America's mudheads: An interview with Proctor & Bergman

Wayne Cordray sat on a table in the hall at KLCC. Dressed in blue cords, blue running shoes with yellow stripes, and a green parka with Vancouver and British Columbia patches, he looked more like a little league baseball coach than a promotion manager for Mercury Records. But there he was, listening to a wall speaker as Phil Proctor and Peter Bergman did their thing in a studio 50 feet away, and Cordray couldn't keep the smile off his face.

"These guys spoil you rotten," he said. "They're so easy to get along with. Some of the people I get" — Cordray rolled his eyes plaintively to heaven — "are such dogs."

Cordray works out of Seattle, and most of the performers who he takes on tours through media-land are AM rockers. Dogs, indeed.

Cordray's trip to Eugene with Proctor and Bergman was his first exposure to the two comedians, and he had to do a bit of homework on the two and their previous Firesign Theater associations. But now, as Proctor and Bergman shot one-liners back and forth on the air, it was obvious that Cordray didn't really have to know who they were. He was having a good time.

"They're like this all day, from morning until night," he said, shaking his head. "In the car, they're always rehearsing skits, or getting new ideas from road signs and other things they see.

"They do imitations of Presidents really well. Proctor has Carter down pat. And last night they were doing a Bobby and Jackie Kennedy routine. I only wish I had a tape recorder."

Eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, Proctor and Bergman live the life of Proctor and Bergman. And their intensity, their willingness to immerse themselves in comedy virtually every waking minute, boggles a lot of minds.

But only if one perceives humor as trivial and frivolous. If comedy is viewed as an art form, their involvement becomes less of a puzzle, and can be seen as no more strange than a painter who devotes each moment to his canvas.

Indeed, Firesign Theater was an art form. In a very short period of time, they blazed a wide trail through America's youth culture. They set standards for recorded humor that have yet to be met.

It wasn't so much what they said, which institutions they satirized. Rather, it was how they said it. They took the vision of reality shared by a large portion of their audience and articulated that vision. They provided a language with which people coud define the sometimes silly, sometimes absurd American experience.

The Theater dealt with sound. They juxtaposed noises, voices and non-sequiturs to create a collage of images. And it doesn't take too many listenings of their albums to realize that everyday life works pretty much in the same fashion. When we hear Firesign Theater, we hear our own lives.

But, as Bergman says, "You have to like someone to poke fun at them." And ultimately, this was perhaps the core of Firesign Theater's success. They liked what they were satirizing. They were biting, they were true, they were incisive, yet they were never malicious.

A central inspiration in the Firesign Theater's work came from their interest in American Indian culture. They produced a four-part radio special on Native Americans in the middle sixties, and have been involved with the Hopis of New Mexico. Their "Temporarily Humboldt County," on *Waiting for the Electrician, or Someone Like Him*, is the synthesis of what they learned about American culture through an Indian perspective, and it is one of the more succinct statements on manifest destiny and the conflict of two diametrically opposed cultures.

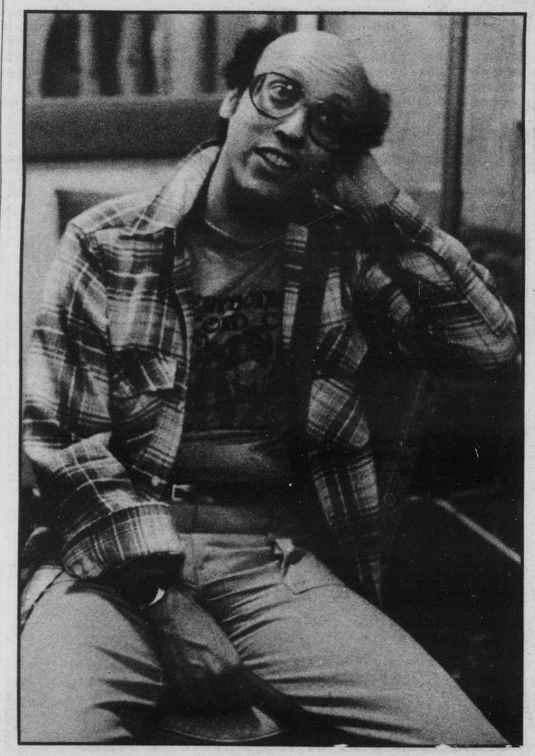
But what about Proctor and Bergman?

Their humor is different from that of Firesign. It is much more of a stand-up variety, and much more topical.

But if the response to their Friday show is any indication, they still have the touch. They still make people laugh.

Their newest album, on the Mercury label, is called *Give Me a Break*. They have also produced a PBS special based on the album. And they hope to break into television on a regular basis.

