

THE CHROMIUM SWITCH INTERVIEW

TAYLOR JESSEN

MASTERING THE

MADNESS

metro
dia/vi
ENTALS • SERVICE
2010



EDITOR'S NOTE:
THIS INTERVIEW WAS
DONE IN 2011 - SO,
DON'T BELIEVE EVERY-
THING YOU READ!

SEE P.8 - C.S.
FOR EXPLANATION....

FIRE SIGN THEATRE ARCHIVIST
ASSEMBLES RADIO SHOW MOTHERLODE
FOR DVD/BOOK RELEASE CALLED
"DUKE OF MADNESS MOTORS"

Taylor Jessen exudes a Zen-like calm and possesses such a cheerful, pleasant demeanor that you might not guess from first meeting that he is also a Firehead's BFF. You see, Taylor also exhibits a terrier's dogged (cue: Proctor barking) determination to preserve, protect and defend the Firesign Theatre's recorded legacy. It's Taylor who has scoured the Internet, mailed the letters, shipped the packages, crawled through the attics, storage sheds, garages and slave's quarters to hunt down that reel-to-reel or cassette tape with the snippet of the "Dear Friends" show missing from the archives. It's Taylor who has cleaned, digitized and edited the scraps of tapes and assembled them for posterity.

With the help of dedicated fans, collectors and aficionados around the globe, Jessen has recently completed the massive task of finding, re-mastering and organizing the complete radio broadcast history of the Firesign Theatre for the years 1970 through 1972 which is being released as a boxless boxset called Duke of Madness Motors. DOMM includes the entire "Dear Friends", "The Firesign Theatre Hour Hour" and "Let's Eat!" programs which originally aired on KPFK, the Los Angeles Pacifica Radio outlet. This amounts to over 80 hours of audio which has been painstakingly preserved on DVD for an audience that has either not heard these shows in about forty years or have never heard them at all in their original format.

If that were not enough, Jessen also compiled a 108-page companion book with an extensive essay on this magical era of Firesign history as

well as recent interviews with Austin, Bergman, Ossman and Proctor and their producer, Bill McIntyre and show engineer, the Live Earl Jive. The book also features dozens of rare and never-before-seen photos (which Taylor also curates for the group), show rundowns, a large sampling of Phil Proctor's amazing collages, show posters, marketing pieces and inter-



esting flotsam and jetsam that is sure to delight hardcore and casual fans alike.

The following is an "e-interview" conducted with Taylor by Chromium Switch via email. The photos and graphics were supplied by Jessen and are exclusive to Chromium Switch (one or two appear in DOMM, but you won't see them on any other Firesign Theatre Webzine, that's for sure).

Taylor, you are the "official archivist" for the Firesign Theatre. Tell us how

you came to be assigned such a task and what the job actually entails.

Actually I just kept loitering and working on spec until they started calling me that. Others like Fred Wiebel and Chris Palladino and Michael Packer did so much before I ever showed up that I hesitated to call myself Firesign's archivist until a couple years ago.

The archivist job entails messing around with fan tapes (querying fans to get them, digitizing them, restoring them, identifying the mystery needle-drops if they were radio shows, doing close listens for context clues to confirm performance dates); working with the guys' personal collections (keeping a running inventory of the Firesign storage unit, unpacking & inventorying & repacking Bergman's entire memorabilia collection when he moved); making sure we've got masters of all the new stuff as it's produced; and very occasionally driving to Malibu and spending seven months clearing the aisles of a collector's bunker until I could reach the shelves where he keeps his 3000 hours of KPFK airchecks wherein was found

the only known copy of an episode of Dear Friends. Kids, don't become archivists thinking that last part sounds like endless fun because I only got to do that once.

All along I keep an eye out for That Which Is Awesome, and when I spot some Awesome that it would be a crime not to share, I try to help Firesign figure out a way to repack-age certain goodies in the form of reissues, which is when I start to play Producer. I coproduced their Nick Danger box set, but Duke of Madness

Motors is the first thing I've produced for them top-to-bottom. The production aspect has its ups and downs. Mostly I'm constantly weighing how awesome something is against whether we have enough in the bank to produce a reissue. Most of the fans who have material in their personal collections are more than happy to share it with us in exchange for an honorarium. Fireheads are nice that way. Then you have the stock footage house which we won't name who have the only known copy of a certain vintage Firesign TV appearance, and are asking \$108,000 for it. When a burning parade float like that drives by, pretty much all you can do is salute and get out of the way.

