

# "In Some Secluded Rendezvous" with Spike Jones and his City Slickers

BY BILL OATES

Some believe that his music was an insult to good taste, while others thought that his crazy antics in song brought a bit of fun into a world that needed an insane diversion. Despite the feelings from both camps, no one can deny that Spike Jones became the most successful bandleader who had fun by creating unorthodox music. Comedy legends like Ernie Kovacs, "PDQ Bach's" Professor Schickele, George Carlin, Dr. Demento (Barret Hansen), the Monte Python troupe, and Stan Freberg all recognized Spike and his City Slickers as their mentor and/or inspiration for outlandish songs and crazy instruments included in their own performances.

Only child Lindley Armstrong Jones first appeared as a member of the Long Beach, California Jones family on December 14, 1911. His conservative and very religious parents seemed not to be the inspiration for the young drummer's success as a bizarre

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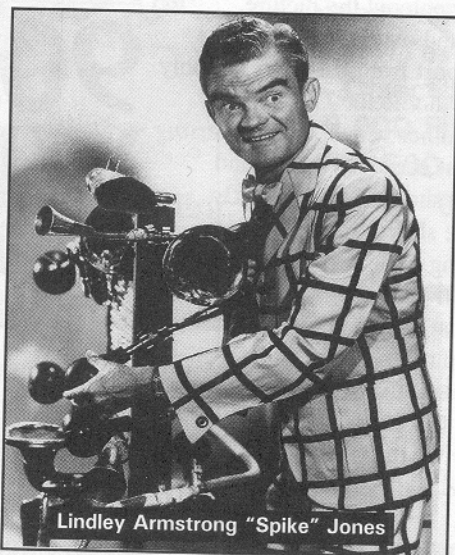
musician. For awhile his mother was his grammar school principal. The couple moved about with father Jones' job on the Southern Pacific Railroad. Spike's nickname may have appeared after someone

attached it as a result of the young boy often following the railroad tracks home. Another story claims that the name came from a relative who thought that the child was skinnier than a railroad spike.

As soon as the youngster could exercise his inborn talents for making sounds by banging on objects, his mother and father

found the boy a pair of real drumsticks. By age 11, when the family lived in Calexico, California on the Mexican border, where his father was the station agent, his mother bought him a set of drums for Christmas. He returned to Long Beach to attend high school, where forming a band occupied his primary musical desire. Shortly thereafter, Spike Jones and his Five Tacks debuted in the Los Angeles area to a less than enthusiastic response.

After graduation from high school, Spike



Lindley Armstrong "Spike" Jones



*The City Slickers*  
 Dr. Horatio Q. Birdbath, Doodles Weaver, Spike Jones, Freddie Morgan, Dick Morgan

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played the drums in nightclubs and eventually joined bands led by Everett Hoagland and Earl Burnett. Essentially, the young drummer kicked around Hollywood during the 1930s playing as a freelance musician; working as the house drummer at Victor, Columbia and Decca records; and then finally finding a seat in prestigious organizations like those directed by David Rubinoff, Victor Young, and John Scott Trotter.

Once Spike Jones began playing the drums with Trotter, he established friendships and connections that would propel his own band. Usually, when the drummer played with John Scott Trotter, he needed to remain subdued, for playing on the *Kraft Music Hall* represented being on one of radio's top-rated, primarily serious music programs. Spike probably relished some of the humorous numbers on the program, like those when the band accompanied resident bazooka player Bob Burns.

With Bing Crosby as the star, Spike Jones learned how to make money in radio, while shaping the basis of his soon-to-be-formed novelty band. At the time, the musician's union disallowed their members to play more than two hours a week, unless a producer requested their talent. In order to circumvent this rule, Spike gathered a set of tuned cowbells, an abnormal percussion instrument for a drummer, and created a necessity for radio brass to hire him for more hours. By adding "washboards, tuned doorbells, tuned automobile horns, pistols, an anvil, and iron mallets," he increased his marketability in radio.

Still on the Crosby *Kraft* show, Spike Jones and a few other musicians began to create parodies like "Sloppy Lagoon" (the original, of course, was "Sleepy Lagoon"). They sometimes played their novelty numbers in the Los Angeles area but with little success. Eventually, they recorded some of these prototype City Slicker numbers



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and garnished a contract with RCA Victor records in 1941. Spike felt warranted in recording funny noises with his music after he watched Igor Stravinsky conduct his own "Firebird Suite" at the Los Angeles Shrine Auditorium. As the maestro moved with the music, his shoes squeaked when he directed. Jones and others laughed at the performance, but some critics believed that the noise was a new percussive effect. Instead of respect for the new musical technique, Spike accepted it as inspiration and justification for his own style of funny sounds as part of a number. However, success still did not follow Spike Jones immediately.

