



JON STEWART

Beyond the Moments of Zen

Bruce Watson



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CHAPTER 1

JUST ANOTHER JERSEY SMART-ASS

Jon Stewart says little about his childhood, and what he does say is not particularly funny. Perhaps that's because he came of age in unfunny times. On November 28, 1962, just a month after the apocalyptic panic of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Jon Stewart Leibowitz was born in New York City. He spent much of his childhood in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, a village in Lawrence Township seven miles north of Trenton and just a few miles from where George Washington crossed the Delaware. The birthplace meant that Stewart grew up in a quintessential American town, proud of its history, a place some might call "the real America."

Stewart, who dropped his last name and changed the spelling of his middle name when he started doing stand-up, missed the famed satirists of the late fifties and early sixties. Too young to have seen Mort Sahl, Nichols and May, or Lenny Bruce, he grew up at a time when television sitcoms passed for comedy, when *Laugh-In* was the funniest show on television, and when only *MAD Magazine* and the *National Lampoon* rose to the level of satire.

Stewart's childhood was peripatetic; his family moved from Lawrence Township to the industrial city of Trenton and back again. His father, Donald Leibowitz had been a physics professor, president of an energy corporation, and energy coordinator for the New Jersey Department of the Treasury. Stewart was ten when his parents divorced. The split must have been painful because Stewart has never spoken publicly about his father. One story says Stewart's father left the family for his secretary with whom he had two sons, Stewart's half-brothers. Donald Leibowitz died on June 8, 2013, at the age of eighty-one. The divorce made Jon Stewart, raised by a single mother, the next in a long line of comedians - from Charlie Chaplin to Eddie Murphy - who grieved for a father, estranged or deceased, through constant wise-cracking. If brevity is the soul of wit, then sorrow is its heart, and the slight, articulate Jon Stewart Leibowitz was soon making friends and disarming enemies by joking about himself.

Stepping into the long-standing role of wise-cracking Jersey smart-ass, the boy also enjoyed that other staple of budding comics - a loving mother who appreciated his humor. Frequent *Daily Show* viewers know that Stewart is proud to be his

mother's son. After her divorce, Marian Laskin Leibowitz a public school teacher who later became a nationally-known educational consultant, moved Jon and his older brother Larry to Trenton. In later years as a stand-up comic, Stewart joked about the hardscrabble city. Noting Trenton's motto, "Trenton Makes, the World Takes," Stewart asked, "And do you know what's made in Trenton? Champale and condoms. So between me and those other two fine Trenton products, there's your Friday night."

By the time Stewart entered high school, the Leibowitz family was back in Lawrence Township. Teachers there remember Jonathan Leibowitz as bright, savvy, and something of a wise-ass. Bullied for being Jewish, he sharpened his wit into his first line of defense. "They will find what is unique about you and destroy you for it," he said of his fellow students. "So if you're Jewish and most people aren't, 'Okay, let's go with that.' But it just as easily could have been because I was short."

Living on the fringes of high-school social life, Stewart recalls "being very into Eugene Debs and a bit of a leftist." Politics, teen angst, and an English teacher who gave him books such as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* also shaped Stewart's perspective on the United States.

Even as his wit was earning him an audience, albeit tiny, Stewart's intelligence – he graduated third in his class – earned him admission to the prestigious College of William and Mary. Why would he opt for conservative William and Mary instead of some university known for its left leanings? "As a Jewish person, I wanted to explore the rich tapestry of Judaica that is Southern Virginia."

Few of his college classmates remember Stewart. It would take a future generation to recognize him at William and Mary, as they did in 2004 when his alma mater gave him an honorary doctorate. Back in the early 1980s, he kept a low profile on campus. He played varsity soccer (ten goals, twelve assists), studied psychology, dated little, and drank a lot. "I was miserable there," he recalled. "I had no idea what I was doing. And then I got out, and I still had no idea."

In 1984, diploma in hand, Stewart returned to New Jersey and

spent two years doing odd jobs, some odder than others. He worked as a contingency planner for the New Jersey Department of Human Services and a contract administrator for the City University of New York. He also gave puppet shows for disabled children and tended bar.

"I've always felt removed," Stewart once said, "that I'm here to entertain people who are in life, living it, but that I'm not in it." Luckily for Stewart the outsider, one bar he worked at had a comedy club on the second floor.

In the mid-1980s, nightclub comedy was thriving. Having survived the somber seventies, stand-up had returned with a vengeance. A new generation of comics, including Steve Martin, Jerry Seinfeld, and Robin Williams, had inspired a stand-up renaissance. Nearly 300 comedy clubs opened across the United States during the 1980s.

The stand-up boom spread to TV on A&E's *An Evening at the Improv* and other shows. Then the pros emerged: Chris Rock at *Catch a Rising Star*, Andrew Dice Clay at *Dangerfield's*, Steven Wright on *The Tonight Show*. The others kept dreaming – of *Saturday Night Live* or maybe even getting their own show, like *Cosby* or *Roseanne*. Jon Stuart Leibowitz was nothing if not a dreamer. "I had a job working for the state. I was on the softball team. I was thinking, 'I guess this is my life,' and panic set in."

In 1986, Stewart quit his odd jobs and moved to Greenwich Village to become, like his idol Woody Allen, a comedian. Shedding his last name was easy, but a full year had passed before he summoned up the guts to walk onstage. Somewhere out there are a few aging comedy buffs who remember being in the Comedy Cellar one night in 1987 when an unknown Jersey comic in a T-shirt and leather jacket made his debut at a Tuesday open-mic night. Stewart's first joke: "What do you call lunch hour in the Diamond District when all the Hasidim are causing a traffic jam in the streets? Yidlock." Heckled by the tough crowd, Stewart lasted two minutes onstage and did not try again for four months. By then, he had developed a routine based on what he called "the holy trinity of comedy: sex, religion, and death."