



**JEAN SHEPHERD**

• "I give up. I just can't understand what's goin' on these days."

"What do you mean, Fat Herbie?" I asked. After all, Fat Herbie is my infallible pipeline for information on what is being thought and said in the Slob World. Herbie is a bonafide, card-carrying slob who happens to drive a taxi in Manhattan.

"Well, I had this here day off, so I decided to treat Ethel and the kids to dinner out like they say ya should on the TV. Anyways, we go out to my favorite McDonald's on the Island off the Southern State. And you wouldn't guess what happened."

"No, I certainly wouldn't, Herbie."

"Whad'ja say?" Herbie yelled over the traffic, also blowing a little essence of pastami back in my direction.

"What the hell happened in McDonald's?" I hollered back.

"Yeah, well, me and Ethel got a couple Quarter Pounders With Cheese and the kids got their usual Big Macs and fries onna side when all of a sudden in comes this fancy lookin' dude with a crowd of chicks wearin' no underwear and them fancy sunglasses up onna head. Then a guy sittin' behind me in the booth eatin' a fish filet sandwich, he says to his date that the fancy dude is George Plimpton. Ya hear of him? Jeez, this Plimpton dude and his crowd looked at all the rest of us who been eatin' there for years like we was out of some zoo or som'pin. What's his act, anyway?"

I considered this for a couple of seconds, because I hate to break bad news to a friend, especially Fat Herbie, who hardly ever does anyone harm unless it's a Jersey driver who tries to cut him off. What the hell, I finally decided, he'll find out some day anyway. "George Plimpton is a writer," I answered, trying to sound kindly.

"No kiddin'," Herbie snorted. "A writer? What the hell does he write?"

Now that was more difficult to answer. "Well, Herbie, it's kind of hard to say. Mostly about how great his friends are and how

much fun it is to pretend that you're a football player. Stuff like that."

Herbie thought it over. His fleshy face—the result of countless Big Macs, Rheingolds and a few fistfights here and there—was blank in the rearview mirror.

"C'mon, yer puttin' me on. Ya mean he writes about *pretendin'* to be a football player? Ya mean he's a phonus balonus passin' himself off as a ballplayer? That skinny, kinda wimpy dude?"

I could see that this was going to be a difficult, involved discussion, but traffic was packed solid on Sixth Avenue and Herbie and I were going to be together for a long time, so I plunged ahead.

"No, you see, Herbie, he doesn't go around passing himself off as a football player. He just pretends he was in some book he wrote. He also pretended he was a pitcher one time and a race car driver and an orchestra leader."

For some reason this convulsed Herbie. "Jeez, what next? Ain't there enough *real* ballplayers to go around?"

"Hold on, Herbie. If George Plimpton and his elegant friends came into your McDonald's, that's bad news."

Herbie glanced back at me in the rear-view mirror, a look of primitive concern on his map. "Yeah, well, Ethel said she didn't like the looks of it. Maybe she was right. I mean, the way they was gigglin' around and

Despite the fashionable claims of Plimpton and Yates, authentic cultural leadership is the sole province of *Slobbus Americanus*

lookin' and starin' at us like we was inna Bronx Zoo or som'pin."

"Herbie, that means that George Plimpton and all of his crowd have now *discovered* McDonald's."

Herbie snorted, "Whaddaya mean 'discovered' McDonald's? I been eatin' them Big Macs for ten years."

"It'll be Gloria Steinem next," I said. "After that, Gay Talese. And Jackie Onassis and her friends can't be far behind."

"No kiddin'?" Herbie's rich Forest Hills voice dripped with incredulity and awe. "That I just gotta see. Jackie Kennedy chompin' down onna Big Mac!"

The thought was too big for both of us and so we rolled on in silence to my destination. As I flipped him his tip Herbie muttered despondently, "Y'gotta be kiddin'."

"No, Herbie, I am not. I sure wish I were, but I definitely am not."

The grimy yellow Coronet pulled away

and slowly rolled off down Pothole Alley.

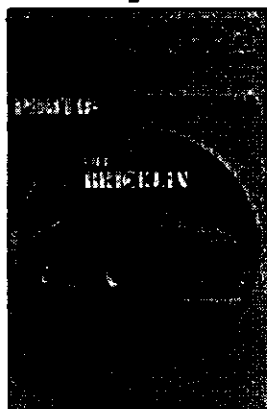
Later I got to thinking about poor Herbie and how everything he and his kind have enjoyed for years has been slowly taken over by the *haut monde*. Another Shepherd theory clearly illustrated, to wit: The Twentieth Century *avant garde* is your average walking-around klutz. For centuries it was the intellectual or the elegant society person who led trends. But no longer. Since about the time of World War I, somehow it has reversed. You can see it all around you. Let us examine our culture briefly: Who was it, for example, who first enjoyed basic honest dirty sordid pornography on film? Why, the good old *Slobbus Americanus*, of course. For years he squatted in steamy American Legion smokers digging such grainy black-and-white epics as *The Box Lunch*. Was George Plimpton there? Was Andy Warhol on the premises? No, the Plimptons of those days were attending the Opera or swooning over Victor McLaglen films. Herbie and his ilk were once again in the *avant garde*, unheralded, heavily fined, but bravely coming back for more the following Wednesday evening.

Today the same films are reviewed by Clive Barnes and Leonard Probst and are shown at places called "Cinema Cinque." They are called "searching, evocative probings into Man's quest for communication through erotic exploration." Poor Herbie paved the way and now he can't even afford the price of a bad ticket.