The following interview took place after the show. The scene is the EMU Ballroom. In the background, one hears the clatter and bang of folding chairs being tossed onto a cart. A group of well-wishers and autograph-seekers pay their final respects . . . .



Peter Bergman

"The 20th Century has seen three – four – of the most extraordinary, mechanized, genocidal wars in the history of this planet. So the Hopi prophecy has been fully experienced in terms of that. I think we're in the post-prophecy period . . . . the prophecy is over and we survived it."

Eric Maloney: How much time do we have here?

Phil Proctor: Fifteen, 20 minutes.

EM: The one thing I'm really interested in is how you got interested in American Indian culture and history.

PP: I wanted to be an Indian when I was a youngster. Everyone else wanted to be a cowboy, but I wanted to be an Indian. This is something I never told Peter, but I used to say, "I want to be an Indian." I guess I identified with Tonto because "Tonto" means "crazy" in Spanish and I always thought that that was cool, 'cause I knew it and other people didn't.

Peter Bergman: It was crazy to hang around with that berserk white man.

PP: With a mask —

PB: — with a mask, sure, I mean can you think of an easier way of getting into trouble than riding into a frontier town with a mask on and a white horse and all that silver?

PP: Yeah, but he wasn't that crazy. He was observing. As you know, Indians observe. Now, whenever we saw it in a comic book, it said u-g-h, "ugh." You know what he was saying?

PP & PB *(groaning painfully)*: Uuuuuggggghhhh.

PP: He couldn't believe his eyes, this dude with the mask and the silver bullets.

PB: We were told the true story of where "ugh" comes from. Do you have any idea?

EM: Not up 'til now.

PB: Not up 'til now. This is a true story, too, it's not a put-on. It was told to us by someone who's been in radio a long time. He said that the person who played Tonto on the original —

(In the background, the sound of folding chairs becomes louder)

PP: Hey. *Hey! HEY!* Keep it down, we're trying to do an interview over here!

Voice: Fuck you!

PP: Shall we go into the dressing room?

EM: I think it would probably be a little quieter.

(Everybody gets up to move.)

PP *(Affecting worker's accent)*: Ah, we're just doin' our job, we're just doin' our job . . .

(In the dressing room, chairs shuffling)

PB: Did you check the check, by the way, to see if it's the right amount?

PP: Sure. $750,000.

PB: Steve Martin made a million dollars on his last tour. He gets on stage and everybody does his material. He just stands there while they sing his songs at him.

PP: They're paying to prove that they can do his material. So let's get this Indian thing out of the way. Tell him about the Indians. I've told my story but this Indian story is real.

PB: The guy who played Tonto on radio was an old radio actor. And when he came to read the part, he had always heard that when you play the part of somebody speaking a second language, you vocalize the pauses. Like an Italian would say, "Well I-a don't-know-a," so he went, "Kimo sabe, ahh, me don't know, ahh, we go to town, ahh." And when it went into the Lone Ranger comic book, they wrote "ahh" u-g-h. And that's a fact. Shows you how little we know about the American Indian.

PB: Our interest in the American Indian came out of the fact that when the Firesign Theater was formed in 1966 it so happened that I had gotten myself involved in the traditional American Indian movement, through the influence of KBSK [radio, in L.A.] itself, and David Ossman tangentially. Philip Austin was interested in Indians and he was the engineer on my show. And I went up and covered the Indian movement in the state of Washington, covered the trial of Dick Gregory, when the Indians were being bashed over the head for fishing salmon.

And from that we all got deeply into the Indians and particularly through a fellow named Craig Carpenter who is kind of a messenger for the Hopis.

PP: And Thomas Banyaca? [Banyaca is a traditional Hopi who has spent much of his time traveling around the country speaking the Hopi message of peace — Ed.]

PB: I just spoke to Thomas Banyaca three or four days ago, at the big gathering at the Bowl, for the anti-nukes.

PP: How about Chief Rolling Thunder, what's he up to?

PB: Rolling Thunder has land of his own now. I spent some time with Rolling Thunder about 10 years ago and he made me his spokesman. He took me in a room and said "Peter, you're my spokesman now." And I thought, "W-w-whaddam I gonna do with *that*?"

PP: If you'd said "how," you would have been a true Indian.

EM: I saw Thomas Banyaca at Dartmouth College, and there were four of us sitting there watching the stage, and all of us saw a white glow around his head.

PP: You're not the first.

PB: Banyaca and I, whenever we get together, we do nothing but laugh. He likes us as comedians.

PP: We are asked — we were given the opportunity to perform with the mudheads, which are the Hopi clowns, at one of their annual ceremonials — what would you call it?

PB: The Hopis have various ceremonies and the mudheads are the ones who make fun, they make fun of the ceremonies, which is what keeps the Hopis so straight.

