

OFF THE WALL

Futzie Nutzle: A Stickman for Our Times

BY BILL BRAUNSTEIN

Futzie Nutzle is not the latest flavor of the week at Baskin-Robbins. Futzie Nutzle is not the lint you find in your navel at the end of the day. Futzie Nutzle is not an esoteric hardware part. "With a name like that," he says, "when people meet me, they are disappointed. They expect some sort of clown that jumps out of a box."

What people do meet is a cartoonist whose best known work appeared on the Letters page of *Rolling Stone* from 1975 to early 1981. But Nutzle's cartoons, which can be likened to drug-addled ideas developed at 33-1/3 rpms and drawn at 78 rpms, have been all over. The publications that have carried his work range from the high and mighty (*Esquire*, *Quest*, *New West*, *Road and Track*, *Out* and the *Village Voice*) to the low and shaky (the *Free Spaghetti Dinner*, *West Bay Dadist* and the *Weekly Breeder*).

"You're probably wondering," says Nutzle, standing by the door of his grey-blue woodframe house, "why I lead an isolated life out here in nowhere's land" a tiny town in the Monterey Bay area of Northern California. A very tiny town. Cattle in the fields nearby out-number people. The main street consists of a post office, fire house and grocery store.

It's a good question, considering that Nutzle's deliriously gonzo sketches are concerned with space-age man facing contemporary problems. His first book of cartoons, released last September, is even called *Modern Loafer*. Yet the look from Nutzle's porch is early American barren.

"This will explain," Nutzle gets into his silver 1957 Chevy, fires it up and drives a few minutes before stopping. He is surrounded by hills which seem to tumble over one another in an endless cascade of purple hues. Wood and wire fences run just outside the car, separating pastures from the dirt road. A cow munches some grass. "This is beautiful—and it's just a mile from my home. As an artist, if you can't be inspired by this, forget it."

Nutzle's inspirations have appeared outside the pages of newspapers and magazines, on display in such prestigious places as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York. His second book, *American Nutcase*, will be out sometime next fall, and he is currently negotiating a contract with a Los Angeles animation studio, finalizing plans to make a feature-length animated film.

Here, most certainly, is a man on the move, yet everything about him is shaded in mystery, either by design or out of an inert strangeness. Nutzle, for example, will refuse to be interviewed if the town in which he lives is mentioned. He also refuses to be photographed. Even Nutzle's agent is in on the game: he legally changed his name to Freeman Zygote a few years back, cryptically citing reasons having to do with freedom and unfertilized eggs.

Then, of course, there is Nutzle's name. He is introduced in a wide variety of ways; some call him Futz, or Futzie Nutzle, or Nutty, but most friends call him just Nutzle. There's no great story or moment of truth that lead to the name change, Nutzle ad-



The Futz and his alter ego stick figure (above), a Nutzle closeup (far right), and three samples from his latest book, *Modern Loafer* (elsewhere).