What about pro football? It may surprise some of you to know that for decades pro football was not only ignored but viewed with total scorn by the elegant *Sports Illustrated* snobs of the day. The only games they deigned to attend were, Yale-Harvard ("The Game" for chrissake) or possibly Princeton-Dartmouth. But the Chicago Bears and the Green Bay Packers? Those were mere mercenaries. Primitive clods playing a violent game for the edification of other slobs who had no college loyalties and, in fact, had barely managed to squeak through eighth grade. My father was one of them. While the sports pages spoke only of Northwestern, Harvard, Yale and Navy, the Old Man and his buddies huddled in lonely isolation in Comiskey Park in Chicago as the bitter winds screamed in off the Lake to watch the Chicago Cardinals lose again to the Detroit Lions, in spite of their star Marshal Goldberg, the Larry Csonka of his day. A big crowd was maybe 4500, mostly steel workers, truck drivers and guys from the poolroom out for a little air. Herbie was there, cheering on the New York Titans. *Slobbus Americanus* once again led the way. Can Herbie afford a seat today to watch the Jets? Who are you kidding? Even if he could raise the dough he couldn't get a seat anyway. They have been reserved by Plimpton and his ilk for centuries to come.

How about the movies? It is hard to believe today, with the contemporary cultism so rampant about the so-called "Golden

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Age" of the movies, but who really dug those films when they were fresh and new? My mother and her friend Mrs. Bruner (who weighed 360) were devoted readers of *Photoplay* and devout fans of Dan Dailey. Millions of slobes filled into movie places around the nation to see Dick Powell and Ann Miller, June Allyson and Donald O'Connor, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. Did the critics dig them? Were the Pauline Kael's of the period entranced? Please!

Today long lines stand before elegant film houses where cinema aficionados, devoted readers of *The Village Voice* and *Evergreen Review*, pay heavily to view retrospective anthologies of the work of such erstwhile despised performers as Deanna Durbin and Kathryn Grayson. And who's right down there in the front row? In fact occupying the entire theater? *The Avant Garde*. Once again Herbie and his kind were right all along. But do they get their deserved credit for an artistic sixth sense, some animal instinct more unerringly right than that of the famed critics? Forget it.

It is almost with embarrassment that I bring up country music. *Rolling Stone* now writes with great feeling of something that a mere 24 months or so ago it put down hard, if it ever heard of it at all. Now Nat Hentoff, of all people, is bravely pretending that he was there all along with Buck Owens. What a joke! I personally grew up in a state—Indi-

A couple hundred steel  
workers and truck  
drivers shivering in  
Comiskey Park  
a generation ago were  
the undisputable  
wave of the future

ana—where country music was and always has been so much a part of the scene that since time immemorial Hank Williams, Merle Travis, The Singing Brakeman, Lulabelle and Scotty were right up there with the major saints and prophets. It's really embarrassing to hear the likes of Wolfman Jack and Dick Cavett pretend they actually know something about Hank Williams or own early Cowboy Copas discs [78, King Records]. No, let's face it, endless generations of Southern and Midwestern Herbies, were light years ahead of their time. Of course today, what with Merle Haggard on the cover of *Time* they can't seem to get any of the tickets any more for the concerts.

Maybe we have finally arrived at that nebulous ideal so beloved of Thomas Jefferson and the aristocrats of the past, the Age of the Common Man. Is the taste of the snob going down to that of the common clay? Or was the common clay right all along, and

the snobs' taste actually has come up? This is a very difficult aesthetic question to answer. Even such recent phenomena as Rock were originally discovered by hordes of the illiterate. In the early Fifties a kid who was dumb enough to dig Bill Haley and the Comets stood nowhere among the more elegant members of his class who were listening to Brubeck and Coleman Hawkins. It's hard to say who was right. Certainly the discovery of Rock by the "intellectuals" and the *Cafe Elegantes* in the late Fifties was a curious thing. They left Brubeck and Jazz in droves, pretended they had never heard it. Now of course, well-heeled "nostalgia collectors" battle over original singles by Chubby Checker and Joey Dee And The Starliners. And who is he getting them from? The unlettered slob who bought them in the first place, played them until they were white with needle-scratch and then threw them in the basement behind the coal bin.

Who, may I ask, originally bought the Studabakers and Edsels, not to mention Hudson Terraplanes of the past? Were they the elegant critics of the automotive world? You answer the question. The old, plodding, reliable Boob was there first. He loved them. Was he applauded for that love? You don't really have to answer.

And now I come to the latest and in some ways most outrageous of the current usurpation of the "discoverers" of all that is new and beautiful. Because I was Herbie. And now Yates comes along (*C/D*, July) claiming to have discovered sprint cars! Since just after Barney Oldfield stubbed out his cigar for the last time and packed it in, countless thousands of beer-drinking, hot dog chomping sprint-car fans have packed the fairgrounds of Indiana, Ohio, and a few other enlightened states to cheer the little murderous monsters around the lethal oval. Of course, they mostly called it "dirt-track racing." The more polite word today is "sprint cars," but it sure as hell is dirt-track racing any way you cut it. I even wrote a short story about dirt-track racing in *Playboy* back in the Sixties. Worse, a couple of years ago I even tried to convince Brock one night on a bus ride somewhere in Illinois that sprint cars/dirt track was where it really was at. I got a blank stare. Oh well. True pioneers hardly ever win.

Now that Brock has discovered the sprints, Boone Arledge can't be far behind. George Plimpton will pretend to race wheel-to-wheel with Gary Bettenhausen at the Indiana State Fairgrounds before a crowd of applauding sycophants while the TV cameras grind. And who went to see Evel Knievel when he was jumping '53 Dodges on a third-hand Harley at fifty bucks a jump as a warm-up for Joie Chitwood's Thrill Circus? Howard Cosell? Brock Yates? George Plimpton? Nope, Herbie and his kind. Let us now pay homage, just once, to *Slobbus Americanus*. He ain't as dumb as he seems. In fact, he's usually right in the end, as much as it pains us to say it.