Gene Lees
Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93024-0240

January 1991

Vol. 10 No. 1

Mail Bag

I've enjoyed *Singers and the Song* and *Meet Me at Jim and Andy's* and I'm looking forward to reading *The Will to Swing.*

I've been receiving your *Jazzletter* for the past year, and had mixed feelings about renewing. On one hand I enjoy the conversations with the giants and monsters of the music, while on the other hand I feel left out when the articles get into such musical detail. It's got an elitist feel (to me, anyway). Perhaps I should overlook the technicalities and just enjoy.

I've been a jazz listener since 1947. However, I'm not a musician. Jazz is my avocation, my passion, if you will.

I enjoyed the letter on Bobby Scott. I first saw Bobby (even spoke to him) in 1954. I was stationed in Virginia, but New York being my home, I went back every weekend, with a couple of fellow jazz lovers from Chicago and Arkansas.

We made a ritual of closing the Hickory House on Friday and Saturday nights (Marian McPartland, Vinnie Burke, and Joe Morello) but before the closing, we'd go over to the Metropole Cafe on Broadway to hear Tony Scott, whom we were nuts over. He was very kind and hung out with us, going for coffee-and in Hector's Cafeteria and other places. At times he had Dick Katz and Earl May with him, and at other times he had the youngest rhythm section around (I think), Whitey Mitchell, Will Bradley Jr., and Bobby Scott.

Those were indeed magic times, enjoying the music, and being made to feel part of the group. None of us were musicians, but we were genuinely welcome, names remembered etc. I shall never forget the good feeling it gave me.

I lost track of Bobby Scott over the years. I read things about what he was doing with orchestrations etc., but since he was not recording regularly in jazz, I missed him. Recently I heard some of the things he did on *For Sentimental Reasons.* He's gone now, as are so many others. Just another chink out of one's life. It's so sad.

So. Thanks for listening, thanks for your insights, and thanks for rekindling some great memories.

Bernie Goldberg, Redmond, Washington

By the subtle corruption of language that is one of the most insidious processes of our era, the term "elitist" was transformed into a pejorative by record company and other entertainment executives during the 1960s. It was a slick and sinister bit of sleight-of-mind. This was the period when the commercial outpourings of musical neanderthals began to be sold --and extolled -- as high art. This was the period when a "rock critic" (and there's one of the major oxymorons of our time) compared Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band *to Beethoven's* Ninth Symphony. *By the tenets of this view, the member of the audience is supposed to be able to do what the artist does; or at least delude himself that he can. Otherwise the art is "inaccessible" and thus "elitist" and therefore contrary to the egalitarian ideal of a democratic society. That's nonsense.*

If you require heart surgery, you want the best surgeon you can get, someone who can do what you can't. One doesn't go to hear Dizzy Gillespie because one can do what he can. On the contrary, he thrills you by doing something far above your aspirations. The picture has been confused by the myth of jazz as a folk music. I repeat something Sweets Edison said to me a few years ago: "Jazz is no folk music. It's too hard to play."

One of the important aesthetic axioms I have discovered is a French expression, which I've quoted before. (Forgive that the font I am using lacks diacritical marks.) "Le gout est le resultat de mille degouts." Taste is the result of a thousands distastes. It is more powerful in French because "degouts" means both distaste and disgust. It is by rejection that one grows artistically: you learn that this is better than that, reject the inferior. That is implicitly elitist, and should be.

From its first days, the Jazzletter *has been not so much about jazz musicians as for jazz musicians. I recognized that some discussions would be hard for the layman. But they needed to be held and would find a home in no other publication -- things such as Mel Powell's vision of Debussy. I try to keep such passages in proportion, but I can't completely pull that off. Otherwise I would be regressing to that mediocrity that is the distinguishing characteristic of the magazines I quit writing for.*

So please hang in and feel part of the group.

Three Little Words

First, if you haven't yet renewed your subscription and intend to, please do it now and spare us mailing out reminders, which take a great deal of work and time. If you don't plan to renew, we'd appreciate hearing from you.

Second, is there anyone who has a complete set of *Jazzletters* in mint condition? I don't have them all, and I'd like to borrow a few of the issues to have them reproduced. Don't send them to me, just drop me a note. A good many people keep them in ring binders, but since that requires punching holes in them, such copies are of no help to me.

