

SPEAKEASY DAYS *Continuing*

By GENE FOWLER

Jimmy Durante started in the entertainment field as a pianist in the small cafés of New York. It was during this period that he met and married Maud Jeanne Olson, and joined forces with singer Eddie Jackson. Soon after, he bought into the Club Durant. But it was not until the cool, wise dancer, Lou Clayton, became a member of the team that Jimmy turned comedian—and embarked on a great career

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BY THE mid-1920s, James Francis Durante's nose was on its way to becoming the most widely known promontory this side of Gibraltar. The team of Clayton, Jackson and Durante was getting rave press notices—although they had no paid press agent—and customers thronged to the Club Durant, which Jimmy owned with his partners, Lou Clayton and Eddie Jackson, and with former bartender Frank Nolan.

George M. Cohan, a man who seldom drank or went to night clubs, was induced by writers Bugs Baer and Damon Runyon to visit the club; he was so enchanted by the trio's performance that he tossed down a \$100 bill as he left, and said, "Ring this up on the cash register." Editor Sime Silverman of the trade paper *Variety* was a constant patron and a true friend; he saw to it that the "Three Sawdust Bums," as he called them, were plugged in almost every issue of his weekly journal.

Neither then nor at any other time was there any quarrel among the members of the trio about billing. Clayton liked having his name first (and, in fact, if the group had a leader it was he); the others felt that the title looked well in print and sounded just fine in Broadway's big ears. As Clayton, Jackson and Durante, they prospered—and so did their club.

It was a decade of loose money and blazing speculation on Wall Street. Along Broadway, even the newsboys had large rolls of bills, and taxicab drivers seldom carried less than \$100 in change.

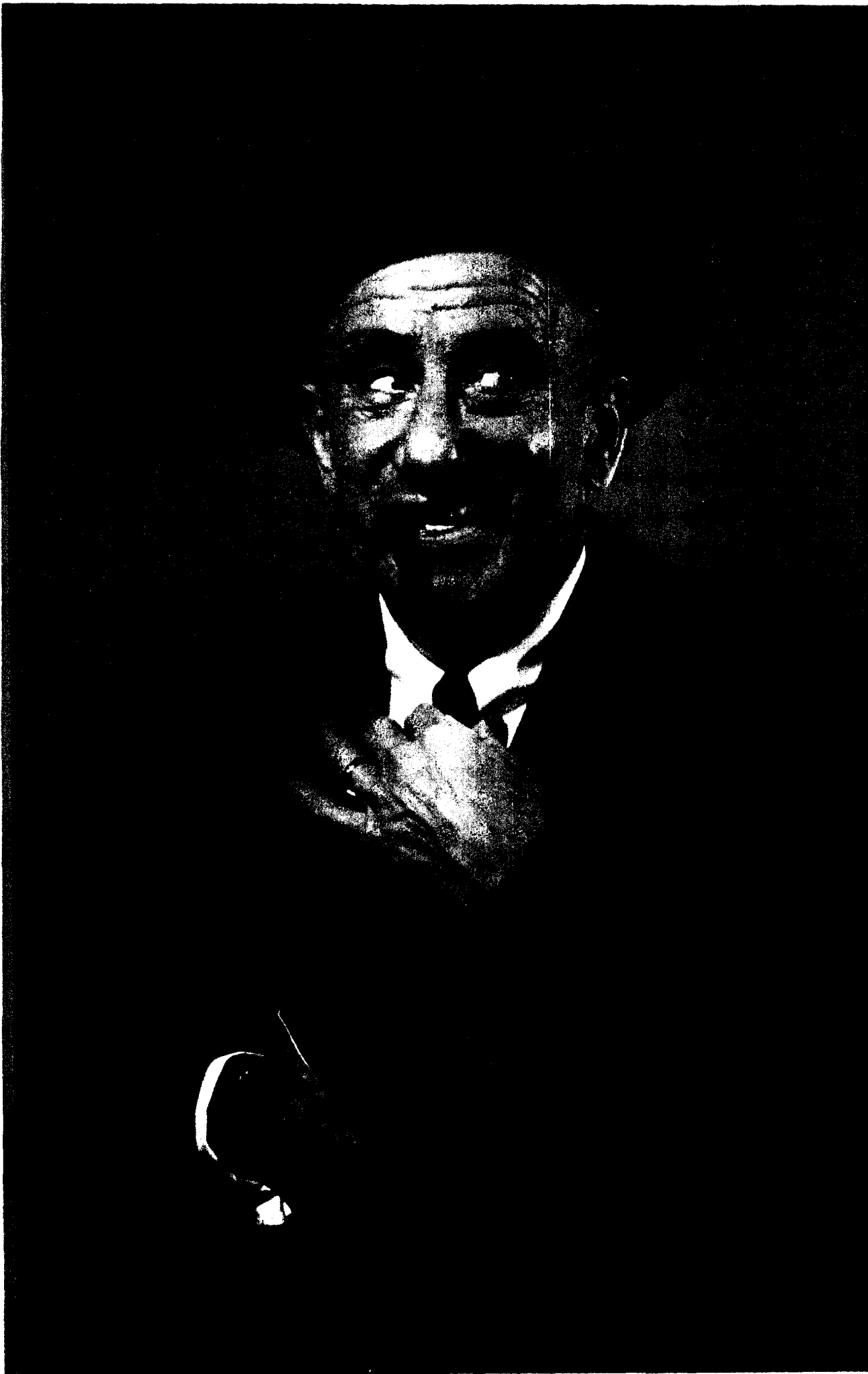
Early in the morning, Wall Street speculators would stop in at the Club Durant to have champagne with their breakfast of ham and eggs before going downtown to count their paper profits. Racketeers came in with their ladies dressed in mink coats and diamonds. They drove to and from the night spots in expensive cars, with liveried bodyguards at the steering wheels. The place, like other speak-easies, also was frequented by such renowned killers as Vincent (Mad Dog) Coll and Jack (Legs) Diamond.

