

# Syd Hoff...the Magic, the Man and the Mystery

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## Syd Hoff and A. Redfield...Two Sides of the Same Coin

Syd Hoff was regarded as one of the great Jewish-American humorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a familiar face at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City, a friend and colleague of Sid Perelman, William Maxwell, Arthur Kober and many other literary stars of the thirties. Yet few knew of his deeply passionate commitment to the plight of the underdog and his great sensitivity to issues of class discrimination, which ultimately led him to also cartoon for a number of left-wing publications under the alias A. Redfield throughout most of the 1930s.

So carefully had Syd concealed his dual identity, that although I grew up in his extended family—the daughter of his kid sister, Dorothy, and a niece who frequently spent time with him—I had no idea of his other world until after he passed away in 2004. I stumbled on his secret while researching the mural he painted for the 1938 opening of Barney Josephson’s historic Greenwich Village jazz nightclub, Café Society, a political cabaret that fostered racial equality in entertainment *and* admission.

The following story is an excerpt from the upcoming book *Syd Hoff...the Magic, the Man and the Mystery* and tells of Syd’s early years as the budding cartoonist A. Redfield.

As the 1930s began to unfold, the world was changing in radical ways, moving from the crisis of World War I into the Great Depression. The times were tough and as people were struggling for their survival on all levels – personally, financially and emotionally – the voices of discontent grew louder and louder. Syd was becoming part of that voice of discontent. Not only did he see firsthand how the Depression affected his own family, with his father losing 40 percent of his stock investments, but he also witnessed the struggles of artists, who sought government support, as the arts were deemed non-essential during the Great Depression. Artists banded together and, inspired by socialist ideology and the labor movement, organized themselves using trade union tactics, creating the Unemployed Artists Group (UAG) in 1933, which became The Artists Union (AU) the following year. Many of these New York artists originally met at the John Reed Club in New York City, which was sponsored by the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). This attracted even more radical artists and writers, including friends of Syd’s such as Phil Bard, a close childhood pal and third president of the AU, and Boris Gorelick, a classmate from the National Academy of Design, who also attended Morris High School in the Bronx, where Syd went.

One afternoon as Syd was leaving the Academy, he noticed Gorelick rushing off with a sense of purpose and determination, holding a copy of the *New York Daily News* featuring front page information about “Red” meetings in Union Square under photos of the police attacking protesters. “Boris, where are you going?” Syd asked.

“Going to a Red meeting,” Gorelick replied.

Syd would always remember what followed: “A Russian tree is just like an American tree,” Boris said, extending an invitation to join him at a meeting at the John Reed Club. Syd went along. One meeting led to another, and in short order Syd found himself ready to join the cause and cartoon for left-wing publications including *New Masses*, *Young Communist Review*, and *March of Labor*, among others. “I was white hot,” Syd said, referring to the depth and spirit of his involvement. His editor at *New Masses*, Clarence Hathaway, suggested that Syd use a pseudonym, a common practice, especially among Jews. And so the name A. Redfield was born – a humorous play on words implying “a red field.”

Syd’s one-dimensional life had now officially begun to morph into something more complex, much like the life of Superman – mild-mannered cartoonist working for a great metropolitan magazine and activist cartoonist for left wing publications. Other well known artists were part of the staff at *New Masses*, including Robert Minor (an anti-war cartoonist who helped establish the *Daily Worker* in 1924), Crockett Johnson (who later authored *Harold and the Purple Crayon*), Hugo Gellert (considered one of the greatest social artists), William Gropper (who produced powerful social protest works of the Great Depression), and the socialist cartoonist Art Young.

As Syd was beginning to establish himself as a mainstream cartoonist with *The New Yorker*, he also attended Camp Unity, an interracial, socialist adult camp located in the foothills of the Berkshire Mountains in the early ‘30s. There he met Yale Stuart, a lifeguard at the camp, and Abel Meeropol, who begged Syd to get involved in “the movement.” Syd also attended meetings of The Workers School, held at the Daily Worker building, to learn more about Lenin and the Russian Revolution.

