

JEAN SHEPHERD: Ticket to Ride

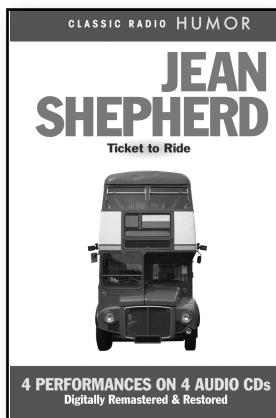
Program Guide by Eugene B. Bergmann

Jean Shepherd loved to travel and had a knack for communicating the feel of a place and what was special about the local people, not through the traditional medium of travel writing, but through his own brand of the spoken word. The many broadcasts I listened to and transcribed portions of during the course of writing *Excelsior, You Fathead! The Art and Enigma of Jean Shepherd* attest to his unparalleled gift in that medium--and the following excerpt from one of them speaks to the subject at hand:

I am a trained reporter. Those of you who listen to me know that. My life has been devoted to absorbing sights and sounds and listening.... As far as I'm concerned, travel—I have found travel to be one of the most—oh—use all the clichés, but it is the one thing I find that really, truly, does give me a kind of a final sense of involvement and satisfaction.

In the section of the book, “Travel Broadens One,” I remarked:

Shepherd emphasized that being in new places promoted new ideas, new ways of perceiving our world. Travel unplanned—all the simple things should be noticed, especially because they are of a different order from the simple things at home. He usually described his visits upon his return in a series of broadcasts, and sometimes played recordings made on site. Most of his travel was for pleasure, although a few times he went on assignment.



In the first of four syndicated recordings made during his October 1964 trip to the British Isles, taped in his hotel room in Edinburgh, Scotland, he sets the scene in his own, special way. He practices his Scottish accent and he plays a bit of Scottish music on one of his favorite instruments, the kazoo. Listen—ah, what a melodious sound! He says that Scots are especially sympathetic toward Americans and that Scotland is “one of the last strongholds of individualism.” He notes the many steam engines that pass by his hotel and Edinburgh Castle. He delights in describing the look of Scotland: “The color is a kind of dark, tarnished, burnished bronze. That’s about the only way I can describe it. It’s a magnificent dark

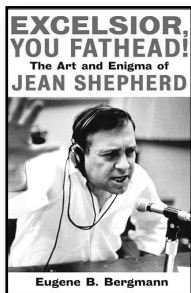
green, reddish brown color. Beautiful, beautiful color. The kind of color that painters are always *trying* to get but never quite making.” He says, “It’s a *green* city, a city of trees, a city of statues and high, thin, ancient, medieval black-looking spires reaching up into the sky, *way* up there, and all topped with tiny crosses.”

Before he ends the program, he teases us: “Now if you wonder what I’m doing here in Scotland, I’m only authorized to say I’m here on a ‘secret mission.’” We Shep fans, however, know that in 1964 he was contracted by *Playboy* to travel with and interview The Beatles, who were already very popular in Britain and were about to make their great surge in the United States. Neither does it surprise us to know that, at least before he got to know them, he disliked them as entertainers, and disparaged rock and roll, “pop music,” as he called it. In fact, in a recently discovered postcard to his wife Lois Nettleton, probably from early in the trip, he wrote, “The Beatles are a first class pain in the ass. I’m really sorry I have to do a story on them. They are the epitome of aggressive cocky slob who lead other slob—.” Yes, he said that, but from what he wrote about his association with The Beatles for *Playboy* a couple of months later (February 1965 issue), and from what he would say in the last CD of this set, we also know that he modified his view of those “cocky slob.”

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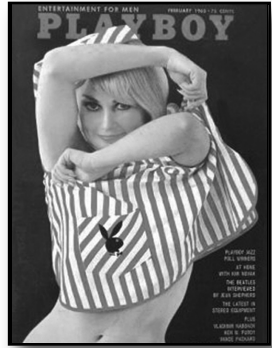
In the next program he mentions that he’d just returned from the Scottish Highlands and reiterates his liking for the country. He describes more of Edinburgh, including its look, sounds, smells, and the friendliness of the people. He plays a bit of a radio soap opera and describes the Scottish penchant for gambling on everything imaginable. He is especially impressed by other characteristics: “If you love conversation, if you like to talk to people and love to read and love to be where people enjoy humor and ideas, this is the country for you.” As we know of his love of all these things, we can see that Scotland *is* the country for him!