Third. We are proceeding with plans to hold a big *Jazzletter* jazz party between Christmas and New Year's Eve in Santa Barbara at the end of 1991. The *Jazzletter* will then be ending its tenth year.

That is a slow time of the year for musicians -- and for most people. Indeed, these are the doldrums, and many offices close down completely during that week.

Tentative plans schedule five evenings of music, culminating on New Year's Eve. There will be no performances in the afternoons. Some of the events I have attended leave one exhausted, with one's ears clogged with music. And we think one should have time to enjoy the community

Santa Barbara (which is about thirty miles from Ojai) is to me the most beautiful city in North America, and indeed, one of the most exquisite on earth. Its growth has been controlled. It is not overcrowded. It is extremely clean. The general style of its architecture is Spanish, with tile roofs a common feature. It has all sorts of excellent restaurants, outdoor cafes, bicycle paths, lovely hotels, a decent art gallery, an excellent public

library, a number of good universities, a fine marina, beautiful golf courses, a polo field, and tennis courts. The climate is mild and, normally, at that time of year all sorts of outdoor activities are available. On weekends there is a huge arts-and-crafts bazaar in the park that edges the seashore.

I don't know yet who the musicians will be. We're just starting to talk about it. I also don't know yet what this event will cost.

Transportation will be booked through Milt Bernardt. As you may know, Milt gave up playing trombone some years ago to open a travel agency in Los Angeles.

The object of this exercise is to have a good time, hear some good music, and treat the musicians with the respect they deserve.

All I need to know at this point is how many of you are interested in attending this event. I'd appreciate it if you'd drop me a note and let me know.

The Musician as Comic

There is a curious affinity between jazz and comedy. Jazz is itself the only music I know that is habitually humorous -- as well as sad, poignant, touching, exciting, and a few more things. So strong is this affinity that a number of perfectly serviceable musical careers were undermined by the gift of laughter. Jerry Colonna was a respected studio trombonist in New York before the call of comedy lured him away from playing. Sid Caesar was a tenor saxophone player, good enough to have worked with Claude Thornhill. Charlie Callas is an ex-musician. And Pete Barbuti is to me is one of the funniest men ever to draw a breath. Milt Kamen began life as a French horn player.

I can think of any number of musicians who could have been stand-up comics, among them Dizzy Gillespie, Jake Hanna, Jack Sheldon, and the late (and tragic) Frank Rosolino. I have been told that any band that contained both Frank Rosolino and Grady Tate was in a perpetual state of uproar.

In the olden days, standup comics and jazz groups used to work the same clubs, and the musicians were frequently such fans of the comics that they would have many of their routines memorized. Indeed, certain comics were nurtured by the jazz clubs, outstandingly Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl. I think Lenny was a comedian of genius, an opinion Steve Allen shares with me. Steve said the other day, "Lenny always struck me as being a musician without an instrument." Perfect.

One of the most startling comedy acts in my experience was that of a man named Leo de Lyon, who never got the recognition he deserved.

I encountered Leo for the first time in the mid-1950s in Louisville, Kentucky, when I was music and drama critic of the Louisville *Times*. Every year there was summer stock of a sort in an outdoor amphitheater. Leo de Lyon was booked for a week as part of one of the shows. The shows were accompanied by full orchestra.

I don't know what he did for the rest of the audience -- his act was terribly hip -- but he had me flopping around in my seat like a landed fish. Aside from his one-liners, he did music. I don't know how else to describe it. He said he was going to pretend to be a trumpet. I groaned a little. This had to be corny: someone pretending to sing a trumpet solo. But instead of doing a solo, he sang lead trumpet on the orchestra. After that he sat at the piano and played with the rhythm section and sang trombone solos and saxophone solos. And in the sound effects he used to punctuate his routine, he turned out to be like Gerald McBoing Boing in the movie cartoon. He seemed able to make any sound in nature.

I was so fascinated that I telephoned him the next day and said I wanted to write a column about him. I met him for lunch. He was a New Yorker, real name Schwartz. He was born with absolute pitch, and had never had a music lesson in his life: he could hear the exact content of chords even as a child. He taught himself to play piano; he taught himself orchestration. And he had this uncanny ability to make noises.