Although The City Slickers eventually achieved the highest rung on the novelty song ladder, they were not the originator of the genre. Numbers like "Who Played Poker With Pokerhontas, When John Smith Went Away" and "The Song of the Prune" appeared soon after records appeared during the late 19th century. Before famous musician Ted Lewis created his top-hatted "Is Everybody Happy?" character, he dressed in a clown suit and played in a four-piece group called The Nut Band. Others dabbled in funny songs, but the greatest early band to play instruments with wild abandon had to be The Hoosier Hotshots. After a number of attempts to create a hill-billy band with several names in the 1920's, the Hotshots caught on the next decade and started their nearly twenty year

stint on the *WLS Barn Dance*.

If Spike Jones could thank anyone for helping to sell his first gold record song in 1942, the primary candidate might be Adolph Hitler. "Pass the Biscuits, Mirandy," recorded on April 7, 1942 and filmed as a movie short later that July, scored the first success for the young band. During that same summer month, Spike



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Jones and His City Slickers had even higher hopes for "I Wanna Go Back to West Virginia." To complete the 78 single, a second side, "Der Fuehrer's Face," made an appearance at the last minute. Englishman Oliver Wallace, who wrote the score for Walt Disney's *Dumbo*, penned the piece, which was then passed on to the Slickers to adapt. In-

roducing the razzberry maker, the bird, or the Bronx cheer as a band instrument, while offering a musical denunciation of the hated leader, struck a chord with the listening audience. *Down Beat* magazine said that it was "the first big war-tune ... It has an easy melody, which a bunch of guys can scream at the top of their lungs."

Cutting the song was one thing, but seeing it in the public's hands meant jumping a few hurdles first. In order to avoid censorship, playing the birdaphone - as Spike called the "razzer" - was lessened by releasing a first cut with a trombone giving "the bird" to the Axis leaders. (For the record, pun intended, the birdaphone was soon joined by the kalaedaphone, the anvilaphone, and the latrinaphone. The latter was a toilet seat with strings.) In or-

der to ensure the song's inclusion on the record, Jones withdrew \$1,000 from his personal bank account so that he could travel to New York and lobby for the more offensive-sounding instrument in the alternate cut. After swaying RCA Victor's board of morals into believing that this more realistic noise would better insult the enemy, the company's hierarchy relented and the second version remained on the record. Victor probably believed that no one would listen to the song anyway, so the company only pressed 500 discs initially. However, as a result of WNEW's disc jockey Martin Block playing the song to Manhattan audiences over and over, circulation ballooned. The radioman promised to play an anti-Hitler

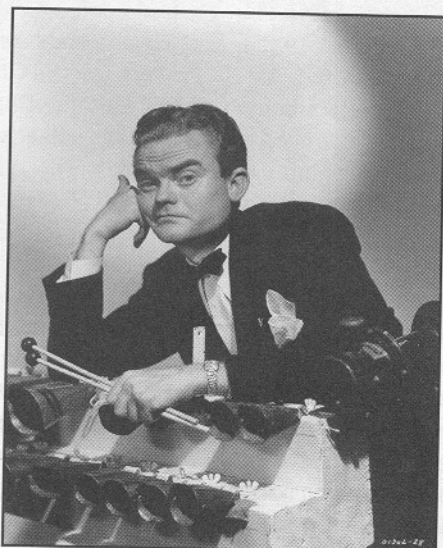
song every time a bond drive pledge reached a certain level and offered a free copy of the record to purchasers of a \$50 war bond. Eventually, he gave away 289 copies and raised over \$60,000 for the war effort.

So popular was "Der Fuehrer's Face" that Walt Disney negotiated to add it to his latest Donald Duck cartoon, "In Nutzy Land." Wisely, the animator changed the title of the cartoon to that of the popular song, and, as a result, received the Academy Award for best animated short of 1942, while Spike Jones and the City Slicker won tours to sold-out audiences.

