

## LENNY BRUCE DISCUSSION PROMPTS

### Description:

The following discussion prompts/questions are for use in Small group discussion. This document contains suggested prompts with background information/answers for the facilitator. These questions are not required, more so, they are provided as a resource should the discussion facilitator need suggestions.



### Prompts/Questions:

- 1. What ways did Lenny Bruce resemble a standard stand-up comic at the beginning of his career?**  
*Background for Facilitator:* Lenny began his career as the standard story-telling comic. His “Djinni” sketch could be played before a general audience, even if it did have hints such as defining “income property” as 15 beautiful women. Likewise, his airplane glue sketch was in the standard standup story-telling format, even though it too had a little tinge in that airplane glue was a starter drug. As the subject matter of his stories got further and further from the mainstream, he became perceived as different than the other standup comedians out there. His story-telling format, however, did not change, except to be more free-wheeling and improvisational in his later years. In his later years, he had so much material built up from his albums that he could swing readily from one subject to another. While this served the purpose of being more stream-of-consciousness and more like a series of jazz riffs, these mini-stories were not as complete and thorough as the same bits on his earlier albums.
- 2. As Lenny’s career evolved, what subjects did he take on in his humor that other comedians would not touch?**  
*Background for Facilitator:* Lenny took on big Religion (Religions Inc., Christ and Moses), which gained him some mortal enemies. He took on military jingoism (Would You Sell Out Your Country?), and race relations (White White Woman). He took on the subject of divorce, which had previously been taboo in comedy, and a benevolent view towards drug usage. He made fun of the 1940’s prison movies with his “Father Flotsky’s Triumph” bit, and explored society’s taboos about sex in multiple bits. After he started getting busted for obscenity, he took on the foibles of the American judicial system and its religious-based view of what constitutes obscenity.
- 3. When Lenny said a “dirty word”, was he saying it as himself or as dialog from one of the characters in his stories?**  
*Background for Facilitator:* As far as I can tell, Lenny never said any of the “dirty words” as himself. It was always within the context of quoting a character within one of his stories. Law enforcement did not make this distinction, and held Lenny responsible directly for the words used by the characters in his stories. The separate issue of what an entertainer can and cannot say within the confines of a private club in which people have paid to see the show later became a subject of Lenny’s later performances.

4. **To whom did Lenny Bruce represent a threat, and why?**

**Background for Facilitator:** Lenny Bruce unmasked the hypocrisy of all big-time religions, but particularly the Catholic Church. In “Christ and Moses”, he pointed out the juxtaposition of the bishop’s extremely expensive ring versus a few blocks away, Puerto Rican parishioners living stacked up 20 to a room. He went further in “Religions, Inc.”, comparing the big religions to large corporate institutions that were only in it for the money. He also went after the hypocrisy of a jingoistic military and the functioning—with regard to him—of an idiotic American judicial system. If it seemed like there was a conspiracy of people in power who were out to get Lenny, it’s because there was. On the government side it went as high as J. Edgar Hoover. On the religious side, there was “Operation Yorkville” (1962-68), a New York based organization that was mainly driven by very right-wing Catholics. After changing its name to “Morality in Media” (1968-2015) the same organization later went after George Carlin (1972) for “The Seven Words You Cannot Say on Television”, and Monty Python for “The Life of Brian” (1978). The group also went after a book by Madonna, John Cleland’s erotic novel “Fanny Hill”, and in 2003, Congressman Leon Waxman for producing the Congressional document, the Waxman Report, which found that abstinence-only sex education programs were unscientific and contained false information. In 2015, the group changed its name to the National Center on Sexual Exploitation to give itself a more anti-pornography image, and then got Walmart to remove Cosmopolitan magazines from its checkout counters. Joseph Coors, of the Coors Brewing Company, was the largest financial contributor to the group.