to get a foothold to pursue his comedic dreams, including quitting his job, having his house evicted and losing his car. After performing in the comedy club scene, he did some work as a voice-over artist in movies and television shows. Finally in 2007, Gabriel earned his first one hour special on Comedy Central. It was so popular that Comedy Central rewarded him with two more. Continuing his partnership with Comedy Central, Gabriel hosted his own stand-up comedy show that ran for a year, and featured tons of up and coming Chicano comedians. Today Gabriel Iglesias is a very popular Chicano comedian. He is doing more work as an actor in movies today, showing his comedic range.

Gabriel uses material about growing up in a Chicano household for a lot of his comedy specials. His mother (with her inability to understand his jokes) and his friends (who are law-breaking, pot smoking, semi-delinquents) have become popular topics in his routine. He isn't afraid to break out some stereotypical Mexican accents when talking about his friends or family. There have been some concerns with Gabriel and his racist accents because he portrays stereotyped characters on a good amount of kid's movies and T.V. shows. Concerns arise that he

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is developing racist stereotypes in the youth. One has to give Gabriel credit for consistently addressing racial stereotypes and informing his audience on how these are common misconceptions. In many of his stand-up specials, he talks about some of the inappropriate assumptions that Anglos and Hollywood make about Hispanics and Chicanos. He does a wonderful job of debunking these stereotypes with humor. Despite some assimilating into cut and dry Hollywood, Gabriel is an activist and informer on Chicano racism, and an all-star comedian as well.

A glaring concern in the Chicano comedy community is the lack of female representation. While Chicanos have broken through the comedy barrier, Chicano women have yet to receive the recognition that their male counterparts have gained. Is it because, while Hollywood and comedy clubs have broken down a fair amount of racial barrier, they have yet to give women a fair opportunity? In a way, a Chicana comedian could be considered a double minority. Everyone knows that women are not always treated equally in the work industry and that the average salary for a woman is less than a man's. I believe that current male Chicano comedians need to do a better job endorsing Chicana comedians so that they too will experience the success.

There is a fine line between being funny and being racist, a line consistently traversed by comedians. They must walk carefully, as it is easy to step on both sides. It is incredibly simple to offend people as a comedian. Especially when talking about race. People say that if you can't laugh at yourself, then who can you laugh at, but it's a little more complicated than that.

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Laughing at yourself and seeing the humor in your culture is a wonderful gift, but comedians have to be careful not to degrade their heritage. So, are Chicano comedians helping or hurting stereotypes and positively contributing to American society?

Regardless of race, culture or socioeconomic class, laughter is contagious. It brings a sense of light-heartedness. When people laugh together, they find a commonality and thus, they bond together. This is one way that Chicano comedians influence American culture. Chicano comedians have the unique opportunity to talk about touchy subjects, such as race, in an environment where controversial and shocking things are expected. But there is two parts to this. First off, it is the comedian's responsibility to dispel stereotypes in a humorous way. Chicano comedians can introduce a new way to think about racial issues, and if they can make the audience laugh, then they can make the audience think. When people think, critically think, that's when opinions are changed and stereotypes are eliminated. But if the comedian is taking advantage of stereotypes to get a cheap laugh, then no progress is made and racism prevails. The second part relies on the audience. When they hear racist jokes or a stereotype being perpetuated, how do they react? Is the audience smart and analytical, critically thinking and dissecting the jokes? What about when racism is address correctly, and presented in a forward-thinking and humorous way? Do they just laugh and let the message pass over their heads?

In conclusion, when analyzing Chicano comedians, one can learn a lot about their culture and also how much potential they have to affect U.S. society. Cultural customs and ideals that were instilled in them have created their unique sense of humor. Also, their Chicano heritage and childhood can generate miles of comedic material. Just the fact that Chicano comedians are

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relevant and Latino Humor is a type of comedy shows how far they have come since the stereotypes and discrimination in early Hollywood. It is key to realize that it takes a receptive audience as well as a proactive, intelligent and brave comedian to challenge the status quo.

Comedy is a vital tool that can be used to bring understanding and acceptance between Chicanos and other cultures in the United States.

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