You have to realize, Indians are not to be taken any more or less seriously than anyone else. They're just folks. They're folks who have problems and have been oppressed and are very possibly a disappearing race. It's entirely possible that American Indians as such will not be on the planet within the next 100 years. It's just a fact. And we're just going to have to deal with that.

The Indians themselves — Banyaca is interested in only one thing, and that's bringing the message of peace. Because Hopis aren't Indians as far as he's concerned. They're the Peaceful Ones.

So that's why we're interested in American Indans, too. We're interested in the message of the Hopis. We aren't necessarily interested in the Sioux more than the Seminole more than the Willamettes or whatever it might be.

We were interested in it although our interest became less and less dominant as we identified more with American media and pop culture, which became a much more pressing problem.

PP: And the Indians stepped forth and began really to speak for themselves. In a sense we were intermediaries in helping them make that transition into the media because it *is* difficult to do so.

PB: Banyaca is going to this UN thing that's going on now, on nuclear disarmament, and he will have an opportuity to talk to Carter. He feels that Carter is one of the first sane Presidents we've had in ever so long; Banyaca thinks he's a real person.

EM: I mentioned that film this morning with "Temporarily Humboldt County," almost the whole thing, spliced in with interviews with the people who were involved up there. [A film on Indian fishing rights, the name of which escapes me — Ed.] I was in a room full of Indians when I saw it and it got a very good response. It pokes fun at the Indians, too —

PP: Sure, that's why the Indians have survived for such a long time, because they understand the value of humor.

PB: They love to be poked fun at. I tell you, persecuted people like to be poked —

PP: Look at the Jews — please!

PB: —like to be poked fun at because if it's good fun it means you like them.

PP: It's better than poking your eyes out.

PB: You have to like someone to poke fun at them. It's not vicious, it's not persecuting them.

PP: A sense of humor is a sense of survival. And a sense of comedy or humor about your own culture is vital to a healthy culture. Now we all know that, we sense that intuitively, otherwise laughter wouldn't be such an instinctive thing with us, and smiles wouldn't bring people together so easily.

PP: In a sense our connection with the Indians came about because we were Indian-like in our early work as Firesign Theater. We were a tribe of people who came together. A couple of Sioux and maybe an Apache, Ossman's probably an Apache —

PB: A couple of partially Blackfeet.

PP: That's right, and we all came together and started in a sense discussing our grievances. As a matter of fact the whole Firesign Theater thing and how it happened could be compared to the coming together of many such factions at that particular time.

PB: We are very different as people, the Firesign. Phil and I have a very strong similarity, so strong that we have remained as Proctor and Bergman.

One of the things that Banyaca laughed about is that we looked at each other and we both basically said almost at the same time, "well, we're still on the road." He hasn't been home any more than Phil and I have been home. And he said he can't plant as much this year because there's too much to do.

What separates Phil and I from the Firesign Theater is that we were dedicated to going out into the country and experiencing American culture to make fun with it, to make fun of it. And if you won't go out on the road, you really can't be an Indian nowadays —

PP: On the trail.

PB: — because the reservation is not the place to bring the Indian cause forward. Well, that's not true. but there are two types of Indians today, in quotes; there are the farmers who stay home, and there are the nomads, who travel. And we are nomadic, Phil and I.

PP *(Italian accent)*: We are-a no mad.

PB: That's why we're in Eugene, Oregon today instead of still back in Los Angeles.

EM: Do you think that humor in Indian culture is more accepted?

PB: No. Yankee culture is the most receptive culture to humor that we have ever experienced.

PP: There's a lot of warmth and camaraderie and humanity in most other cultures, but it is expressed sometimes very privately or it's expressed sometimes very publicly.

But American — the sense of American satire is quite unique in the world, it seems to me. It seems to me also that it comes out of the very fact that in this democratic society opposite ideas are constantly coming into apparent conflict. And that really is very funny. The whole basis of any dramatic or comedic situation is one person who believes totally one thing and another person who believes totally the opposite, placed into a situation of conflict.

PB: And they can express themselves without having to take up arms.

PP: That's the American experience. And it's dramatic, and it's comedic.

PB: The irony is that the American experience is initially at the expense of the Indian. But you cannot deny the fact — how best to put it — the thing is, is that this land mass of billions of square miles, until the appearance of Western Europeans —

PP: Billions of squares.

PB: — basically was unorganized. There was no technology, there was no political system —

PP: One could say untouched.

PP: — basically untouched. It really was basically untouched. In most cases it was desperately primitive. And there was a lot of war — don't get the idea that Indians in general were any less brutal than Western Europeans. And it was not difficult for Western Europeans to take over this continent because they had behind them science, organization and what they called civilization. You can't deny that. I mean, you just can't deny that.

