

Amusement

# Great Moments in the History of **LAUGHTER**

by **Jeff Baker**

Illustrated by Eldon Doty



## Laugh and the World Laughs With You . . .

*Laugh at your friends if your friends are sore, / So much the better, you may laugh the more.*

—Alexander Pope, English poet (1688–1744)

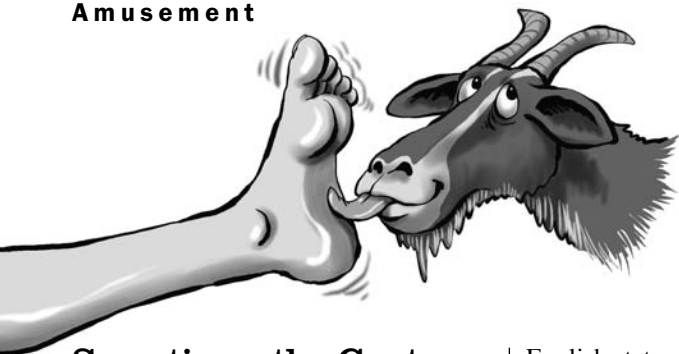
**R**oman philosopher Democritus (460–370 B.C.) earned great respect for determining that all matter in the universe is made up of atoms, but his neighbors found him strange because he laughed. At everything.

Concerned, they called in Hippocrates. He found Democritus unkempt, dissecting animal spleens in order to study their bile, and laughing all the while. The pair began discussing the absurdities of human nature, and, before long, each agreed that life is laughable.

Hippocrates assured the townspeople that Democritus was not deranged; indeed, he believed that Democritus's measured view of the world proved his sanity. Ever after, Democritus was known as “the laughing philosopher.”



(continued)



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## Sometimes the Goat Gets You

*'Tis a good thing to laugh at any rate;  
and if a straw can tickle a man, it is an  
instrument of happiness.*

—John Dryden, English poet (1631–1700)

**T**he Moravian Brethren, a sect of Anabaptists that originated in 15th-century Bohemia, believed in nonviolence toward miscreants, no matter how devilish the deeds. These pacifists reserved a fate worse than death for the most serious offenders: tickling, which can be tortuous when prolonged.

The brothers liberally coated a victim's feet with salt and then brought in one or more goats for a salty snack of . . . sole food. The condemned did not die directly from the tickling but most likely expired from cardiac arrest or brain hemorrhage brought on by the squirming, struggling, heavy breathing, and laughing that the tickling had induced.

## If You're Happy and You Know It . . . Don't Show It

*Beware you don't laugh, for then you show  
all your faults.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, American poet (1803–82)

**P**hilip Dormer Stanhope (1694–1773),

English statesman and author of *Letters to His Son*, a book of advice and commentary upon the morality of the day, advised that when amused, a gentleman should show the ultimate in restraint: “A man of parts and fashion is . . . only seen to smile but never heard to laugh. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners.”

## N<sub>2</sub>O Pain, N<sub>2</sub>O Gain

*Laugh and be well.*

—Matthew Green, English poet (1696–1737)

**A**lthough chemist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) in 1772 became the first person to isolate and study nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O), or laughing gas, a practical scientific use for it would not come along until the second half of the 19th century. In the interim, it remained a sort of recreational drug, taken for its euphoric, giddy, and relaxing effects. Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge waxed poetic about the colorless, sweet-smelling gas. Chemistry and medical students were known to hold “laughing gas parties.”

Self-proclaimed “professors” traveled the countryside, purportedly lecturing on chemistry and conducting demonstrations, inviting attendees to partake. Among these teachers was Samuel Colt (aka “Dr. Coult”), later famous for his re-

volvers, and P. T. Barnum, who opened a laughing gas show at his American Museum in New York in 1844.

In December of that year, while attending an “exhilarating gas” show, dentist Horace Wells observed that a gas-intoxicated man didn’t flinch when he stumbled and cut his leg. Recognizing the gas’s potential as an anesthetic, Wells convinced a group of physicians to observe a demonstration at which he would have one of his own wisdom teeth extracted while under the effect of the gas.

The operation went off without a scream, and one of the mainstays of dental anesthetics was born.

