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 —Frank Sinatra, Nat "King" Cole, Four Knights, Dean Martin, etc.  
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 —Les Baxter, Ray Anthony, Nat "King" Cole, Les Paul and Mary Ford.  
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# NEW ZEALAND LISTENER

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## Anonymous Letters

THE retiring conductor of the National Orchestra, James Robertson, made an incidental reference to anonymous letters in an interview printed in last week's *Listener*. "If people," he said, "have something to say they should believe in it sufficiently to sign their names instead of using 'Pro Bono Publico' or some such silly pseudonym. It is unworthy of a people at this stage of civilisation." Correspondents who prefer pen-names will not be in agreement, but if their reasons are sound they should bear examination. Perhaps the time has come to look at them more closely.

Some correspondents are diffident: they do not wish to draw attention to themselves, and are alarmed if their names are bandied about in cold print. Others go further and allege that people who sign their letters are often inveterate debaters who enjoy the sensation of being on a public platform. (There is no reason why they shouldn't, if it comes to that.) But the reason most frequently given is a fear of victimisation. Persons who wish to bring up matters of public interest are said to be afraid that their careers might be endangered. These are village attitudes which would indicate (if they were soundly based) an alarming amount of malice beneath the friendliness of the New Zealand character. There might have been justification for them in years of unemployment and hardship, when friendliness became careful; and it is true that states of mind persist when the circumstances which helped to form them have disappeared. But in New Zealand today they begin to look anachronistic.

If a case is to be made against anonymity, it can be done most effectively by turning from theories to facts. Pen-names are not permitted, or are allowed only rarely and in special circumstances, in the best English papers and journals. The standard of letter-writing is high—so high, indeed, that people take pride in reaching the columns of *The Times*. All the evidence suggests that standards go down as

anonymity goes up. Letters published in New Zealand newspapers leave an impression of depressing mediocrity. They seldom reveal injustices or deal in a high-spirited way with noble causes, but are so dull in their niggling and complaining attitudes that persons with more serious purposes are unwilling to be found in their company. Pen-names may provide security for the timid debater, but they also supply convenient shelter for the man with a grudge. Every editor knows that the anonymous correspondent is less careful of his facts and more violent in attack than is the man who writes above his own name. Why should it be otherwise? If his facts are wrong, and his opinions rejected, he suffers no discomfiture. He is immune from legal action if he utters a libel, for his identity cannot be disclosed. It may be said that these risks and penalties help us to preserve a democratic freedom. But do they?

Freedom of the press is the right to print opinions, not necessarily in newspapers; and every man has it while he can pay a printer to run off a handbill without fear of police intervention. He has no right to demand publication in a newspaper, though in practice the right is frequently asserted—and conceded. The best way to preserve a freedom—or a privilege—is to use it wisely. Signed letters may sometimes be foolish or spiteful, and unsigned ones may be intelligent and useful; but in general the most responsible comment is printed above a signature. On a population basis, there are as many people able to write good letters in New Zealand as in London; yet the clogging pen-name is probably used more widely here than in any other British country. It is largely a vestigial practice, supported by a relatively small group of "B. Fairs" and "Indignants." The practice will continue until newspapers decide to make pseudonyms the exception rather than the rule. It has been done elsewhere, with a corresponding gain in intellectual vitality; and it can be done here, if we really want our standards of debate to become adult.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, NOVEMBER 15, 1957.