

The Style Invitational »

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

Week 803: The Pepys Show



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

11/16/1863, 12:30 a.m. Dear Diary: Just fourscore and seven hours from now I'll find myself engaged in a speech testing whether I can find something interesting to say about a cemetery. Thankfully, the world will little note what I say . . .

In addition to inflicting their humor on the world at large, a number of Style Invitational entrants (and assorted hangers-on) do the same privately on a Yahoo e-mail group called Losernet, in which they share their submissions after the Invite deadline each week, as well as engage in your typical online soul-baring, bickering and general flirtation. Recently, we hear, Chronic Loser Jeff Brechlin of Eagan, Minn., noted that his family vacation cabin contains a journal containing several generations' worth of diary entries. This prompted an ad hoc Losernet competition to speculate on the entry for the random date of July 14, 1921 — and it also prompted Losers Russell Beland and Anne Paris to suggest, independently, a contest idea to the Empress. **This week: Write a humorous diary or journal entry for someone, famous or not, for any point in history**, as in Russell's example above. Anything over 50 words had better be a classic.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. Second place receives — just in time to be too late for Valentine's Day — a large heart-shaped can of Bittersweets conversation hearts "for the dumped," including such sentiments as "Return my CDs" and "Back 2 Kennel." Donated by Ed Gordon of Georgetown, Tex.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable Mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. First Offenders get a smelly tree-shaped air "freshener" (Fit Stink for their first Inks). One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Tuesday, Feb. 17. Put "Week 803" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published March 7. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. This week's Honorable Mention name is by Bruce W. Alter; the revised title for next week's results is by Chris Doyle.

REPORT FROM WEEK 799

Our biennial contest to fashion "joint legislation" from the names of the 68 new members of Congress. As always, thousands of bills were submitted, many of them pretty much the same: Among the most common were the Harper-Lee Act to make it a crime, as well as a sin, to kill a mockingbird, and lots of variations on Fleming-Coffman germ-spreading, not to mention Fudge-Cao to encourage the natural production of chocolate milk.

For humor's sake, we were willing to bend actual pronunciation a bit: Cao, for instance, is really pronounced "Gao," but we're calling that close enough for you-know-what-kind-of work. On the other hand, Driehaus, pronounced Dree-haus, can't be "dry house," though it would work for "treehouse." (Literally dozens of entrants "solved" the dry-house problem simply by spelling the congressman's name Dreihaus.) And some pathetically hardworking Losers sent in names that matched the words they had in mind only in their thoroughly deluded brains (Cao-Nye for cojones? Begich for Belgium??).

4 The Hunter-Thompson Act to legalize everything. (Doug Pinkham, Oakton)

3 The Roe-Pingree-Lee-Risch Bill: The Democratic Party's economic recovery plan. — S. Hannity (Dave Zarrow, Reston)

2 the winner of the genuine Goldwater '64 and Mondale/Ferraro '84 bumper stickers:

The Schock-Roe-Lee-Polis Taser-Motivated Weight Loss Act. (Jonathan Paul, Garrett Park)

AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER

The Bright-Lee-Fleming-Massa-Cao-Fudge Bovine Biofuels Development Act. (Dudley Thompson, Cary, N.C.)

ACTS OF DESPERATION: HONORABLE MENTIONS

The Udall-Udall Act to forbid calling out to pretty women walking past construction sites. (Michael Kilby, Sandoval, Germany)

The Schauer-Schock-Burris It Cold Act to standardize the temperature of hotel water heaters. (Beverley Sharp, Washington)

The Peters-Warner bill to require men to provide their shoe sizes on online dating sites. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

The McMahon-Cao Act to prohibit the addition of human flesh to fast-food burgers. (Jackie Dobranski, Washington, a First Offender)

Begich-Schrader Airline Luggage Damage Compensation Act. (Dudley Thompson)

The Nye-Teague-Lance Act prohibiting preteen boys from spying on slumber parties. (Ned Bent, Oak Hill)

The Begich-Teague-Schauer Resolution encouraging common-sense personal hygiene. (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

The Posey-Coffman bill to crack down on unlicensed hernia doctors. (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)

The Lance-Franken-Roe Act to combat unfortunate results of in vitro fertilization. (Eric Ries, Bethesda, a First Offender; Stephen Dudzik)

The Coffman-Fleming Act: Just another piece of legislation that puts us deeper into hock. (Larry Yungk, Arlington)

The Olson-Grayson Act to mandate that men over 40 still living at home with their parents need to move out. (Bruce Collins, Olney)

The Schock-Udall Act to take Taser Barbie off the market. (Chris Doyle, Ponder, Tex.)

The Massa-Hunter Slave Revenge Act (J.J. Gertler, Alexandria)

The Franken-Roe Act to keep the cost of a caviar dog in the Nationals Park skyboxes under the \$25 lobbying limit. (Pam Sweeney, St. Paul, Minn.)