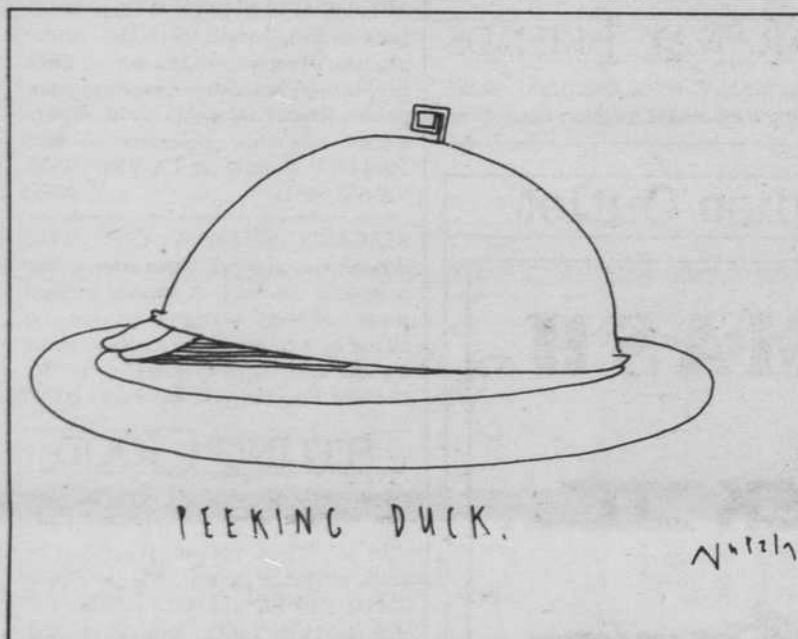
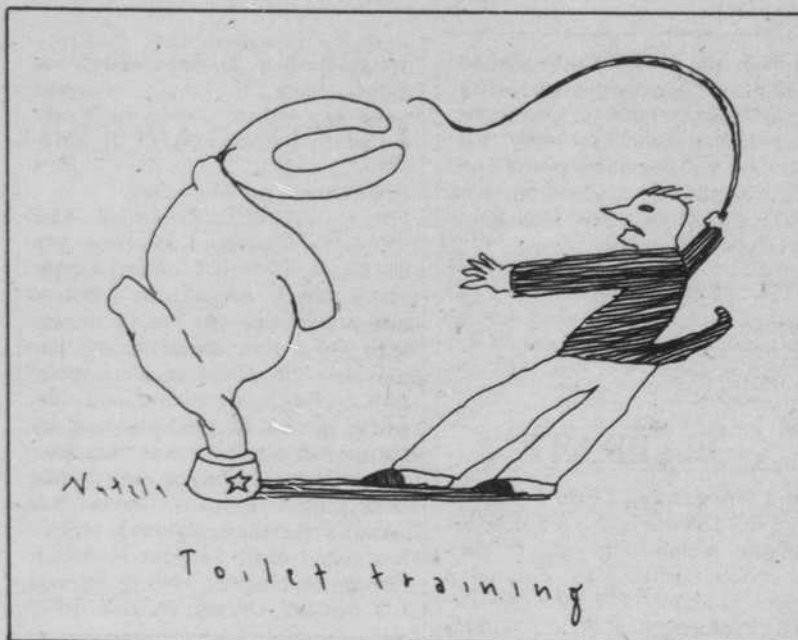
mits. It came from a character he was drawing for a late Sixties underground newspaper called the *Balloon*. His other artist friends had pen names, so he took one, too.

"At first I was uncomfortable with the name," he says. "It's really silly and my art isn't always that silly. But in another way, it's part of the plan. It gets me further than my real name would, and it's become sort of a trademark. Then there's the question of how much of my real personality do I want to expose. I'm not really sure, but Nutzle takes the pressure off."

After a morning cup of coffee strong enough to launch a rocket ("Why drink four or five cups to get going," he says, "when you can drink only one?"). Nutzle leads a visitor to the barn in back of his house that serves as his studio. "It's perfect back here," he says. "I have nobody banging on my door. In fact, sometimes I wish the phone would ring just to make something happen."

A quick glance around reveals the helter-skelter atmosphere of a childhood that wouldn't let go. The walls are covered with posters and paintings. Stereo speakers hang from the loft, usually blaring out the jazz of Charlie Parker or John Coltrane while Nutzle works. An HO-scale train set complete with miniature tracks, bushes and houses, sits in one corner. On a nearby shelf is a lineup of about 15 Hawaiian hula-girl dolls, with nodding spring heads. "Great for monitoring earthquakes," Nutzle says. A glass case by the trains contains an extensive array of Hopalong Cassidy collectibles. And overhead, a pair of gymnast rings dangle from the ceiling.

Somewhere in this conglomeration is an artist's table where Nutzle works. But the room also serves as a study,



where Nutzle has collected literally hundreds of books on cartoonists he admires. Shelves lined with names like Otto Soglow (creator of "The Little King"), George Herriman ("Krazy Kat"), Charles Addams and Rube Goldberg.

In rapid succession he takes out old *New Yorkers* from the war years, an issue of *American Artist* dated 1948 with a Saul Steinberg drawing on the cover and even some old *EC* horror comics. The book collection is the result of doggedly attending swap meets and scouring antique shops and garage sales.

As he turns the pages of a book, the cartoonist becomes animated himself, obviously enjoying the works of the past masters. "These books on cartoons say just about everything," Nutzle says. "They poke fun at the rich, at people who are successful, at the middle class and at the poor."