## Monkey See, Monkey Do—Not

*Laffing iz the sensation ov pheeling good all over and showing it principally in one spot.*

—Josh Billings, American humorist (1818–85)

**E**nglish biologist Charles Darwin (1809–82) published *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* in 1872. This work contained at least one notable observation: “If a young chimpanzee be tickled—the armpits are particularly sensitive to tickling, as in the case of our

children—a more decided chuckling or laughing sound is uttered; though the laughter is somewhat noiseless.”

## Play It Again (and Again)

*Can you withhold your laughter, my friends?*

—Horace, Roman poet and satirist (65–8 a.c.)

**O**ne of the recording industry’s first hits was “The Laughing Record.” Released in 1922 by Okeh Records, the recording contained a trumpet solo and the guffawing of a fictional German tavern-keeper and his wife.

This inspired a field of imitators, including Jelly Roll Morton, who released “Hyena Stomp” in 1927; Louis Armstrong, who made “Laughin’ Louie” in 1933; and Sidney Bechet and his band, who released “Laughing in Rhythm” in 1941, with Bechet imitating the sounds of laughter on his saxophone.

The song that most closely follows the form of the Okeh record is Spike Jones’s “The Flight of the Bumblebee” (also known as “the Jones laughing record”), popular in the late 1940s. On it, a trombonist’s solo is interrupted by outbursts of laughter by professional laughers.

“The Laughing Record” is often cited

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as the first successful novelty record, and it remains one of the most popular niche recordings of all time.

### Cue the Laughter

*Where is the laughter that shook the rafter?  
Where is the rafter, by the way?*

—Thomas Bailey Aldrich, American author (1836–1907)

**T**he TV situation comedy *The Hank McCune Show*, first broadcast in September 1950, was distinctive for the first-ever use of a laugh track, an edited audio tape of people laughing. The show lasted only three months but the sound effect lived on, despite the skeptical review of its debut in *Variety*: “There are chuckles and yocks dubbed in. Whether this induces a jovial mood in home viewers is still to be determined, but the practice may have unlimited possibilities.”

Today, laugh tracks are created by secretive “laugh men” with a keyboard and a foot pedal or digital technology (few will discuss or even acknowledge their work), although industry legend has it that tracks from 1950s TV classics *I Love Lucy* and *The Red Skelton Show* are still in use.

Readers may have gotten the best guffaw: In 1999, *TIME* magazine included the laugh track in its list of The 100 Worst Ideas of the Century.

### The Last Laugh

*He laughs best who laughs last.*

—proverb

**I**n March 1975, a 50-year-old bricklayer was at home in Norfolk, England, watching a television comedy called *The Goodies*, during which a kilted Scotsman used his bagpipe to defend himself against

attack from a black pudding (blood sausage). The man found the scene so hilarious that he laughed uncontrollably and hard—and did not stop. His laughing fit lasted for 25 minutes, after which time, according to his wife, he gave a final “tremendous belly laugh, slumped on the settee, and died.”

### A Healthy Laugh

*Laughter’s never an end, it’s a by-product.*

—Maxwell Struthers Burt, American poet and rancher (1882–1954)

**I**f you pass a public park, don’t be surprised to see a group of people laughing in unison. It may be a meeting of members of Laughing Clubs International. The organization was founded by Madan Kataria, M.D., who in the early 1990s ran a private medical practice in Bombay, India. Kataria became fascinated with scientific evidence indicating that laughter is beneficial to mental and physical health. He and his wife, Madhuri, a yoga teacher, began integrating yoga breathing, stretching, clapping, and exercises to create what they called Laughter Yoga.

The first group met in the couple’s home and exchanged jokes to induce laughter. Quickly, Kataria realized that humor was not necessary. After a warm-up of “ho-ho, ha-ha” in unison, the group engaged in laughter exercises for 30 to 45 minutes. Soon, they were laughing freely and uncontrollably, spurred on by the laughter of the other attendees, and Laughter Yoga took off. □□

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**Jeff Baker** learned to read by studying the cue cards on TV’s *Laugh-In* in the early 1970s. His work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Oxford American*, and other publications.