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Spinning Tales of Woe, Jean Shepherd Wins Fans, Fame, Fortune

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He Parlays Elaborate Yarns
On the Perils of 'Kidhood'
Into Multimedia Popularity

But Hammond Isn't Laughing

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NEW YORK Cackling fiendishly, Jean Shepherd sits in the midst of an awesome clutter of mail, records, books, magazines, reels of tape, cartoons and old radios, sifting through a batch of newspaper clippings sent to him by fans.

"This is fantastic stuff," chortles the shaggy-sideburned Mr. Shepherd, looking for all the world like a mod Satan as he waves a news item disclosing that a TV Station ran a film called "Attack of the 60-Foot Woman" on Women's Liberation Day. "And look at this pie-eating content in Nova Scotia where the contestants turned on the audience and threw the pies at them! Or the nude parachute jump In England. A nude parachute jump! Incredible!

For the madcap, intense Mr. Shepherd, it is all grist for him mill. Which means for his next radio show. Or him next TV appearance. Or his next book. Or magazine article. Or record album. Or personal appearance at the local shopping center, campus or wherever he's invited.

Whatever the medium, Jean Shepherd will have thousands of fans hanging on his every wacky word. For Mr. Shepherd has accomplished what most men only dream of - he makes a living, and a very good living at that, by talking about whatever comes to mind.

In Jean Shepherd's case, what comes to mind is an endless stream of colorful, usually convoluted tales that demonstrate and celebrate the hopelessness and haplessness of the human race and the total absurdity of life on earth. Many of Mr. Shepherd's creations involve vivid tales of his own childhood or "kidhood," to use his word - in the 1930a In Hammond, Ind., and almost all of them Involve characters including young Jean Shepherd who flirt valiantly but briefly with victory, only to go-down in the end to crushing defeat. If there is a constant factor in the thousands of fantasies with which Mr. Shepherd regales fare, It Is the absolute certainty of daily disaster and humiliation in his life and yours.

In the world of Jean Shepherd, there is no cause whatever for hope. And hope springs eternal.

Flick & Schwartz & Wanda Hickey

It is a message that apparently has enormous appeal. Through the fabrication of such yarns, grounded in real experience but heavily embellished with imagination and fantasy, Mr. Shepherd has become, in his late 40s, a sort of anti-Establishment guru to a large cult of fans who cut across all age groups. Anyone who grew up anywhere seems to find a great deal in common with Mr. Shepherd's tales of growing up in a grimy mill town in the Depression, surrounded by his father's bowling balls and his mother's red cabbage and peanut-butter- Sandwiches, by friends with names like Flick and Schwartz and Farkas and girls with names like Daphne Bigelow, Wanda Hickey and Josephine Cosnowski.

Mr. Shepherd, whose main forum is a 45 minute show each night on radio stations in New York and 40 other cities, likes to appear as a child of "that great rabble of faceless mankind . . . who are forever condemned to view the great pageants of life from parked third-hand jalopies amid the apple cores and beer cans of drive-in movies"-that is, most people.

He asks his listeners questions like, "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 the game?" (The answer: at about age 14, when for the first time a beautiful girl shuns him.) Typically, he will use up half an hour telling the story of the time his high school football coach made an inspirational pep talk - after which the fired-up team ran onto the field and lost the game 56 to 5.

Or he will tell of the notorious Bumpus family, a filthy, surly assortment of hillbillies who once lived next door to the Shepherds. The Bumpuses, it is said, had at least 745 dogs, all of whom were named either Big Red or Old Blue - with the exception of the 17 named Luke.

One day, Emil Bumpus, the head of the clan, got so mad that he "grabbed ahold of the back porch and pulled it right off the house. He just ... yanked it out by the roots. 'AAAuuuggghhh!' From that day on, the Bumpus house had no back porch, only a door about eight feet up in the air and a rusty screen. Once in a while, one of them would jump out - and land in the garbage. And every so often, one of the skinny, red-faced sisters would fall out accidentally, usually carrying a pail of dishwater or chicken innards."

Not Like Captain Kangaroo

The Bumpuses "drove an old slat - sided Chevy pickup truck that was covered with creamy-white bird droppings and thick coating of rutted Kentucky clay. It had no windshield, and the steering wheel looked like it was made entirely of old black friction tape.

It seemed to be always hub-deep in mud, even though there was no mud in our neighborhood." The penalties for living next door to the Bumpuses Included Gene Autry music at 3a.m. and gusts of wind that "covered my mother's flapping laundry - her pride and joy – with a thin, indelible coating of chicken dung, pigeon feathers, rabbit fur and goat droppings."

Why Jean Shepherd's tales of childhood and later crises spellbind so many people is a question

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Mr. Shepherd has never paused to answer. One psychologist believes that "everyone can remember any number of humiliations from childhood. The adults were in charge. Being kid wasn't easy. Jean brings It all back in vivid detail." A Yale senior puts it more simply: "You don't outgrow him like Captain Kangaroo. Shepherd just seems to go on forever and you just go right along with him."

