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WHILE we await the details that we hope will somehow explain the shocking murder of comedian Phil Hartman, we reflect on the gifts he gave us over his twelve years on the national comedy scene. Great comics do much more than make us laugh, and when they depart they leave us with more than a stale bag of jokes. Great comics help us recognize and confront our social demons in a strangely therapeutic way. They home in on cultural fault lines, probing them, provoking mild tremors of laughter -- and in doing so, they ease tensions and help to lessen the severity of the major quakes.



Of course, this is not how they think of themselves, any more than musicians are mindful of their role as secular priests. Jerry Seinfeld's famous denials about a conscious politics of comedy are no doubt entirely sincere. *We just try to make people laugh -- that's all.* Comedy's potency involves sublimation; it requires that neither the performer nor the audience have much, if any, awareness of the turbulent psycho-social counseling session that is going on just beneath the surface of the spoof or the farce or the mockery. The term "amusement" perfectly connotes the presumed harmlessness of the craft.

Hartman's *métier* was vanity; on "Saturday Night Live," "News Radio," and perhaps most importantly on "The Simpsons" he impersonated and invented characters who had at first somehow forgotten to censor their own narcissism and then had eventually started to wear it as some sort of bizarre badge of honor. He wasn't a one-joke comic, but he did have the fairly narrow tonal range of a specialist. He dissected hubris. As a colleague of mine astutely observed, his characters were clearly distinct from one another, but they were all essentially variations on a theme: gradations on the idea that the country is run by smarm.

Hartman's face was mildly expressive, but it's his voice that made him a marvel. It was, one could argue, the quintessential comic voice of the past decade -- not the most famous or necessarily the funniest, but the very embodiment of the high-gloss sarcasm that sometimes seems like our best hope of escaping the cynical celebrity hucksterism of our time. Hartman did vocally what *Spy* magazine did in print: employed irony as a tool to unmask hypocrisy and grandiosity. How do you ward off a vampire? You keep showing it its face in a mirror. The serious idea behind *Spy*, "The Simpsons," and most of Hartman's characters is that as long as we keep recognizing the demon and laughing at him, we'll make it through all right.

Unlike *Spy*, though, there was a reassuring warmth to Hartman's tone. It was accessible and, though not particularly charismatic on a physical level, it had loft. It was a tone that filtered (appropriately) into the work of other professionals, and into our own consciousness. There it will remain. -- [David Shenk](#)

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