Once Leo was riding with his wife in the new car he had just bought her. She suddenly heard horrible grinding noises seeming to come from the engine or the transmission -- and realized that Leo was making them. Another time, Leo told me, his own car developed a real problem. He heard a very strange noise. When he pulled into a garage, the noise of course stopped; that is the way of the world. The mechanic said, "What kind of noise was it?"

And Leo did it for him. Exactly. And, to Leo's infinite amusement, the mechanic not only didn't laugh, he said, "Oh, I know what it is. I'll fix it."

A few years after I met him, Leo made a record, which I've heard. It's a big-band record. The only "real" instrumental sounds on it are the rhythm section. Leo sang all the trumpet, trombone, and saxophone parts.

When rock groups were cropping up with names like the Animals and the Monkees, Leo invented a group called the Dogs, and recorded it. All the members of the group were dogs, dogs of various sizes and breeds, yipping, yapping, and barking in harmony. At the end of the record a fight breaks out among them and they kill each other. All the voices were Leo, of course.

I lost track of Leo for a long time, then ran into him when he was pianist and music director for Sandler and Young. And I lost track of him for a second time, encountering him again in California about six years ago. At that time I had a pleasant little gig singing weekends in a charming inn over in Montecito, which is on the coast just west of Santa Barbara. Sometimes I did the gig with Roger Kellaway, sometimes with Alan Broadbent, and on two or three occasions with Doug

Talbert, who had at one time been Jack Jones' accompanist. Not too shabby, and the piano was a nine-foot Yamaha. One weekend when all three were out of town or otherwise unavailable, I asked Leo to do the gig with me. He did it and we had fun, and we talked about comics, particularly those with an affinity for music. And naturally Lenny Bruce's name came up.

Then Leo told me about a comic who came before Lenny, one who worked under his last name only. Leo said the man, who was a pianist, was the most original comic he had ever seen, a forerunner of much that came later in the field. Leo said he did totally zany things, like walking across the top of the piano and jumping off in a parachute harness, delivering his lines while hanging in the air. Or he would play an acetate record of his new-born baby goo-gooing.

But the most interesting thing he did, according to Leo, was to call celebrities on the telephone, pipe the sound into the audience, and put them on. He had some sort of genius for scoring private phone numbers.

One of the people he called was Bob Hope. Hope, according to Leo, was annoyed, and sent a couple of his people to have a talk with the man. They found themselves laughing helplessly, and reported back to Hope that he had better go and see this man. Hope did go to see him and became his ardent champion.

I was talking to Steve Allen about comedy one night recently. It's a subject we often get on. Steve shares with me a curiosity about where jokes come from. Indeed, he says all comics wonder about it. They spring up from nowhere, perfectly crafted little stories.

A year or two ago in Pennsylvania, I heard a joke that killed me. It was so different that I phoned Steve to tell it to him. It goes like this:

Two game wardens spot smoke in a government reserve. They drive their jeep to the location and see a little guy beside a dying campfire. Around him are the feathers of a trumpeter swan. Enraged, the wardens arrest him and slap him in handcuffs and drive him off to jail, all the while haranguing him for killing and eating a member of an endangered species.

When they lock him in a cell, one of the wardens says, "I might as well ask you. What does it taste like?"

"Well," the little guy says thoughtfully, "it's somewhere between California condor and bald eagle."

Steve laughed hard at the joke, and then made an interesting observation. He said, "That joke is genuinely new, because the ecology movement is only about thirty years old. That isn't a variation on something from Joe Miller's Joke Book."

When I saw Steve the other night, I asked him if he knew Leo de Lyon. He said, "Sure. I had him on my show."

And then I told Steve about the comedian Leo had described, whose name I could not remember. Did Steve know who he was? "I certainly do," Steve said. "Hornsby. Don Hornsby. I not only saw him, I knew him. I even wrote something about him. I'll send it to you."

What follows is Steve's essay on Don Hornsby, whose career is a forgotten chapter in the evolution of American comedy.

Hornsby
by Steve Allen

Don Hornsby was the NBC television network's first choice for host of a late-night program to be called *Broadway Open House*. Had Hornsby actually undertaken that assignment, neither Jerry Lester, Jack Parr, Johnny Carson, nor I might subsequently have succeeded, at least in the way we did.

Hornsby might well have become one of the leading lights of the golden age of television comedy.

