

***Afterpieces:
A miscellany of well-considered trifles***

- **Laurence Senelick**
Tufts University, US

The Circus Origin Of 'Hep'

The earliest published appearance of *hep*, meaning knowledgeable about the latest thing, has been traced to 1903 and a "Modern Slang Glossary" that appeared in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*: "*hept* -- To get wise or next [*sic*]"¹. The cartoonist Tad Dorgan, who has been credited with any number of coinages, used it in one of his panels the following year. In 1907 Ring Lardner put it in the mouth of a soldier in his story "Defense," published in *McClure's Magazine*. The word appears to have been in wide circulation before World War I, and, although later supplanted by *hip*, is still in use.

The etymologists' surmises about its origin have been far-fetched, to say the least. Stuart Berg Flexner and Anne H. Soukhanov offer the remote possibility that *hep* derives from 'on the hip', an opium-smoking position, or even the "Walof *hipicat* (meaning 'one who has his eyes wide open')." ² This tenuous suggestion is echoed by the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2000) which ventures: "Perhaps from Wolof *hipi, hepi*, to open one's eyes, be aware."³ Such a conjecture, although alert to African slave contributions to American slang, begs the question of how a West-African word remained current but unrecorded until it showed up in print in an urban daily newspaper in the first years of the 20th century.

It was customary to name a smart guy "Johnny Hep" or more commonly "Joe Hep." The fact that "Are you joseph" has been given as a synonym of "Are you hep?" suggests that the proper noun preceded the adjective. *The Random House Historical Dictionary of Slang* cites the 1909 *How to Be a Detective* by F. H. Tillotsen:

"One thief will say to his pal 'Are you hept?' or 'Are you joseph?' or 'Are you

jo hept?" His pal will say, "I'm wise." The expression was given its fame from the characteristic of an old circus man who was famous. He would always say that he knew just what to do or what was being said... Finally when anyone contemplated an act or expression around the show grounds, the gang would say, "Yes, you are the same as Joe Hept."⁴

This information and its source seem to have become garbled over time: a 1914 slang dictionary identifies Joe Hep as a Cincinnati detective, while David W. Maurer associated the phrase with a Chicago saloon owner or bartender. 'Tis said that back in the 1890's Joe Hep ran a saloon in Chicago where Maurer states, without quotations, that the original use of "Joe Hepp" was thus ironic, to indicate someone who thinks he's in the know, but isn't. He also suggests that phrases such as "Let me Joe you to the racket" or "put you Joe" derive from the same dim-witted barkeep.

Flexner and Soukhanov (221) consider his etymological scenario unlikely, but it led Archer Taylor to comb directories of the period for a likely suspect:

According to the Chicago directories, 1885-99, Louis Hepp was a bartender (1886, 1887) and Charles, Mrs., Charles, Mrs. Elizabeth, and William A. Hepp owned saloons at various locations not far from the Loop between 1887 and 1893. A Joseph Hepp, news agent, appears in 1895. No Joe Hepp is reported as a saloon owner. Although the explanation is plausible, more evidence is needed.⁵

The reference to saloons had led Taylor astray. It was Tillotsen's earlier allusion to "a circus man" that should have been followed up. In 1933 Bert J. Chipman listed *hepp* in a lexicon of circus slang as meaning "Wise, informed".⁶ Another such list, spelling it *hep*, provided the definition "Road-smart. Traveled lots."⁷ These citations, later conflated by Don Wilmeth in his lexicon of show business lingo,⁸ associate the word specifically with the outdoor entertainment industry.

The missing link between the circus and a more widely disseminated usage can be found in a special anniversary issue (15 February 1913) of the *New York Clipper*, the professional journal of show business, soon to be absorbed by *Variety*. The columnist Louis E. Cook, in an article entitled "Are you hepp?", wrote:

Probably few people were aware of the fact that "Joe Hepp" was a unique character in real life, and because of his quaint, inquiring nature, used as a

synonym for knowledge in the matter of being well informed as to what was going on or likely to happen in his bailiwick. Hence the phrase “Are you Hepp?”

