

GILBERT GOTTFRIED

Rolling Stone called Gilbert Gottfried the Miles Davis of stand-up comedy. Jazz like, Gilbert delivers absurd jokes off a thread of simple logic that he twists so much it makes you laugh at things that only his warped perception can make obvious. Just as you're catching your equilibrium he's into another bit only related to the one before it by its absurdity. If Gilly wasn't so down-to-earth you would think he was from another planet. Today he sat before me, at Da Marino's on 49th Street, smiling at the thought of a free meal, the same quiet, gentle, cheap (he loves to play this up) and generous (he would give you the shirt off his back, even if it costs him more than fifty eight cents) guy I met thirty years ago. Fame, money, and another foot in stature couldn't change him, nor would I want it too even if he picked up the check. The one thing he loves to do at his expense is laugh at himself.



Photo by Frederick M. Brown / Getty Images

— Interview by John DeBellis

DeBELLIS: So Gilly, how are you today?

GILBERT: Ecch...

DeBELLIS: That good, huh? Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?

GILBERT: Sure, go ahead I'm an open book, an encyclopedia of answers. Ask me anything, as long as you mention my album, "Gilbert Gottfried's Dirty Jokes," which you can get on my Web site.

DeBELLIS: Okay, we'll talk about "Gilbert Gottfried's Dirty Jokes," which you can get on your Web site, later in the interview.

GILBERT: Then fire away.

DeBELLIS: Gilly, do you think of yourself as cheap?

GILBERT: I'd make Jack Benny look like a philanthropist. By the way you did say anything on the menu?

DeBELLIS: Yes, I did.

GILBERT: Is this on an expense account?

DeBELLIS: No, I have to pay for it myself.

GILBERT: In that case, I'll have the filet mignon.

DeBELLIS: Were you the class clown?

GILBERT: I was the class podiatrist. I never made it to class clown. I wasn't funny enough. I would examine feet and prescribe an ointment. It was a sad childhood.

DeBELLIS: Not too long ago a newspaper tabbed you the unsexiest man in the world.

GILBERT: The Phoenix Sun did a list of the unsexiest men in the world and I made

it to number one. I beat out Bin Laden. He's a terrorist, hasn't bathed in months. I beat him out. To me it was a great honor.

DeBELLIS: No one deserves that title more than you.

GILBERT: My sentiments exactly. It was the best publicity I ever had. It went all over the world, Japan, China, India, Korea... Europe. In Russia they retitled the article as "The Most Asexual Man in the World." When I got that news I was ringing the bells at Notre Dame. They said, "Climb down. Read this." I've been fighting to hold onto that title, and you'd be surprised to see how many women are helping me. Every time I try to get laid after one of my shows, I say, "Damn it, I should have learned to play the guitar." All my career I heard about all those comic groupies. And I say, "Tell me what town. Just direct me there." Guys, who opened for me on the road, who have been doing their act for six months and get no laughs, they get laid. I can't even masturbate, my hands pretend that they have arthritis.

DeBELLIS: What did your mother say when you told her you wanted to become a comedian?

GILBERT: I seemed like the loser of the family at the time. So to them it was just another thing I could fail at. Back then it would be insane to tell anyone that you

were becoming a comedian. Later on, it became a career option. Every other door was a comedy club.

DeBELLIS: One of your first TV auditions was for Bill Cosby.

GILBERT: Cosby for some reason liked me, so I got called in to audition for his show. The producers were asking about this guy *who yells a lot and is annoying*. I said, "That's me." The show was called "Mr. Smith," it was about a talking orangutan. It starred three orangutans. I had worked with these orangutans before on "Thick of the Night." So I guess they had bad feelings, so I didn't get that job. My grandmother was watching Bill Cosby on some show and she was going on and on about how funny he was and so talented. So I said to my grandmother, thinking this was my chance of impressing her, "I auditioned for a show out in LA, and I had gotten the audition because Bill Cosby said I was funny." And my grandmother, in typical Jewish fashion, says to me, "Yes, but you didn't get the job?"

DeBELLIS: You're big break in this business ca—

GILBERT: I'm in a business. Okay, I'll admit it. I'm in show business. And being interviewed by you is what I've always dreamed of. Who cares about TV shows, movies and millions of dollars, I can die

now knowing you're asking me questions...

DeBELLIS: We can only hope...

GILBERT: Not until after I finish my steak.

DeBELLIS: Your big break actually came as a fluke.

GILBERT: No, that was my date last night! See I was playing on the word, cum. Okay it wasn't that funny. My first big break? People name things that they think were my first big break. I've been on TV and I've had exposure. They weren't big breaks like "Saturday Night Live." But that was disastrous. I did some pilot before that never aired. So there was nothing really going on in my career. I was just hanging out in the clubs. I had gone up on stage and these people from *MTV* saw me and asked me to come in and audition. They turned the camera on me and I just started rambling on and on and on. I totally improvised the whole thing and they loved it. They were playing the audition tapes on the air. And that was the first big exposure I got. And naturally I called them and I said, "Do I get any money?" And they said, "No." I said, "Can I get *something*?" And finally they discussed it. They gave me five hundred dollars and my agency found out about it and immediately jumped into action and took fifty dollars commission. That was my first great exposure. People were seeing those and asking, "Who's that crazy guy in the *MTV* spot?"

