Jean Shepherd Tells It Like It Was, Maybe

By JOHN KRONENBERGER

Henri Dauman

Jean Shepherd, whose talk show is a fixture on WOR radio, is currently host of a TV series, "Jean Shepherd's America," Sundays at 8 on Channel 13.
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HIS life, I always thought, was an open microphone. Back when I was in the ninth grade, in the middle fifties, there he was on WOR every Sunday night from 9 until 1 in the morning, just . . . talking. Talking about his mother's rumpsprung bathrobe and a baseball game in Chicago, about something he'd just read in the paper and that time in the Signal Corps during the war, about striking out on a date and . . . about absolutely anything. "I'm a kid, see . . ." he would begin, launching into another exploration, and we were all hooked. It was important not to arrive in school Monday morning looking as if you'd had enough sleep; staying up to the end of the Jean Shepherd show was a very *macho* thing in the ninth grade.

And if there was ever a voice to hypnotize a 14-year-old, it was Ol' Shep's: familiar but not condescending; sharing (it seemed) confidences with masculine camaraderie; constantly interrupting itself in a stream-of-consciousness more properly described as a torrent; now exploding into bursts of maniacal laughter, now subsiding into low chuckles that hinted (but never delivered) a fantastic dirty joke. It was like being admitted to a locker room bull session with a guy who *really* knew what it was all about—and (here was the ultimate magic) implied that you did too. You shared it all with him, and prayed nothing would happen to your radio until next week.

Fourteen years later. Shepherd comes on after WOR's 10 P.M. news, six nights a week, still dealing from the same deck of cards with the same fancy shuffle. The kazoo and the Jew's harp are still whipped out at appropriate moments, just as in the old days, and—just as in the old days—he's still reviewing all the incredible chapters of his life.

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One evening recently, Shepherd is heading into the stretch (winging it as usual, completely without notes), leading up to the time when, as a teen-ager, he was hit by lightning as he operated his ham equipment ("I just sat there, stunned, and then I noticed a figure standing in the doorway. It's was my mother; she says, 'I *told* you you'd get a shock . . .'"). He leaves himself just enough time to plug his current Channel 13 TV series as Herb the engineer brings up the last few bars of theme (a polka whose title Shepherd doesn't want let out) to a roaring finish.

He takes his headset off, over the Swedish barge captain's cap he wears everywhere, and strolls heavily into the control room to talk ham radio with Herb. Below the cap, long pointed sideburns extend down to his neck; a ceramic evil eye hangs on a thong outside his shirt; a colorful Zuni beltbuckle dominates a pair of striped bell pants. We leave the building and wander up and over to Downey's, where Leigh Brown, Shepherd's producer and right-hand-lady in all his ventures, waits in a front booth.

The talk is of the television show, "Jean Shepherd's America" (8 P.M. Sundays), a series of what Shepherd calls "sensual essays" that the Ford Foundation has been underwriting on PBS this spring. Far from the usual travelogue, of course. One show explored a steel mill, another dealt with trains (and with Ernie, who during World War II stepped off Shepherd's troop train for beer, tried desperately to catch up with the train as it began pulling out, missed it by an instant, and was never seen or heard of again), a third with microscopic examination of national food favorites. This last allowed Shepherd to accompany a particularly sensual closeup with the whispered voice-over: "Strawberry shortcake . . . as American as Norman Mailer." So the Ford money was well spent. One of the last shows will be on the ecstasy of flying, a recent Shepherd hobby. Great care has been lavished on the photography: no film, everything taped with a lightweight imported color recorder that, although temperamental, has come up with remarkable detail and shading. "It's not for black and white sets," says Shepherd.

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"You know, it never occurred to me, John, that there was any difference between working in one medium or another—that's an Eastern notion, for some reason. I mean, I do radio, television, live appearances, I write for Playboy. I'm a story-teller; a story-teller can work any medium. I originally came to New York, by the way, for *television*, not radio. I had been doing, for two years, probably one of the most popular television shows in Cincinnati . . . the closest thing that it was compared with later would be the Kovacs show. I had a few local actors who worked with me. I'd say, 'We're going to do tonight's show in a Southern mansion,' so we'd make these sets. Then, instead of wearing Southern mansion clothes, we'd all be discovered drinking Nehi Orange, wearing chain mail, having a very involved discussion about King John. It was called 'Rear Bumper'—it followed everything else each night and I'd come on for as long as I liked. One night I waited through one of the worst late movies ever made . . . jungle goddess in a plane crash . . . and I did the only logical thing. My theme came up—I had this beautiful opening—fade it out, and there's my face, full screen . . . I says, 'Look . . . anybody who enjoyed that movie is not going to enjoy anything that I'm going to do. And conversely, any man with taste has already left us . . . so let's just part friends. . . .' And on came my theme again.

"Anyway, I got a wire from NBC. Steve Allen had written a letter to Sarnoff, saying I should be given a chance to replace him on that nighttime show—how he found out about my work, I don't know. I was brought to New York and there was lots of talk, back and forth, but it never worked out. While this is going on, I'm walking around town and I meet a guy who'd been an executive out at the station in Cincinnati, and he says to me, 'I don't know how the hell you could do a radio version of your TV show, but I think I could get you a slot over here at WOR,' where he was working at the time. He says, 'It'll pay your keep until you get your job going.' That's when I started to do radio—and overnight, people were saying, 'Well, you'll never do television.' It's unbelievable.

"What I think throws people about what I do is that they think of me as *talking*. They don't recognize the fact that what I'm doing is extra-ordinary. . . . I have a very idiomatic style, which makes every guy who listens to me seriously believe that, if he had a microphone, he could do what I do. If you're a writer, people recognize writing as something they can't do; yet what I'm doing is *oral* writing. It's taken years for me to learn how to edit, to phrase, to give pause, beat, momentum . . . to keep a thematic mood running through the whole thing . . . it's oral writing, which is the essence of any great story-teller. I'm not saying that I'm a great story-teller, but . . . well, a story-teller in a primitive tribe, the people in the tribe recognize that he does something they can't do."

I want to know how he started playing back his life on the air. "You can tell a story about anything, but the only stories that have any fidelity, any feeling, are stories that either did happen to you or conceivably *could have* happened to you." Conceivably . . .? "Well, it's funny . . . nobody believes a story-teller is telling stories, they think he's telling *fact*. I keep reminding people there's a difference between reportage and fiction. That reportage is telling you what happened and fiction . . . is taking the real time and place and telling what *might* have happened. I may change my mind, next time I tell it, about what might have happened."

Does this go for, say, all that wonderful stuff about the Signal Corps? "Sure. The milieu is correct; it remains truly the army. And the names are real. But the people are composites, all my people are composites. The names are actual names, but they're not the real people." I'll be darned.

When I ask Shepherd his age, somewhere in the late 40's, he starts a story about why he prefers not to talk about it. Aside from one reference to a former marriage, there's almost nothing in the clips about the private Shepherd. A few days later, Leigh Brown tells me on the phone that "Jean doesn't like to talk about his personal life. He thinks it has nothing to do with his work."

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