

CELEBRATING THE UNDERBELLY OF AMERICA

JEAN SHEPHERD'S AMERICA

by Fred Barzyk,
series producer

I can still remember that cold Saturday twenty-five years ago when a radio show changed my life forever. My Emerson table-top radio was especially plagued with interference that day as I tuned past the endless cacophony of "Top '40s" and deejays reading the news.

Suddenly, an insistent voice came rasping out of the static telling an epic tale of a boy who worked at a steel mill along Lake Michigan. Like some Joycean jazz musician who used words instead of notes, his voice instead of a saxophone, he told of steelworkers undaunted by heat-tapped giant vats of molten steel, who drank beer at the Bluebird Tavern, bowled occasional gutterballs, and lived "in that great inverted bowl of darkness, that stygian bowl of Omar Khayyam, the Midwest." This was coming out of my red plastic Emerson radio? Who the hell was this guy? What was he doing?

The voice continued:

"Why does a man become a revolutionary? Just when is that precise instant of stark realization when he perceives, with unmistakable clarity, that he is but a humble tenpin in the cosmic bowling game of life? And that others are balls in that game? Look closely in the early private life of any great revolutionary and you will find a girl. Somewhere along the line, a pair of elfin eyes put Karl Marx down so decisively that he went home and wrote the first words of his *Manifesto*.

I well remember my own turning point. Like most pivotal

moments in our lives, it came unexpectedly and in the guise of rare good fortune. Her name was Daphne Bigelow. Even now, I cannot suppress a fugitive shiver of tremulous passion and dark yearning."

Wham! My refrigerator clunked in and the static crackled out of the speaker. I feverishly tried to tune in that voice. All I got was The Coasters singing "Yakety Yak, Don't Talk Back!" Suddenly the refrigerator stopped its infernal whirring.

And the voice on the radio continued,

"Only in America do we truly believe that the *past* was beautiful, romantic, clean, and bright. We also believe that the *future* will somehow be exciting, magical... it's only the *now*, the accursed *now*, that is rotten."

I knew then that I had to work with Jean Shepherd.

As a young producer-director working for educational television in Boston, this seemed somewhat problematical. How was I going to entice an entertainer who had appeared on Broadway, made guest appearances on network shows, written a best-selling novel, won awards for his humorous short stories, and become a legend to his fans in New York? Cautiously, a group of us drafted a letter asking if he would like to come to WGBH Boston and be given thirty minutes of air time to do *anything* he wanted. Unfortunately, all we could offer was a dollar as a token honorarium. That was twenty-odd years ago. He accepted, and we have been working together ever since.

Jean Shepherd is a rare breed, a survivor from the glory years of broadcasting when individual creative per-

sonalities reigned supreme: Dave Garroway, Ernie Kovacs, Jack Parr, Ransom Sherman, Kukla, Fran, and Ollie, and Soupy Sales, to name just a few, people who had a vision and a chance to ply their art on television—unthinkable in the mainstream "copycat" broadcasting mentality of contemporary network television.

It seems appropriate somehow that the grown-up educational television, now called public television, should be the home for this singular American humorist. Where else will prime-time television allow a crazed artist to pursue his wildest dreams in front of millions of viewers? On NBC? ABC? CBS? Fat chance.

Jean Shepherd's America, a series of thirteen unabashedly personal and joyful half-hours, has found its home on PBS, and those in the audience who are open to adventure may find the same excitement I did when I first heard Jean Shepherd.

But be warned: This is like no other show now on television. Each week, Shepherd's head is screwed on a little differently, and what comes out surprises this producer as much as it will the viewers.



When Jean Shepherd plays tourist, he does it right.

My old Emerson radio is long gone. I now own three televisions... one color, one black-and-white, and one that doesn't work. I have a lot of channel choices too, because I have cable. *Dr. Ruth and Good Sex*, *World Champion Water Polo*, and *Headline News*, because I'm too busy to listen to the 7:00 P.M. network news. Most of the time I leave the TV on—it's like video wallpaper. It fills up the void. Maybe somewhere out there, someone will find Jean Shepherd like I did. Somewhere in between *The Love Boat* and *Divorce Court*. If that happens, I'll be very happy. ■

Jean Shepherd's America
April 24, 7:30 P.M.