

# USO tours—from symphony of superstars to 1-man band

by Martin Kasindorf

One of the few happy innovations of modern warfare is the celebrity entertainer performing for troops overseas. George M. Cohan set the pattern during World War I; dozens of Hollywood stars carried it on in World War II, in Korea and for the first years in Vietnam.

Lately, however, what the USO used to call its "Symphony of Stars" has begun to resemble a one-man band. Bob Hope still turns up regularly on the military circuit; so occasionally do Martha Raye and George Jessel.

But for the great bulk of their entertainment, the troops must be content with the likes of "The Lumpty Brannun Show," "Gemini Crickets" (a rock group), "Johnny Pineapple and His South Pacific Revue," and "Funny Girl" with a cast of 15, all of them students at Rio Hondo Junior College in Whittier, Calif.

These performers, skillful though some of them are, nevertheless lack the star quality present only a couple of years ago. Then, Danny Kaye was touring the Vietnam boondocks and so were Nancy Sinatra, Jonathan Winters and Joey Bishop. Raymond Burr was doing burlesques of Perry Mason for the troops then, and James Stewart was doing burlesques of himself.

"In those days," says James Sheldon, head of the Hollywood office of the USO, "you'd never know who would be on the phone saying, 'I have some time, I've been thinking about going, how long will it take?'"

Sheldon even has trouble remembering the last big star to go overseas. "Who in the hell was it," he mutters. "Ann B. Davis. Sebastian Cabot...?" Finally he asks a secretary to check.

"It was Robert Horton," she discovers. "In March 1971."

The stars began to drop out as the war became more and more unpopular. At about the same time, the muscle-men of Hollywood, the heads of the big talent agencies, stopped pressuring their clients to go on USO tours.

Young entertainers these days are especially uninterested in going to Vietnam—even as entertainers. And their lack of enthusiasm is not helped by the USO's discouragement of "controversial material."

"I don't believe in stirring

up the troops," Sheldon says. "Our function is to go in and create as few waves as possible and to keep good public relations."

He also goes along with military guidelines on personal appearance: "We try to convince a guy not to flaunt some little personal eccentricity like too much hair and beard and peculiar clothes. We say: 'Full-dress guys are treating you, and in a nice environment like that, you'd want to blend in as much as possible.'"

Yet the stars once went on long tours and retained their individuality—and occasionally took their lumps for it. One World War II veteran recalls the day Mickey Rooney arrived in a camp in southern France wearing an officer's dress shirt, a cravat, fatigue pants pressed to a knife-point crease, white sweat socks and moccasins:

"A West Point colonel chewed him out for five minutes in front of a hundred men. Rooney never answered back once. He just shrugged and went off and changed his clothes. And an hour later, he put on the best show I've ever seen—for something like 25,000 GI's sitting on their helmets in the middle of a dusty drill field."

The spirit is very different

now. Recently Joey Bishop griped to Daily Variety about the transportation accommodations on a trip he made to Vietnam in 1968. "Stars are accustomed to tailors and all kinds of conveniences," he said.

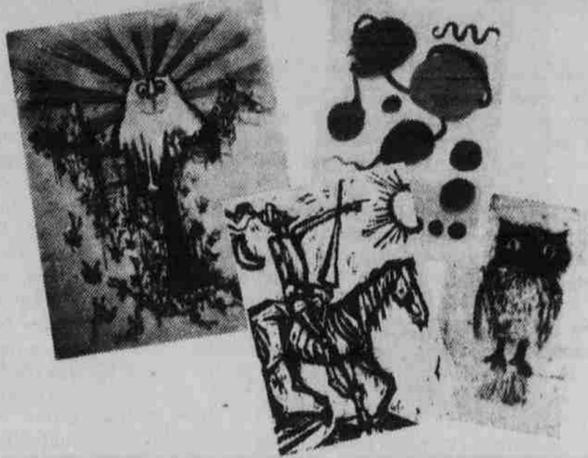
Veteran entertainer J.C. Curtiss, now head of the USO audition committee, shakes his head at this kind of complaining. "I remember being on Guam in World War II when Jack Benny, Carole Landis and other big stars flew in," he says. "They rode in jeeps and trucks in the rain, slept in tents and never complained."

Despite its troubles—and a five per cent budget cut this year is another one—the USO carries on. Last year, it sent only 72 shows to the Far East (compared to 110 the previous year), but overall it put on 7,840 shows (at home and overseas) and entertained for 7,850,000 military viewers.

And Sheldon is still hoping the big stars will return. "Maybe I'm naive," he says, "but I keep trying to remind people that the USO is a voluntary effort for the involuntary GI, for the young draftee and the more or less coerced enlistee who has been thrown into the pit."

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Hester is a co-author of the book, *On the Brink*.