The Roe-Massa-Teague Wild Horse Free Range Act. (Dudley Thompson; Jon Graft, Centreville)

The Schock-Johanns Act to make joy buzzers illegal. (Doug Pinkham)

The Cao-Fudge Act, affirming that euphemisms are often preferable during House deliberations. (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

The Markey-Peters Act requiring convicted sex offenders to have an ID tattooed in a relevant place. (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly; Ellen Raphaeli, Falls Church)

The Fleming-Fudge Fondue Safety Act. (Cy Gardner, Arlington)

The Udall-Roe Act to reduce fuel expenditures for the Navy fleet. (Rob Cohen, Potomac)

The Schauer-Hunter bill to fund less risky ventures for NOAA after hurricane

season. (Rob Cohen)

The Hunter-Begich Act to mandate training in the interdisciplinary field of gynecological dermatology. (Brian Cohen, Potomac)

The Lance-Udall Act legalizing voodoo. (Steve Offutt, Arlington)

The Massa-Kosmas-Hunter Resolution honoring Carl Sagan. (Mike Hammer, Arlington; Ira Allen, Bethesda)

The Johannis-Hunter-Titus Emergency Security Legislation revising airport screening practices, including pat-down searches on hotties. (Gregory Bartollett, Dumfries)

The Griffith-Rooney-Coffman Act recognizing the importance of the Andes. (Rick Haynes, Potomac)

The Lance-Nye ban on running with scissors. (Mike Hammer)

The Cassidy-Markey-Rooney Act to bail out the Italian restaurant industry. (Michael Fransella, Arlington)

Next Week: Comparisons, or Pun Pals

ON WASHINGTONPOST.COM Can't figure some of these out? Well, we could. Sigh. Okay, you can look up the translations of 10 of them at washingtontpost.com/styleinvitational.

Finally, Paxton Joins Famous Pals in Grammy Pantheon

PAXTON, From Page C1

Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and the Weavers, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.

"One of the things with Tom Paxton is that while he might not be as much of a household name as some of the people we've honored, his music has been really influential," says Bill Freimuth, vice president of awards for the Recording Academy, which gives out the Grammys. "He's very much considered a mentor to many, many musicians; he's been an inspiration to so many other folks who've continued the tradition of making great music."

"... And Tom always stuck to his heart, sometimes perhaps at the cost of his wallet. He did not go the commercial route. People really respect that about Tom."

Paxton's take? "The English have a word for it: gob-smacked. It's recognition I never thought I'd get. You think of the Grammys as billion-selling artists. I've never had a hit record myself; other people have had hits with some of my songs, but I haven't. Not even close. I'm stunned."

For the uninitiated (basically, anybody who doesn't have a subscription to Sing Out! magazine), Paxton's catalogue is filled with both satirical songs and serious songs, almost all of which have choruses constructed for sing-alongs. They're songs about adult relationships, children's songs and pointedly topical songs. Lots and lots of those, including "Lyndon Johnson Told the Nation," "The Ballad of Spiro Agnew" and "I Don't Want a Bunny Wunny," about Jimmy Carter and the "killer" swamp rabbit that the president said attacked his fishing boat in 1979. (That one still gets requested in concert, though Paxton is down to about 40 dates per year. Loves the interchange; hates the travel.)

There was also "I'm Changing My Name to Chrysler," about the controversial 1979 federal bailout, and the recent update/sequel, "I'm Changing My Name to Fannie Mae." Also: "The Bravest," a poignant song about the heroic efforts of the 9/11 firefighters, and "Sarah Palin," a silly song about, well, ... you know.

Over the past half-century, other artists have recorded plenty of Paxton's songs — none more frequently than the regretful lover's farewell, "The Last Thing on My Mind," which has been recorded by something like 200 artists, from Baez and Judy Collins to Neil Diamond and Charley Pride. It's been performed so many times, by so many artists around the world, that some people apparently think it's a traditional folk song of unknown origin, as Paxton's youngest daughter, Kate, discovered at a pub in Scotland.

"True story," he says. "A musician at the pub sang 'The Last Thing on My Mind,' and during the break, Kate went over to him and said, 'Thank you for singing that song; my dad wrote it.' He said: 'No, he didn't. ... He



BY LINDA DAVIDSON — THE WASHINGTON POST

Tom Paxton still riffs and writes often at his Alexandria home, where he keeps a framed copy of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."

couldn't possibly have written it. That's an old Scottish folk song that I learned from my dad."

"And she said: 'I'm telling you, it was my dad!' 'Who's your dad?' 'Tom Paxton.' He thought for the longest time and then said, 'Well, he might have written it.'"

He laughs. "I've decided to settle for that: I might have written it."

Paxton still sits down to write several times each week at home in Alexandria, where there's a framed manuscript of "This Land Is Your Land" — in Woody Guthrie's own handwriting! — on a living-room table. (It was an anniversary gift from Midge, Paxton's wife of 45 years. They moved here in 1996, from East Hampton, to be closer to their brood: Kate lives a few doors away in Old Town, oldest daughter Jennifer is in Bethesda with her husband and three children.)