I went to see him one night back in 1950. He was working at Charlie Foy's Supper Club on Ventura Boulevard, not far from Hollywood. There was a sense in those days of being far out in "the Valley" when venturing as far as Foy's. Los Angeles has since expanded so that the neighborhood is now considered close to town.

Don Hornsby and I were then in our late twenties. I had been hearing of him for some time, although I had neither heard nor seen him because he did not perform on radio or television. A number of people in the music business had told me that Hornsby and I worked in a somewhat similar fashion, in that we both ad libbed, did one-man shows, and got laughs in what was then a new way.

Hornsby's first successful long-run engagement, the one that finally began attracting Hollywood's attention, was at the Jack Lasley Cafe in the Long Beach area. Since that port city was only a few miles south of Los Angles, it was inevitable that word of his turn-away business at the obscure club would get through to employers in the entertainment capital.

Hornsby's important break came when Bob Hope went to see him one night in Long Beach and, soon thereafter, added him to the bill of a variety show that Bob did at the Municipal Auditorium on February 14, 1950.

The night I finally saw Hornsby, I perceived similarities in our styles but noticed mostly the differences. He worked in a much louder, more physical, extroverted fashion. Like myself, he worked partly from a piano bench and was also, I understand, the composer of a number of songs. But he did part of his act from a crazy trapeze-bar swing from which he would loft himself out high above the first few rows or tables of the audience, while carrying on a non-stop patter. I can't recall a single one of his jokes, unfortunately, merely that he worked in a very free-form fashion.

One gimmick I do recall -- because it worked so well -- involved one of those enormous five-battery railroad-yard flashlights that casts a powerful beam. He would point it now at one table, now another, which had the effect of suddenly spotlighting some embarrassed customers. He would ask them questions to get them talking, and then do a combination of prepared jokes and ad libbing, which went over wonderfully well.

Hornsby was -- because of the physicality of his style -- a natural for television, which was then summoning up a small army of entertainers from the radio, nightclub, theater, and

film worlds. Early in May of 1950, he flew to New York and signed a network contract with NBC television. More of that in a moment.

Years later, when I met a Miami nightclub entertainer named Woody Woodbury, I was reminded of Hornsby in that Woodbury also worked from a piano, sang parodies, did a partly ad lib act, joked with members of his audience, and even, if memory serves, bore a physical resemblance to Hornsby.

A Los Angeles nightclub entertainer of the 1940s who worked in roughly the same style was Harry "The Hipster" Gibson, one of the wildest and most original entertainers of all time. So far as I know Gibson was the first comedian to use hip musicians' lingo in his act. This was long before Lenny Bruce.

Gibson was himself a jazz musician, and the language was already his own. A comic named Lord Buckley also talked hip, but always seemed to be doing it in quotation marks, as if he got a kick out of the way musicians spoke and decided to adopt the style as his own for comic purposes. Buckley also affected a British accent. He was a truly funny man, although he also seemed to be partly whacko. Or is it more charitable to say "markedly eccentric"?

But Harry the Hipster Gibson was even wilder, if those who recall seeing Buckley at his best can believe it. He played piano, sang, and might even have been surprised to hear himself described as a comedian. Yet he got bigger laughs than some full-time comics.

He did no straight stand-up routines at all; all his bits grew out of music. He worked generally with a rhythm section, and the accompanying musicians would keep the beat going even when his spontaneous creativity outgrew the bounds imposed by the piano's eighty-eight keys, and he would leap to a standing position on the piano bench, holding his hands as if cradling a trumpet, and sing scat jazz choruses.

Gibson was one of the first entertainers to openly perform in a drugged state, and I'm sure he was into heavier stuff than marijuana. If he had a problem as an entertainer, it was that he appealed almost entirely to musicians, music business people, and hipsters generally. I don't know whether Lenny Bruce ever saw him work, but it wouldn't surprise me. Lenny, some years later, performed with a similar use of hip language, an iconoclastic to-hell-with-it attitude, and related some of the humor to the musicians with whom he performed.

Don Hornsby was of the late 1940s Los Angeles "school" of comedy. I put the word in quotation marks since all of us who emerged from that soil were individualists, copied nothing from each other, yet nevertheless had certain areas of similarity in our work. Harry the Hipster was too far out for television, which in those early days was tame territory. So was Lord Buckley, although I used him a number of times on TV even before booking him for the *Tonight Show*.

