

## ARTE JOHNSON RECORDED MY AUDIOBOOK (WHICH INCLUDED A CAMEO APPEARANCE BY ARTE JOHNSON)

Sometime in 2003 the late Beverly Hills publisher Michael Viner called me to say, “I’ve got a funny title: *The Cat Who Killed Lilian Jackson Braun*.”

I considered this for a moment. “You know, that *is* a funny title.”

With no more direction than the title, I wrote Viner an original novel that summer. I had never read Lilian Jackson Braun, and so I dutifully checked out about five of them from the library. Since Braun’s world felt (to me) so sanitized, sexless, and white-bread, I decided to make my story as ethnic, vulgar, and puerile as I could get away with. The novelist Philip Roth (dying in my story from a lung ailment) played a significant role in my mystery—and he spent much of the story railing against the world, particularly the publishing world, from his sick bed. When he was wasn’t complaining that he deserved the Pulitzer Prize for every novel he’d ever written, Roth watched reruns of *Laugh-In*. He found the show a riveting relic of its time—and he particularly loved Arte Johnson as the dirty old man on the park bench leering at Ruth Buzzi.

I wrote the novel primarily to amuse myself (under the copyright, a disclaimer announced: “All of the jokes in this novel were originally rejected by *The New Yorker*”), and no one was more surprised and delighted than I was when the novel received a superb review (“wildly funny, biting satire”) in *Publishers Weekly*. Fans of Lilian Jackson Braun, of course, hated the book, and they complained vociferously on Amazon that the story was “pornography.” Others found it inspired. And the novel, quite mysteriously, sold well. In 2006 Viner told me he’d asked Arte Johnson to record the audiobook.

“Arte Johnson is *in* the novel,” I said.

“I know.”

The next call was Viner telling me that Johnson had read the manuscript and was uncomfortable with the vulgarity; he was afraid of offending his grandchildren.

I wrote a long, elaborate email to Johnson arguing that the vulgarity had a genuinely satirical point and that we couldn’t make fun of the offense-less world of Lilian Jackson Braun without it.

He relented, and about a month later I received in the mail, in its bright orange cover, the 4 compact disk set that comprised the audiobook. No one had ever recorded a novel of mine before. I listened almost exclusively in the car as I drove to work. And Johnson was terrific—a vocal chameleon right up there with Peter Sellers in his ability to lose himself completely in the characters. He did a Sydney Greenstreet impersonation (in the spirit of *The Maltese Falcon*) that ran a full ten minutes. He voiced an effete intellectual; a sex-starved murderous housewife; my inept overweight detective Q.; his sprightly teenaged sidekick Sally; an *extremely* Jewish Philip Roth who laced his tirades with all the Yiddish I could borrow from my father. And right in the middle of the novel—as Roth held court about why he was so fascinated by *Laugh-In*—Arte Johnson got to play Arte Johnson doing his celebrated lurch Tyrone F. Horneigh. Johnson even got to sing the entire “*Laugh-In* Looks at the News” jingle. There was a deliciously ironic chuckle in his voice as he seemed to wordlessly acknowledge the absurdity of what he was doing. And in the final scene of the novel, when Q. and his partner Sally finally

part (she's going back Dartmouth), Johnson's narration felt bittersweet and touching. The last line came right from *Laugh-In*. "We've got to stop meeting like this. I think Harold is getting suspicious."

Arte Johnson seemed to have arrived fully formed from another planet—a world vastly sweeter and more surreal than the one we mortals lived on. I will miss him.