While continuing to create humorous, yet thought-provoking cartoons under the name of Hoff for mainstream publications, including those owned by William Randolph Hearst, Syd was now enjoying a creative life under his alias, A. Redfield, supporting social issues he felt deeply connected to – class oppression, the rise of Hitler and anti-Semitism. While Syd considered himself primarily a humorist and not a political cartoonist, his “urge to do battle with evil became irresistible.”

Yet, Syd’s mother didn’t find anything humorous about the day when Syd wound up in a holding cell at the local police station after supporting fellow members of the local Cartoonists Guild in a protest against below-scale rates paid by *College Humor Magazine*. \* Although Syd’s prices were at scale, he decided to support his friends and join the protest march on the corner of 48<sup>th</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue – until a police officer decided to haul them off to jail for obstructing pedestrian traffic. As they sat in the holding cell, the group sang “Solidarity Forever,” the popular union anthem originally written for the Industrial Workers of the World. Unfortunately for Syd, this made the evening news, which his parents heard over the radio while preparing dinner. “Among those cartoonists arrested was Sydney Hoff.” My grandmother immediately fainted. Later that evening, Syd was released from jail, and after a long subway ride home he walked through the front to be greeted by his mother’s welcoming words – “Your dinner is cold.” His kid sister, one of his great supporters, was quick to follow, asking “How’s Alcatraz?”

Syd continued to pursue work in both creative worlds, and in 1935 his first book, *The Ruling Class*, was published by the *Daily Worker*, filled with over 150 cartoons depicting the oppression of the working class and the workers' corresponding disdain of the upper crust. The Introduction was written by Robert Forysthe – the pseudonym of Kyle Crichton, a writer/editor at *Collier's* magazine who also wrote a column for *New Masses* and father of novelist Robert Crichton, author of *The Secret of Santa Vittoria*. "Redfield is a superior satirist," writes Forysthe. "His drawings are so biting and cauterizing and delightful."

"Redfield was good for a sardonic smile," Jeff Kiseloff, historian and oral archivist wrote recently in his blog. "Subtlety was not his strong point, but his portrayal of American's economic upper crust was dead on, in part because his anger at the suffering caused by the Great Depression was so palpable in his drawings, and he took great glee in pointing his pen at those who were to blame."

More than seventy-five years later, many of Syd's cartoons still have that edge, and his barbed insights can occasionally draw blood. The 1935 cartoon below was recently reprinted by Occupy D.C. protestors in their premier edition of *The Occupied Washington Post* (November, 2011). The caption reads, "Should I give him a dime tip or do you think it will spoil him?"

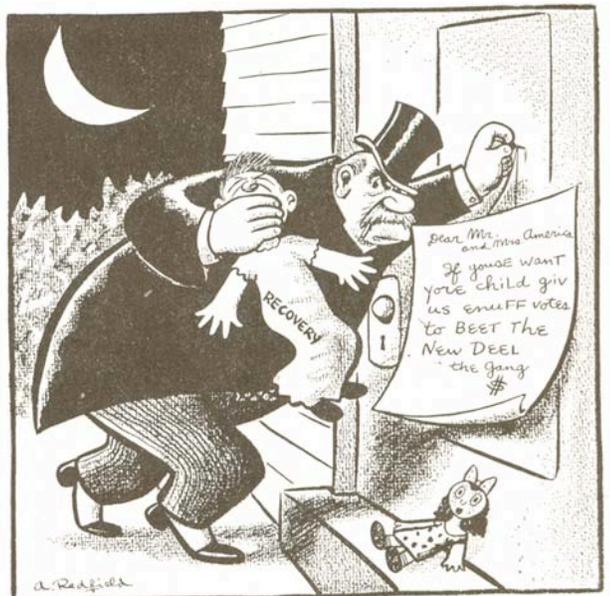


Another cartoon that has resonance today, two ladies of leisure in pearl necklaces are shown relaxing on a sofa. "I'm against unemployment insurance," one says, "It'd make people lazy."



"I'm against unemployment insurance—it'd make people lazy."