For that matter Lenny Bruce was not really for TV either, although I hired him for the only three national television appearances he ever made.

But Hornsby was perfectly suited to the medium. He did some salacious material -- which he didn't really need to get laughs -- and I don't remember that there was any social or political commentary to his comedy. He just had the gift of being funny with whatever was going on at the moment, in somewhat the way that comedians like Don Rickles, Shecky Greene, or I take advantage of whatever is occurring when we are working: a bartender serving a drink, a waiting carrying a tray of dirty dishes past us, a woman leaving her table to go to the restroom. Hornsby was able to take anything happening in front of him and turn it to his advantage.

He used a few more crazy props -- like the trapeze swing and the flashlight -- a little in the way that Rip Taylor and Steve Martin do at present with their rubber chickens, imitation fish, arrows-through-the-head, etc., but after so many years I can recall only a few of the other props.

He was not above such aren't-we-devils gimmicks as walking through the audience with an all too realistic rubber Gila monster. He would also from time to time pick up a giant cheerleader's megaphone and, instead of singing into it, put it over his head, dunce-cap style. Pretending to be displeased with one segment or another of his audience, he would spray ringside tables with pressurized dry ice from a fire extinguisher and then tell those on whom the chilly dust had settled that in a few minutes holes would begin to appear in their flesh.

In his youth, Hornsby -- like Johnny Carson -- had been something of a magician and, like Steve Martin, he would pick up whatever standard props or tricks could be turned to comic purpose.

He would lure a woman from the audience onto the stage, tying a pair of colorful silk scarves together and then tucking them into her neckline. A moment later he would pull them out with a flourish -- and between the scarves was tied what appeared to be the woman's brassiere.

You can buy that trick from the standard suppliers of vaudeville paraphernalia. But the switch that followed was, I suspect, Hornsby's own. He would quickly tie two more scarves together and somehow tuck them into the woman's belt or tie them around her waist. When he yanked the scarves away this time, the audience naturally expected to see something like a pair of panties, a girdle, or a garter belt. There would be nothing between the scarves and Hornsby would shout, "Whoops! No underwear!"

Another sure-fire laugh-getter was a life-size blonde window mannequin, which sat behind him on the stage. Whenever the mood struck him, he would whirl about and slap her in the mouth.

Hornsby was born in Cooper, Texas, which his grandfather, J.C. Cooper, had helped settle. As a teenager he moved to Wichita Falls to attend Hardin Junior College. When the Second World War came, he joined the Marines. Concerning his military career, he once said to columnist Erskine Johnson, "I went into action immediately with 543,324 white porcelain bowls, which I fought furiously for eighteen months, and was decorated for having read more wet *Colliers* than any other man in the service."

Actually spinal meningitis took him out of the Marines after only seven months of service. While the members of his company went off to Bougainville, Guam, Iwo Jima, and other Pacific outposts, Hornsby lay in the San Diego Naval Hospital.

Before reaching his twenties, Don was playing piano with unknown combos in small jazz clubs around the country. While developing his skills from those of a funny piano player into those of a full-fledged comedian, he worked in a San Diego shipyard. Later he went to San Francisco. It was in the latter city in 1942 that he met laboratory technician Dorothy Carr. She was a coed at San Francisco State College. He did not yet have his discharge from the Marine Corps. He was eighteen when they married.

Dorothy recalled, "Don wanted to get jobs playing the piano in a nightclub, but he had to wait three months before he could join the musicians union. So he got a job as a cab driver. He told me, 'I can't make a living for both of us this way. I hate to say it but I think you'll have to get a job as a waitress or something, at least for a little while.' So I took a job as a waitress. It was the first job I ever had. I used to get off work at midnight. Don would pick me up and then I'd ride around with him -- against company regulations -- until his shift ended at four in the morning."

During the next two years Don and Dorothy traveled about the country, seeing the seamier side of show business. "It was a hot-plate and hamburger existence," she told me. "I worked as a hatchcheck or cigarette girl in some of the clubs. Dawn, our first child, was born then. Eventually we wound up in New York and Don was determined to scrape together enough money for a concert at Carnegie Hall."

