

# Redd Boggs' SPIROCHETES

## MR LAUREL AND MR HARDY

As almost everyone knows, I am a great admirer of Greta Garbo, even of, or especially of, "Ninotchka" and her last picture, "Two-Faced Woman," although the latter was deemed a flop when it was released in 1941. If you're one of the bereft persons in the world who doesn't know, you can go out on the street and buttonhole the first person you meet; I'm sure he will gladly verify the fact. But it's a closely-guarded secret that I am also a big fan of Laurel and Hardy. If you ask someone on the street about this -- perhaps you had better choose a second person, not to frazzle the buttonhole of the first person -- he will probably scratch his head in bewilderment, like Stan Laurel, or twiddle his necktie nervously, like Oliver Hardy, and confess that he can't conceive of such a thing. "What!" he may gasp, "BOTH Garbo AND Laurel and Hardy? That's like admiring both Henry James' *The Ambassadors* and P. G. Wodehouse's *Leave It to Psmith!* In two words," he may add cleverly if unoriginally, "im possible."

But that's the case anyway. As much as I admire Garbo, dancing, smoking cigarets, and drinking champagne in her delightful last comedies, I find myself watching a lot more of Laurel and Hardy than of the glorious Swede. They made more movies than she did, for one thing, and I have many of their comedies on videotape. I have viewed them so often that I have most of the dialog by heart and can visualize most of the situations in my mind in close detail, like F. Towner Laney playing his jazz records mentally (complete with surface scratch) while stuck in church with his wife. Not only Stan and Oliver, but such staunch supporting players as James Finlayson, Anita Garvin, Edgar Kennedy, Vivian Oakland, Arthur Housman, Billy Gilbert, and especially the marvelous Mae Busch are like old friends whose faces return in happy dreams. Unfortunately, after so many viewings (which may not compare with 4e's attendance at showings of "Metropolis," but will suffice), my attention sometimes wanders, and while watching Stan and Ollie I find myself peering over their heads and looking into the background of the scene.

"The special magic of Laurel and Hardy," Randy Skretvedt writes in his book *Laurel and Hardy: The Magic Behind the Movies* (1987), revealing the secret right away, "isn't in their gags, but simply in *them*." This is true, but for me it lies also in their world, so far -- but not TOO far -- removed from ours. I watch their old movies in the same spirit that one looks at an album of old photographs, nostalgic with the reminders of times and places of long ago. "Remember *that*," we think, as the shock of recognition resounds softly behind our eyes, "and that and that!" "If the major studios could be likened to a huge chain of supermarkets," Skretvedt explains in his book, "the [Hal] Roach lot was a Mom-and-Pop grocery," and during the Roach era when Laurel and Hardy made their movies there the producers very thriftily used the same sets for numerous movies, only slightly rearranged and redecorated for different situations. You can easily recognize the livingroom set from "Blotto" in 1930 little changed in "Beau Hunks" a year later, and the same hallway or foyer in many Laurel and Hardy films such as "Scram!," "Be Big!," "Chickens Come Home --," "Block-heads," and others.

But the exterior scenes are more fun to watch when scanning the distant background because those old movies were often filmed outside on the street rather than on the backlot, although the Roach studio did have a "New York street" set, used for the parade scene in "Sons of the Desert" (representing Chicago, not New York, on that occasion). Chaplin, too, went out out on the streets to shoot his early films, and in Los Angeles Gretchen and I once saw Chaplin's "In the Park" (1915) in a theater that was directly across the street from the very park where it was filmed, nearly 50 years before: MacArthur park, formerly Westlake park, and we visited the



Nu Pike amusement park in Long Beach where, in 1927, Laurel and Hardy's silent comedy "Sugar Daddies" was filmed.

In the 1920s and '30s the Laurel and Hardy comedies were often filmed within a few blocks of the Hal Roach studio in Culver City, then a small suburb, and in adjoining parts of Los Angeles. "We Faw Down" (1928) was made in part at Westlake and Eighth (a well-remembered address) and Western and Tenth (now Olympic boulevard). The bungalow seen in "Perfect Day" (1929) was located on Vera avenue, Culver City, and was owned by Baldwin Cooke, who plays a small role as their neighbor in the film. The house in "Hog Wild" (1930) was a prop built on a lot on Madison avenue, Culver City, and the building that stands in for the County Hospital in the film of that name later became the exterior of the Hall of Justice in "Going Bye-Bye." It was perhaps actually Culver City's city hall.

