

Jean Shepherd

by Phil Arkow

"Excelsior, you fathead!!!"

And with a ringing cry shaking the very roots of Greenwich Village, Jean Shepherd, radio commentator for WOR and the greatest Second Lieutenant Company K (the Signal Corps) ever saw, opens his Saturday night shenanigans at the Limelight Cafe.

"Okay, gang, let's give all those people out there in 27 states the impression the Limelight tonight is just bordering on Orgy!"

And with a bacchanalian warwhoop, 200 polluted Villagers watch the old master himself weave a tapestry of experience and lead the 27 states on an hour-and-a-half trip as only "Shep" can do it.

As you sit out there in radioland, parked in your '64 Jag with your girl, listening to Shep recall those Good Old Depression days in Hammond, Indiana, when he was trying to make it with this chick in a '35 Mercury, you know he's out there in the Limelight, and occasionally you can hear the applause fading in and out as WOR drifts back and forth across the dial. But it's only when you get to see him in person—for many Shepherd insomniacs, a life-long ambition—that you realize the full impact of this man.

He starts out a half-hour before air time, warming the audience up as he weaves an inebriated spell of joy and bronze figtrees with oak-leaf clusters. Though gone are the days of Creeping Meatballism and screaming midnight locomotives, he can still attack the phallic symbol of the stuffed rhinoceros head overlooking the stage. And even though you're standing at a bar, up to your ankles in whiskey sours, you can hear him tell of radio drift problems in central Wisconsin, where listeners pick up both Shepherd and Billy Graham simultaneously.

"'And everywhere I look, I see sin and corruption!'" Shepherd quotes.

"Here I am, trying to make it with this chick," he continues.

"'And this is the moment of decision!'"

Nonstop to Euphoria

Once the floodgates are opened, it's non-stop to Euphoria as he rambles on and on. This night, Mrs. Lou Gehrig was in the audience, and Shep rose to the occasion by repeating a story of his father in Depression-age Chicago, when the White Sox—the national institutional equivalent of the Mets—played the Yankees and Lou Gehrig aimed two home runs at Shep's "Old Man."

From the stockyards and the ballpark, it's only a quick jump to Company K and the great airplane wire-laying experiment in the Signal Corps. "Well, it was better than being latrine orderly," he growls.

As the audience roars in hysterics, one notices the only non-smiling faces are on the two G.I.'s on leave.

But midnight approaches, and a silent hush pervades the great primeval swamp of New York, and the horsemen are galloping across the kilo cycles, and Shep is getting signals from the engineers, and in a mighty blast of "Excelsior!" it's all over.