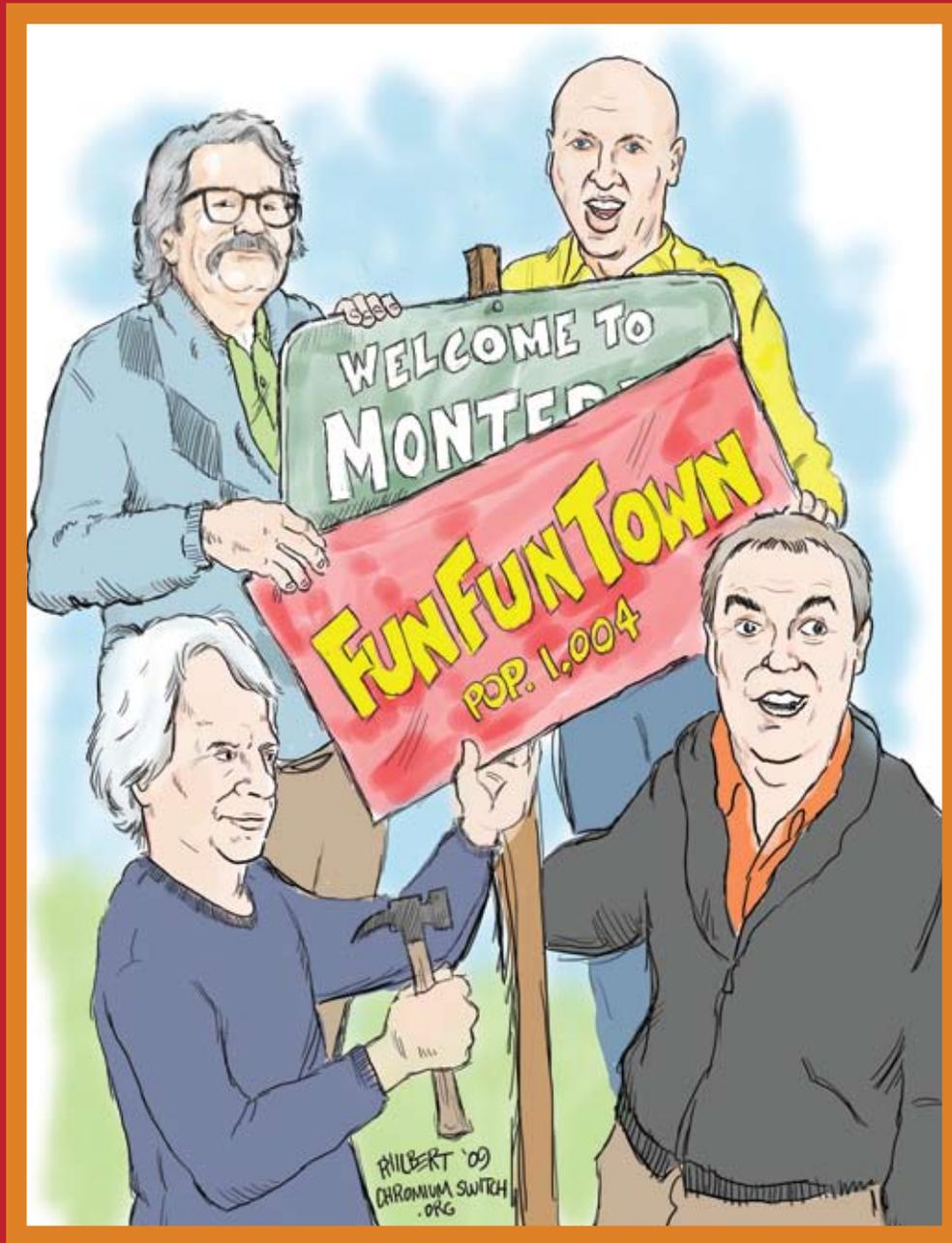


Travels With Porgie

A Visit With The Firesign Theatre On Cannery Row



A Travelogue by Insuper, er, Intrepid Correspondent
for It's Just This Little Chromium Switch Here
PHIL 'PHILBERT' FOUNTAIN

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Visiting the Firesign Theatre on Cannery Row

By *It's Just This Little Chromium Switch Here* correspondent,

Phil 'Philbert' Fountain

Author's Note: When the Firesign Theatre announced they were going to perform (one show only) in celebration of the 40th anniversary of their seminal recording, "Nick Danger, Third Eye," I immediately contacted *Chromium Switch* Editor/Webmaster, Thomas Gedwillo, and volunteered to cover it for the website. His response was, "Will all of your sentences be of the run-on variety like your first one here?" I confessed that they probably would. He gave me his blessing anyway. As the site's unofficial, part-time cartoonist, it stands to reason that I'm clearly more than qualified for this important and prestigious assignment.

