

# Funny Long Ago



by Bruce Bawer

**Howard Stern was never just** another entertainer. For millions of (mostly male) fans—first in New York, and later, thanks to syndication, in markets around North America—he was the guy who helped get them through the day and rise above their mundane frustrations, with his irreverent humor about politics and pop culture and hilarious rants about his own life, which, in the 1980s and 1990s, was unspectacular enough that an ordinary working stiff could easily identify with him. Like many of his listeners, Stern was a husband, father, and put-upon employee, who began and ended every weekday with a punishing commute (in his case, between Nassau County, Long Island, and midtown Manhattan). Unlike many others in showbiz, whose self-important parroting of left-wing boilerplate he skewered mercilessly, Stern was on the side of the cops and military and law-abiding, nose-to-the-grindstone taxpayers. His fans knew that he understood them. He was one of them—their buddy, their voice, even their hero. On occasion, callers to his show would address him, only half-facetiously, as “my king” or “my god.”

But then things started to change. Not long after the release of his 1997 movie, *Private Parts*, which chronicled Stern's show-business climb and celebrated his then-wife's quiet devotion to him and to their three daughters, that wife, Alison, left him. (They divorced in 2001.) Taking up with a leggy young model, Beth Ostrovsky, whom he married in 2007, Stern—who was now, thanks to a mind-boggling 2004 contract with SiriusXM satellite radio, one of the richest performers on earth—put Nassau County behind him and divided his life among a lavish Manhattan apartment and mansions in the Hamptons and Palm Beach. Over time, he exchanged politically incorrect friends like Donald Trump for the likes of Rosie O'Donnell and Ellen DeGeneres, whom he'd once brutally ridiculed. And, in one of the stunning turnarounds of all time, he became a fount of leftist cant. In his 2019 book *Howard Stern Comes Again*, a massive assemblage of interview transcripts, he described insipidly woke celebrity dum-dums like Stephen Colbert and Gwyneth Paltrow as “evolved” souls, awash in “wisdom” and “humanity.”

I'm not alone in [lamenting Stern's metamorphosis](#). On social media, former fans articulate their disillusion with the man they now call “Hamptons Howie.” In April of last year, *New York Post* columnist Maureen Callahan weighed in, [declaring](#) that “*The Howard Stern Show*, long in decline, is dead” and that the new Stern “is unrecognizable.” Noting that the old Stern's “best attribute” had been “going after famous hypocrites,” Callahan pointed out that the brouhaha surrounding Alec Baldwin's wife, Hilaria—who'd pretended for years to be a Spanish immigrant but was revealed in December 2020 to be a Boston brahmin, born Hilary Lynn Hayward-Thomas to an attorney and a professor at Harvard Med—would “once have been Stern show fodder for days.” But now that Alec and Stern were palsy-walsy neighbors in the Hamptons, Hilaria was off limits.

By the time Callahan's article appeared, I'd long since

canceled my Sirius subscription. But in January, like some nosy divorcée wondering what her ex is up to, I took advantage of an incredibly cheap offer to re-up—three months for a dollar, which may or may not be evidence that Stern is bleeding listeners, as has been speculated—and caught up with *The Howard Stern Show*.

My curiosity was spurred largely by recent news stories about how the self-styled King of All Media has been faring during the pandemic. For one thing, I read that he and Ostrovsky had been veritable hermits in their Hamptons manse, and that he'd been broadcasting from there, with sidekick Robin Quivers chiming in from her New Jersey residence and guests participating from SiriusXM's Manhattan studios. For another, according to reports, the once fiercely pro-liberty Stern had become a top-flight Covid-19 scold. In November, when Green Bay Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers contracted the virus after refusing a vaccine because he's allergic to one of its ingredients, Stern made headlines by calling for Rodgers to be kicked out of the NFL. In January, after Novak Djokovic (who'd already had Covid) traveled to Melbourne to play in the Australian Open only to find that the waiver he'd obtained wasn't good enough for that country's draconian lockdown gendarmes, Stern savaged the tennis star: "That fucknut . . . what a fuckin' asshole. . . . They should throw him right the fuck out of tennis." You'd have thought that Djokovic had firebombed a maternity ward. On a later show, responding to a listener's information that in 2020 Djokovic's foundation had donated \$1 million for ventilators in Serbian hospitals, Stern said: "I don't care. He's an arrogant fuckhead."