Indeed, many hard-core fans of the robust Mr. Shepherd claim they started listening him as kids and simply never stopped. That may be true for a few, but not all. "People who listen lend to confuse their own childhood with mine," Jean says. "Within six weeks, 40-yr old guys honestly believe they've been listening to me since they were 10. People think I'm 100 years old."

Mr. Shepherd says he also gets a lot of letters from people who refuse to believe he is a humorist end think he's just a guy who drops by a radio station each night and starts chat- ting And in a way, that's exactly what he is.

Home Sweet Home

Jean Shepherd broke into the entertainment business at age 10, doing a weekly high school sportscast for a radio station in Hammond, a town that he has described as a place "people never really come to but mostly want to leave." Hammond he recalls fondly, "clings precariously to the underbody of Chicago like barnacle clings to the rotting hulk of a tramp Steamer." He remembers that at night In Hammond "the trains thunder through the dark on their way to somewhere else," and "the sky is always lit by the eternal flames of the open hearths and bleat furnaces."

But he also remembers that to the people who live there it is home. He recalls once returning to his hometown from New York In the dead of winter and taking a cab through the town. "Outside I could dimly see the grimy streets lined with dirty, hard ice end crusted drifts covered with that old familiar layer of blast-furnace dust; ahead of us a long line of dirt-encrusted cars carrying loads of steel workers, refinery slaves and railroad men to wherever they spent most of their lives…. We continued to rattle through the smoky gray winter air. I watched a giant gas works drift by our port side. On the starboard, a vast undulating sea of junkyards rolled to the horizon." In the midst of this hellish tableau, the cabbie learns Jean is from New York and says: "New York. I sure don't see how anyone can stand to live there."

But Hammond was good to Jean Shepherd. The radio job, which he got "because I played high school football and was a ham radio operator," led to parts in several radio soap operas in Chicago - heady stuff for a teenager. Jean says life back at home wasn't very much different from the way he described it in a 1966 collection of short stories, "In God We Trust All Others Pay Cash," and In a newly published collection, "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories and Other Disasters."

Hairy Gertz and Mickey Iseley

Jean's mother wore a Chinese red chenille bathrobe, always seemed to have aluminum rollers her hair and turned out an endless stream of red cabbage, meatloaf and Jell-O. His father drank beer, bowled, owned Used Cars and "truly believed that the only food people really liked was meat and potatoes and that they just pretended to like other things in order to impress each other." His kid brother whined a lot. And Jean ran around with his friends Flick and Schwartz and studied the principal exports of Peru at Warren G. Harding school.

Much of Jean Shepherd's ad lib recollections dwell on events common to almost everyone's childhood - like the time his father introduced him to manhood by letting him come along on a fishing trip to Cedar Lake, a body not of water but of "10% waste glop, 12% used detergents, 35% thick gruel….of decayed garter snakes, deceased toads and fermenting crappies and a strange unidentifiable liquid that holds it all together."

A crappie, If you didn't know, in a special fish "created by God for the express purpose of surviving in waters that would kill a bubonic plague bacillus." As Jean remembers his first fishing trip, there were "17,000 guys clumped together in the middle of the lake, fishing for the known 64 crappies." Each boat contained a "minimum of nine guys and 14 cases of beer." It was 2a.m. and about 100 degrees. Hairy Gertz, a friend of the old man, held a blinding Coleman lamp, meant to draw fish but drawing only mammoth mosquitoes. Across the lake, Mickey Iseley's Moonlight Serenaders, at the Cedar Lake Evening In Paris Dance Hall, play "Red Sails in the Sunset" on Montgomery Ward altos.

After Initiations to adulthood like that, Jean spent three years in the Army Signal Corps, studied engineering and psychology at Indiana University and quit before graduation to take a job at a Cincinnati radio station. He worked here a while, worked at a Philadelphia station for a while and in the mid 1950's returned to Cincinnati to do a TV show called "Rear Bumper following the late movie.

A Short Show

It was on "Rear Bumper" that Jean Shepherd came into his own. One show consisted of Jean clanking back and forth on a distant balcony in a suit of armor, telling some "totally irrelevant shaggy dog story." From time to time, without any explanation, on would come a film clip of thousands of baboons swimming upstream in the Uganda River. Another lime, after enduring what Jean believes was the worst movie ever made ("White Pongo," about a white gorilla and a jungle goddess). Jean strode on stage and told his viewers: "Look, anybody who enjoyed that movie isn't going to enjoy anything I'm going to do. And conversely, anybody with taste has already left us. So let's just part friends." End of show.

By 1958, word of Jean Shepherd had drifted east and, after dickering inconclusively with NBC to replace Steve Allen on the old Tonight Show, he signed on with WOR, a New York radio station. His offbeat musings were an overnight hit. Today, his 10:15 p.m. WOR Show is tuned in by about 260,000 people, one of the biggest late night radio audiences in New York,. and is heard on tape on other stations around the country.