As *Chromium Switch's* insipid intrepid correspondent, I was granted access to the Golden State Theatre on the morning of the show. I could watch the run-through and sketch the surroundings without worrying about disturbing patrons during the performance. I didn't bring a camera. I didn't take any notes. Actually, come to think of it, I was a pretty shitty correspondent. But! I was 'on the scene' and the Firesign contingent were a kind and tolerant bunch, especially after I 'tipped' the roadie twenty bucks (later discovered to be Phil Austin in disguise) to let me in a side door. The following are my recollections of the day as I recollect them. They are as close to accurate as any of my other recollections. Hey, you get what you pay for. Thanks for listening, and thanks, Tom, for letting me have this space.

Do You Know the Way to Monterey? Doo-doo-doo-doo-dooo...

Three o'clock in the morning and it's time to hit the road. The Firesign Theatre will be arriving at the Golden State Theatre in Monterey around 11:00 am for a run-through prior to the evening's performance, and I'm about a five or six hour drive away. My wife audibly sighs but, dutifully, makes the coffee. She's resigned herself to the fact that she's married to a Firehead. Life has played other dirty tricks on her, but so far she hadn't had to get up at three o'clock in the morning to drive to Monterey for any of the others. We all have

our cross to bear and I'm her 'little splinter'. She smiles when she calls me that, which is rather disconcerting, but I digress (get used to it).

We hit Interstate 5 heading south. It's the end of April in northern California and the weather is clear and cool, good for highway driving. I load *Box of Danger* into the CD changer. My wife rolls her eyes and asks, "Aren't they going to be doing these bits tonight?" Well, yeah, probably, but I gotta get psyched. "You need to psych yourself up to be a member of the audience?" She doesn't make sense sometimes but marriage is all about making adjustments and, after all, it is three o'clock in the morning, so I'll let her slide.

We stop at one of I-5's finer eating establishment-slash-car wash-slash-gas station and we order pancakes. I ask the waitress to "go heavy on the 30-weight" and she stares at me blankly. My wife hides behind a newspaper rack. This is pretty much how the rest of the drive went, but we, the car and the marriage, arrive safely

WARDROBE DECISIONS ARE A BIG PART OF EFFECTIVE TRAVEL PLANNING...



in Monterey about two hours ahead of schedule. Our hotel room isn't ready yet. My wife suggests some sight-seeing. The sight she'd like to see is me stuffed into the trunk. We go check out downtown and Cannery Row instead. Adjustments, see?

We find a charming little café near the theater with decent wi-fi and my corresponding begins. Over coffee and pastries I settle in to Twitter/Facebook the highlights of our Firesign Experience, so far, from our trusty laptop. The Internet has been awaiting news of the journey and I imagine servers crash around the globe from the heavy traffic generated by my reports. Right away, three of my Facebook buddies comment. They want to know how the pastry is at the café, and they also take the time to send out a cyber 'Mafia Hit' on me. I play it close to the vest; I want to save my Big Guns for this article. Don't want to divulge too much right away, need to build up a buzz. Besides, it's time to head to the venue. The Guyz should be arriving by now, and I've got work to do.

The Golden State Theatre, Dr. Firesign's Garage Sale and Evidence of the Fifth Crazy Guy

We pull into a parking lot behind the theater and I start to wonder how I'm actually going to gain entrance when I see Phil Austin, in yellow slicker, cross the lot and bang on the front door. Magically, the door opens. I'm not nearly quick enough to slide in behind him and get through on his coattails, but I figure if it worked for Austin, I'll try the knocking thing. Hey, I've got reporting to do, sometimes a crack correspondent has to improvise.

I knock on the glass doors with my keys. Nothing. I try a little louder with a more staccato rhythm and, eventually, a tall, very nice young man in a red t-shirt opens the door a crack and peers at the dumpy, middle-aged guy with the sketch pad and pencil box. My wife says goodbye and bails, leaving me to fend for myself. She knows an awkward social situation when she sees one. Besides, there are some nice shops nearby and I made her get up at 3:00 am. Again, adjustments.



I'm starting to feel like the Cowardly Lion standing at the gates of Oz and the nice young man is starting to get that skeptical Frank Morgan-ish glint in his eye.

"Hi, I'm the cartoonist guy from the *Chromium Switch* website. I asked if I could be here."