The band's output during July of 1942, a time when many musicians enjoyed summer breaks, resulted in another early Jones hit, "Clink, Clink Another Drink," with

special guest "vocalist" Mel Blanc playing the hiccupping, inebriated barfly in the piece. One irony about the song, as trumpeter George Rock later noted, was that when he and a tuba player joined the band, drinking heavily represented a common pastime for the group. Rock cautioned that no one was ever drunk while performing, but he and the tuba player remained

the only sober members of the Slickers at the time. Two years after Rock joined the band, Spike Jones dropped any use of alcohol completely. More importantly, regardless of what vice needed to be omitted from the band's repertoire, Spike's guiding principal became "Keep it clean," because children might be in the audience.



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Mel Blanc was not the only non-Slicker comedian to have a part in the musical mayhem. Comedian Milton Berle, who knew the bandleader early on and remained friends until Spike's death, collaborated with Jones on "Leave the Dishes in the Sink, Ma," the flip side of "Cocktails for Two." Vocal contortionist Paul Frees likewise contributed his talents when a personality impression or other cartoon-like rendition was needed on a recoding or in public appearances. Conversely, City Slicker Freddy Morgan shifted from his manic banjo-playing talents to the cartoon world when he voiced characters on *Matty's Funday Funnies/Beanie and Cecil* in the early 1960's. (For the record, banjo players Dick and Freddie Morgan were not related. Actually, their real names were Richard Issac and Philip



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Morgenstern, respectively.)

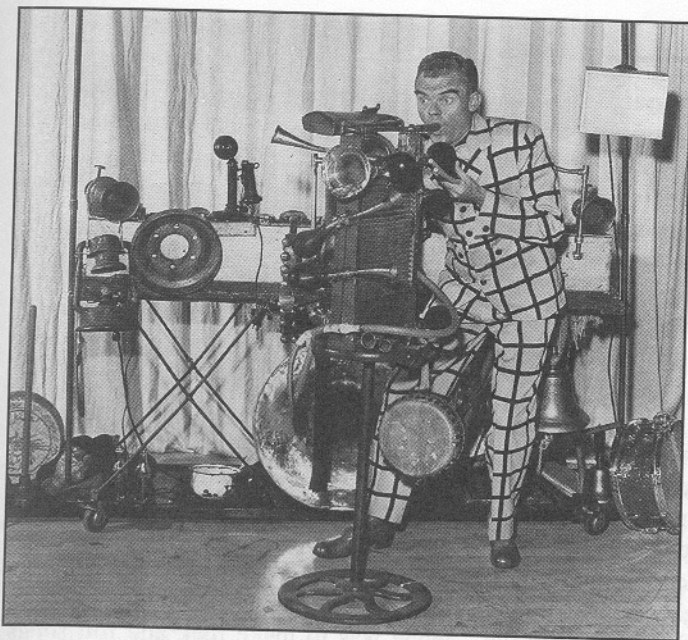
Once the band took the popular music world by storm, other media beckoned. Spike made several solo appearances, sometimes billed and others not, in films like *Give Us Wings* (Universal 1940), *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (Warner Brothers 1943), *Meet the People* (MGM 1944), *Bring on the Girls* (Paramount 1945), *Breakfast in Hollywood* (United Artists 1946) and *Variety Girl* (Paramount 1947). However, as the band continued to make recordings, one particular number established them in feature films and underlined their staying power. Previous hits had been crazy songs intended for a laugh, but "Cocktails for Two" represented a change to serious songs that started safe but quickly deteriorated into pandemonium. Set up as a beautiful choral piece fitting for a couple in love and who are enjoying a quiet evening together, the lyrics are soon distorted by penetrating noises (hiccoughs, alarm bells, etc.) by the manic musicians. The 1944 hit appeared in the film *Ladies' Man* (Paramount 1947). Strangely enough, the band was on a USO tour when "Cocktails" became popular, and they had to wait until they returned home to record the song. Spike worried that it might not be popular by the time they got back, but he was not disappointed months later.

The next step for Spike Jones was to get his own radio show. The band regularly appeared on several series like *The Bob Burns Show*, but after the summer of 1945, when they filled in for the popular *The Chase and Sanborn Show*, more permanent positions loomed in the future. They even spent two seasons on the West Coast show *Furlough Fun* during the War. For a brief time in the spring of 1946, the group played non-comedic numbers in *Spike's at the*

*Troc*. However, comedy soon became the band's bread and butter, and when the director decided to tour his "Depreciation Revue," he wisely opted to record the remotes as his own network show. Intended as a two and a half hour concert intended for "Music Lovers," the visits to venues across the country exploded into wild receptions for the City Slickers.