Listening to Stern hold forth on these miscreants, I reflected on the whole Covid saga: how two weeks to "flatten the curve" became two years; how the official line on masks kept changing; how politicians broke the harsh social-distancing rules they imposed on the rest of us; how selective lockdowns destroyed mom-and-pop stores, while benefiting giants like

Target and Amazon; and how the wet-market origins story crumbled and Anthony Fauci turned from the hero of the piece into its likely villain. The old Stern would've weighed in—epically, ardently, titanically—on every detail of this once-in-a-lifetime story of establishment deceit, cynicism, injustice, corruption, and colossal abuse of power. As a lifelong New Yorker, he'd have crushed Andrew Cuomo, who as governor of New York had sent Covid patients into nursing homes, causing thousands of deaths, only to laud his own pandemic leadership in a bestselling book. But the new Stern consistently parrots the official line, repeatedly employing the terms “anti-science” and “conspiracy theory.” And he's a Cuomo fan, who chides CNN not for promoting the Russia conspiracy hoax but for firing the ex-governor's brother Chris.

“If it was up to me,” Stern said the other day, “anyone unvaccinated would not be admitted to a hospital. . . . They think they're gonna be magnetized if they take the vaccine.” On January 25, Stern praised aging rocker Neil Young for threatening to yank his catalog from Spotify, the music streaming service, if it didn't cancel its \$100 million contract with podcaster Joe Rogan. Young's reason: guests on Rogan's show, he charged, had spread vaccine disinformation. The old Stern, let it be recalled, spent years defending himself from the Federal Communications Commission, which tried to silence him by imposing huge fines on his employers for his use of profanity; but now he cheered Young's attempt to muzzle Rogan. “I am moved by Neil Young,” Stern gushed. “This is a man of integrity.” (Spotify agreed almost instantly to remove Young's songs from its platform.) Stern echoed Young's claim that some of Rogan's guests had promulgated “conspiracy theories about the vaccine,” when in reality they'd only challenged the narrative *du jour*, and he chastised Rogan himself for having disclosed that he'd apparently benefited from taking Ivermectin, a drug that's extensively prescribed for Covid across the globe. Similarly, Stern

characterized the singer Meat Loaf, who had just died, supposedly of Covid complications, after criticizing irrational and autocratic lockdown protocols, as having been “sucked in by some kind of cult.” Like other “Trump people,” pronounced Stern, Meat Loaf had lived “in that bubble where all you hear all day is how dangerous the vaccine is.”

Stern doesn't devote all of his airtime nowadays to harangues about Covid. Much of his current schtick would be familiar, after a fashion, to fans who checked out decades ago. He still picks on his producer, Gary Dell'Abate (Baba Booey), and other members of his radio staff, as well as on the collection of misfit callers known as the Wack Pack; but these bits—which used to feel motivated by genuine irritation, and could actually be risible—now feel *pro forma*, a way to kill time. Speaking of which: at his height, Stern was scheduled for four hours a day but almost always went over, sometimes exceeding five hours, so eager was he to keep on yapping; now he's paid to do three hours, three days a week, and has loads of vacation time—and even with this drastically reduced schedule he seems to be desperately padding.

As ever, Stern talks a lot about his personal life. During his first marriage, that meant unburdening familiar marital frustrations; since he's been with Ostrovsky, by contrast, he sounds like a man on a leash, whose wife would punish him dearly if he breathed a cross word about her. Under the Ostrovsky regime, then, the private stuff has been pretty anodyne. Pre-lockdown, listeners were treated to accounts of his and Ostrovsky's glamorous Mexico vacations with their chums Jimmy Kimmel and Jennifer Aniston—banal stories of the kind that starlets shared for years with Carson and Letterman. Since he's sequestered himself in the Hamptons abode, his tales from home are mostly about the cats Ostrovsky is fostering. Yes, he still imitates his parents and retells the same old stories about the psychological damage they caused him in childhood—but this material, which used to be amusing

(especially when his folks would call in and fight back), seems hoary and even heartless now that Stern is a withered 68, his mother a dotty 94, and his father an addled, stone-deaf 98.

Then there are Stern's guests. He once welcomed some of the world's funniest people—Rodney Dangerfield, Joan Rivers, Pat Cooper, Gilbert Gottfried. The conversations were riotous. Alas, Dangerfield and Rivers are dead, and Cooper and Gottfried are *personae non gratae* in Stern's woke new world. Who's dropping in these days? Well, in the last few weeks, Stern has chatted, for an hour or so at a time, with actors Jake Gyllenhaal and Ben Affleck (“a really smart guy”) and musicians Billy Corgan and Eddie Vedder. Stern's suck-up interviewing style recalls Barbara Walters at her smarmiest. Similarly, in place of the hysterically gifted voice artist Billy West, who in the early 1990s contributed edgy impersonations of Nelson Mandela and New York Mayor David Dinkins, there's now a guy named Chris Wilding who does imitations of Mitch McConnell and Alex Jones that are so predictably, painfully PC that you might as well be watching *Saturday Night Live*.

