The following interview with PHIL PROCTOR, of the Firesign Theatre, was conducted by the Library of Congress on September 15, 2015.

Phil Proctor

LOC: How did Firesign Theatre first come to be signed to Columbia records?

Well, we were doing a radio show of Peter Bergman's at KPFK in LA which I became involved with in a very strange way.

I had first come out to Los Angeles with a musical called "The Amorous Flea," for which I won a "Theater World" award and then I returned to New York to perform on Broadway in "A Time for Singing" and "A Race of Hairy Men" by Evan Hunter, where I understudied Brandon DeWilde. Brandon and I became close friends and decided to drive out to Los Angeles together.

Through Brandon I met Peter Fonda and we sort of became the "Three Musketeers." At the time, Peter was working on a little movie idea he called "Captain America" but he couldn't get the rights to that title so he renamed it "Easy Rider." And he was doing research on the youth movement, so we went down to the Sunset Strip one night to became part of a protest against a curfew law which then turned into the Sunset Strip Riots. At one point, we joined a sit-down, a sit-in—and I found I was sitting on a copy of the "LA Free Press." So, I pulled that out from under my butt and I realized I had sat down on a picture of Peter Bergman interviewing returning Vietnam War vets for KPFK Pacifica Radio.

Bergman and I had both gone to Yale. He was the class of '62 and I was the class of '61. He had written lyrics to the musicals "Tom Jones" and "Booth is Back in Town," written by Austin Pendleton, in which I starred.

So, I called up Peter the next day and he said, "Yeah, I'm the Wizard of Oz." It turned out he had his own counterculture late night, call-in talk show called "Radio Free Oz" and he invited me to join him on his show that night. It was there that I met Phil [Austin] and David [Ossman], and we soon discovered that we had a lot in common including a knack for creating characters and improvising together.

One of the things we did was called “The Oz Film Festival” where we showed movies on the radio.

Phil Austin played a character who made films “for the bedroom”--this was way before the big adult movie explosion--and we “showed” a clip from “Blondie Pays the Rent” on the radio! Well, people starting calling in: “You can’t show a dirty movie on the radio!” [Laughs.] Then other people called in and said, “Of course you can! What about free speech?”

And we thought, “Hmmmm, we have something going here--the art of the send-up.” And we continued to improvise characters in outrageous ways without revealing ourselves to the audience, and our reputation started to grow.…

We began to identify ourselves as Firesign Theatre because we found out we were all “fire” signs astrologically—I’m a Leo; Bergman and Ossman are Sagittarians, and Austin is an Aries. Of course, being a fire sign, means you come with a fiery ego but also a great sense of entitlement and a fearlessness in expressing comedic ideas.

After KPFK, we continued to find venues on other radio outlets where we spent a minimum amount of time in the writing and rehearsal of material because we all had a love of improvisation and surrealism. We were like jazz musicians playing off of each other.

We had many radio program incarnations including the “Firesign Theatre Hour Hour” (because it was two hours long), and “Dear Friends,” excerpts from which were released in an album by our producer, Bill McIntyre.

More recently, our archivist, Taylor Jessen, put out a book, “The Duke of Madness Motors,” which includes an MP3 of about 80 hours of these early radio shows collected from our basements, garages, sheds…and after we put out a call to our fandom, people sent us things they recorded off the air. We recovered entire reel-to-reel recordings. And now they’re all in this book , including our personal recollections--“profusely illustrated” and available via our website, www.firesigntheatre.com

On the site, you can also connect to our 24/7 streaming podcast, maintained by Bill McIntyre. So people are being introduced to us for the first time. They can listen to us at breakfast while they boil their eggs.

Anyway, how we got signed: Phil Austin did a record called “Duckman” that drew the attention of Gary Usher, a producer at Columbia Records, who was intrigued by the “Goon Show”-type comedy that we were doing…

Well, Gary called Bergman and said, “I want to do an album of ‘Radio Free Oz.’” And Peter said, “No, we’re going to do an album called ‘The Oz Firesign Theatre.’” But we couldn’t use “Oz” because Disney at that time was doing an animated “Return to Oz” movie and their lawyers sent us a letter. So we became just “The Firesign Theatre” which is confusing enough!

You know, I was inspired by Ernie Kovacs and Bob and Ray. My mother would record their morning show for me, and I used to listen to it when I did my homework.

I even sent them postcards and they’d read them on the air because they thought they were funny. It was my first credited radio writing!

Anyway, Usher signed us up with Columbia and right away after I closed up my apartment in New York, they flew me out to LA where we started writing. The first album was called “Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him.” It was based on a skit we performed about

a theatre troupe from Eastern Europe that escaped to America. We first improvised it at the UCLA Student Union, and like many of our albums, it proved predictive. It was our way of saying, "We can have a peaceful revolution."

The album had modest sales. But John McClure, a producer for Columbia who later produced recreations of great musicals featuring famous singers, went into a board meeting and said, "You've got to keep these guys signed to Columbia. I want you to give them a spoken arts contract."