So how many Tom Paxton songs might there be? "It's a meaningless statistic," he protests. "I could say a couple thousand. But it doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is how many songs you'll admit to having written. That could be 500."

The first one worth owning up to was "The Marvelous Toy," a whimsical, oft-covered children's song written during his stint as Pic. Paxton. "I wrote it on an Army typewriter," he says. "I was in the clerk typist school at Fort Dix, New Jersey. But I was bored out of my mind because I could already type!"

Paxton became a folk artist because, he says, "I couldn't not." Explain, please.

"I was always a sensitive child and young man, and I was very passionate about the things I was passionate about. One of those things was music in general and folk music in particular. There was something about folk music that spoke to me very personally,

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Tom Paxton

even when the songs were nothing about a life I knew. They seemed to be a window into a broader soul. They made me feel connected somehow."

He'd been born in Chicago and raised mostly in Bristow, Okla., and enrolled in the drama program at the University of Oklahoma because he'd always been in school plays and always loved to perform. But he became increasingly interested in folk music, eventually forming a group with two like-minded classmates. "We had our own little imitation Kingston Trio/Weavers trio, singing in a coffeehouse off-campus for no

money," he recalls.

Listening to "The Weavers at Carnegie Hall" changed his life. "By the last track, I had undergone a chromosomal change. I had gone from somebody who loved this music to somebody who had to try to do it."

When he came to New York, courtesy of the Army, he'd found his spiritual home. "I began making friends right away: Dave Van Ronk, Noel Stookey from Peter, Paul and Mary. I stayed in the Village and slept on a lot of sofas and somehow began to make my way."

Pete Seeger took Paxton under his wing and sang "Ramblin' Boy," the young, still-unsigned artist's elegy to a lost friend, at a Weavers reunion concert at Carnegie Hall in 1963. Nice introduction. (It became the title track of Paxton's 1964 debut recording for Elektra and remains one of Paxton's best-known songs.)

More stories? The owner of the soon-to-be-legendary Gaslight Cafe, where Paxton often performed, was convinced that the singer-songwriter with the Army haircut was an undercover cop. "But nobody really thought of me as an Army guy; I was one of them."

Paxton ran with Van Ronk and Stookey and Phil Ochs, and he talked shop with Dylan. "One night, in the Kettle of Fish, which was the bar above the Gaslight, a bunch of us were sitting around a table, as we usually did between shows. Bob was sitting next to me and said, 'Listen to this.' And I leaned over, and into my ear alone, he sang a new

song called 'Gates of Eden.' I said: 'Bob, I really like that song. I really like that song.' He was really exploding creatively then."

Did the positive feedback flow both ways? "Oh, yeah," Paxton says. "We had a drink one night ... and Bob told me that he loved my song 'Annie's Gonna Sing Her Song' and that he'd actually recorded it, though he didn't know if it was going to come out. He told me several times over the years how much he liked that song."

Funny thing about the scene, Paxton says: "We were all competitive and supportive at the same time, and there was no apparent dichotomy. We were supportive, but of course you wanted to do better."

Some did better than others, of course. Dylan took off like a rocket before plugging in to play rock-and-roll. Others became marquee stars, too: Baez, Richie Havens, Peter, Paul and Mary. That gave everybody hope. "Looking back, the thing that one is apt to forget is the insecurity of it," he says. "Nobody knew if they were going to be able to actually sustain a living doing this."

Paxton, though, couldn't land a record deal during his first four years in the Village. "And it wasn't like now, where you can put out your own record; you had to wait until you got a contract," he says. He wondered if he'd ever make it.

But he had steady employment, performing at the Gaslight and elsewhere. And the songwriting was really working for Paxton, who had received his first big break in fall 1960. He'd auditioned for the Chad Mitchell Trio and was picked provisionally as the group's newest member, but it turned out that the voices didn't blend quite right. But he'd sung "The Marvelous Toy" for the group, which ultimately had its one hit with the song. More important, Milt Okun, the founder of Cherry Lane Music and the Chad Mitchell Trio's producer, wanted to publish Paxton's work. "That was the only good song I had at that point; I thought I had more, but I didn't," Paxton says. "But it was enough to let Milt know that I was already a songwriter. ... And we're still together, damn near 50 years later."

At the time, Okun was producing for multiple artists, including Peter, Paul and Mary, and he wound up getting several of them to record Paxton's songs, such as "I Can't Help but Wonder Where I'm Bound." As a result, Paxton had a modest, steady income even before he was signed to Elektra in 1964. "And it was tremendously supportive morally," he says. "I knew that I was not kidding myself if other people liked the songs well enough to do them."

"It was exciting to think that, my God, I can actually do this."

Still can. Still is. "I wouldn't be able to define success in folk music; it's almost an oxymoron," Paxton says. "It really doesn't fit. But I suppose one measure of success is that I'm still doing it nearly 50 years later."