SMITH ON WRY
Jack Smith, Columnist for Our Times

The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens
Feb. 15 – May 12, 2008  |  Library West Hall
Jack Smith chronicled life in Los Angeles for some 40 years in his featured column for the *Los Angeles Times*. A lifelong newspaperman, he was born in Long Beach in 1916 and grew up in Whittier, Bakersfield, and Los Angeles. After working as a journalist for the *Bakersfield Californian*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, and other newspapers, he moved in 1953 to the *Times* as a reporter and then columnist. His final article appeared on Christmas Day in 1995, just a few weeks before he passed away in January 1996. The Huntington acquired Smith’s papers in 2004.

Like fellow columnists Herb Caen in San Francisco and Mike Royko in Chicago, Smith was the voice of his city, capturing its unique soul and culture. But he wrote larger stories of the human condition, wry and pithy observations on the foibles and follies of people living in changing times. He was a blogger before the word existed and before the Internet was a fact of daily life. His essays, conversational and personal in tone, elicited scores of letters from his readers every day. Smith mined these letters, leading to ongoing dialogues in subsequent columns.

The popularity of his columns led Smith to gather selections in nine volumes, including *Alive in La-La Land*, *How to Win a Pullet Surprise*, *The Big Orange*, and *God and Mr. Gomez*. A posthumous volume, *Eternally Yours*, appeared in 1996.
A Journalist’s Beginnings

In his teens, Jack Smith served as editor of the **Belmont High Sentinel**, later remarking that this was the highest position he ever reached in his career. After leaving Bakersfield Junior College, he began his professional career as sports editor for the **Bakersfield Californian** before moving on to the **Honolulu Advertiser**, where he witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. After the war, Smith covered the infamous story of the Black Dahlia murder for the **Los Angeles Daily News**. Although some dispute the attribution, Smith probably was the first reporter to publish the sensational name, gleaned from a pharmacist who told him that the victim, Elizabeth Short, was called the “Black Dahlia” for the way she wore her hair.

War Correspondent

In World War II, Jack Smith enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and was part of the assault on Iwo Jima in February 1945, as a combat correspondent. He went ashore with his rifle, but no typewriter. At a colonel’s suggestion, he sent in his typewriter in the colonel’s jeep but it was lost when the boat carrying the jeep sank. After another correspondent was killed, Smith acquired the man’s typewriter case, which, when pried open, revealed no typewriter but, instead, a supply of canned goods. About this event, Smith wrote, “That’s what war is like. Only a thousand times worse.” Back home, Jack’s wife Denise (Denny), expecting their first child, corresponded with him about ideas for the baby’s name, prompting him to pore over a book of baby names. It is unknown whether this book included two names Jack favored: Lucky Jordan Smith (after the title character in the 1942 Alan Ladd film) and Caesar Wolfgang Smith.
Mt. Washington
Site of the Smith home, Los Angeles’ Mt. Washington figured prominently in many columns. Smith explored the history of the neighborhood as well as its flora and fauna. He became a bird-watcher in his own backyard and in the canyon it overlooked. It was there that he famously sighted the common grackle, despite the scoffing of ornithologists. From this historic moment on, the theme of birds, especially the grackle, appeared frequently in his columns, and Jack and Denny became active bird-walk leaders for several area Audubon societies.

The Smith Family
Jack Smith often exploited the activities of his wife, Denny, and sons Curt and Doug to feed the insatiable demands of writing a daily column. He wrote about the latest home remodeling project, the invasions by feral cats living under the porch, and the peccadilloes of the family dog. One of his most popular columns told the story of an especially prized Christmas present from Denny, pieces of type spelling out a favorite saying, “Spend All Your Kisses.” The phrase thereafter reappeared in many more columns over the years.

“It was unbelievable, of course, and nobody believed me. I was soon vindicated, however, by a second sighting. This one again took place in my backyard and nobody believed me again.”

Jack Smith, commenting on his historic sighting of the common grackle

Wall hanging created by Jack Smith using the pieces of type given to him by Denny.
Landmarks of L.A.
As a chronicler of Los Angeles, Smith focused often on its history and landmarks. Whether writing about Clifton’s Cafeteria, the Hollywood sign, the Hollywood Hotel, or such constructions as an intricately coiled freeway interchange, Smith delighted in exploring the edifices that give Los Angeles its unique heart and soul, and, in the case of the mighty freeway system, determine much of the cadence of Angelenos’ daily lives.

