

## **George Carlin in a Can**

In the 60s, Chicago had this legendary club called Mother Blues. It was the place to be for cutting-edge music and comedy. You'd often catch acts like Spanky and Our Gang and the one-and-only George Carlin performing there.

Meanwhile, in New York, as an arranger, I was working for record producer Jerry Ross. We had just come off a hit record with Bobby Hebb's "Sunny." Jerry Ross riding high on Bobby Hebb's success was approached by Mercury Records to produce Spanky and Our Gang. In the record business in those days, it was not uncommon for a producer to use a variety of arrangers on an album or single. Jerry, working with the wonderful arranger Jimmy Wisner, produced "Sunday Will Never Be the Same." The record reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on April 15, 1968, and because of its enormous success, Mercury wanted Jerry to produce an album for Spanky and Our Gang. It was decided to record in Los Angeles, and Jerry wanted me to write the arrangements, so off he and I went to L.A.

I found myself in L.A. with this wild hippie group, Spanky and Our Gang, we were recording and occasionally smoking some weed. I wasn't a full-blown stoner then; let's just say my arranging skills took a nosedive when I got high.

Spanky and Our Gang was an incredibly talented bunch, deeply rooted in the folk-rock hippie scene.

One day, during a break from recording, Spanky announced that their "connection" was going to show up with some top-notch weed. I was all in. When I asked about this connection, Spanky revealed it was a comedian friend from Chicago—she asked me if I had ever heard of him. His name is George Carlin!

"What?" I gasped. I was a huge fan of George Carlin from the very beginning. This news hit me like a lightning bolt. After embarrassing myself by gushing about how much I loved him, Spanky confirmed he was indeed as cool as I thought—a great dude. (Yeah, we were using "dude" back then.)

Carlin, who had an eclectic taste in music, was a big fan of Spanky and Our Gang. They had met while performing at the extremely hip Mother Blues club in Chicago.

Later that afternoon, George Carlin did show up and strolled into the studio carrying a cardboard box. He was still rocking his hippie-dippie-weatherman vibe: tie, dark suit, short hair. After we introduced ourselves, he got right to business. And when I say “business,” I don’t mean he was dealing drugs. He was just a friend with connections, occasionally gifting Spanky and Our Gang some grass.

But this was George Carlin, after all, and instead of just pulling out a bag like a basic plebeian, he opened his cardboard box and gave me a personal tour of its contents. Inside were about five or six metal film cans, each roughly 5 inches in diameter, sealed closed with gaffers tape. A yellow label on top read “Technicolor, Camera Master—Do Not Expose.” In the film world, that means these were the camera masters, the negatives, fresh out of the camera from a location shoot, meant to go straight to the Technicolor labs for processing and developing.

I asked George why he was carrying around camera masters. With a grin, he replied, “Man, that’s where I store the pot.” He popped the seal off one can, revealing weed, pot, Mary Jane, chronic—aromatic goodness. He explained, “When a film crew is out shooting, they want to get the exposed film to the lab ASAP to avoid losing it or having it damaged. So, they have a runner whose job is to drive the film cans to the lab in Hollywood. Now, if a cop stops me and decides to search for drugs, he has a choice. Does he open the tape on these cans and expose the film, ruining it? That could make him liable for thousands in damages. Most likely, he’d just say, ‘Move on, buddy, get outta here.’” George had a solid cover; I never heard of him being busted.

Before he left the studio, he invited Spanky and the gang to a party at his house that night. The gang was well acquainted with these parties and said they'd make their way up there into the Hollywood Hills as usual. Then George graciously and genuinely invited me and Jerry to the party. “What!” I thought. I was going to a party at George Carlin’s house... Wow! I had no car; Jerry Ross had the car, a rental courtesy of Mercury Records. Jerry wasn't thrilled at the sound of this party, being a bit of a square, a bit of a suit. But I convinced him to drive us to George's house in the hills above Sunset Strip. The address was something like (and I paraphrase here): 147 8 81 4 32 Skyline View Rd., Site Plaza Drive, Plaza View Way, Site Skyline Street. If you’ve been up in those hills, you know what I'm talking about; you know how long the house numbers are.

There are never any pedestrians walking around to help you with directions, after all LA is not known for its pedestrian traffic. They had something that was called the Thomas Guide, naturally we didn't have one of those. We never used them in Philadelphia. A city with a much simpler layout, a grid. Thanks, William Penn.

We searched and searched. I almost held Jerry at gunpoint to keep going, backtracking over the same streets, up one, down another, around and around we went. But we just couldn't find that friggin' number. We must've spent an hour and a half up there without any luck. We were lost and confused. And of course, we were low on gas.

We never found the joint. I was bummed. I could handle missing Woodstock, as I did, but missing a party at George Carlin's place? A terrible experience. We finished up the album, said our goodbyes, and flew back to Philadelphia.

After his passing on June 22, 2008, a private memorial was held that honored George Carlin's wishes for a lively atmosphere instead of a formal service. He had selected a whole list of songs and singers and musicians to perform live at his memorial.

Among the songs he requested to be performed by friends was a song recorded by Spanky McFarlane of Spanky and Our Gang.  
"COMING HOME" (aka "SUNDY MORNING")

© Joseph Renzetti 2026