"Just a moment," he says tightly as he swings his axe over his shoulder and does an about-face. I can see he's going to research my claim. I get a load of my reflection in the theater doors, and I can't blame him. I can hear him saying, "There's a homeless guy out here, says he's a cartoonist and that he has permission to be here." Fortunately for me this kind of situation must not be an uncommon occurrence in the Firesign Universe as he comes back and, reluctantly, opens the door letting me into the lobby.

I'm greeted by the lovely Judith Walcutt who, aside from being David Ossman's partner-in-crime, is serving as the group's Road Manager and Traveling Secretary on this very brief, but historic, North American tour.

"Oh, yes," she smiles, "...your name again?"

"I'm Phil, the cartoonist from *Chromium Switch* that's been pestering you mercilessly via e-mail and cell phone the last few weeks."

"Of course."

I can see she's starting to make the connection. I'm expecting Security any minute.

"Good," she says, still smiling, "Just what we needed, another Phil."

I can't tell if she's kidding or not, but she has a twinkle in her eye. I take it as a good sign.

"Thanks for this opportunity, I really appreciate it. I'll try not to get in the way," I'm trying desperately

to reassure her. I don't think she's convinced, but she smiles anyway. Now, I can see the kindness in her eyes and I relax. There are people whom you meet that exude an aura of gentleness and compassion and, as I'm soon to find out, the Firesign Theatre has surrounded themselves with this kind of individual. Judith, in Zen-like fashion, is taking care of the "cartoonist situation."

"Make yourself at home, the guys should be around. They'll be doing a run-through and getting the sound and lighting cues down in a few minutes. You can stay and sketch away."

She vanishes, off to handle a new "situation." The Firesign troupe is in good hands with Judith, and the other wives and girlfriends as well, keeping an eye on things. I've learned (and learned and learned) having some female supervision can be a healthy thing.

I look around the lobby and I notice a gentleman stacking and un-stacking boxes, laying out all manner of goodies on long tables near the front door. I realize that it's David Ossman, Porgie himself, organizing the souvenirs.

"I had a bunch of stuff in the garage, this might be my last chance to get rid of some of it," I overhear him say to one of the crew.

The group had taken some time out from writing and rehearsing for the show to sign hundreds of photos and to put all kinds of goodies into little brown paper bags with the Nick Danger logo printed on them.

"Little Bags of Danger, I call 'em," chuckles Ossman, "Real collector's items."

I buy mine on the spot. I wanted to buy them all, but my wife was shopping and she left me with limited funds. I didn't want to ask one of the great comedic minds of our generation if he took Master Card, so I contented myself with one keepsake.



I looked over my shoulder and saw a familiar figure making his way across the lobby. Phil Proctor had come out to see when everyone was going to be ready for the walk-through. I took the chance to approach him. I thought it might help if I came bearing gifts, so I used the presentation of a small, framed cartoon we put together at *Chromium Switch* to commemorate the event as a reason to invade the poor man's personal space.

I introduced myself and handed Proctor our little token. He thanked me and gave me a big hug. He seemed genuinely touched by our gesture and I was taken aback by his warmth. I felt a little bit like one of those old "fanboys" that people generally find so pathetic but I have to admit, getting a hug from Phil Proctor – I almost made a puddle. Of course, the whole puddle thing can happen at the Taco Bell drive-through just as easily these days, but honestly, it's *Phil-fucking-Proctor!*

I'm suddenly very conscious of the fact that these men are here to work, and I don't want my giddy exuberance to run amok and embarrass myself in front of my heroes. So, I find a seat in the semi-dark theater and settle in. I put my sketchbook on my lap and open up my box of pens and pencils. And, finally, I take a moment to

look at my surroundings. I realize what a beautiful place the Golden State Theatre happens to be. I start to make (really) loose sketches of the theater and the set. The theater is one of several recently refurbished movie houses that dot the California landscape today. Many of them, the Golden State being one, served as home to the Vaudeville circuit back in the day. I'm informed the stage backdrop the guys elected to use was from that very era. Very cool. Very Firesigny.

There are four ornate king's thrones lined up across the stage, one for each of the Firesigners. This will

be the setting for Act One of tonight's show. Somehow, it seems appropriate given the auspiciousness of the occasion. Forty years since the creation of one of our culture's most iconic, and enduring, comedic characters, Nick Danger, is something to be proud of. It should merit at least a golden throne on the stage of the anniversary performance. But, as with most of the Firesign Theatre's work, there is something subtly subversive, and tongue-in-cheek funny, about the chutzpah in awarding yourself the mantle of Comedy Kings, even if that is, in fact, what you are.

