

Not everyone is an exhibitionist. But for those who are, the singing telegram business provides a legitimate, albeit slightly outrageous, outlet for their passion.

Dressed as bellhops, gorillas, belly dancers, chocolate chip cookies and famous celebrities, these high-spirited entrepreneurs will deliver just about any greeting, from "I love you" or "I'm sorry," to "Surprise! You're going to be a father!"

Personal business isn't all these telegrams convey. Even corporations are dropping the formalities and joining in the fun. Recently Transamerica Airlines sent a singing balloon gram to its new advertising agency to applaud them for landing the account. A local branch of Bank of America celebrated the 30-year anniversary of one of its employees with a traditional banquet and a less than traditional strip-a-gram. Even Ma Bell had Eastern Onion deliver a Rhapsody in Balloons to several of her outstanding employees in appreciation for a job well done. Seems a phone call just wouldn't do.

While each service varies, most provide a costumed messenger to sing one or more greetings and leave the honoree with a written keepsake of the occasion. Some companies can provide same-day service, but they suggest you contact them two to three days before the delivery to guarantee your choice of time and performance.

The Bay Area has attracted an eclectic mix of singing telegram services, from the department store variety which claim, "We have something for everyone," to the small specialty shop that prides itself in doing just one thing and doing it well. Here's a sampling of the variety of services you'll find in the Bay Area which, for a price, will say it for you in song.

**Cookie Cut-Ups**, Redwood City (367-1975). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$18-\$47.50.

If you want a real milk-and-cookies act, Cookie Cut-Ups promises to deliver. "We won't shake our chips for anybody," says owner Diane Keith. Instead, a messenger dressed as a chocolate chip cookie will sweeten your message with a dozen Mrs. Field's chocolate chip cookies and belt out a rendition of "Chippety Do Dah."

## THE ART OF DESIGNER TELEGRAMS

By Genita Kovacevich-Costello



Dressed as bellhops, gorillas, belly dancers, chocolate chip cookies and celebrities, these high-spirited entrepreneurs deliver any greeting.

For the chocolate fans on your list who hate wading through the cookie crumbs to find the chips, a chocolate kiss-clad messenger will deliver a Kiss-Sing-Gram sealed with a ten-ounce version of the real thing.

Recently, Cut-Ups added a bit of the Old West to the tastes they'll deliver. Order a Howdy-Gram and your recipient will be serenaded by a country singing cowboy who leaves a can of pork and beans behind in his stick horse's tracks.

In the midst of all these calorie-laden greetings there is something for the diet-conscious — Singing Vegetables who sing their greetings to the tune of "Lettuce Entertain You." By this summer, the Singing Vegetables, true to character, will also deliver No-Belly prizes to friends and loved ones for staying on their diets. The award? A no-belly button.

**Strip-a-Gram**, San Francisco (885-4031). Check or cash only. Price: \$80-\$100.

"Mind if I take off my jacket?" Janelle Manzetti asked the man who thought she was a job applicant. That seemed innocent enough. But unbuttoning her blouse did not. Before he could call for help, the music flipped on, sending Janelle into her Strip-A-Gram dance routine. Relieved, her would-be employer took his seat and enjoyed the show.

That wasn't the first time Janelle and other Strip-A-Gram messengers have taken their guests by surprise. Both male and female dancers arrive dressed in Financial District attire, but underneath those tailored suits the men strip down to brief bikinis and the women display pasties and panties.

Valentino Jazzari started Strip-A-Gram over a year ago to provide a classier alternative to other performances he had seen. While bachelor and bachelorette parties are common occasions that warrant Fazzari's services, he also sends messengers to birthday parties, office farewells, anniversaries, even wedding receptions. Because of the demand, Fazzari has also added gay strippers to his act.

**Eastern Onion**, San Francisco (664-2100). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$29-\$69.

If you thought singing telegrams were small business, think again. Last

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year Eastern Onion's 52 franchised locations grossed over \$6 million. The San Francisco branch, owned by Ed and Linda Gormley, contributed to that success by delivering over 1,000 telegrams each month. What works for hamburgers, also works for telegrams . . . or so it seems. "We can guarantee consistency nationwide," explains Gormley.

Eastern Onion's trademark is its messenger who appears dressed in a red tux accompanied by a cymbal-clanging mechanical monkey and sings one of 95 copyrighted songs.

But repeat business is the lifeblood of this industry and Eastern Onion has added a smorgasbord of specialty acts to keep you coming back for more.

Most of Onion's acts last from seven to eight minutes. But for a longer performance you can request a dual act for \$69, which includes the original singing messenger, followed either by a female belly dancer or disco-dancing Mr. Macho, who can shed his hard hat and most everything else upon request.

*Jazzcats*, San Francisco (564-1979). Check or cash only. Price: \$40 minimum.

Zanne West, owner of *Jazzcats* (formerly *Swinging Telegrams*), writes original lyrics tailored to each occasion and sings them to the swing of jazz greats like Cole Porter and Count Basie. The honoree is left with a copy of the lyrics handwritten in italic script.

These swinging telegrams are delivered by a messenger dressed in classic Prince Albert long-tailed tuxedo coat, a 1930's dance skirt, white vest and gloves and black satin bow tie. Zanne also tap dances, and delivers roses, champagne or balloons — whatever the client requests.

*Jazzcats* messengers are likely to show up at benefits because of Zanne's personal interests. Most recently she appeared at the Black and White Ball.

*Ann's Em-Bear-Us-A-Gram*, South San Francisco (952-6000). Cash or check only. Price: \$38-\$100.

"The more you pick on them, the more they love you," insists Ann Bruno, creator of what she bills as "lousy singing telegrams sung by comical characters."