And while we can try to make it as peaceful an experience as we can, I do not regret the fact that this land mass has been Europeanized, and Asianized. Any more than I regret the fact that Indians came across the Bering Strait a long time ago.

EM: What do you think the Hopi culture has to offer American culture?

PB: Oh, it has to offer the fact that they've been here for so long and they understand the peaceful way and they're great magicians and they have power that takes study and they bring up their children better than anybody in the world. There are all sorts of secrets that they have for which most people are going too fast to understand.

PP: The fact that the Indians can sustain —

PB: Some Indians. Hopis are very rare; remember where Hopis came from. They're not a tribe, they're a type of Indian that gathered. They're not a tribe, they are like a brotherhood. Hopi means peaceful one. It's not the same as Shawnees and Seminoles and Arapahos.

PP: But the Indians in general, the fact that they can sustain a claim to their native land over such a long period of oppression and change — just change, let's say, let's not even talk about the horror or joy of it — is wonderful. And that's also what Peter is saying. The Indians have a long deep real consciousness of their place in this world and that's what makes them so real.

PB: The problem is that the Indians were massacred. Unlike the blacks — who were brought over and made slaves, and who were used as economic tools, and who are now getting an opportunity to become assimilated, which is a marvelous challenge — we slaughtered them, we shot them from railroad trains —

PP: Or gave them diseased blankets —

PB: — we killed them off. They are basically an endangered species right now. There's little or no chance that they'll survive. And we do carry that with us. When I say "we" I'm not talking about you and I, because I didn't do it, you didn't do it —

PP: We also sat around and let it happen during our lifetimes.

EM: Do you believe in the Hopi prophecies?

PB: I asked Thomas about the prophecies recently and he said that — he gave me the impression at least, that the major fulfillment of the prophecy now will be to bring the message of peace to the world.

Now, that's not just a cliche. We do stand right now on the brink of world peace. We can do it. And if we can pull that off and learn to live as brothers, the prophecy will be realized.

As far as the prophecy of red cloak for breakfast, the purification and all that, much of that has happened already.

PP: Red Cloak cereal.

PB: Think of what we've gone through —

PP: We ought to design some Red Cloak cereal, make the prophecy come true. It should be a — should be a — puffed wheat —

PB: They drop out of the skies like puffed wheat.

PP: Puffed wheat you drop in milk, turns it red. And it tastes like cherries.

PB: The 20th Century has seen three — four — of the most extraordinary, mechanized, genocidal wars in the history of this planet. So the Hopi prophecy has been fully experienced in terms of that. I think we're in the post-prophecy period, and while Banyaca didn't say that, that's the impression I got from him.

See, Banyaca was on our radio show in '66, with Rolling Thunder, and Janet McCloud, and all these people, and at that time the prophecy was being fulfilled. We were just entering Vietnam. We blew off more bombs in Vietnam than we blew off in all the wars. I mean the prophecy is over and we survived it —

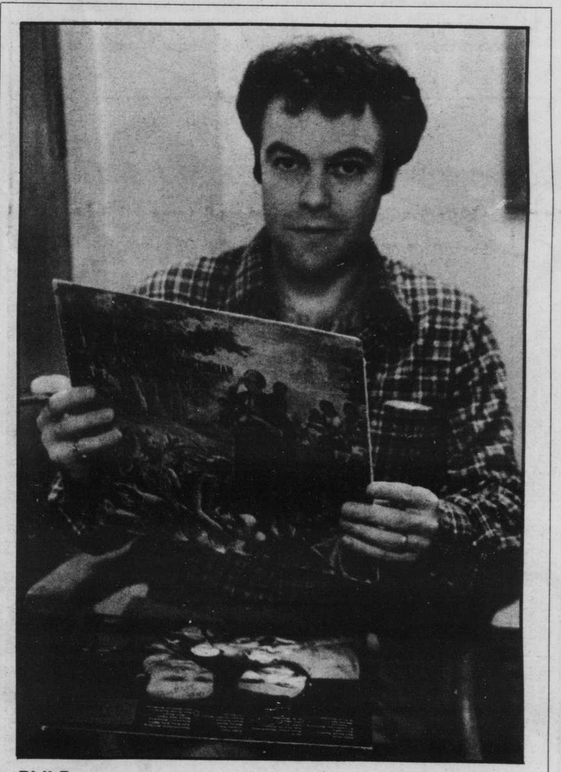
(A sudden bang of a dropped chair outside)

PP: There's a few more.

PB: The American people withdrew from the Vietnam War. The war lords and corporations didn't withdraw, the people withdrew their support and stopped it. Not for any other reason than no one would support it anymore. And that I believe was the beginning of the new age.

I really think so. I think we're in it now, at the very beginning.

By Eric Maloney
Photos by Erich Boekelheide



Phil Proctor

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