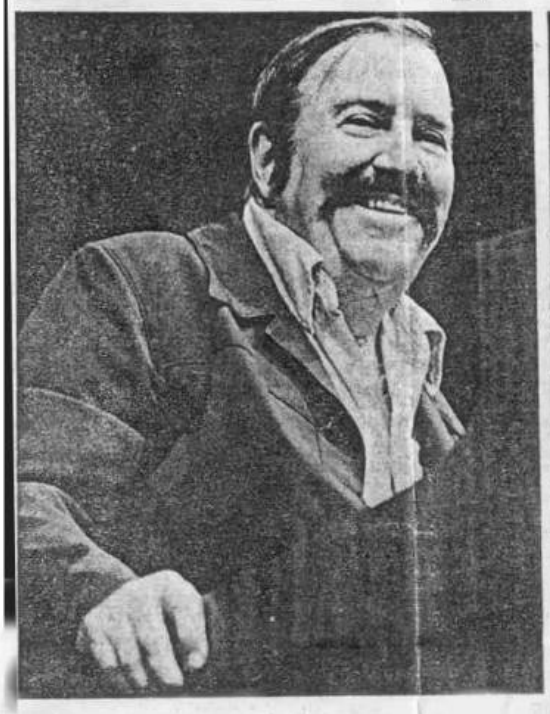
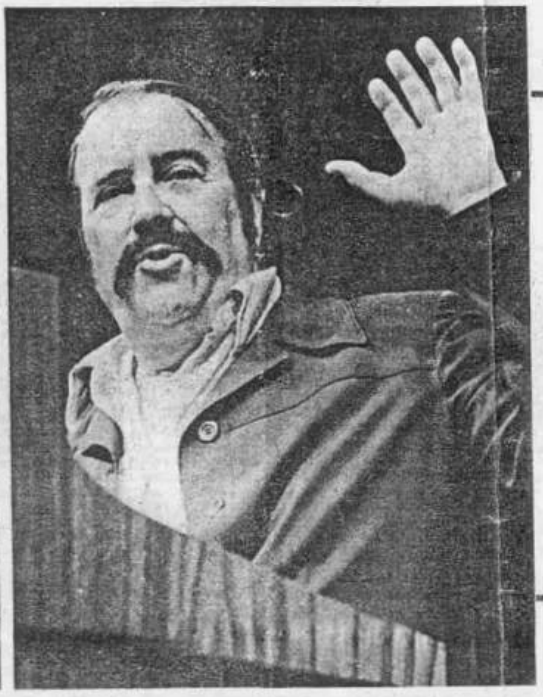
LANSDALE, PA

Tuesday's living people





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—Jean Shepherd, at M.C.C.C.

Photos by Robert Martin

Jean Shepherd is glad to be out of the box

"Jean Shepherd of WOR in New York regards radio as a new medium for a new kind of novel that he writes nightly. The mike is his pen and paper. His audience and their knowledge of the daily events of the world provide his characters, his scenes and moods.... He is the first to use radio as an essay and novel form for recording our common awareness of a totally new world of universal human participation in all human events, private or collective..."

— Marshall McLuhan, 1964

"On radio, people steal your stuff constantly. I see Steve Martin, Chevy Chase and others doing what I did years ago, and thought 'What the hell am I doing it on the radio for?' "

— Jean Shepherd, 1979

By BRUCE SCHWARTZ
Reporter Living Editor

Jean Shepherd has gone multi-media.

For those who grew up with his disembodied voice beaming from a tape recording in the studios of WOR radio in New York City, his abdication of the airwaves is disconcerting.

His shows, masterful comic storytelling, were a religion to many.

In Philadelphia, teen-agers would pile into their cars on Saturday evening and head up the Jersey turnpike for better reception. Others would just twist their home sets and twirl their antennas to bring in Shepherd above the static.

One Vermont listener, it is said, would drive to the top of a mountain, alone, and park with his antenna extended for some two hours every Saturday — that is, until FBI agents surrounded his car and accused him of spying on a nearby military installation.

"Now THAT'S devotion," laughs Shepherd.

Then again, to most people, Jean Shepherd is not even a voice. He's "Jean who?" or worse, "who's she?"

"If you went around this campus and asked 500 people who Jean Shepherd was, maybe 50 of them would know," says Shepherd, describing another problem he ascribes to the limited audience of radio.

His halcyon days of radio, from his start in 1959 until the early 1970s, made him known along the northeast portion of the U.S. But other parts of the country — and the world — know him for his books, including the classic "Wanda Hickey's Night of Golden Memories, and Other Disasters" and "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash," and "The Ferrari in the Bedroom."

Those books are, in part, compilations of his numerous short stories from the pages of Playboy (from which he's won awards four years in a row) and Car and Driver, among others.

Still other people know him from his programs on the Public Television network. He used to appear on the "Great American Dream Machine," which spun off into "Jean Shepherd's America" and locally, "Shepherd's Pie," a New Jersey showcase of the best of the Garden State, to the accompaniment of an all-tuba band.

It makes for a pretty schizoid public life, says Shepherd.

"It tends to confuse people," he said. "The reader resents the radio listener, the listener resents the television viewer, and the viewer resents the reader. People feel they own you, and resent your moving on.

"It's like, if the guy next door moves out and becomes a movie star, you say 'Oh, but he's not happy.' "

ON STAGE, ESPECIALLY, Jean Shepherd exudes happiness.