From the *New Masses*, Syd took aim at a stereotypical tycoon in top hat and formal dress who is abducting a baby, labeled "Recovery," while tacking a note on the parents' door that reads: "Dear Mr. and Mrs. America, If youse want yore child giv us enuff votes to BEET the New DEEL." The note is signed "the gang \$."



When I discovered this cartoon, I was astonished at the parallels to the current Recession – widely considered the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression – and the political arguments surrounding it. While many economists and politicians have argued in favor of extending unemployment benefits and using federal money to stimulate the sagging economy, others representing the interests of the wealthy and corporations have attempted to hold those legislative agendas hostage, arguing that it's really in the interests of the working classes to cut taxes for the rich (read, "the

gang”). What struck me as so clever about Syd’s cartoon was his stuffing the ransom note with misspellings and slang, to pose as if it had been written by someone with a working-class education.

That was the essence of Syd’s genius, though. Exposing the bully in humorous fashion, without crossing the lines of decency, made both his “Hoff” and “Redfield” cartoons so appealing, and he received high praise for this from colleagues. “Redfield performed a miracle,” said Garner Rea, one of the original contributing artists to *The New Yorker*, in a blurb for *The Ruling Class*. “He has made our Upper Classes—yours and mine – almost as ridiculous as they have succeeded in making themselves. Nobody could do more.” Robert Minor, a political cartoonist, radical journalist, and leading member of the American Communist Party, said at the time, “Redfield is one of the geniuses among the cartoonists of our day. There is a vitality that promises to grow.”

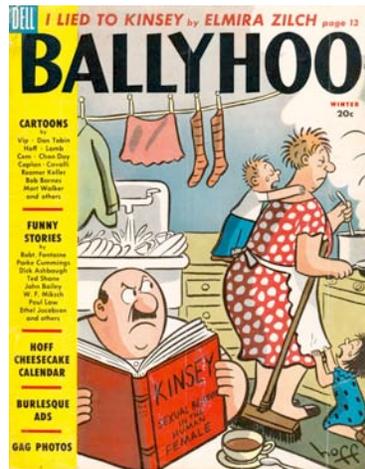
Nonetheless, Syd did not consider himself to be a political cartoonist per se. “Political cartooning takes not only courage, but also a special kind of skill,” he once said. “Everybody can love a comic artist. Not everyone can love a political cartoonist. If you want to be loved by everybody, don’t become a political cartoonist.” He went on to say, “I stuck by those sentiments for most of my life, except way back in the early days of Hitler’s rise to power, and offered them anywhere they would be accepted.”

Syd managed to broker both worlds and not alienate himself from either through the universal language of down-to-earth humor coupled with simple art, as shown in one cartoon that was part of a subscription offer for the *New Masses*. Even as Syd was in the process of actively seeking more mainstream cartoon connections, including Hearst publications, he took shots at the conservative publishing magnate.



Still at an impressionable age, Syd was passionate about doing whatever he could with his craft to make the world a better place, one that was more equitable for the little

guy. He was a risk taker with creative talent who knew how to use humor to make a point, knowing that underneath it all, everyone has a sense of humor. “Everyone is waiting to be amused, to laugh, to smile,” Syd once said. “A good cartoon has got to remind people of something they’re faced with. They won’t laugh unless it’s something they’ve seen or experienced.”



Ballyhoo Magazine - 1954

Syd also found time to read books by some of the great writers, including the French novelist Honoré de Balzac, whose insights into the working class conditions earned him the esteem of Socialists and Marxists; and Guy de Maupassant, who wrote about the futility of armed conflict during the Franco-Prussian War of the 1870s. He was also a fan of the American novelists Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, both concerned about class struggles; and novelist and journalist Theodore Dreiser, who railed against social injustices and became an important influence for Syd. “He was my life,” Syd said of Dreiser. Dreiser also headlined fundraisers for the war and was an outspoken critic of the government trials against Sacco & Vanzetti and the Scottsboro Boys.

