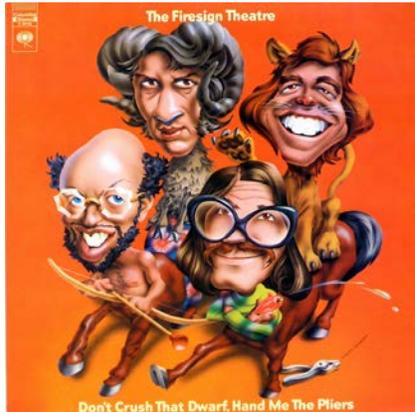


“Don’t Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers”—The Firesign Theatre (1970)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Frederick C. Wiebel, Jr. (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



The Firesign Theatre

Just mentioning the name The Firesign Theatre evokes many mental images. A nostalgic warmth for the good old days that never were. Of millions of Americans gathering around their citizen radios listening to FDR's weekly fireside chats. Zodiacal puns for the pot smoking patrons of the psychedelic sixties and seventies trying to escape from a club-swinging world gone mad with war and political upheaval. Guerrilla theater in the streets humorously deprogramming a populous from the narcotic of pop culture and authority. A put-on group of cohesive thought. A group that never was a group. A rock band without music, playing with words in rhythmical patterns on a major scale. A concern that puts out comedy albums but aren't concerned about being comedians. College boy counter-culture humor from post graduates for students and non-students, adults and non-adults who remain forever young at heart. An indefinable outfit that produces an indefinable product for an indefinable market. Fighting clowns against the powers that be. Shakespearean comedy in a time of Orwellian tragedy. An aural Norman Rockwell painting on acid. A theater of the mind built with the bricks of politics and poetry on the solid foundation of the golden age of radio. The images pile on and on, and on, with double, triple, quadruple entendres and non-sequiturs, layering a baklava of subconscious surreality and blatantly silly humor acting as a political poultice for the open wounds of a sick society. It is all of these things and yet, none of these things. Even that nomenclature is ever changing. With or without the "The," it's still them.

Whatever it really is, or was, or could or should be, Firesign Theatre is a collective mind of Media Magi on the cutting edge of technology and satire. Four or five crazy guys with their fingers poised to push the buttons: Phil Austin, Peter Bergman, David Ossman, and Phil Proctor, with the fifth being all of them and the listeners as a collective entity conjured up by communal thinking. It is a comedy troupe, but not a band in the sense of musicians that practice what they preach every day. Firesign's humor is seriously funny, demands strict attention, involvement and even multiple listenings from their audience to "get it" and is designed that way to be enjoyed over and over like a favorite pop music record that remains fresh, as the inside "jokes" sometimes take years to reveal themselves. You can't whistle these tunes, but the word phrases remain in your head and drop out of your mouth when the situation arises, signaling recognition among the initiates that you're one of them and they're one of us.

This highly energized way-out warren of creative individuals have spent the majority of their lives putting their personal lucrative commercial careers on hold, to occasionally come together to give testimony to the masses in the form of concerts and recordings. Not willing or able to

rest upon their laurels, take off their eight shoes, sit in a tree and learn to play the flute, but to keep on going and going, running off at the mouth in a conversational marathon for 50 years of collective reasoning purveyed on hundreds of hours of live and studio recorded material generating millions in sales, sold-out nationwide concert tours, dozens of syndicated radio shows and TV appearances cast into the ether, volumes of videos, motion picture scripts, books, plays, poetry, magazines, newsletters, newspaper columns, art, comic strips, photo ops, voice-overs, commercials, and you name its. They don't even have to be there as they've digitally pried open the windows of the micro-soft virtual world of computers and the Internet to download fresh air and revive the undying theatre of the absurd.

The Firesign Theatre had its humble beginnings in the small fledgling LA Pacifica Radio Network affiliate station KPFK during the 11/17/66 broadcast of Peter "The Wiz" Bergman's five-night a week underground hit call-in radio show "Radio Free Oz." Under the pretense of The Oz Film Festival Jury, these four strangers in a strange land improvised a series of imaginary movies projected and narrated as pseudo filmmakers. There was an instant unique chemistry formulated that continues to attract, combine and coagulate their diverse elements into a living organism still active to this day and now long into the future and forward into the past.

The Firesign Theatre began a series of round table discussion writing sessions to script out the hours of open improvisational air play, out-gaseously filling up any vacuum or space that was offered to them. They were their own best audience with the ultimate result and the highest compliment being, to make each other laugh. From the very beginnings, Firesign employed the truest sense of democracy--only material that they all agreed to incorporate became part of their compositions. The one man veto and the filtration system of four high intellects stimulated an organization built on trust and a handshake of legal anarchy. They threw the flotsam and jetsam of their own daily lives into the stream of consciousness, free-association humor of their audio mind movies, churning out surrealized versions of classic radio. Firesign developed a continuing theme of power, paranoia and populism, running the entire political gauntlet of American culture.