It is not generally known that anyone can simply rent the facilities of Carnegie Hall, even the main auditorium. For a few weeks Dorothy worked as a cigarette girl at Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe, Don as a masseur at a Turkish bath. Finally they saved enough money to rent the small Carnegie concert hall and Don was able to add a "concert at Carnegie Hall" to his list of professional credits.

He was still a pianist who did a bit of light chatter. Only gradually did he become a comedian and learn to function as a master of ceremonies.

At one point he put together something called *The Hornsby Show*, in which he was assisted by a musical group he called the Frustrated Five and four vocalists called The Sons of the Beaches, who had come out of Long Beach City College. Later he began to work as a single.

Shortly after he opened at Charlie Foy's, Hornsby had the bad luck to be reviewed by a *Variety* critic on what must have been one of his rare slow nights. The critic wrote, "The comic works alone from a stage so laden with props that it looks like a war surplus store. Unfortunately he seems slow in getting started, permitting an hour or more to elapse before drawing one healthy belly laugh." The critic did report that "the remarkable subtlety and wit of the man frequently comes through . . . The crowds are big, with such figures as Groucho Marx and Phil Silvers up for a professional peep at the comic."

In 1950, following his triumph at Foy's, Hornsby made a European tour. A London critic succumbed to the Hornsby charm: "Don Hornsby, the man who wants to make everybody laugh, has had another success here. Everything about the man . . . is funny. He wears collapsible boots and carries a rubber cock-eyed skull about in his suitcase."

Most young comedians, not having had time to become accustomed to such success and audience acceptance, are modest in commenting about their own professional virtues. Hornsby was not. He knew he was funny and had no reservations about saying so. "I can make people laugh with a tube of toothpaste," he said to the London journalist, "or maybe by hanging from the ceiling by my toes."

A few years ago, my good friend Stan Burns, the comedy writer, sent me photocopies of clippings on Hornsby. A columnist friend put out that word that I wanted to talk to Don's wife, Dorothy. She contacted me and sent me a package of crumbling clippings and Don's fake book -- a small, black-leather three-ring binder holding in alphabetical sections the music and lyrics to popular hits and standards, parodies of which were part of his nightclub act.

In addition to lyrics the book contained six or seven pages of jokes, almost all of which were dirty. Little of it was original; most of the jokes were of the college drunk level. Since almost all nightclub comedians do vulgar humor, particularly in small, hard-duty clubs with unsophisticated audiences, this was not particularly noteworthy, except for one thing: I had not recalled that Hornsby had worked in this way. The reason for my failure to recollect it is, I'm sure, that he really was funny and didn't depend on that kind of material to get laughs, as do some third-rate comics.

One of the clippings appears to be from the New York *Times*. It covered Hornsby's arrival in New York City to take up his television duties with NBC. It said, "The network thinks so highly of its new acquisition that it has sold him to Anchor-Hocking as master of ceremonies for its nightly series of hour-long variety shows scheduled to start May 16th in the 11 p.m. to midnight time. The Milton De Lugg trio also has been assigned to supply the music for the programs." Older television viewers will recall that De Lugg not long thereafter indeed became that program's music director.

Don by now had three young children, Don, David, and Dawn, and a wife who loved him. He had great talent, and a future spread out before him. The show, as we have noted, was to go on the air May 16.

But Don took sick on the very day he was to have done an audition performance of the show.

This was before the great break-through of Jonas Salk. Don was placed in an iron lung at the Grassland Hospital in White Plains, a victim of poliomyelitis.

He told Dorothy, "When I go to sleep, I'm not going to wake up."

Two days later, on May 22, 1950, Don Hornsby died, and we were deprived forever of his talent.

-- SA

Culture Shock
by Grover Sales

At the start of the Good War, I lucked into a barracks of musicians, but not because I played anything, except the phonograph. The military discovered that journalists seemed to have an ability to assimilate and convey information, so a lot of reporters ended up in intelligence work, along with linguists. The Army also noted that people who were musical learned Morse code with comparative ease. I was one of those who scored high in aptitude for Morse, along with a considerable number of musicians who, like myself, had been drafted out of the New York area to take basic training at Camp Croft, South Carolina, early in 1942. My only recollection of the neighboring town, Spartanburg, was the Confederate monument that bore the legend: "No nation ever rose so pure, nor died so free of shame." We New Yorkers could hardly wait to get out.