DeBELLIS: You almost didn't get the job on *SNL*.

GILBERT: On "Saturday Night Live" when I met with all the producers, I was surprisingly a smart ass and self-destructive. They said, "What would you say if we offered you 'Saturday Night Live'?" I said, "I'll do it, but only if they fire you."

DeBELLIS: You had to explain it to producers of a comedy show that you were a comedian and were joking about the whole thing.

GILBERT: It didn't bother me. I'm used to explaining to people why my jokes are funny.

DeBELLIS: Years ago we wrote a rather risqué sketch together on "Saturday Night Live" about two proud fathers sitting at a bus stop talking about their daughters.

GILBERT: Oh, yeah, one of them started bragging about his daughter being a porno star. He'd tell the guy about his daughter's new movies like, *Not With My Face You Don't*.

DeBELLIS: We even got censors laughing and they liked us and they started to give

us movie titles like *Okla-homo...*

GILBERT: And *Blow Boat* where his daughter had to learn to sing with her mouth full.

DeBELLIS: We actually had to censor them.

GILBERT: On "Hollywood Squares" they have these censors working. Sometimes it was like they'd just spin the wheel, throw the darts, and whatever it hits would be too dirty and they'd cut it out. Because other times they'd say "no" when I would be doing something that would be clean. When Whoopie Goldberg was talking I would just jump out and climb in and get behind her. She'd say, "Oh, I got scared. I could feel him coming." I would look in the camera and say, "Whoopie could hear me cumming." And they would allow that. No problem. They had another one where they said, "In space this grows an inch and a half." So I said, "That would make me two and a half inches." Of course they said, "no" to that. They didn't know I was just stating a fact.

DeBELLIS: You told me there was one answer you really liked. They were cartoon characters?

GILBERT: Oh, yeah. I think they were named, Tootem, Tuggy, and Squirtle. So I said, "Whenever they tug on my totem it definitely squirdles." That was a no, no. Another time the real answer was "A Giant Horn," or something. The question was, "What weighs a ton and gets blown twice a day?" I said, "A very happy whale." That they wouldn't allow. Another time they said if they lined up all the Chinese in a line, and they passed by me how long would it take? I said, "Well how do you know that it's not the same guy just passing you by over and over?" That they wouldn't allow. Then I'd get away with stuff that's totally filthy.

DeBELLIS: You got in hot water for something you said on the Emmys.

GILBERT: That was right after Pee Wee Herman got arrested in the porn theater for masturbation. Because masturbating in a porn theater, who ever heard of such a thing? It looked like his career was over. He was on the cover of every magazine, the mug shot. I was on the Emmys as a presenter. They said, just go up there and have fun. And to

me what's more fun than masturbation? So I went up and I said, "I really sleep better at night knowing that Pee Wee Herman's in prison. If masturbation's a crime I should be on death row. I think that at the age of 12 I was already Al Capone. Right now my right hand is like Superman. You could put charcoal in it and I'd crush it into a diamond. And how exactly did they prove he was masturbating? Did they dust for prints?" And that got bleeped on the West Coast. The producers of the show sent out apologies. "We'll never have him back on the show." Critics were writing about it. One critic called it a sneak attack on the unsuspecting American public who may have been watching with their families. And this was the *Fox* network that was shocked and they were putting out shows like "Thongs of Today," or whatever they could get away with. The funny part of it is, at the time, I was recording *Aladdin* for *Disney*. I was too dirty for *Fox* but clean enough for *Disney*. My career has always been walking the tightrope between morning children's programming and hardcore pornography.

DeBELLIS: Oh, that reminds me, you just came out with an album. Do you want to tell us about it?

GILBERT: Okay, if you insist. I came out with a dirty joke DVD basically to have something to sell after the show. I'd be working someplace and there'd be an open-



Gilbert Gottfried is the voice of Iago the Parrot in the family cartoon adventure *Disney's Aladdin*.



The Aristocrats (2005).

auditioned I just tossed the script out. I started going more and more crazy with it. After they agreed that I would do it, they kept sending me scripts and I would just toss the scripts out, because I knew I wasn't going to follow it. That's another thing when people talk about it. They say that Eddie remembered his old friend Gilbert and put him in. Murphy said to me he had no idea that I was in it till he saw the morning run down. This is uh... Audie Murphy, all the kids now-a-days know these names. Of course, I'm kidding. Anyway, I started completely ignoring the script and was improvising. Murphy immediately started playing along with it. He didn't do anything off the script either. We went back and forth and we would be laughing. To this day people come up to me in the street and say, "I got something in this hand, and if I put something in that hand, and this hand..."