As I sit there, trying to sketch the big room in the semi-darkness, it begins to dawn on me where, and with whom, I am today. I'm a fan, a privileged fan at that, with an opportunity to watch four of the greatest comedy writers/performers our country has produced prepare for an all too rare live performance. Fans are



coming from as far away as Chicago, New York and even Germany, to bear witness to a display of surreal wordplay, puns, double entendres and brilliantly insightful comedy. I believe that it is quite appropriate to speak the names of Phil Austin, Peter Bergman, David Ossman and Philip Proctor right along with the greats of American humor. Yes, right there with Twain, Kaufman, Perelman, Thurber, the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope, Stan Freberg, Ernie Kovacs, Bob and Ray, Lenny Bruce, Pryor and Carlin. Hyperbole? Maybe. But even the Library of Congress has called the Firesign Theatre, "The Beatles of Comedy." Who am I to argue?

The Beatle analogy has run parallel with the Firesign Theatre throughout their career. They formed in the fertile creative era of the 1960's where The Beatles had proven that four individuals could create something quite larger than their separate parts were able to produce alone. It became clear to the troupe early on that something special happened when the four of them were in the same room at the same time and writing together. They described it as if a fifth group member was created when they got together, and this ethereal creation was quite capable of taking their comedy places they would have never visited but for his appearance. This Beatle-ish spirit in their approach to the creative process was furthered by their own predilection to utilize snippets of Beatles' lyrics and Beatle references in their recorded works.

It became a kind of inside joke among the group and their fans.

I'm about to witness the conjuring of the "4 or 5 Crazy Guyz" from my plush theater chair as the four men take the stage to do a run-through in preparation for the evening's show. They appear on stage one at a time, wandering in from four different, unseen locations. They each have their faces buried in the loose sheets of typing paper that comprise the script. They've been meeting down in the bowels of the great building for the past two days to write and rehearse the special material designed for Nick Danger's birthday party. They don't see one another on a regular basis and come together for special occasions such as tonight's show or to be honored by the likes of the Library of Congress. Yet, it appears to the outside observer (me) that they fall into the group rhythm with one another quite naturally.

Although as individuals, each has accomplished great things and all are quite successful outside the group, there is no escaping the fact that what they created together as the Firesign Theatre will be their enduring legacy. It seems that this reality has, in a sense, brought them a little peace. No one can deny that their inventive, intelligent and totally remarkable comedy has never been successfully duplicated or, in my humble opinion, equaled by anyone. It can, in fact, only be brought forth by the four of them. It is totally unique, and it is theirs.

There may have been a time when their egos would struggle against the fact that no matter what else they've done, it's as a member of a 60's comedy group, no matter how influential and important, that their

public personas will always be associated. Perhaps the acceptance of leading a double life, one as an individual artist and one as a member of the FST, has made it easier to slip into the old roles. Like putting on those comfortable old shoes again, the ones for industry, the ones for the dead.

Watching the four of them go through the script was fascinating. Hours before the show and they were still writing. Adding and subtracting lines, words and even small utterances that would only be noticed by them, but would turn out to be, unquestionably, *funnier* once changed. Then, “it” seemed to appear, the energy that put them all on the same page at the same time. The Fifth Firesigner. It was as if, instinctually, they all had the same idea at the same time.

It would start innocently enough, one making a suggestion, “Wouldn’t it be better if we said ‘this’ instead of ‘that’?” Then, there would be a tangible flash of recognition among the others and they would each frantically scribble the minutest of these tweaks into their copy of the script. It was as if some unseen force had decreed that, yes, that *would* sound better. Instantly agreed and instantly altered on the spot.

Even if not adopted, ideas bounced from Austin to Bergman to Ossman to Proctor and burned like flames above the heads of the apostles. The four of them equals, but better. Moved and guided by the muse. Even though the material, a medley of bits spanning their entire career, had been finely honed by years of performance, they were still making little improvements on the fly. Their canon became a living, breathing *thing* right there on the rehearsal stage. It was something quite special to see, but for the life of me, I couldn’t get it down on paper.

I noticed my quick studies of the scene were far looser in line than I normally draw, and I’m pretty loose to begin with. The figures I had sketched of the group members were more nuance and suggestion than form, almost ghostly in a way. Looking back, I think that instinctively my mind’s eye sensed that what I was seeing wasn’t necessarily what was being shown, or indeed, what was actually occurring. This Firesign thing was more than meets the eye.