After three years at the National Academy of Design, Syd abruptly left, following an embarrassing moment during the Annual Exhibition held at their gallery. While hanging some of the art, he and another classmate accidentally hung one abstract painting upside down, believing it looked the same from either direction. Looking up, the artist who created the painting let out a scream, which later caused a metaphoric ripple of laughter throughout the greater art community of New York City. After suffering several days of embarrassment, Syd decided he couldn’t continue to face his teachers, and he quit. Heart-stricken, he called his folks, who were enjoying a few days in the Catskill Mountains, in upstate New York. They extended an invitation for him to join them.

When Syd returned from his weekend getaway, he continued to maneuver between the two worlds he created, as many fellow cartoonists did. Ben Yomen, considered the dean of labor cartoonists, told me that being a radical in the 1930s was a hard pill to swallow. A lot of people didn’t look up to those who were involved in the

movement – they looked down in judgment. Ben was affiliated with the big labor organizations and demonstrated in the Ford Hunger March in 1932. He worked for *Federated Press* and *New Masses* and found work on projects created by the Depression-era government organization known as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Ben had also used a pseudonym during those years. Publishers knew this to be an accepted practice, especially among Jews, who were especially concerned about shielding themselves and their families from discrimination and persecution.

Rallies and protest marches continued to appeal to Syd's inner activist. The substandard working conditions of the coal miners and steel workers brought him to Pittsburgh to see first hand what was going on, and to figure out how he could support their cause through the vehicle of the cartoon. The Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which pitted Fascist army forces under General Francisco Franco against working-class revolutionaries in support of the Republican government, struck a profound chord with Syd. He felt a deep yearning to join his fellow comrades and enlist as a soldier with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a 2,800-volunteer unit consisting mostly of Jews, who were headed to Spain in 1936 aboard the SS *Normandie*. He sadly recalled standing dockside at the Hudson River as many old friends were departing, including Yale Stuart (who lost his arm during battle), Phil Bard (who helped organize the first group of volunteers), radical cartoonist Robert Minor, and William Herrick (who wrote *Hermanos!*, a novel about the war). "I was dying to go myself," Syd said. But he was torn between two worlds – the global community and the family he grew up with, including his mother, who was able to use her physical maladies, including episodes of high blood pressure, along with generous helpings of Jewish guilt to persuade Syd that if he joined the Brigade, he'd most likely come home in a body bag. After deep reflection he did the next best thing to fighting, which was to stay in the country and support the cause through various events and fundraisers.

One of those events occurred at Columbus Circle in Manhattan. Along with other artists, including Abe Birnbaum, Syd stood on the street giving a "chalk talk"—executing simple cartoon-like drawings with relevant commentary – while posing for photographers. His goal was to raise awareness about the war and support the "Relief Ship" that was headed to Spain to bring much-needed medical supplies for the elected Republican government that was under attack by Franco and the Fascists. Other events sponsored by *New Masses* included a 1938 fundraiser at Carnegie Hall, entitled "From Spirituals to Swing," which featured black gospel music, blues musicians, big bands and small jazz combos. It represented the first time African Americans performed to an integrated audience at a major commercial venue, and featured many of the same artists who made the opening of Barney Josephson's Café Society such a success just a few days later. Syd also joined the ranks of fellow travelers as they marched through New York City, straight into Union Square, for one of the annual May Day Parades supporting union workers.

In the midst of securing his place as a left wing cartoonist, Syd also became the art director for *Young Pioneer* magazine, another left-wing publication. At the same time, he was continuing to increase his mainstream visibility by having more of his cartoons published in *The New Yorker* and other magazines and newspapers, including *Liberty*,

*Collier's*, *College Humor*, *Judge* and *The New York Journal-American*, a daily newspaper owned by William Randolph Hearst.