Well, a "spoken arts" contract meant that we wouldn't have to pay for studio time! And that is why we were able to create such dense albums with so many sound layers. It gave us the leisure to do that.

And so we'd go on stage and develop these scripts. We played the Roxie and Ed Pearl's Ashgrove, which is now the Improv on Melrose, where we played on a bill with famous blues musicians. Then, when we were ready, we'd go into the studio and start to lay it down, refining the material as we went along.

We were creating a whole new way of recording comedy, and given absolute freedom to create our multi-layered story-oriented comedy, which I still think of as "movies for the mind."

LOC: Did you and the group ever face issues of censorship?

No. You know, concurrent with our success there was a revolution going on… LPs had come in. The music industry was starting to show their muscle. There were AMAZING ACTS coming out. It was a hot business, and radio was the main vehicle for promotion.

FM radio had come on the scene, and especially in college towns, they'd play whatever they wanted, for as long as they wanted, pretty much uncensored, and they'd play entire Firesign albums!

Also, records are a private adventure. You bought the record and listened to it in the privacy of your home. One of my inspirations was old "blooper" records. They were filled with dirty words, and double entendres. They were very risqué. And I'd sit with my parents and listen to them! Records were the great equalizer.

I was born in 1940 in Goshen, Indiana, and when we moved to New York all the clichés were true. We lived on 94th Street and Lex in Manhattan and we'd sit around the big old radio counsel and listen to Fred Allen, Jack Benny and Fanny Brice. I had a radio by my bed, where I enjoyed Westerns, serials, mysteries and even the McCarthy hearings later on! Radio was a tremendous influence on my life--the power of the word.

Very early on, I latched onto that…what I wanted to do. That's why I used to record the Ernie Kovacs TV shows. I bought sound effects records and then I'd create my own audio skits on a reel-to-reel recorder. It was an easy evolution.

Later, in my scholarship job at Yale, I worked on the radio show "Yale Reports." All the famous people at the time would come in to talk, and then I'd have to cut it down to 28 minutes and one of the ways I did that was to take out all the "err's" and "ahh's." And I saved them all! I later edited them together into a piece I called "Yale Distorts."

We were all apparently inspired to work in the sound medium. Bergman did fake announcements over his high school PA system; he got into trouble once, I think, for saying that the Chinese communists had taken over the school. Phil used to do a radio broadcast at school in

Fresno; Dave was a professional announcer on a station in New York. And Bergman even did cut-up records—taking excerpts from popular songs and cutting them back together with funny dialogue. He was also a DJ in Cleveland who had a knack for rhyming; he was a rapper before the idea of rapping existed.

As for me: I speak seven languages. Even as a baby I could hear and repeat music. I could hum lullabies back to my grandfather. I have an odd ability for mimicry--not quite the same as an impersonator but, if I hear a voice, I can usually recreate it. I later did a lot of ADR work, adding background tracks and dubbing and replacing voices for many mainstream movies and TV shows, which led to my work for Pixar and Disney. Later, I was the voice of Howard on "Rugrats" for 14 years. I am the drunken French monkey in the "Doctor Doolittle" films, and have played villains on many interactive games like recently "Assassins Creed" and "Batman: Arkham Knight."

But getting back to your question: there was no hint of censorship--not at our public performances, nor on the records. We came on the scene in a naïve era, in a way, a Bohemian era. But it was an era of cooperation. We were all on the brink of being discovered and becoming internationally famous. How many times I got to hang out with Mick Jagger or go to a party with this community of artists! It was a refreshing time.

LOC: Do you have a favorite out of all your Firesign albums?

I get asked that a lot. What I like regarding all our work is the challenge and variety in everything we did, but I think for "Don't Crush That Dwarf" we all felt very close to it because it was an expression of the introduction of television into our consciousness. How do you express television only via audio?

So we invented the idea of channel surfing. That's what TV meant to us. Switching channels, switching from one thing to the next: to soap opera, to a cartoon, to a newscast—hamburgers on the highway!--plus all the commercials, and still telling a narrative story with villains and heroes.

The next album was "I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus." In it, we dealt with the development of computer culture. I played Clem, basically a hacker who plants a virus in the government-programmed computer that runs the "Future Fair" theme park.

You know, if you have an iPhone and say to Siri, "This is worker speaking. Hello," you get "Hell, Ah-clem. What function can I perform for you? LOL." The reason for that Easter egg is because Steve Jobs was a big fan of Firesign Theatre.

It's interesting to be so much a part of the culture that way, and we were very touched by the Library of Congress recognizing us as well. After all, we were never a great public success but had a unique, underground success instead.

People were afraid to put us on TV because we were making fun of the culture. We were the jesters of our generation—long before Monty Python--making fun of the people who were taking things so seriously.

People come up to me still and say, "You saved my life! I thought I was the only person who thought this way. You guys proved that I wasn't alone. You introduced me to others who were like-minded." That's a nice legacy.

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