Let's talk about Duke of Madness Motors (DOMM). I know this is a project very near and dear to your heart. You've assembled, edited and remastered all of the group's original radio

shows from their Golden Age, 1970-1972, which includes not only Dear Friends but The Firesign Theatre Radio Hour Hour and the Let's Eat! broadcasts. A Herculean task in and of itself (over 80 hours of audio!), but you've also put together a beautiful 108-page book chock full of rare, never-before-seen photos, show run-downs, Proctor's collages, interviews with the principals and a very insightful essay on this era in Firesign history. Was this project your goal when you started hustling for show tapes?

Not at all – at first I just wanted to do a reissue of the syndicated Dear

Friends shows. I discovered Firesign for the first time in 1993 when I was working at a college radio station, and it didn't take long before I ran out of new albums to listen to. So I hit the tape trading trail, which is where I first heard about these syndicated radio shows they'd done in the 1970s. When Boom Dot Bust came out in 1999 Firesign was about to do a signing appearance at Borders in Westwood, and I was thinking about pitching a Dear Friends reissue project. I was working as a P.A. at a documentary TV company so I didn't have



a lot of production experience, but I'd shelf-read the entire Pacifica & KPFC archives in North Hollywood looking for Firesign reels, so everyone knew I liked to dig. By then a complete set of the syndicated records was commanding \$1000 on eBay, but David had all the masters in his archive. I asked Proctor what he thought of a Dear Friends reissue, and he was pessimistic. "It's just too big. I don't think we can do it right now." Pause. "But you should come to the signing and harass us about it from the audience." At that moment I realized that no matter how it turned out, Firesign and I were always going to be able to talk to each

other, because we all spoke Smartass. The project stayed on low boil for about five years. Circa 2001-2002 Alan Olsen and Michael Pearce, two Fireheads from Portland, digitized their original Dear Friends airchecks and set them loose on the internet. I was the kind of fan who had practically memorized the syndicated series, so hearing these unreleased shows was like getting cool water out of a fountain that hasn't worked since I was a kid. I thought maybe we should reissue the syndicated programs and include all the original uncut airchecks as extras.

The project crashed and burned for a while in 2005-2006, and then I got on it again and set up the "Got Firesign?" form at www.firesigntheatre.com so fans could tell us if they had old recordings they wanted to share. That's when Michael Mahon of Bellevue, Washington wrote in

and surprised the hell out of us by saying he had the entire Radio Hour Hour on cassette. We'd never seriously considered a Radio Hour Hour reissue because our archive was incomplete – we knew the show ran weekly on Sunday nights from the end of January 1970 to the middle of July for a total of maybe 25 episodes, but among all the members of Firesign we only had about ten airchecks total. Now suddenly we had the whole schmeer. And we also had Let's Eat, the series they did a year after Dear Friends, because Ossman kept all of those reels.

After Mahon got in touch with us and

I heard the shows for the first time, I realized we needed to put out one big reissue package that included all three series, basically everything they did on the radio from 1970-1972, because it represented a complete Firesign period. Firesign had a lot of scintillating adventures on the radio prior to 1970, but between 1966-1969 the Firesign was always the really interesting guest on someone else's show. Radio Free Oz was hosted by Bergman or Ossman or Proctor or Austin, or some combination thereof, but never by the Firesign Theatre per se. The period of 1970-1972 was unique because Firesign was the show – the star, the host, the main attraction. Now suddenly thanks to these new fan recordings we had a complete Firesign epoch in the can. So from then to now I've been working on putting together a package to contain all that.

The shows are sans some of the musical interludes. Licensing issues? Tell us a little about the obstacles you faced in recreating the shows for release without the music.