Amid cries of rapture, we learned that our destination was the Signal Corps in Fort Devons, Massachusetts. Fifty-seven of the sixty men in our barracks had graduated from college. The outfit included several linguists destined for intelligence, two violinists from the New York Philharmonic, and Harold Schonberg, later the classical music critic of the New York *Times*. Our sergeant, Richard Beatty, had been the classical-music critic of the (now-defunct) Boston *Evening Transcript*, a metropolitan daily of legendary snootiness. (A celebrated piece of folklore claimed that when a bevy of newsmen descended upon a Beacon Hill mansion to cover a story involving a famous Brahmin, the butler announced: "Madame, some newspapermen are here -- and a gentleman from the *Transcript*.") If you can imagine Clifton Webb as first sergeant, that was Beatty.

Our barracks competitively applied itself to learning to send and receive Morse, each man bent on proving he had the most natural -- and the fastest -- sense of rhythm. Seated at two long tables, wearing earphones, each of us with eager hand poised over his Morse key, we were initiated into the code's mysteries by an affable New Jersey sergeant who was a born teacher.

Once we had learned to identify letters with one impulse (e, t) two impulses (a, n,) and three impulses (k, r,) the four-impulse characters (q, x, y) presented an invariable stumbling block which our instructor helped us surmount via a series of unforgettable mnenomic devices:

"Men, you all know the song, *She married a man who had no balls at all*?"

We did. Many armies march to a counterpart, like the British, whose *Colonel Bogie March* -- made famous in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* by the whistling prisoners -- bore the words: *Hitler -- he has no balls at all. Goering -- has some, but very small.*

"Well," continued our instructor, "what's the word in the Able Baker Charlie alphabet for the letter Q?"

"Queen!"

"Right! And the Queen has no balls at all. And *no balls at all* is exactly the rhythm of the letter Q. Now, let's all sing it together."

As sixty voices rose in lusty song, my own and Harold Shonberg's and those of the two violinists from the New York Philharmonic among them, a general materialized for a surprise inspection. Our instructor feared for his stripes, but the laughing general turned out a good joe. Nobody got 'Q' confused with another letter ever after.

Our outfit in Fort Devons had been incorporated into the 45th Division, originally made up of National Guard units from Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico. It included a smattering of Indians, one of them named Bill Crow, no relation to the bassist. He was a wizened silent corporal hardly bigger than the fifth of bourbon he consumed in tow every payday to let loose his hatred for the white man. H once hospitalized three MPs before he could be subdued.

Each morning we fell outside in formation with the rest of the company -- wirestringers from the Texas panhandle who could scramble up a thirty-foot telephone pole, toss a cap in the air and beat it to the ground. What resulted was a culture clash of epic proportions. The few yards that separated our barracks from the wire-stringing shitkickers might have been the Grand Canyon.

One morning as the entire company stood in formation, Sgt. Beatty announced:

"AttenSHUN! At ease. Rest. Gentlemen, Paul Robeson and Uta Hagen are appearing in *Othello* Saturday night at the Brattle Street Theater in Cambridge. I have reserved tickets for those who want to attend. See me after formation."

An incredulous buzz swept the platoon of wire-stringers:

"They got a black-ass nigguh makin' love to a whyte woman raht on stage! I seen pictures of it in *Life* magazine with mah own fuckin' *eyes*!"

The tension between the two groups was heightened when many of us saw that unforgettable Robeson performance a came back raving about its wonders. The hatred of the wire-stringers for our group focused on an approaching twenty-five-mile hike. Every morning formation brought loud asides from the wirestringers meant for our ears:

"Boy, ah can hahdly wait for that twenty-five-mile hike and watch the medic ambulance pick up those nigguh-lovin' New Yawk jew-fruits droppin' out like flies, limpin' an' cryin'."

A gentlemen's agreement of unvoiced resolve united our barracks: no one was to drop out. Sgt. Beatty made sure that everyone had foot powder and an extra pair of clean socks for the hike. The day of the ordeal came, and passed. We learned that a dozen wire-stringers had fallen out. The New York-jew-fruit-niggerloving commies had held fast to a man.

A few weeks later I transferred out to the Air Corps. The 45th Division was decimated in North Africa and Italy. Sgt. Beatty and, of course, Harold Schonberg survived the war. I don't know whether the two fiddle-players ever found their way back to the New York Philharmonic.

-- GS