The locale of the most celebrated Laurel and Hardy movie, "The Music Box" (1932), 1127 Walnut avenue, is a real place, if not with that particular street address. It is to be found, says Skretvedt, between 923 and 937 Vendome street in the Silverlake district, and I have a vague recollection of visiting it in 1963 with Bill Blackbeard. (The stairs up which they carried the piano numerous times has 131 steps, according to Skretvedt.) Anybody familiar with the Los Angeles of half a century ago can probably identify many other landmarks of that era (some may not still exist in 1995), such as the Culver City hotel seen in the Laurel and Hardy silent classic "Putting Pants on Philip" (1927). The streets, too, in these old comedies, are real streets, bustling with real traffic, with real people strolling along the sidewalks. In a scene of "County Hospital" (1932) there's a view of the street with a railroad track running along the far edge. As Stan, with Ollie in the backseat, prepares to drive away from the hospital in their familiar tin lizzy — only a prop but the street is real — a hobo plods slowly along the right-of-way. Obviously he is no actor, but only a man who happened to wander onto the scene, and out of it, incurious about the cranking camera and paying no heed to anything but his weary trudge toward oblivion. He probably never dreamed that purely by accident he had been immortalized in a movie.

In the distant backgrounds of "The Finishing Touch," "The Music Box," "Towed in a Hole," "Perfect Day," and many others, we can glimpse vehicles rolling along streets seen from far away, across vacant lots that now must be clustered with houses. The drivers of these cars, too, must have been unaware of the distant camera as they passed by, their cars glittering in the California sunshine, and probably never knew that they happened to appear (if you looked real close and very quickly) in a movie shown months later at the local Bijou.

All these scenes of L. A. of the early 1930s, nearly 30 years before I ever visited the city, are fascinating, but one is particularly interesting. In "Me and My Pal" (1933) Stan and Ollie sit impatiently in a taxi in front of Ollie's house, waiting to be driven to his wedding, while inside the house the taxi driver has become engrossed with assembling a jigsaw puzzle they left scattered on the livingroom table. The taxi itself is once again only a prop, but the background seen through the backlight of the taxi is real. There is a busy cross-street a block or two away, with heavy traffic zipping back and forth. Perhaps someone can identify the street for me. Along the street where the taxi is sitting we can see a milkwagon parked in front of a house just this side of the busy intersection, and there is a real milkman, delivering milk to real customers. (Perhaps the

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man later did discover himself in the movie by recognizing the street and the house on that street where he left a quart of milk every morning.) In a later scene, with Stan and Ollie again in the taxi, the milkwagon has disappeared, as would likely happen anyway, as the milkman proceeded on his route, but the two scenes may not have been shot on the same day, although unlike other movies, the Laurel and Hardys were usually filmed in sequence.

Here is an amazing thing! As Stan and Oliver climb into their familiar Model T in "Leave 'Em Laughing" or "Perfect Day," or into the 1935 or '36 Ford convertible in "Block-heads," or into the little Austin in "Our Wife," they don't pause for a moment, as you would think they would, and exclaim, "Hey, would you look at this wonderful old beautifully preserved classic car, with running boards and everything!" Instead, they get in and drive away without a thought. Sometimes, of course, they ride in one of those special contraptions that can fall completely into flinders after a minor collision or after being shot at, as in "Chickens Come Home --" and "Blotto" -- Stan recalled that "We had them specially made.... There were no motors in them, you know, they were just breakaways; we had one that was all fitted together, and you pulled wires, and everything collapsed at one time" -- or in a jalopy that can be crushed fore and aft and still chug along with difficulty, spouting steam from the ruptured radiator, as in "Two Tars," "County Hospital," and "Hog Wild." But sometimes they are depicted traveling along in a real car, driving past the other wonderful old cars of the 1930s parked along the street: the simpler, less complicated cars of that far-ago era, which (I always think to myself) somehow look like cars OUGHT to look.

The old trolley cars are marvelous too, and the people on the street wearing hats -- everybody in those days, male and female, wore hats. But the cars! The auto-mo-*beels*! They are seen in wonderful profusion in the rear projection footage of "County Hospital," where the camera must have been mounted in the front of a moving vehicle and cranked nonstop as they proceeded down a Los Angeles street, whatever street it was. Even back in 1932 the traffic on that street was almost as dense as it must be in 1995. Urban Los Angeles, even before the invention of the freeway, was always the city of the motorcar.