He opens a cabinet in the room's center and takes out a huge box containing the drawings that will compose his next book. Like a father holding a baby, he carefully displays a few of his latest sketches. The influence of the older styles Nutzle studies is obvious, like tracing one's lineage on a family tree, similar yet different. "I think the older times, like the Fifties, were more interesting than the present. For that reason all my cartoons have funky old buildings and huge cars, plus modern things. I see a real contrast between the old and new."

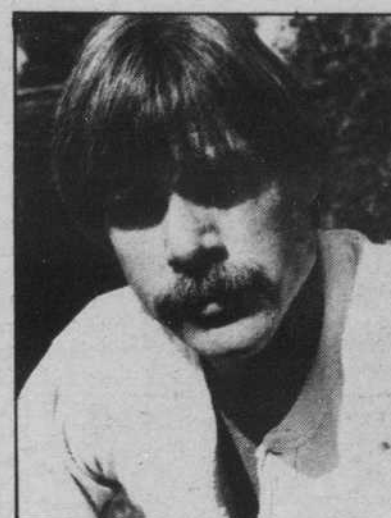
Describing Nutzle's drawings is no easy task. Their humor often relies on

puns, double and triple entendres. He'll sketch "news anchormen" as just that — people with anchors for heads. A "sandwich" is drawn as two pieces of bread with sand overflowing out the sides. An illustration of "body building" will be a structure shaped like a body. On a good day, Nutzle will concoct up to a dozen sketches, using his right hand, then sign his name using his left, to give it a child-like quality.

Oftentimes there is no joke, per se, his purpose being to simply create an image that stays with the reader for no other reason than being interesting to look at. Spare and to the point, his sketches look like the absent-minded doodling one might do while talking on the phone. Nutzle himself acknowledges his shortcomings as an artist. "It's not what you'd call a real slick approach," he admits.

"The style is derived from my being unable to sit at a table for hours and hours. I hate that. I usually find that the successful drawings are just about finished before I even realize that I sat down to draw them. Something will be twirling in my brain and when it finally starts to jell, I'll sketch it. If the sketch is legible and has something going for it, I consider it a success."

The closest Nutzle comes to using a character is his version of Everyman, a figure who wears a blank expression and has three hairs coming out of his head. That person, he says, is his fantasy counterpart. "Who else could it be but me?" he asks. "But I don't want to get caught in the trap of having a particular character. It keeps changing. I



don't want to draw a Snoopy five million times in my life."

If Nutzle's Everyman is a befuddled figure often confronted by strange circumstance, perhaps it is because his own life has been a jumble of mixed experiences and extensive travel. Nutzle was born Bruce Kleinsmith in 1942 in Cleveland, Ohio. His father was killed during World War II's Battle of the Bulge, and his mother remarried, giving him a step-brother and -sister.

He held different jobs as he grew, working in a foundry, driving a truck, cutting weeds along highways, landing his first painting job at 17. "Painting a bridge silver was my first masterpiece," he says. Nutzle's first published drawings, caricatures of teachers and friends, appeared in his high school paper.

When he entered Ohio State University he was still uncertain about what career he wanted to pursue. That changed when he saw the first real painting he'd ever seen hanging in a university gallery. "Watching the canvas, the weight of the painting, and watching it vibrate when I pushed it—that did it. I was completely intrigued. It was there I decided that I wanted to be an artist."

After dropping out of Ohio State, he attended two other art schools, the Cooper School of Art and the Cleveland Art Institute, before deciding he wasn't the school type. He dropped out of college for good and moved to Fort Lauderdale. Returning to Ohio for a brief fling as a commercial artist, Nutzle next realized that he wasn't cut out to lead a normal 9 to 5 existence. His next stop was Lake Tahoe, where he worked for a hotel removing money from slot machines. After brief stays in San Francisco and Santa Cruz, Nutzle settled in the Monterey Valley area in 1975 with his wife of six years, Laura, and their young son, Adrian.

Which brings us back to this tinker toy of a town, so simple and uneffacing, it looks like a cartoon that Nutzle might have sketched. "Yes, I like it here," says Nutzle as he leads a visitor to his car. "It's unaffected. There isn't a cute little coffee shop where hip people go to hobnob with their friends. The birds don't have Tupperware parties in the garden. It's the lack of distractions that give me my inspiration."

Just the spot for a cartoonist to spend the rest of his days, right? "No," says Nutzle, with part of that inert strangeness resurfacing. "I'll only stay here about five more years." A mysterious grin crosses his face. "After that I'll move even further away from civilization."