To prevent gunplay on the premises, Clayton made it a rule that all marksmen had to turn in their side arms upon entering the room. He reminded the pistol packers that if police officers were to frisk them and find the guns, it would mean prison for violation of the Sullivan Act, which prohibited the carrying of firearms without permits. Indeed, detectives occasionally did search the patrons, but they discovered no iron evidence at the Club Durant.

The hiding place for the pistols was a box behind the bar in which the bartenders kept cracked ice. Clayton used to refer to these frozen weapons as "frappéed artillery."

Because of this precaution, the Club Durant avoided some of the shootings experienced by other establishments in the neighborhood. There were occasional brawls, however; when they occurred, the peace-loving Durante and the nervous Jackson took to their heels, holing up at an all-night restaurant near Columbus Circle until Clayton—who stayed behind to deal with the trouble-makers—phoned to say the storm was over.

Despite the constant threat of fights, the club paid not a penny for police "protection," an amazing circumstance during an era when many law-enforcement officers, both national and local, had



Many of the routines the elfin Durante uses today originated in Manhattan clubs 25 years ago

PHOTOGRAPH FOR COLLIER'S BY ZINN ARTHUR

SCHNOZZOLA! Jimmy Durante's Life Story

The Schnozz and his partners prospered during the wild prohibition years—although beset on one side by cops, on the other by vicious thugs

eczema of the palms. The "square" cops—and there were several—admired the partners for their refusal to "put in the fix." Certain crooked officers, however, feared that such a policy might set a precedent along the guilty avenue, and vowed they would get evidence against the Club Durant.

Prohibition agents frequently searched the premises for liquor, but they never found the "plant," a hiding place beneath a trap door in the club's cloakroom. (That was the "little plant"; the big one was at Nolan's apartment 10 blocks away.) Before a speak-easy could be padlocked under the law, proof had to be established that liquor had been served to and paid for by the investigator. Samples of the seized liquor must then be brought to court and identified as such. The snoopers carried small flasks for the collection of such evidence.

It was necessary for Clayton to keep a schoolmaster's eye on Jimmy, for the friendly Schnozzola might let just anyone into the club. Lou made Durante swear never to buy anyone a drink, even if the man were dying of thirst.

How Two Strange Visitors Got In

One evening, two men appeared downstairs at the club. Lolly, the doorman, did not know them and said so. One of them replied, "Well, go get Durante. His brother and me went to school together."

When Jim came down, one of the fellows shouted, "Hello, Jim, old pal!" The other chap also called Durante by name.

The Schnozzola responded in kind. "Well, well, hello, and how are you? So glad to see yuh!" Jimmy

turned to the doorman. "What do you mean, not letting these men in?"

When Lolly said that he did not know the gentlemen, Jimmy bawled him out. "You *should* know them! They're friends of my brother's. I've known 'em since I was a kid."

So up the stairs they went. A worried Clayton whispered, "Say, Jimmy, just who are these guys?" "They're friends of mine," Jim said. "Al went to school with them."

"Are you sure, Jim?"

Durante seemed annoyed. "Lou, am I *sure*?"

"Well," Lou agreed reluctantly, "if you say so, Jim, I guess it's okay."

Jimmy went onto the floor to do his number, then rejoined his brother's friends. They bought Durante a drink. He sipped it out of politeness, and bought another round. Then one of the fellows brought a small bottle from his pocket; instead of drinking his whisky, he poured it into the bottle.

"Gee," Jim said, "are you chemists?"

The man with the bottle nodded. "Yeah. We're chemists—for the Prohibition Department!"

The next day, while padlock proceedings were under way, the partners met in the deserted club to divide their assets, including \$32,000 in cash earned that month. While Clayton was casting up the figures, Nolan put in his claim for an "extra piece" to cover the rental of his apartment.

This astonished Clayton. "I don't think you're justified in nicking us for your apartment, Frank. You were living there."

"I know that," replied Nolan. "But I was making a storehouse out of it, wasn't I? I was keeping your liquor up there, wasn't I?" (Continued on page 66)



Humorist Bugs Baer (left) brought friends to Club Durant to watch Clayton, Jackson and Durante



ALBERT DAVIS COLLECTION

When George M. Cohan first saw the Durante team he was so impressed he tossed down a \$100 tip. Later, Cohan and Durante acted together in film *The Phantom President* (above) Collier's for July 14, 1951



EDWARD STEICHEN

Lou Clayton (l), Eddie Jackson (r), and Durante—caught by noted photographer Edward Steichen

