

# Jean Shepherd Leads His Flock on a Search for Truth

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

ON Saturday night the invaders arrive early at the Greenwich Village coffee house, slipping past the regulars, past clusters of men and women drinking from beer mugs and puffing on tiny cigars and glaring with utter disdain at the newcomers, the invaders, the squares. The regulars lean back on the dirty benches and watch the young men in crew cuts and those blue suits and buttoned-down shirts and regimental ties and cordovans, and the young girls, those young, pink-cheeked, slightly overweight girls with velveteen bows tucked in their blond hair.

The invaders drive in from Queens, Staten Island, Newark, Jersey City, Brooklyn and all points north of Fourteenth Street. They park near Sheridan Square and when they enter the Lighthouse they move awkwardly past the icy stares of the imitation Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jeanne Moreau before reaching a staircase where reservations are checked, smiles exchanged, ties straightened. And finally—this agony nearing an end—they are ushered to a table where they sit waiting for their favorite radio performer who is so honest, so meaningful, so truthful—Jean Shepherd.

The bearded, sleepy-eyed performer conducts a two-hour monologue over WOR radio from the coffee house. During the week he also appears nightly on the station, broadcasting from a local studio. Shepherd's forte is talk, usually spontaneous and composed of formless reminiscences.

## Back and Forth

Wearing leather boots, crumpled chinos and a black turtle-neck sweater, Shepherd paces back and forth on a make-shift stage before the two-hour radio show begins. He chats with a radio engineer, puffs on his cigar and sips coffee under the rapt stares of his audience. Shortly before the show begins, Shepherd turns to them, lifts his left hand and cries: "At ease. Y'all ready to give 'em hell?"

"Yeah," the audience snaps back.

"It sounds like it. Now look, we go on at five minutes after 10. My name is Jean Shepherd. Oh, I can see a little ripple of angry confusion out there. Now you're in The Lighthouse, gang. You're in Greenwich Village, stretching from Sheridan Square to the river and then, there it is — America! Lying out there in the darkness. There it is: Trenton, Teaneck, places like Circleville, Ohio. Circleville, Ohio? Think of waking up in Circleville?"

"And here we are. We come on at five minutes after ten and we can all tell Circleville to go to hell."

The audience laughs and

and his particular ability to point up the anxieties of his predominately young audience has catapulted him into the forefront of successful radio performers.

On a recent Saturday night, Shepherd's monologue focused on the army. "It's summer. I've risen rapidly in three years to the rank of corporal," he said. "It's Saturday afternoon. Now all you guys who've been in the army know the feeling. It's after the parade. I had a date in town with this great chick. There is that great feeling of putting on a new pair of suntans. You know, you got it back from the cleaners on Thursday afternoon! The suntans are crisp. I go into the orderly room. I have my hat in my hand. I'm sharp, I'm clean. You never see these scenes in Van Johnson films.

## One Hisser

The monologue delighted the audience, but at the bar the regulars watched indifferently. Some ignored Shepherd. Others glared at the spectators. A few made derisive remarks. At one point a youth began hissing Shepherd and Shepherd snapped: "Shut up fella. They got your game next door. That's an inside joke." Very inside.

After the performance, most of the audience left quickly. Shepherd, exhausted, sat down and ordered a hamburger. "It's funny, you can't tell much about a gang by looking at them, but what they wear. You find the squarest people with beards and carrying guitars. And the little old grandmother from Circleville can really be a hippie."

Wiping perspiration from his forehead, Shepherd added: "I work on the air as a short story writer. My job is to make people believe — make them see — what I'm saying. I write short stories here. The specific facts of the story may be fictional, but that doesn't matter. It's like Jonathan Swift — or Salinger. Is Salinger really Holden Caulfield? Did he really run away to New York to steal old Phoebe's records? Who knows? Who cares? He's honest and that's what I try to be."



Hans Knopf from Pix

## Jean Shepherd

Coffee house communication

applauds and Jean Shepherd continues:

"Now, when we go on I want you to shout three words. You ready gang, here they are: 'Excelsior, you fatheads.' Now let me hear it."

The audience repeats the words.

"Oh come on gang. You can do better. Conjure up your own favorite fathead. Maybe it's your date. Maybe it's your old lady. Let me hear it."

"Excelsior, you fatheads," the crowd shouts.

"That's it, that's it, and don't forget the comma."

Shepherd's themes — small-town America, the army, college life, fraternities, working for large organizations —

REMEMBER THE NEEDLE!