.. [Hepp was] a whole-souled, genial fellow, running a “pick out case”⁹, working on the stands, or making himself generally useful with the privileges in connection with the W. W. Cole Shows away back in the ‘70s. In those days nothing was ever pulled off or a route changed, that Joe Hepp was not “wise” to, and no matter what happened, it was safe to predict that Joe knew of it beforehand, or at least was able to tell you all about it when the subject was discussed and strangely enough, he came pretty near being right. So it came to be nearly a standing joke, whenever a fresh bit of news was revealed, that the narrator must be “Joe Hepp” to all that was transpiring.¹⁰

Another clue to confirm this omniscient roustabout as the etymon for *hep* comes from the manager Frank Lemen (1847-1921), the eldest of three brothers, who began as musicians with the W. W. Cole circus at the same time that “Joe Hept” was supposed to be working on its lot. When the Cole operation was sold at auction in 1885, the brothers Lemen bought up much of the equipment and launched their own railway show as the Lemen Brothers Circus. Frank Lemen, the general factotum and medical man, was called “Joe Hepp” by his friends, for “there was nothing around a circus he couldn’t do.”¹¹ A colleague recalled that “‘Joe Hepp’ was rightly named, he was ‘Hepp’ to everything, so much so that at times it became uncanny.”¹² The Lemen circus had an unsavory reputation as a *grift* operation, bilking the customers in a number of ingenious ways, until it reinvented itself as the Pan-American Show in 1904. A flurry of reportage about the new respectability of the Lemen circus may have made Frank’s cognomen more familiar, which may account for the proliferation of “hep” in print around that time.

Maurer’s colourful account of 1941 had ended with the statement, “Circus *grifters* have created a mythical brother, Bill.”¹³ Although “Bill Hep” has remained elusive, the mention of *grifters* seems to be traceable to Lemen. The question remains: was there a real circus employee named Joe Hep with the Cole circus when Lemen signed on there, or was the name invented to describe a sawdust know-it-all? The former seems likely, since the word *hep* would have to pre-exist in order to be applied to such a case.

As to the circulation of the term, we can be somewhat more positive. The name “Joe Hepp” was assumed as a *nom de plume* by Warren A. Patrick (c1870-1915) in writing his gossip column for the *Clipper*. Patrick had worked in the tent-

show business for a dozen years before 1895, served as a treasurer with Ringling Brothers' circus, and then signed on as Chicago representative for *The Billboard*. He started his own paper, *The Show World*, before becoming the *Clipper's* Western manager and a founder of the Showmen's League of America. To the *Clipper* he contributed a column covering "Live Tent Show News, Circus, Carnival, Wild West Gossip and Comment. Pertinent Paragraphs by our Special Correspondent" under the byline "Joe Hepp." It ended in June 1915 when he returned to his Chicago home and committed suicide by taking poison.¹⁴

These circumstantial instances imply that *hep* arose not in the milieu of detectives and bartenders, but was first current in the world of circus and carnival. From there it was easily disseminated through a wider range of performance, including that of musicians, so that by 1925, those who were *hep to the jive* were known as *hepcats* and *hepsters*. A few years later the form *hip* had become so closely associated with jazz that the circus origin was obscured.

¹ J. E Lightner, ed., *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Random House, 1997) II, 84.

² Stuart Berg Flexner, and Anne H. Soukhanov, *Speaking freely: A guided tour of American English from Plymouth Rock to Silicon Valley* (New York: Oxford University Press), 221-29.

³ *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. Fourth Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

⁴ Lightner, II, 85.

⁵ Archer Taylor, "Investigations of English proverbs, proverbial and conventional phrases, oaths, and clichés," *Journal of American Folklore* 65, 257 (July-Sept.1952): 260.

⁶ Bert J. Chipman, "*Hey Rube*" (Hollywood: Hollywood Print Shop, 1933), 194.

⁷ Esse Forrester O'Brien, *Circus. Cinders to sawdust* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1959), 247.

⁸ Don B. Wilmeth, *Language of American Popular Entertainment. A Glossary of Argot, Slang & Terminology* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 128.

⁹ An act in which an animal is made to pick out a card, number or individual. Wilmeth, 200.

¹⁰ Louis E. Cook, "Are you hepp?," *New York Clipper* (15 Feb. 1913): 10.

¹¹ William L. Slout, *Olympians of the sawdust circle: A biographical dictionary of the nineteenth century American circus* (San Bernardino, Cal.: The Borgo Press, 1998): 472-73. Also see Paul E. Bierley, Paul E., *Hallelujah trombone! The story of Henry Fillane* (n.p.: Carl Fischer, 2003).

¹² Chipman, 21-22.

¹³ Maurer, 1941, *ibid*.

¹⁴ "Kills himself. W. A. Patrick, Chicago representative of 'Clipper,' takes poison," . *New York Dramatic Mirror* (23 June 1915): 9; Slout, 128.