WOR hasn't always been happy it made that move. One night Jean urged listeners to ask for Sweetheart Soap at their local stores and to cry "Excelsior!" to the clerk on the way out the door. Sweetheart Soap wasn't a sponsor, and Jean was cut off the air. He was off for about six weeks, while fans wrote and picketed WOR *until* the station reinstated him.

"Another favorite stunt is "hurling invectives," which Jean describes as a true public service, in that it permits him to tell the world things "my listeners don't have the guts to do." Sometimes, he suggests that all listeners put their radios in their windows and turn up the volume. Then he yells something like - "OK DROP THE TOOLS, WE'VE COT YOU COVERED!" or playa a soundtrack of a freight train.

Unwelcome In Indiana

Another evening. Jean yelled "OH MY GOD, THIS IS FANTASTIC!" – a pronouncement that, he claims, caused chaos at a girls' school In New Jersey. After hearing the remark, booming forth from dozens of radios and echoing through the courtyard, appalled housemothers allegedly conducted a room-by-room search for a salacious male.

Jean Shepherd displeases more than just housemothers, of course. He says he "gets a lot of hate mail" whenever he plays the kazoo or his Jew's harp on the air. He admits to being "persona non grata" back In Indiana for all the cracks he's made about life back In Indiana. (HIS mother and kid brother still live in Hammond. Jean Says they view his work "with amusement." His father died years ago.)

Though much of Jean's material is about himself, little of it is about his life since leaving Hammond. He doesn't talk about the fact that he was once married, or that he likes to prowl New England antique shops in search of 18th-Century religious art. Jean rents one floor of a brownstone in New York's Greenwich Village and has a summer home in Maine and a winter home in Florida. He drives a Fiat and also owns a Morgan and a 1831 Chevrolet roadster.

All that comes from an Income that Jean says is close to $100,000 annually. He contributes at least three stories a year to Playboy, writes a column for Car and Driver magazine - and also writes for National lampoon, a humor magazine. Lately, he has been devoting much time to a television series, called "Jean Shepherd's America." Last year's Shows received generally good critical reviews and were mainly half-hour glimpses of things like steel mills or flying (another Shepherd hobby) or trains or food.

Joseph Stalin and Joan Bans

On the food show, the highlight featured a close-up of a piece of strawberry shortcake, oozing whipped cream and Strawberry juice, as Jean's voice whispered In the background: "Strawberry shortcake... as American as Norman Mailer . . ."

Jean also visits about 40 colleges a Year, where he earnestly tells students things like "Joseph Stalin was not a Dale Carnegie graduate, but he went all the way," and collects fees of up to 3,500 for a two-hour performance.

Blended into it all are little snippets of his personal philosophy, the main premise of which is that "there is no way for man to control history. He is instead a victim of it." As Jean sees it, "No matter who is mayor of New York, there will always be large numbers of people drunk and large numbers of people cheating on welfare." That's a skeptical view end one that causes Jean Shepherd to look askance at people who believe in the ultimate improvability of mankind. "We assume everyone in the world wants peace," he says. "But is this really so? If there were peace, where would Joan Baez be? Left totally without any strings in her guitar."

The fatalism of the Shepherdian view comes through in Jean's recollection of winter in Indiana considered a classic by fans: "Kids plodded to school through 45-mlle-an-hour gales, tilting forward like tiny furred radiator ornaments, moving stiffly over the barren clattering ground," wrapped in so many coats and scarves that "only the faint glint of two eyes peering out of a mound of moving clothing told you that a kid was In the neighborhood." His mother would push open the front door and "we would be launched, one after the other, my brother and I, like astronauts into unfriendly Arctic space. The door clanged shut behind us and that was it. It was make school or die!"

Of Taste and Mortality

"Scattered out over the Icy waste around us I could be seen other tiny befurred jots of winds driven humanity. All painfully toiling toward the Warren G. Harding school, miles away over the tundra, waddling under the weight of frost-covered clothing like tiny frozen bowling balls with feet. An occasional piteous whimper would be heard faintly, but lost instantly in the sigh of the eternal wind."

For what? "All of us were bound for geography lessons involving the exports of Peru . . . '

Such musings, aloud and to himself, are the only preparation Mr. Shepherd makes for his nightly radio show. He never tells anyone what he is going to do. About 10 minutes before air time, he gathers up whatever records, kazoo, or other sound effects he needs and leaves his office for the studio. At precisely 10:15, Jean's theme - an obscure Eduard Strauss galop – goes on, and he is on the air, typically with an opening like: "Many of the things you will hear on this show are in exceedingly bad taste." Forty-five minutes of rambling anecdotes later, the engineer in the radio elation brings up the theme, and Jean Shepherd builds to a typically cheery conclusion. Leaning over the mike and lowering his voice to a near-whisper, he says: "Can you imagine *4,000 years* passing, and you're not even a *memory*? Think about it friends. It's not jus a possibility. It is a certainty."

The galop crashes to a finish. Jean Shepherd pauses and lakes a deep breath. "This Is WOR In New York," he says. "Stay tuned for the news."