The 1930s continued to fill Syd's plate with opportunities to expand as an artist in a multitude of venues, as he met colorful characters who fueled his passion to make a difference in the world. One cold winter day while walking in Greenwich Village, Syd ran into a friend, Sam Shaw, an artist and photographer (who later created the Marilyn Monroe image of her standing over the subway grate), and another man whom he didn't know, a New Jersey shoe salesman and jazz aficionado named Barney Josephson. After Barney revealed that he was in the midst of renovating a basement space for a nightclub, he led his companions to the century-old building on Sheridan Square where all this was taking place. Syd listened intently as Barney described this innovative club, to be known as Café Society. Wittingly dubbed "the wrong place for the Right people" by Clare Boothe Luce (before becoming a Republican member of Congress), it would become a political cabaret –the first integrated nightclub in the country that welcomed blacks and whites alike, both as performers and customers. The walls were to be decorated with satirical murals to be drawn by local artists. As soon as Syd heard this, he excitedly took Barney up on his offer to do a mural. Sam Shaw then contacted nine other artists whose talents proved to be a great match for Barney's vision. They included:

- Ad Reinhardt, a *New Yorker* cartoonist, the son of socialist parents, and member of the Artists Union and Left Wing American Arts Congress.
- William Gropper, A cartoonist whose work appeared in *The New Masses*. His art depicts harsh realities of social injustices played out in everyday life.
- Sam Berman, political cartoonist for *Collier's*. He originated the original trademark for the cover of *Esquire* magazine (called "Esky")
- John Groth, art editor and cartoonist for *Esquire*, who also drew gag cartoons for *The New Yorker* and political cartoons for the afternoon New York newspaper, *PM*.
- Anton Refregier, a diehard Communist who fled the Russian Revolution with his parents and saw only the evils of capitalism in America. His art reflected social realism.
- Abe Birnbaum, the cartoonist who created 72 covers for *The New Yorker* in addition to 141 cartoons inside.
- Christina Malman, a *New Yorker* artist who drew over 35 covers and more than 500 drawings.
- Gregor Duncan, cartoonist for *Life* magazine, *PM* and the *Daily Worker*. He and Syd marched together at one May Day Parade to Union Square, where CPUSA headquarters were located. This yearly event supported the labor movement. He became an illustrator for Ernest Hemingway.

Barney instructed these artists to paint whatever they wanted to in their given space on the walls. They would have absolute freedom to let their imagination take flight. He would pay for their supplies and would give each of them \$125 for their work, along with a \$125 due bill, which they could use at the club for food and drinks. Syd's nine-by-five foot mural depicted a spoof of a fan dancer – a round-bellied man with moustache, wearing his red nightshirt and holding a large white fan, sashaying around the tables at a

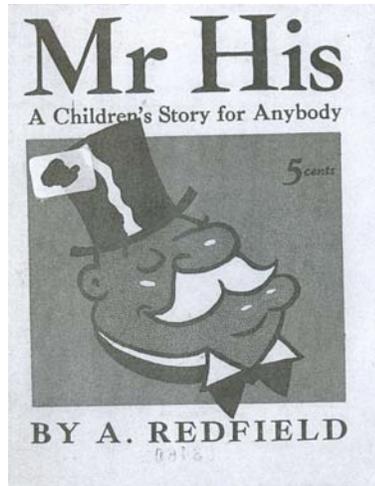
dinner club surrounded by the crusty upper class, who surveyed him with their noses turned up.



After signing his name with the usual lower case “hoff,” he looked around the room at the other finished murals. Then, feeling his work was as good as the others, decided to add the initials N.A. after his signature, which indicated he had been awarded the recognition of “National Academician,” bestowed by fellow classmates at the Academy in recognition of high quality of work. It was the mark of utmost prestige. He then asked Barney if he could decorate the restrooms.

With Barney’s blessing, Syd headed to the ladies’ lounge. The empty wall soon took on a personality of its own and later became an ad for Ivory Soap. It featured a dowager character wearing her lorgnette, sitting in a bathtub filled with water and bubbles up to her bosom. Her butler is at her side, with nose turned up and one sleeve rolled up, about to reach down and pull out the soap as the dowager exclaims, “I thought the ad said ‘it floats.’” After doing a second drawing in the ladies’ lounge, Syd moved onto the men’s room where he drew a urinal and alongside a twelve-inch ruler. The same dowager exclaims “Ooooh...soooo big” as she looks through her opera glasses. Café Society opened its doors in December of 1938, and featured some of the greatest jazz and blues performers of their time, including Hazel Scott, Lena Horne, Sarah Vaughan, and Joe Turner, all of whom also performed earlier that month at the landmark concert From Spirituals to Swing. It was here, at Café Society, that Billie Holiday made famous the song “Strange Fruit,” about the lynching of blacks in the south, written by Abel Meeropol, an English teacher, poet and closet Communist, who later adopted the children of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg after they were convicted of espionage and executed in 1953. (Meeropol wrote under the pseudonym Lewis Allen.) The club also featured some of the top social satirists of the era, including Zero Mostel, Imogene Coca, Jack Gilford and Jimmy Savo. Syd enjoyed many hours at the club, eating, drinking and hobnobbing with the colorful and thought-provoking group of left-wing patrons, whatever their color.

