

US comedian George Carlin dies aged 71

Irreverent comedian George Carlin, whose profanity-laced skewering of US political and social conventions made him a counter-culture hero, has died of heart failure at the age of 71.

Carlin died Sunday evening at the Saint John's Health Centre in Santa Monica, California, just hours after complaining of chest pains, publicist Jeff Abraham said. Carlin had a history of heart problems and underwent rehab in 2004 for addictions to alcohol and prescription pain-killers.

He died just days after it was announced he had been awarded the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for 'American Humour' by the Kennedy Centre for the Performing Arts in Washington. The award would have been presented this November.

'In his lengthy career as a comedian, writer and actor, George Carlin has not only made us laugh, but he makes us think,' said Stephen A Schwarzman, the Kennedy Centre chairman. 'His influence on the next generation of comics has been far-reaching.'

'I've always been sort of anti-authoritarian and I really don't like arbitrary rules and regulations that are essentially designed to get people in the habit of conforming,' Carlin said in a National Public Radio interview in 2004.

Born in New York in 1937, Carlin started out as a radio DJ and stand-up comedian and went on to make 23 comedy albums, 14 television specials, and win four Grammy Awards. He was famously against religion and politicians.

'I'm completely in favour of the separation of church and state,' he once said. 'My idea is that these two institutions screw us up enough on their own, so both of them together is certain death.'

But his most lasting impact dates from 1972 and his bawdy routine: 'The Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television'.

When he uttered all the words at a stand-up show in Milwaukee he was arrested and charged with disturbing the peace, but was later exonerated when a judge ruled he was protected by the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of speech.

However when a New York Radio station played the routine the Supreme Court ruled in 1978 that the government had the right to censor radio stations.

Last year Carlin was voted the second-best comedian of all time behind Richard Pryor in a Comedy Central cable television station poll of network executive and industry veterans.

Carlin is survived by his second wife Sally Wade, daughter Kelly Carlin McCall and brother Patrick. His first wife, Brenda, died of cancer in 1997, and he himself had long ruminated on the end of life.

'Death is caused by swallowing small amounts of saliva over a long period of time,' he said.

A fierce critic of modern civilisation, Carlin told Playboy in 2005 that his vision of the afterlife included a 'heavenly CNN'.

'The world is a big theater-in-the round as far as I'm concerned, and I'd love to watch it spin itself into oblivion,' he told the magazine. 'Tune in and watch the human adventure. ... That's what I want heaven to be.'

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