Her cast of characters is a motley crew sent out to deliver one-liners in Don Rickles style and sing songs deliberately off-key. They include the Disco (and pregnant) Nun and Lillie Belle, the expectant bride, who are popular guests at bachelor parties or birth announcements; Grandfather Time, a comi-

cal flasher, and "My name is Ima. Ima Hooker."

Be forewarned. Any idiosyncracies, private jokes and physical characteristics are fair game for these performers. As Nurse Numbunz notices in her examinations, "I see you have one of those horseshoe haircuts. You must be balding because you make too many U-turns in bed."

*Musical Messages*, Walnut Creek (935-2060). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$25-\$35.

As young as the singing telegram business in the Bay Area is, it has been around long enough to establish some traditions of its own. *Musical Messages* continues to carry on the practice of delivering greetings via bellhops dressed in a blue and gold uniform.

These messengers have delivered and accepted marriage proposals, informed husbands they are fathers-to-be, and conveyed apologies for everything from lovers' spats to a missed hair appointment.

One of owner Suzi Gilbert's most unusual clients was a domesticated ferret. In gratitude for saving his life, the ferret's owners arranged for a thank-you message to be sent to the veterinarian.

*Laugh Menagerie*, San Francisco (567-5233). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$35-\$100.

"People have a fetish for gorillas," explains Richard Olenchak, creator of *Laugh Menagerie*. And that's why Olenchak started *Gorilla-A-Grams* over three years ago.

He has since expanded his line-up to include other animals, though gorillas remain a big part of his business. Olenchak's payroll includes rabbits, kangaroos, ostriches and lions.

The *Menagerie* also features performers of the human persuasion. For example, you can select from the likes of Ms. Kitty, straight from *Gunsmoke Days*; Ethel Cockroach-woman, with her can of *Rid-Away*, a people repellent; Carmen Purr-anda, flaunting her fruit basket bonnet, slit skirt and provocative Latin flair; or Mae Whest and *Send-A-Yenta* who perform a twenty-minute comedy routine.

Like most singing telegram businesses, *Menagerie* has discovered that skin sells, and women are Olenchak's best customers. Depending on their fantasy, they can choose an executive who starts out in a three-piece suit or a Texan cowboy. Clothes do not make the man, however. By the end of their routine, both dancers are down to their speedos.

*Looney Ballooney*, Redwood City (367-

## Order a Howdy-Gram and your recipient will be serenaded by a country singing cowbody who leaves a can of pork and beans behind in his stick horse's tracks.

1623). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$26.50-\$42.50.

Donette Maloney and her sister started Looney Ballooney two years ago with a capital investment of \$250.

Today Maloney still runs a close-knit organization with family and friends involved in the business. But she has a retail outlet and has expanded to include a variety of services, all of which feature balloon bouquets, guaranteed to "rise to the occasion."

Tuxedoed messengers will deliver a dozen helium balloons for \$26.50 and up, depending on location; with music the cost is \$31.80. Balloon-A-Grams feature costumed characters such as Cave Man, a clown or Superman.

Balloons seem to be the popular choice right now for congratulating new parents. Looney Ballooney delivers a pink or blue bouquet with matching streamers. They will also arrange for balloon releases to greet the bride and groom as they leave the church, honor the birthday celebrant, or bid travelers farewell.

Maloney can also provide champagne service for \$35 featuring transparent balloons that look like the bubbly; a cake service starting at \$30; and clowns, who for \$50 will visit children's parties armed with balloons, of course, and entertain them with a magic show or face painting.

*Whim Agency*, Mill Valley (383-WHIM). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$35-\$60.

Lenora Black, a WHIM messenger, decided to deliver singing telegrams for the agency because each messenger creates his or her own performance. Black's current ensemble includes an Opera-Gram, featuring Carmen and flamenco dancing; Kiddie-Gram, highlighted by songs from children's musicals; Shalom-A-Gram, with Yiddish folk songs; and Inspire-A-Gram for people who need a "pick-me-up" via songs like *Climb Any Mountain*.

Mara Marin, owner of WHIM, considers herself a natural matchmaker and does her best to tailor each telegram to the occasion. Sometimes that means accompanying the message with breakfast-in-bed, or sending Ginger Rogers out to greet old movie buffs.

Dolly Parton is one of WHIM's hottest characters right now. Thanks to a couple of balloons situated in both the right places, an authentic Parton wig, and an animated version of *Nine-to-Five*, Pattie Newman needs no introduction.

Several of WHIM's messengers can add a continental flair to your message by delivering it in French, German, Spanish or Italian. If you prefer not to mix words with your message, Mr. Top Hat and Tails can mime your song, accompanied by a strolling violinist.

Singing telegrams are actually only one service that WHIM offers. The agency also contracts a variety of personal services including bartending and yardwork. You might want to order your next birthday greeting from WHIM as well as a maid to clean up after the party is over!

*Wine-O-Gram*, Oakland (839-9466). Accepts major credit cards. Price: \$40.

Seems there is a job market for winos and bag ladies. Carl Nelson needs them to deliver Wine-O-Grams. "Our telegrams are very improvisational," explains Nelson, "and it takes a unique performer who can play it by ear."

After scheduling the telegram, Nelson's messengers contact the sender to gather personal information. Their routines can last anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour, depending on the crowd. They perform a comedy act, sing the greeting and leave the recipient holding a bottle of Ripple concealed in a brown bag.

"Our telegrams work particularly well with people who are wine connoisseurs," says Nelson. While their current service is more of a gag, Wine-O-Gram is looking into the possibility of delivering wine for the more refined taste.

Nelson requests four to five days' advance notice of a telegram to allow time for his messengers to collect and prepare their ad lib material. Currently Wine-O-Grams are only delivered in San Francisco and Oakland, preferably during the day. You see, Nelson worries about his bag ladies being out late at night. □