He tells stories from everyone's childhood — as he did last Saturday at Montgomery County Community College's 15th anniversary, where he was keynote speaker; as he does three to four times a week, on campuses across the country, and as he did in most of his short stories and on radio.

In his late 40s, Shepherd looks like your father's country club buddy in a vain, eternal search for hipness. His mustache grows like untrimmed Zoysia grass, his hair like a winter lawn on the path to a school bus stop. He wears a blue leisure suit with a rumpled pink shirt, the kind of clothes that cause cancer in laboratory animals. His wrists are manacled in turquoise, and Indian bead jewelry hangs around his neck.

What he does, better than nearly anyone else — whether on radio or in person or in print — is project a sense of closeness rather than space, intimacy instead of coldness, between himself and his listeners.

He talks about second grade in the Warren G. Harding School. "There I was, eight years old, I didn't know that I was going to a school named after the worst president in history — until today, of course. Some poor little kid will be going to Richard M. Nixon Elementary School and not even know..."

He writes about growing up in Hohman, Indiana, the "great dust bowl of America," watching the sun rise and battle with the airborne grime of steel-mill smokestacks for supremacy of the horizon. His stories are inhabited by such childhood friends as Flick, Kissel and Schwartz. He chronicles that one night of high school penguin delight — the prom — going out to eat and drink afterwards, ordering a "double," not knowing what it is, drinking it, rushing to the men's room...

And his words are so richly descriptive, his voice so absolutely convincing, that people are shocked when they find out that there is no Warren G. Harding School. No Hohman, Indiana. No Flick. No Kissel. No Schwartz. And Jean Shepherd never went to his school's senior prom.

"I am a comic, a storyteller," Shepherd explained. "I create mythical characters, and people take it entirely so real, they don't think I made it up.

"A storyteller is not the same as a reporter. You tell a story — you use some basic truth, something everybody recognizes, and build an epic on a mundane theme. I'm more or less an epic storyteller."

Actually, Jean Shepherd grew up in South Chicago, although he did live in Hammond, Indiana for a few years. He was fresh out of Korea in 1956, doing classical theater work, when he found that he could take a fertile imagination and grow a cash crop.

"I'm trained as a classical actor," he says, "and working on stage is most natural to me. There's nothing I enjoy more than stage work... To make people listen, to perform a monologue, is the hardest thing in the theater. It's 90 percent acting.

"In European theater it's well-known," he says, "but in America, the media have taken over so much that someone standing on a stage telling you stories for two hours is virtually unheard of."

So Shepherd took his act to radio. His success there has been a curse as well as a blessing, he says.

"Radio makes people feel they've always known the guy," he said. "So I have 70-year-old guys coming up to me and saying, 'I listened to you when I was a child.' It's a transference.

"People feel they're your friends. You never feel Johnny Carson is your friend, but you feel I am your friend.

"And people tend to take radio as nostalgia," he continued, "even current rock stations — 'Here's a big golden oldie from 1978!' So I've stopped doing radio, and continue to do everything else. It's an ad medium, an incomplete medium based on selling."

HE IS AS DISENCHANTED with television work. He left Shepherd's Pie in New Jersey, he says frankly, because "the budget wasn't there — they couldn't afford me."

Most of what passes for comedy on TV, he adds, is adolescent. "It's like little charades. A lot of TV humor is adolescent. 'Saturday Night Live,' say, is adolescent, while 'Second City TV' is not.

"There is much you can do mechanically with TV, but from the standpoint of personal satisfaction, pure and simple, the stage is my basic medium. If you tried to tell an epic story on TV, it wouldn't work, for a number of reasons."

The most effective medium for his storytelling, though, is print, he says — if for no other reason than its universality. "I was in an Athens airport, and saw some of my books translated into Greek... You can't picture them doing 'Happy Days' in Greek.

"There's another thing about writing — it's permanent. People all over the country can go out to their library and pick up my book. That means something to me."

He is singularly unimpressed with today's young comics. "You'd be surprised how little people in show business pay attention to other people in show business," he says. "It's work, it's a business, and it tends to color your view of it. You hear an audience laugh, and you know where the joke is coming from."

Shepherd is tight-lipped about his personal life. He doesn't have a home in the traditional sense, he said — he goes from a house in New England to an apartment in Greenwich Village to a condo in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. For relaxation, he flies a private plane.

And he makes up stories as he goes along.

"I operate on the premise that there is no sex or age, there are just scared human beings.

"When you are seven years old, and about to fail a test, the audience tends to believe that the experiences you are talking about are understood only by people their age. What they do not understand is that it is universal.

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SHEPHERD SAYS HE keeps looking at life for story ideas. Just as one of his most famous, "Wanda Hickey" came to him after a nightclub date, watching some tuxedoed teenager driving five feet, pulling over, vomiting, getting back in the car and driving five feet more, he says that life is full of ideas.

But he bemoans people who won't let him forget his radio days. He feels pigeonholed, and makes reference to Sterling Hayden, the actor who has also written several novels, including "Voyage" and "The Wanderer."

"Fifty to 100 years from now, they'll be seeing Hayden as a great author," says Shepherd.

That's a long time for any writer to wait. And especially for a man who feels trapped in the Delcotron AM radio in the dashboard of a '64 Chevy, or in a small box on a nightstable, it can't be great comfort.

But for all the Schwartzes of the world — whatever their names might be — it's a very nice thought.

'Star Trek' big-screen TV series

By KIRK L. BJORNSGAARD
Of The Reporter Staff

"Star Trek — The Motion Picture" is a logical progression from the television series that ended a decade ago.