Life in La-La Land
Jack Smith reveled in the sometimes strange way of life in his “left coast” city and in the images it carries for the rest of the world. He embraced all of the insulting names bestowed upon Los Angeles for its easy, tolerant way of life. La-La Land, Double Dubuque, Forty Suburbs in Search of a City, Land of Fruits and Nuts—these and other epithets tickled Smith and inspired some of his funniest columns, as did the oddities of life in L.A. that inspired these appellations.

“I do not worry about a heart attack, since my bypass is supposed to protect me from that, but I worry that in a traffic jam on the Santa Ana Freeway I will die of old age.”

“If the ‘Big One’ Doesn’t Get You, the Pyramid Will,” Jan. 28, 1990 (In Eternally Yours)
“I had always told him that I would not consider the house finished until the toilet was in. He called us from Tijuana one day and told us the house was finished. The toilet was in. We rushed down to La Bocana and threw open our front door. The toilet was sitting in the living room.”

“Adios to Gomez and Their Baja Mansion,” July 8, 1990 (In Eternally Yours)

**The House in Baja**

In 1968 Jack and Denny Smith, somewhat to their own surprise, leased a vacation house in Santo Tomas, Baja, built by their landlord Romulo Gomez. Jack’s columns capturing the incomparable Mr. Gomez and the life of “mañana” captivated his readers and led to his most popular and enduring book, *God and Mr. Gomez*.

**About Words**

As one who made his living with words, Jack Smith loved to explore language, the meanings of words, and the minutiae of grammar and usage. Whether debating the proprieties of ending a sentence with a preposition or discovering a fascinating, unfamiliar word like boustrophedon,* Smith and his readers engaged in a lively dialogue about the vagaries of everyday language.

*Turning like oxen in plowing; an ancient form of writing in which the lines run alternately from left to right and right to left; or the action of some computer printers.*
The purpose of life is to keep on living and see what happens next.

"Is That All There Is to a Lifetime?" May 21, 1989 (In Eternally Yours)

Changing Times
His abiding fascination with the human condition and the way people understand and deal with their world led Jack Smith to explore the changes occurring at ever-escalating rates. Especially in the 1960s and ‘70s, decades of enormous social change and unrest, he observed and commented on the widespread shifting mores and values. The U.S. Bureau of the Census grappled with how to designate unmarried heterosexual couples and came up with the acronym "POSSLQ," or "Persons of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters." Smith popularized the term in a series of columns. He also chronicled his own switch from typewriter to computer, sharing his eventual uneasy truce with technology, but also writing about how computers would profoundly and permanently alter people’s lives.

Community Involvement
Jack and Denny Smith contributed much to the life of the greater L.A. community. An unflagging supporter of public libraries, Jack spoke often to their friends’ groups, seldom turning down an invitation and routinely declining to accept an honorarium. He was also a frequent graduation speaker at area colleges and universities. Denny worked for 26 years for the Southern California Counseling Center, and she volunteered with many organizations, including the Los Angeles Assistance League and committees of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Together, the Smiths worked to promote literacy and children’s education.

Sara S. “Sue” Hodson
Curator of Literary Manuscripts
RELATE D PROGRAMS

CURATOR TOUR
Smith on Wry: Jack Smith, Columnist for Our Times
April 3 (Thursday) 4:30–5:30 p.m.
Join exhibition curator Sue Hodson for a private tour of "Smith on Wry: Jack Smith, Columnist for Our Times." You will view writings, correspondence, photographs, and other material from the personal papers of one of the most popular columnists in the history of the Los Angeles Times.
Registration: 626-405-2128.

LECTURE
Tales of a Columnist’s Life
April 13 (Sunday) 2:30 p.m.
Al Martinez, columnist for the Los Angeles Times, will talk about Jack Smith and about writing a column.
Free. No reservations required.

BIRD WALK
April 16 (Wednesday) 8–10 a.m.
Do grackles perch in The Huntington gardens? Find out by joining leaders Elaine MacPherson and Will and Lois Fulmer.
Free, but reservations required, nrussell@huntington.org.

BIRD WALK
May 10 (Saturday) 8–10 a.m.
Another chance for a grackle sighting. Join leaders Ron Cyger and Elaine MacPherson.
Free, but reservations required, nrussell@huntington.org.

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