

Learning to Love the Law

“Hello, I'm Lenny Bruce,” the sleepy-eyed man in chinos and short sleeve sport shirt said in the doorway. “You must be the young guy Selma said she was sending.”

“Yeah, I'm Joe.” And I'm a young, dumb hick from L.A., I didn't have to add.

“Come on in,” he said, ushering me into his dump of a hotel room. “There's the typewriter. She said you were a good typist.”

“Well, you know.” He looked at me, my worn corduroy pants sticking out from under my tired trench coat. I saw ankle-deep litter completely covering the floor, an incredible wall-to-wall mess of reel-to-reel tapes, folders of legal briefs precariously perched atop stacks of legal books; balled up papers and old bagels gave it all a kind of Easter egg hunt effect. There was an old hot plate that had heated a pot of something that had splattered the nearest folders with tomato sauce.

“You wanna eat something? I got some cheese.”

“Oh, no, no, I'm fine. Ate just before—”

“You sure? Got a half bagel here. I can heat it up—”

“No, thanks. I'm all right.”

“Okay. Well, here ya go, man, you can step here, go ahead, that's just an old book. That chair okay? I don't know if Selma told you, but I'm kinda broke now, you know how it's been, but here's ten bucks for now,” and he pressed a couple of wadded-up fives into my hand, despite my weak protestations. And then we went to work.

Lenny'd been hounded by the law all over the country the last few years for profanity, anti-clericalism, everything but lese majeste in his night club act. Throw in a few dope busts, the loss of his cabaret card in New York, which meant he could no longer work in a club there, a disastrous drop in bookings in the rest of the country, thousands of dollars drained by lawyers plus a devastating divorce and you had the picture. And don't forget the horizontal filing system on the floor and yesterday's bagel.

We started before midnight and worked straight through the night till the sun came up and daytime traffic noises penetrated the mad scene in the cheap-ass hotel room. Lenny was tireless. His mind worked just like his act I'd heard only on record up till then, one thing leading him to something else that paralleled a third thing, his lingo in his dictation switching from street dooper slang to that of legal briefs to rabbinical law back to forties hipster, often in the same sentence:

“Let's lay this on em, man; I'll cop a plea for the *cabaret owner* that even his own lawyer doesn't know about, practically an *amicus curae*, you know, and I'll end up being his beard. Diggit . . . ”

He reached down in the mess without looking and snagged a legal-length xerox and started reading from it. “As *Farnworth v. State of New York* proved in 1928, a cabaret owner cannot be held responsible or liable for the content of an act that a performer . . . ” and off I'd go on the typewriter, pacing him. I don't know how I kept up with Lenny. I couldn't have done it for a living; only the adventure of it all gave me the mental sharpness it took just to keep up with his nimble mind.

When he was finished with the page he nonchalantly flipped it over his shoulder to join the hundreds of other papers hopelessly scattered all over the floor, but I knew he could somehow find that verysame document in a second, if need be. I shook my head in admiration. He turned to me and took a little break in his dictation.

“They always send some schmuck Irish cop on the stand with his little notebook and he pretends to have exact quotes from me he scribbled down in pencil in the dark: 'Eleanor Roosevelt's little tits, her asshole with some shit . . .' *He* bombs in court doing my act and *I* get convicted. Here's

what I really said,” and he snaked his arm out behind him and snatched one of the dozens of reels of tapes strewn across the floor and loaded it on a tape recorder, expertly whipping the tape tail around and around onto the take-up reel with a well-practiced motion. He fast-forwarded about halfway through the long tape and miraculously started the machine *exactly* on the Eleanor Roosevelt bit of his he'd recorded in a night club. “. . . about flag-waving, why don't they wave little pictures of Eleanor Roosevelt's tits and Norman Rockwell's ass? Can't get any more patriotic than that, Jim. No shit . . .”

And then back we went to the brief we were preparing and on and on it went, the very inside of a once-in-a-lifetime night club act that lasted eight hours, until I was beyond grogginess, somehow staggering in my seat as I typed.

I remember once getting up to go to the bathroom and finding a hypo right on top of the toilet tank: Lenny's works. He'd claimed to have been framed on dope charges and I was still at an age where I religiously believed in frame-ups, and it was the first in what would become a long line of disillusionments, of framed-up dynamiters who turned out to really have been blowing things up in their spare time, of lecherous saints and egomaniacal democratizers guilty of conduct unbecoming poster heroes.

So Lenny was a hype after all, well, well. Then it was back to the typing, the dictating, the historical protection offered cabaret acts according to a New York appellate court that held that bla bla and sure you don't want me to warm up this half-bagel? You should eat something. . . .

Even though each moment was crystal clear it all blurred together by the end of that crazy night. All I knew was that we had to be finished and in court by eight in the morning and Lenny was still dictating. “. . . and in conclusion—”

“Lenny, it's 7:45 and this is the last legal blank left. You gotta finish on this page. Look where I am.”

“All right, I'll end it like this,” and he launched into another, shorter version of the concluding

sentence.

“Lenny, I'm on the last line. Look,” and I showed him how I was typing with one hand, holding the paper on the roller with the other.

He dictated a shorter version yet, but the last word was not going to fit, I told him, and he substituted another word that just made it, the final period only fitting on the page because I fudged the paper back a little.

He ran out to grab a cab while I madly threw the papers together in a folder and followed him out. We heard the eight o'clock church bells ring on the way and Lenny nudged the cabbie to violate every law in sight and we got to the courtroom just as the clerk read off “—ple versus Lenny Bruce,” and the spectators gasped at the timing of our entrance.

Realist editor Paul Krassner, who'd long championed Lenny in print, strode forward and beamed at Lenny and kissed him on the cheek with a big smile. He stood out in the courtroom in his black pegged work pants, boots and leather jacket—and then the suits closed in. The scene quickly degenerated into total humiliation and disaster, with the judge sniping at Lenny with that tired old quote about someone who represents himself having a fool for a lawyer.

Lenny gamely plowed ahead through the interruptions, but his legal scholarship only served to get his codefendant off. The cabaret owner's lawyer stole Lenny's fire by triumphantly chortling, “Your Honor, never in all my years of practice has a codefendant done such a thorough and neat job of getting my own client off. I move that . . .” and it was so moved and ordered, and Lenny was left getting a solitary and massive shaft. Before he knew what hit him the trial was over and the judge refused to hear his attempt at doing the cop doing him, as Lenny had done for me a few hours before.

“Why can't *I* do my act for you; then you can judge—” Lenny impotently sputtered, and for a minute there it was touch and go if the judge would throw him in jail for contempt of court or not.

Lenny could never again appear on a nightclub stage in New York and his career was over. He ended

his life a few years later seated on a toilet with a spike in his arm.

But I don't want to leave you, or Lenny, that way, so I will crank it back to a previous reel, Lenny caught in mid-pace, his finger marking a place in a lawbook, finishing an elaborate end run around the law he had started with a Talmudic quotation, his mind obviously racing ahead of his tongue, a would be rabbi quoting New York civil code instead of the Torah, a defrocked night club comedian knocking himself out for an audience of one in a wino hotel room and it was all the greater for that. Lenny chuckled and looked up at me over his law book. "I love the law," he said, and he brought down the house.