The following year, Syd wrote his first children’s story, although it was not written for a mainstream publication. Under his pseudonym A. Redfield, *Mr. His...a Children’s Story for Anybody* was published by *New Masses*. It’s a story about a man,



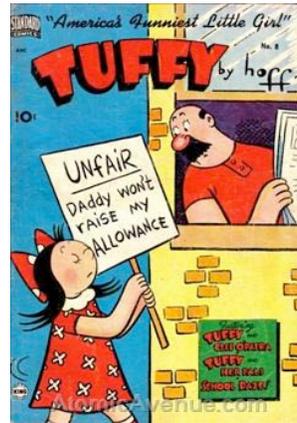
Mr. His, who owns everything and everyone in town, until a group of disgruntled citizens band together and drive him away. Although the narrative appears to be for young readers, it does serve a dual purpose. As scholar Phil Nel, co-author OF *Tales for Little Rebels*, points out, “Mr. His is both a social fable in the guise of a children’s book and a children’s book containing a social fable. On the one hand, Redfield seems interested in using the children’s genre to satirize adult problems: the tale of Histown nearly reduces society to a struggle between one greedy fat oligarch (Mr. His) and the hard-working people. On the other hand, Redfield remains mindful of the potential child reader, explaining that while you might like ‘to own everything,’ it ‘wouldn’t be much fun’ to ‘own everything while everybody else had nothing.’”

Syd challenged the status quo in children’s literature by inspiring children to look more deeply at the choices they make and the consequences that follow. “Satire,” he said, “should be used, not as a medium of escape, but as an amusing and educational means of improving the cultural level of the masses.”

Following his decision to leave the National Academy of Design, Syd had met a 14-year old girl named Dora, a talented piano player whom everyone called Dutch. Syd was enthralled with her musical talent as well as her beauty, and four years later they were married. In 1939, thinking that he might be able to find work as a gag cartoonist, Syd and Dutch traveled to Hollywood, where they re-connected with George Willner, a close friend of Syd’s and the former office manager at *New Masses*, who had relocated to the West Coast. For several months, agents had insisted that work was plentiful out there, but as Syd recounted, “It was hardly the time to start a career in the motion-picture industry, the House Un-American Activities Committee having begun its witch-hunt, and a producer wouldn’t even hire his own mother unless she had been ‘cleared.’ Anyway, a phone call from Pop in New York informed me that although his stocks were still down, my mother’s blood pressure was up, so we turned the car around and headed back east.”

All was not lost, though, as word came to Syd that Hearst was impressed with his work and had solicited him to write a comic strip for his newspapers. After several attempts, *Tuffy* was born later that same year. A popular strip about a young tenement girl

who said funny things and often got into trouble with her friends with her antics, *Tuffy* ran for ten years and appeared in over 800 newspapers worldwide.



As the decade was beginning to wind down, Syd's inner pendulum continued to swing between the creative worlds of Redfield and Hoff. The political climate in this country and overseas was becoming more volatile and fragile, and even as the Depression finally began to loosen its grip on America, another global conflict was brewing in Europe. Given his intense passion for social justice, the world stage had become a great source of inspiration for Syd, whether his cartoons appeared in mainstream or left wing publications. In spite of the ever-changing times, one thing never changed for Syd – his ability to use humor to communicate, and to understand that on some level everyone appreciates a moment of lightness in their lives, even in the midst of adversity. For him, that was the glue that kept the ups and downs of life connected.

(Stay turned for Part 2: The FBI is just around the corner)