In the fall of 1947, the first installment of Coca-Cola's *Spotlight Revue* debuted Friday nights on CBS. "Park Avenue Hill-billy" Dorothy Shay joined the group as its resident singer, and later comedians but not necessarily musicians like Winstead "Doodles" Weaver and Professor Gas (Earl Bennett) added to the insanity. Writer Eddie Brandt later recalled how much more of a challenge it was to create shtick every week for what was billed as "Spike Jones, the Craziest Show on Earth." In order to fill the lengthy live show that performed five to six times per week, the following augmented the cast at the live performances: jugglers, singers, and midgets (first, Frankie Little, and after him, the late Billy Barty.) In order to keep the growing group together, the ensemble traveled on a private train. This conveyance also allowed the writers to assemble quickly, so that they could begin writing the next show, a task that began shortly after the week's last performance finished.

As for the organization's well being, because of sold out crowds, the band members received top dollar for their efforts. George Rock later recalled that the comic instrumentalists had to command a wide background of many music genres. Strangely enough, because Spike's first love was classical music, many songs emanated from this very lofty platform. Rock himself not only mastered classical music, but he also displayed incredible lip and tongue contortions as he kissed, razzed, and triple-tongued many Slicker numbers.



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Not only were his trumpet playing skills extraordinary, but also his falsetto and lisping little boy impression became a hit on the show. In 1947, just before a record ban, Rock created the next great hit for the City Slickers, "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth," a number that eventually sold over two million copies.

After a year and a half with Coca-Cola, the band embarked on a slightly new version of the program entitled *The Spike Jones Show*. The only major cast change occurred when Dorothy Shay departed the cast. Soon thereafter, a new female vocalist, Helen Grayco, joined the band and became Spike's second wife. Guests continued to appear on the program wherever the band performed from coast to coast. Regardless of the radio show title, generally, after a placid opening under the guise of the theme song, announcers like Myron Wallace (later CBS newsman Mike Wallace) recognized the host city, just before the band let loose with a raucous version of a Dixieland number like "Somebody Stole My Gal" or "Frivolous Sal."

200 plus pound body in a little child's costume added much to the effect. Of course, the midgets, the looks of Doodles Weaver, Freddie Morgan, and Sir Frederick Gas, and the many other sight gags did not always translate to the radio audience. In the 1950s, the up and coming medium television compensated for radio's shortfalls, at least for those who wanted to see the City Slickers. First appearing on *The Colgate Comedy Hour* as an occasional guest, the group began its stint on the one-eyed medium.

Although Spike and the boys had appeared in front of "seeing audiences" for many years, their debut on TV met with a few catastrophes. Broadcast from Chicago on February 11, 1951, several prop problems resulted in unexpected laughs. For Spike, the ultimate perfectionist where a gag was concerned, the setback only meant that the next appearance needed to be better fine-tuned. Live television also limited the group to a time constraint unfamiliar to their style. However, the best-laid plans went further astray when a tragic

From this point onward the show often included a somewhat serious song, a skit with the guest, and the eagerly awaited wild numbers for the "Music Lovers" in the crowd.

Even though the listening audience received the cream of the concert, many of the gags were lost because so many of the jokes relied on visuals. George Rock was funny playing an annoying child, but to see his

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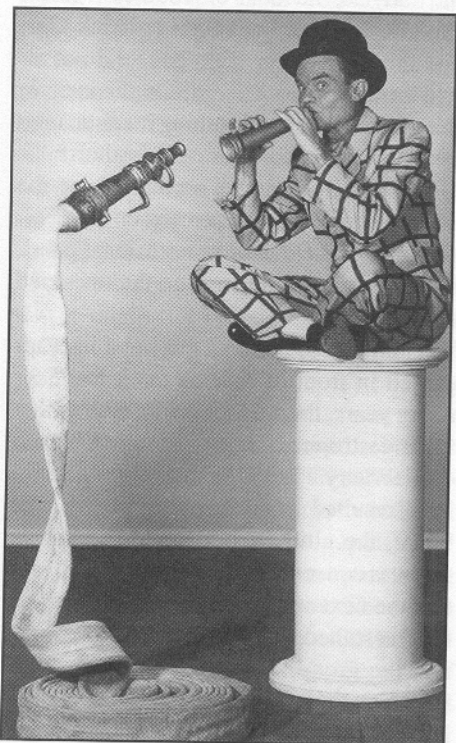
incident happened on the same show on September 16, 1951. During a sketch where Freddie Morgan was being sent away from his unit during a French Legionnaire's sketch, the master electrician in the New York control room suffered a heart attack. The stage, which was supposed to revolve, did not until the stricken worker was freed from the board. In the advent of live television, weeping NBC technicians labored to move their fallen friend, so that the show could continue. Ironically, the Slickers were singing "Goodbye, Forever" and had to keep in character until the stage rotated.