DeBELLIS: You take a lot of risks on stage, and you often do these obscure bits that a few people in the audience get.

GILBERT: Like Myron Cohen (old time comic) as the Son of Sam. (Going into a flawless Myron Cohen, who spoke with a heavy Jewish accent) "So I run out, to kill two people in a car. They unroll the window, I shoot the two of them. They say, 'Why are you shooting us?' I say, 'A dog told me to.' They say, 'You doing this because a dog told you to do this? That's why you're doing this?' I said, 'You got a better reason?'"

DeBELLIS: You were hysterical in *The Aristocrats*.

GILBERT: It was perfect for me, an old dirty joke which I could make even filthier. On the DVD version I did, I say, your mother is fucking the dog and your dog is fucking your father and it's getting more and more perverted with blood and semen, and in each one the father is doing the daughter and the daughter is doing the son. In the middle of it I turned to the camera and said, "This is a favorite family practice of beloved character actor Kevin McCarthy (original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*)." Now it turns out one of the guys who's an editor on *The Aristocrats* actually is friends with Kevin McCarthy. So he said to Kevin McCarthy, "In this new film, *The Aristocrats*, on the DVD, this comedian Gilbert Gottfried says the following..." And he repeats the whole thing, the father doing the dog and the dog doing the daughter bla, bla, bla... "And it gets more and more disgusting and this is a

favorite family practice of beloved character actor Kevin McCarthy." And Kevin McCarthy, who's like a hundred, goes (imitating Kevin) "Well that's offensive." And his friend starts to say, "Well, Gilbert Gottfried has a tendency to go..." And Kevin McCarthy goes... "I'm not a character actor... I'm a lead."

DeBELLIS: That's very funny.

GILBERT: I'll take that as a compliment. I remember one compliment I got from a performer. Notice my clever segue. We were working in Las Vegas, and he had a great show and my show just tanked. So after the show we're going to a club, we got into a cab... Yes he paid... Need you even ask? So we go to the club and a guy says to the comic, "You were hysterical and the other guy sucked." No one knew what to say. Afterward the other comic said to me, "Look you want to know why I did great tonight and you did so poorly? It's like you're Neiman Marcus and I'm Kmart." It was one of my biggest compliments ever and the closest I'll ever get to Neiman Marcus.

DeBELLIS: What was the best?

GILBERT: I was working on a film. Of course they cut me out of it. I remember Richard Pryor saying (doing a great impression of Pryor), "You're like super funny. Even if you don't want to be funny, you're going to be funny." That was an amazing thing. All I kept thinking was, "Can you go and say that on TV. Go on 'Entertainment Tonight,' tell my parents, something." Me hearing that didn't do a bit of good.

DeBELLIS: Somebody must have heard. You keep working. You've been on just about every talk show.

GILBERT: I never was on Carson. I did Letterman a lot. I did Leno a lot. They'd have me come in and do these bits. I'd never know until I got there. They'd dress me up as a gorilla or the Queen of England or something. One time they dressed me up as Kim Young Yee, the dictator of Korea. They put me in an army outfit. I didn't even try to do an accent. I wasn't imitating him. It was just me...no make up. And afterwards they had members of the Asian Anti-Defamation League group writing in, saying they thought it was so deeply offensive to have an actor there made up with big teeth and squinty eyes.

DeBELLIS: Some people feel that you've changed the face of comedy.

GILBERT: Yes I changed the face of comedy. I used to be funny. Now can I eat my steak?

ing act who had three minutes of material and he'd be selling DVD's, and I'd see him walking away with money and it would be just too much for me. I love old dirty jokes. "A man walks into his son's room and says, 'Son if you keep doing that you're going to go blind.'" And the son says, "I'm over here Dad." So I made an album, "Gilbert Gottfried's Dirty Jokes." The title was my idea. Always thinking. Always imagining things. You can get it on my Web site, gilbertgottfried.com, unless you're all dead. Unless this is being read from Jupiter [talking like a space man]. "What is this Web site he speaks of?" Because we all know from science fiction movies that people speak English on other planets. They just wear aluminum foil outfits, but they all speak perfect English, because they intercepted our radio broadcasts. There are people living in this country their entire lives who are trying to learn from watching TV. You still can't make out what they say, like me for instance.

DeBELLIS: How did you get *Beverly Hill's Cop II*?

GILBERT: A lot of people were auditioning for that. I went in and just ignored the script totally. The original scene with the financial manager, was that Eddie goes in, and this is Eddie Canter. It was a black and white film and we broke into a song. No, it was Eddie Murphy. Eddie goes in. He has some traffic tickets and he has to pay for these tickets. And the character says, "Is there some way we can take care of this?" I say, "No, you have to pay two hundred dollars." Eddie says, "Very well," and he just hands him two hundred dollars. When I