These movies were intended, I suppose, merely as an evening's entertainment, or not even that, but only a curtain-raiser to the main feature on the program, and nothing more. Surely Laurel and Hardy, or Hal Roach himself, never thought that these two-reelers would be seen over a half century later by means of a medium they probably never imagined would exist. But somehow these unpretentious movies have captured, if only in brief glimpses, the look of a world that has vanished while we were weren't paying attention. There is a certain pleasure to be derived from identifying a can of Coleman's mustard in "Blotto" that looked much the same back in 1930 as it does today, but in most ways the world altered so subtly before our eyes that we hardly noticed it was changing. Somehow the old upright telephone was supplanted by the instrument we once called the French telephone, with a rotary dial. The console radio in the livingroom was superseded by the little black-and-white TV set, with rabbit-ears on top. The Model A Ford and the Packard were replaced by the Toyota and the Lexus, with automatic transmission. We were so heedless of change that we forgot to mark the moment of transition and commit it to memory. Only a time traveler on a backward span could properly appreciate those small changes.

The world of the 1990s is a better place to live in than the world of the 1930s, no doubt of that, but wouldn't it be fun to go back into Laurel and Hardy's world, in the flesh, not just on a celluloid excursion, even for one afternoon: to pick up one of those old phones and ask the operator for a number with an exchange name as well as four digits, like Oxford 0614, Stan's phone number in "Blotto"; to turn on that radio in the parlor -- the one in "Hog Wild" for which Stan and Ollie try to install an antenna, or aerial as they call it -- and listen to "Jack Armstrong" and "Amos 'n' Andy" and "The Lone Ranger"; or to drive one of those beautiful old flivvers -- the one in "Perfect Day," perhaps -- along the placid palm-lined Los Angeles streets of the 1930s, making hand-signals for turns. I'll tell you how much fun it would be: I'd almost rather do that than be dancing and puffing cigarets and sipping champagne with Greta Garbo!



## THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

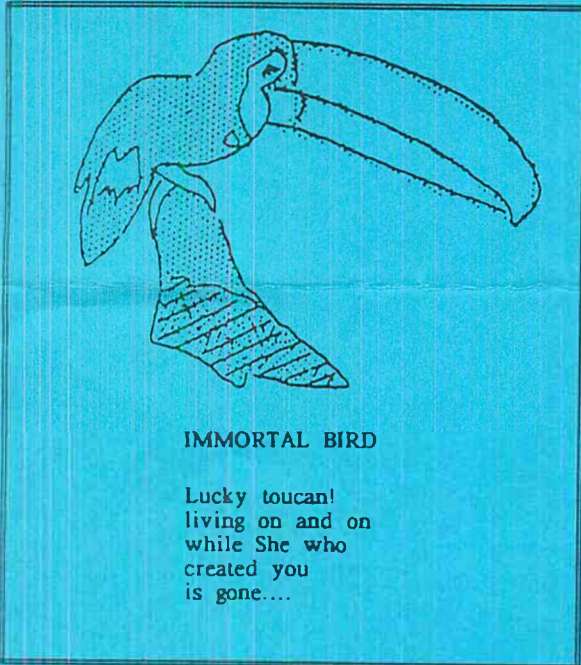
VIRGINIA KIDD

*Asleep at the Wheel* was really nice. I take it you wrote it? Nobody but you would have an unusual superannuated lady hitchhiker waiting in his car, after all.

*Spirochete* #72: "The Things You Can Count On" is so perfectly you-and-Gretchen. And "The Little Texan" would have been truly lovely if it weren't for [Polly Parker's] Texas attitude toward the black GI, which just about made me split. That he took it is almost as bad as her saying it: "HEY, BOY! YOU COME HEAH!" Well, I guess she gave you pleasure; she bugged me.

I loved your final interlineation: "I'd damn the whole human race, but that would be racist." Nothing will ever top "I know I am august, but I don't know about september."