Cast members recalled that if radio required new material, television ate up the bits even faster. On the other hand the medium created new "props," as the destruction of cameras, boom microphones,

and scenery often became targets or weapons for the slapstick du jour. Despite the challenges, Spike Jones enjoyed the test of television and continued to adapt throughout the 1950's and with a variety of venues. Among his appearances were those on the aforementioned *Colgate Comedy Hour* (1950-51), *The Spike Jones Show* (1951, 1954, and 1961), the *Four Star Revue/All Star Revue*, *Club Oasis* (1957), and *Swinging Spiketaculars* (1960). He also made guest appearances "as himself" on *The Perry Como Show* (1948), *The Toast of the Town* (1948), *The Frank Sinatra Show* (1957), and *Burke's Law* (1963).

Even though television created new logistics horizons for Spike Jones, he met them head on. George Rock noted that his fearless leader thought that one real challenge was to make rock and roll songs sound more bizarre than they already did. Nonetheless, the ensemble offered even funnier versions of "Jail House Rock," "I'm Gonna' Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter," and finally George Rock doing his little Georgie voice for "I'm Walking."

During the 1950s, Spike Jones and his City Slickers enjoyed one last great appearance in motion pictures. In 1954, Universal Pictures discovered that it had a film without stars. *Fireman, Save My Child* was to have been an Abbott and Costello vehicle for the famous comedy team, but when Lou Costello fell ill, the studio had to scramble to see the project finished. A seeming unlikely duo, Hugh O'Brien (who the following year began his stint on television as Wyatt Earp) and up and coming comic Buddy Hackett, replaced the more famous comedy team. The City Slickers played firemen in an early 20th century San Francisco fire station. As the comedy leads changed, the band received a greater spotlight in the film with their key musical segments including the "Poet and Peasant



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Overture,” “Dance of the Hours,” and “In a Persian Market.”

As tastes changed on television, so did the audience for Spike’s music. Finding himself out of the medium’s changing landscape, he returned to the type of songs that made him famous. Stereophonic recordings became the new gimmick in disc technology, and Spike found it to be a conduit for sending two separated channels of funny sounds to his audiences. However, years of being a “massive smoker,” three and a half packs a day by George Rock’s reckoning, took its toll on the bandleader before he could create another incarnation of the City Slickers. As Spike Jones continued to write new numbers, his emphysema grew worse, and on May 1, 1965, he died at age 53 in his Bel-Air home. His funeral at St. Victor’s Roman Catholic Church in West Hollywood included those who often worked with Spike, like The Robert Wagner Chorale who sang a Gregorian requiem. The City Slickers formed an honor guard of pallbearers. In his tribute, Msgr. John Devlin called Spike Jones “a genius in the clothes of a musical satirist,” a bandleader who “used [his imagination] to make people forget for a moment the nervous tension of our era.” From “Der Fuehrer’s Face” through the

tunes that remained popular during the Cold War, Spike Jones did exactly what his eulogizer suggested: he helped his audiences laugh, when such emotions remained difficult to otherwise exhibit.

Spike Jones’ story did not end with his death in 1965. Thanks to “music lovers” who grew up with the mad-cap antics of the master of mayhem, interest in his style remains fresh. Because of

the Internet and compact discs, new generations of devotees emerge and discover outlets where they can find music unlike they had ever heard before. Punch “Spike Jones” into an Internet search engine and a fist full of videos options, as well as albums, pop up. Thanks to the British devotees of great comedy, companies like Harlequin continue to re-release albums like *Bluebird* and *Ones You Always Wanted* as recently as February 2001. From “serious” albums like Spike’s *Let’s Sing A Song of Christmas* album to his *V-Disc Recordings* and the *Music Depreciation Revue Anthology*, the music of the City Slickers continues to attract audiences wherever music lovers gather. ■

*NOTE-- Tune in TWTD April 21 and May 19 to hear a pair of Spike Jones radio shows. For those who wish to read more about Spike Jones, Jordan R. Young’s Spike Jones Off the Record is a good place to begin. Additionally, many of Spike’s television appearances exist on videotape, and if the true “music lover” wishes to dig for it, The Spike Jones Story (1988) appeared on PBS stations as part of their pledge drives, just proving that Public Television escapes its sometimes unwarranted stuffy image from time to time.*