As for Stern's political commentary these days, it's as insipid as anything by Colbert or Kimmel. Greta Thunberg? “I admire her.” *Morning Joe*? Stern's a loyal viewer. The Supreme Court? Three of the justices are “eccentric rebellious kooks” who want to ban abortion entirely. Stern praised President Biden in January for his vaunted plans to “help vets” and “eradicate AIDS by 2030”—but, so far as I can see, he's been mum about such Biden disasters as the mangled Afghanistan pullout. As for the president's manifest senility, Stern and Quivers actually professed to marvel at how much “energy” Biden exhibited during a December 10 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*. On the same day, Stern maintained that if he ran into his old friend Trump on the street, he wouldn't feel comfortable speaking to him, given that he'd tried to

install himself as “a dictator” and to “rig the election.” Republicans like George W. Bush and Mitt Romney, Stern claimed on another day, once “had values” and were “somewhat reasonable,” but Trump’s supporters want the U.S. to be “like Russia and China”—an autocratic state without real elections. On yet another day, Stern warned that “this country is teetering on the edge of losing its democracy” and called for an end to the Electoral College to prevent further GOP presidential victories. Trump, he contended, had come close “to saying ‘Fuck you, I’m the king,’” and many Americans had liked it: “They want to be led. . . . They want to have a Vladimir Putin-type situation right here in the United States.” Predicting civil war, Stern—who was once a proud patriot (to the point, in fact, of sounding at times like a comically knee-jerk xenophobe)—pondered a move to Canada or Sweden or Australia.

The old Stern used to be preoccupied with—which is to say, titillated by—lesbians. (“Lesbians,” he asserted in the movie *Private Parts*, “equal ratings.”) Now he’s obsessed with what has arguably, if inexplicably, become the key issue of the moment: transsexuality. By his own testimony, he “religiously” watches *I Am Jazz*, the TLC series, now in its sixth season, about Jazz Jennings, born a boy in 2000 and diagnosed as gender dysphoric four years later. While enthusing that Jazz’s parents “are so accepting of everything,” Stern fretted that Jazz, after undergoing sex-change surgery, became depressed and gained a hundred pounds. But why? Stern honestly didn’t get it. After all, he exclaimed, “she’s got the vagine now” (*vagine* has always been Stern-speak for the birth canal) and “the vagine was supposed to be the answer to all the problems!”

Stern gave big props, too, to a new show, Amazon Prime’s *Always Jane*, about another young male-to-female, the teenaged Jane Noury. Stern likes this series, he explained, because Jane has “just gotten out of high school and she’s

hot," with "nice titties" that have won her a spot in "a trans modeling competition" against "twenty-five former dudes," all of whom "look good." The big news about Jane, as far as Stern's concerned, is that "they're gonna cut her cock off by Episode Four, and that's what I'm waiting for." Bizarrely coexisting in Stern's mind with this ghoulish eagerness to see a teenage boy undergo irreversible genital mutilation is a total allegiance to transgender ideology: moments after gushing inanely about the voyeuristic thrills these TV programs afford, Stern lectured solemnly that "being transsexual in this country" is "a nightmare," because "boys of three or five go into their mothers' closets," and, realizing that "they're the opposite" of what they've been told, are "tortured" by this awareness.

How long ago it seems! Back in the day, I listened to Stern all morning, every morning, with very few exceptions. He was always a welcome distraction from the anxieties of the day. He always helped put life's botherations into perspective. And he always made me laugh. If I ever turned off the radio, it was usually because I was laughing so hard that it hurt. Listening to him during the last few days, I couldn't take more than a few minutes of him at a time. He was just too phony, too dull—and, when exulting over the tragic stories of young boys who've been convinced that they're girls, too much of a fool. So I kept switching over for a while to one or another of the podcasters who've taken Stern's place in my life—among them Anthony Cumia, Steven Crowder, and Nick DiPaolo. How melancholy an experience it was to shuttle back and forth between the once gutsy, gut-busting Stern, who now serves up a menu of warmed-over PC pabulum, and these lively voices, who, exuding conviction, do the job he once did so splendidly of subverting orthodoxy, mocking the powerful, and making it all entertaining.

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