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In the third and fourth programs, taped in London, he focuses on several attributes of then-current English culture. Remember that this is the period of wild fashions emanating from Great Britain. England is just the place to see the new, outrageous trends clashing with tradition, and these trends are becoming the most visible of their exports to the United States—rock and roll is on the rise—the “British invasion” is about to begin! Shepherd is a strange combination of liberal and conservative, so, despite not being a prude, he is aghast at the pornographic magazines openly for sale at newsstands, and he finds the increased

mixing of gender attire and hairstyles confusing and unpleasant. During this period he sometimes comments on his New York broadcasts about the trend of challenging sexual stereotypes in what was known as “role reversal.” Shepherd hyperbole from one of his broadcasts: “I’d be willing to bet, speaking of reversal of roles, that the cab used to be really a thing for businessmen—hurried guys—I would say probably a good seventy-five percent of the cab riders today are angry chicks sitting in the back seat.” So the pop scene in London is timed perfectly for him to make his very personal-and astute—comments on what that scene is all about.



Shep’s interview with The Beatles appeared in the Feb 1965 issue of *Playboy*

He seems in a state of conflict regarding the Brits: “It’s a thousand percent more exciting than it was just a couple of years ago when I was here,” but he’s displeased with the startling combination of Victorian tradition with the current pop culture, which he describes as slob culture. All this ferment gives him the opportunity to describe and decry pop culture in general and rock and roll in particular. Pointing to the British entertainment business of one-night-stands up and down the countryside, he comments that the slobs “come out of the hills like locusts. You never would believe me! Eating their candy and meat pies and chewing away at popcorn as fast as they can, swilling beer and yelling and hollering....” This gives him the opportunity to comment that Americans think that countries like Great Britain “are pure and pristine and are magic *culture* centers,” and he corrects our idea by describing how pop culture with all its slob-like characteristics had taken over the country.

And then he can at last reveal his secret: he’s traveling with and living with The Beatles—the ultimate example of rampant pop culture! For *Excelsior, You Fathead!*, I asked Hugh Hefner why *Playboy* had chosen Shepherd for the assignment:

“I suspect, quite frankly, there were occasions when we would do that because it would produce an interesting result. An obvious example of that is that we sent Alex Haley, the author of *Roots*, to interview George Lincoln Rockwell, who was a neo-Nazi.” Hefner suggested that “Using a very American guy like Jean, with his sensibilities, to interview The Beatles,” was the same kind of inspired editorial decision.

Shepherd uses The Beatles as a prime example of the degeneration of taste in Great Britain and, in a major descriptive and interpretive riff, he goes to considerable lengths to speak of the rare and wonderful reportorial opportunity



Jean Shepherd

he's been given. As he puts it, "I wasn't really *traveling* as an observer—they began to accept me as *part of the gang*." The way he describes the scenes of scrambling away from adoring fans along with John, Paul, George, and Ringo—running in the streets and climbing down fire escapes—you can picture him as a fifth Beatle in their film, *A Hard Day's Night*. He contrasts them with many American entertainers, whom he sees as having an immature, naïve attitude toward life: "The Beatles are four successful truck drivers. And they have seen the world and they know what it's about and for that reason it's much easier to get on terms of rapport with them as an adult." This experience obviously changes him and you can observe it happening as he speaks to us in this program. By the time he's written the *Playboy* interview, he's describing them as four regular guys who manage to take their fame in stride, and he portrays them sympathetically.

As he does so often, Jean Shepherd takes this experience of touring and living with The Beatles to comment on larger issues, to reflect on his own attitudes, and within those issues and attitudes, to give a critique of our lives. In these four programs, we've been permitted to experience with him during this journey through the British Isles not only his perceptions regarding our world in the mid-twentieth century, but his emotional and critical reactions to a far-reaching cultural phenomenon of our age.

Eugene B. Bergmann is author of *Excelsior, You Fathead! The Art and Enigma of Jean Shepherd*. Published by Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, it is available through fine booksellers nationwide or through Music Dispatch at 1-800-637-2852.

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