Their rise in local LA radio popularity and cohesive writing skills of the theatrically trained well groomed academagicians caused Columbia Records in 1967 to sniff them out with an off-handed, uncensored recording contract to book unlimited studio time with the only stipulation being that they make a profit. That they did, and more, constantly producing over 40 albums for various companies since. Now that most of their recordings are available on CD or via download, being preserved for all time, plus a web site (www.firesigntheatre.com) and occasional performances, the Firesign legacy lives on.

The political climate has changed over and over again through their years of operation, with the old lines being constantly re-drawn in the sands of time. Who am us anyway? Who cares? We're bringing the war back home. The mask of the enemy has lifted, and we see our own face. Is war now real or virtual? Who bought the government we paid for? Do we submit to the tyranny of the majority and quarrel and destroy ourselves in the process, just in the name of democracy? The establishment broke the Presidency and the anarchists helped elect a new one. Papoon is the ever running, never seen President with a bag over his head, who could be anyone. Former pot smokers are now in the White House, Congress, and on the Supreme Court. They're making the laws that lock up people who behave like themselves. You can vote for none of the above and still win. We live in the predicted Firesign World.

All of us need to be deprogrammed in this age of unreason or we'll continue to turn upon ourselves and open the old wounds for the return of fear. We're all Bozos on this bus and the only thing we have to fear is us. Without the help of The Firesign Theatre to make fun of it all and turn on the light that scatters the cockroaches that feed upon a decaying society, we'll still be waiting for the Electrician or someone like him to pull the plug, and rewire the system.

Probably The Firesign Theatre's best recorded work and most popular among fans and critics alike is the album "Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers" (1970). It is also the favorite of the group as it portrays the warmth and friendship these four men shared for each other at their peak. This is a masterpiece in all respects, considered by many to be the best concept comedy album ever produced and one of the finest examples of Firesign's style of humor captured on record. The entire mind-meal platter-play takes up both sides of the LP, now the full course digital-entree, not a menu of unrelated track offerings but an ala carte of "bits" and "pieces" somehow melded together to help digest the story.

Firesign Theatre has been called "The Beatles of Comedy" but this trite appellation does deserve some respect because the group was the first to apply rock and roll stereo recording techniques to the comedy album, particularly those utilized by producer George Martin and The Beatles for their revolutionary "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" LP. Firesign used to play, study and emulate that album in the studio while working and those production values were used to special effect on "Dwarf."

"Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers" was a smash hit, initially knocking out over 300,000 copies, breaking into the charts, continually stamped, pressed and available by Columbia Records in the US and Canada, hammering its way through all of the multiple commercial formats over the years: LPs, EPs, 8-Track and Cassette tapes, and numerous reissues on CD, licensed to various companies here and abroad, continuing up to this day. In this age of Aquarius, Firesign's been phished for the Net to be released downloaded by different digital trawlers for the entire cyber sea. "Dwarf" really launched the group, up-streaming their career, spawning many spin-off comedy groups, and even college courses on Firesign Theatre's methods of "mind massaging" and manipulation, non-linear thinking and subconscious psychological free-word association to tell a tale on multiple levels and meanings. The unusual title itself, coined in the back seat of a wildly painted VW while going over old WW1 sheet music covers, has a multitude of meanings to many listeners or no meaning at all to the majority of the record buying public. It's a decision for the individual to figure out or not, as it has nothing to do with the content of the recording, or does it? But it's still funny.

"Dwarf" is the life story of a man, George Leroy Tirebiter, who sells his soul to the TV set, becoming forever young and forever old on the reruns of late night movies. Tirebiter, named after a long dead, unofficial, car chasing canine mascot of the University of Southern California's athletic squads, is trapped in a Dantesque Hell of perpetually watching his life unfold on the electronic screen. The Firesign Theatre uses the audio effect of channel surfing, clicking from station to station, developed on previous live radio performances of "A Life In The Day or The TV Set," to tell the story of the four ages of man, and the constant sell-out of his ideals to make it in the modern world. Some of the ideas worked up during breaks from their writing sessions for the major motion picture "Zachariah," the first "electric" Western, as well as the current events of the Vietnam War and Kent State student massacres, were also subtly incorporated into the record's script.

Originally released with a beautiful airbrushed painting of the group in astrological characterizations on the bright orange cover by famous illustrator Robert Grossman, a friend from college days, and with a fold-out poster insert containing Polaroid snapshots of the group in and out of costume, the packaging helped "Dwarf" stand out in the record store bins, on displays and in advertising in major publications and on college campuses.

It was a surprising yet remarkable decision, though justly deserved, by the Library of Congress to preserve "Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me The Pliers," a counter-culture representation, for listeners for all time. This is the highest honor ever bestowed upon them, proudly considered so by the flabbergasted and humbled group of now forever aged performers, The Firesign Theatre.

Frederick C. Wiebel, Jr. is the author of the book “Backwards Into The Future: The Recorded History of The Firesign Theatre” (2006).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.