LEE HOFFMAN, 3290 Sunrise Trall, Port Charlotte, Florida 33952-6606



The rattlesnake meat I bought ["in the Pasture," *Spirochete* #73] was in "Supreme Sauce" and I couldn't really tell much about the flavor of the meat. As I recall, as a whole, it tasted a lot like chicken à la king. The sauce pretty much overpowered whatever flavor it had. I had heard a number of times that rattlesnake meat tastes like chicken. I have heard that all manner of things taste like chicken. Not too long ago, I had some alligator tail. It was breaded and deep fried, and as best I could tell, it tasted like chicken -- breaded deep fried chicken, that is. I figure as with cat-meat pies, it's the seasoning that makes the difference.

I do not think the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals would be keeping turkeys as pets. Or anything else. As I understand it, they're opposed to the exploitation of animals as pets too. All animals, except humankind, are supposed to be allowed to live in the wild as nature intended. At least that's the way I heard it.

My own favorite critter in the kitchen is the hog.

Your observation about the horses reminds me of an incident in my horse-keeping days. I was sitting in the pasture in the shade of a sycamore, just enjoying the day, when Kehli came up and stood with his head next to mine, a couple of inches from touching me, with his warm breath on my shoulder. It reminded me of the contented way two horses

will stand side by side in a field. I felt this was probably as high an honor as a horse might pay a human, this gesture of acceptance, of trust and companionship, and as you've put it, "the simple pleasure of being together."

KRISTI JALICS, 4367 Ranchwood road, Akron, Ohio 44333

We had a family discussion after my call to you [July 1995] in which everyone expressed the feeling that we had been living in tents far from home for long enough and the time had come to hit the road home. Going to San Francisco would have put another twelve hundred miles on our journey. We would have done it only to meet you. Home was more than two thousand miles away. We had had a beautiful view of the "high southwest," but there is a Hungarian saying, "Jo volt. Szep volt. Eleg volt." (It was good. It was beautiful. It was enough.) So for three days we spent about twelve hours a day driving, and late Tuesday we were home -- home in Cleveland, where relatives were living in our house, so Wednesday we drove out to our cottage in Chautauqua where we have lived most summers for the past fourteen years. It is really beautiful here, incredibly green after the desert.

We stopped in Albuquerque to look for the cemetery where Gretchen and her mother and Walter Smith [Gretchen's stepfather] are buried. It is a very peaceful, cool, shady place, not far from a small airfield, close to the mountains. Perhaps you have been there. We stole some red roses from a bush nearby, put them on Gretchen's grave, took some photographs, and left. I am not a person who visits graves very often, although old cemeteries are very interesting places. But I was very glad to find Gretchen's grave. Perhaps it is connected with the need to strengthen my sometimes faltering sense that she really existed and I am really her daughter.

About halfway through the last paragraph, about 1015 a.m., Paul invited me to bike to Westfield, which I have never done before. (He gave me a wonderful bike for Christmas, as sturdy as the ones from my childhood and six-g geared to boot. I have never felt safe on my kids' bikes; they are too unstable and I found the many gears impossible to understand and shift. Now, talking to my children, I have discovered that they never feel as if they know what the gears are doing either.) The road is nearly as slick as the road to hell, I found. The Point is seven miles south of Lake Erie, and about seven hundred feet higher. There is a continental divide on the way, with all the water on the north side flowing into Lake Erie, the St Lawrence, and the north Atlantic, while all the waters from Lake Chautauqua go into the Chadaquin, to the Allegheny, the beautiful Ohio, the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico. Biking to Westfield we found only a gentle slope up until we came to Bliss road where we left the plank road for the back ways and a slow roll into the village. It was amazingly peaceful, pastoral, and beautiful. We walked up the Bliss road chomping on McIntosh apples, enjoying the roadside weeds: chicory, Queen Anne's Lace, pink mallow and grasses. Soon the avenue of sugar maples gave way to vineyards. Westfield is Welch's grape juice country. The sky was cloudless, the breezes were soft. The company was great. Life hardly gets any better. I wish you could have been walking with us.

I have just been rereading some issues of *Spirochete*. Thank you so much for sending me so many issues. I wanted to say that numbers 67, 69, and 72 seemed especially good. I like the word "larch" ["A Sonoma Idyl," issue #67] very much. "Lunch" has always sounded rather unappealing to me for such a pleasant occasion. "Larch" has a sound at once light, clear, and comforting.

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*We are all so bored with the world that one yawn in a group will set us all to yawning.*

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