Things lapsed into a brief lull on stage and I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and it was Kathy O’Mara, longtime FST associate and member in good standing of the inner circle. Oddly, Kathy and I became aware of one another completely outside the Firesign sphere of reference. I was acquainted with her brother, Tom, who lives in the Redding area and travels in many of the same community-arts circles. In fact, I had recently run into him at a mutual friend’s party and we ended up chatting endlessly about baseball in general, and Sandy Koufax in particular. I had no idea that his sister, my Facebook friend, was connected to the Firesign Theatre. Shoot, Tom had even had me do a cartoon for Kathy as a surprise for her just a few months ago. Small planet, huh?

As show preparation turned to the more pressing matters of a lunch break, Kathy and I caught up on all the latest Redding, Fountain, and O’Mara news. After a while, she asked, “Would you like to come along for lunch? There’s a nice little Mexican place across the street.” Being hungry and never one to turn down a good quesadilla, I quickly signed on.

We continued our chat in line at the cafeteria style restaurant just outside the theater’s backstage door. The Firesign battalion pretty much took over every table in the place. I sat with Kathy and waited for our order to arrive. Then, quite leisurely, we were joined by Peter Bergman, arguably *the* founding member of the Firesign Theatre. It was, after all, his radio gig that they first appeared on as a group. I tried to keep my inner ‘fanboy’ in check and was careful not to spit milk through my nose or otherwise soil Mr. Bergman who sat across from me and was definitely in harm’s way should my relatively weak grasp of proper eating procedures and/or basic table manners should abandon me in my schoolgirl excitement.

To make it even more difficult to maintain my affected persona of cool, David Ossman was sitting



directly behind me. I had wanted to talk to him about his recent book, *The Day of the Dead and Other Poetry*, which I was hoping to review for my “real job” as a contributor to anewscafe.com, a Redding area website that has gained a sizable, loyal following in the far northern reaches of California. I was also fascinated by his work with Judith as ‘Otherworld’ wherein they act as ‘creators of magic for the mind.’ Not to mention his mystery novels. I wanted to tell him how much I loved *Dr. Firesign’s Follies*, a signed copy of which rest in a place of honor in my home office. The man is a veritable cornucopia of material for an enterprising blogger. If left unattended, I could manage to badger to poor man all the way back to Seattle. Fortunately for him, I was distracted.

I was quite willing to sit quietly at our table and listen to Bergman and Kathy reminisce about the “old days” in L.A. Then, I was treated to a rundown of Bergman’s latest project, his efforts to bring art to underfunded, urban schools in the Los Angeles area. His eyes would dance and shimmer in the light as he spoke of utilizing audio plays, their writing and producing as a tool for reaching kids who have been passed by and ignored by the system. It was obvious that he derived as much, or more, satisfaction from his efforts on behalf of the kids as he did with his ‘other’ more famous career.

The light burns bright in some people, and they seem to bring a passion and creativity to whatever experience that catches their imagination, Bergman’s work outside the group being a prime example. Suffice to say, my lunch with Kathy and Peter was a real treat for me. I truly enjoyed being in the company of these vibrant people, regardless of the circumstances that brought us there.

The various groups bussed their tables and began heading back to the theater. There were still some lighting cues to get down and the Second Act to prepare. I still had a bag loaded with three more “presents” to be awarded. Austin, Bergman and Ossman had eluded my efforts to pawn off these cheesy plaques and time was running short. I had promised Thomas I would get this done.

I managed to accost the unsuspecting Austin and Ossman in a stairwell backstage and, fumbling, I was able to thank them on behalf of *Chromium Switch* for the forty-plus years of entertainment and inspiration. They accepted our gifts with gracious smiles and nods of appreciation. Being the considerate and affable men they are, they were discreet about ‘accidentally’ leaving their prizes in the dumpster out back. They promised to deliver Bergman’s plaque to him, which I assume they did with the same aforementioned discretion. These guys are a class act all the way.

After the ‘bestowing of the plaques,’ I was running out of excuses to hang around. I had gotten the sketches I needed (I work fast, stuff like mine doesn’t require a great deal of effort). Besides, I was beginning to feel guilty. The theater was going to be filled in just a few short hours by a thousand Firesign fans, all of whom would kill to be in my shoes, privy to the behind-the-scenes banter and general jocularity. Besides, I had nothing to offer the proceedings, Proctor had yet to seek out my opinion on matters of comedic timing and nuance, although I was well-prepared should he change his mind. So, if these comic geniuses had no desire to utilize my particular skill set, then it’s on them, right? I might just as well go hang out with my wife. I have no shortage of places to go where my comedic senses are unappreciated. Besides, it was only a couple of hours before show time and the serious business of making people laugh was well underway by the professionals. If they needed a cartoonist between now and the performance, they knew where to find me.

End of Part One
Next: The Show (and afterward)