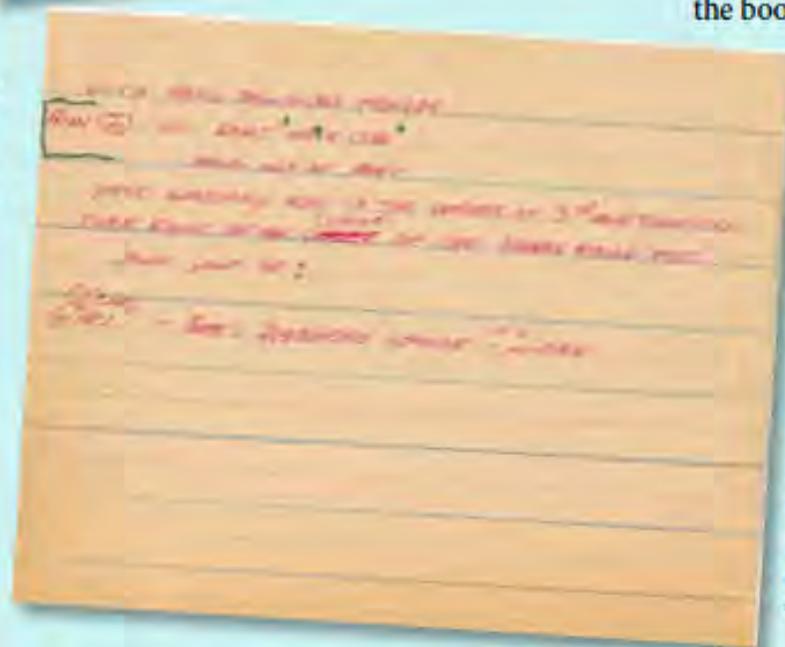
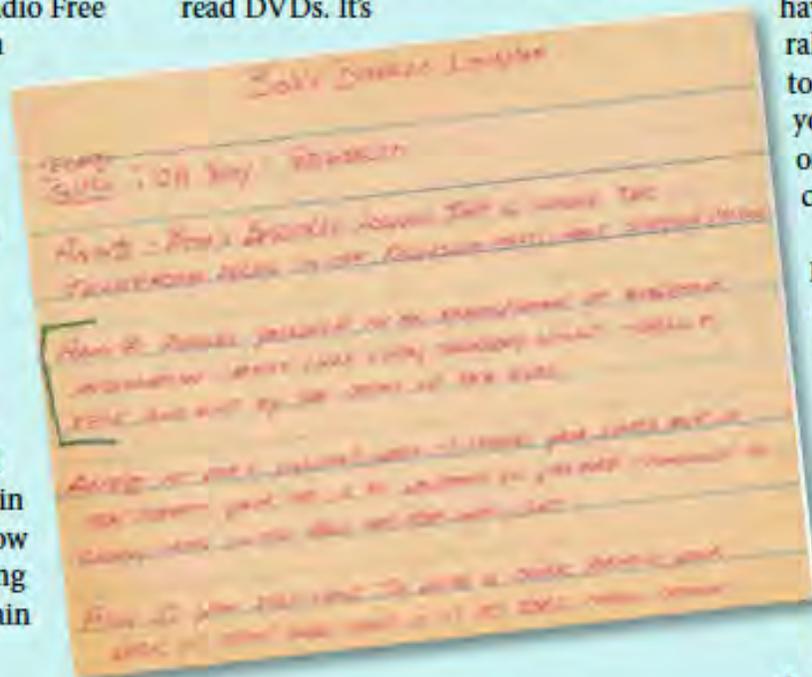
Oh, um, actually, heh heh...

I'm dodging this question because...let's just say fans will be pleasantly surprised with the unexpurgated nature of this product. The story behind that is maybe the most interesting part of this whole saga, in that Firesign and I nearly fucking killed each other over it, but prudence dictates I should save it for another day. Let's wait a year or so and come back to that.

Techie question; DOMM is a DVD/

Book package... a "boxless" boxed set as you refer to it. So the audio files (MP3s) need to be extracted from the DVD by the consumer and loaded (dumped) onto the drive of whatever device they intend to listen to it on, right? That's some serious bytes. How many gigs are on the DVD?

All fans will need is a device that can read DVDs. It's



100% data – there are no menus or software apps, just five directories and two sub-directories full of MP3 files. There's 7.61Gb of data, all DRM-free. It's a bucket. You can copy the files to wherever your data likes to live – in-

ternal drive, external drive, flash drive, iPod, data cloud, what have you. Or you can launch a file directly from the DVD-ROM and never copy it to anything. Where it definitely won't play is CD environments, so for instance you probably can't pop it in the car stereo. But really, the disc is just a shipping container – once you've got the data, it can escape and self-replicate and have wacky adventures. Naturally that'll make it all too easy to BitTorrent, so remember, if you must upload it for someone else to download, please charge more than we do.

I'm a big fan of physical objects, LPs and CDs and DVDs and books, which is why we produced the book and why we're not making it available as a PDF for the time being. But of course every one of these MP3s will eventually be just a couple of clicks away on the InterTubes, so I designed the book to be a kind of museum catalogue for an exhibition that has no gallery. Or there is a gallery, but it's so big you can't see it. Basically the shows are Mike TeeVee and we're Gene Wilder in a white suit. "What you cannot see in a million billion pieces all around you are the remains of a giant art experiment perpetrated on L.A. radio from 1970 to 1972." "Ooooooh!"

In the book, you talk with not only the Firesign guys but show producer Bill McIntyre and audio engineer, The Live Earl Jive. Were you able to get a sense from your talks with the guys "behind the glass" what

Yeah, that was a hot one – “Chinchilla Show” and “Yale Distorts” and “Any More Rocket Fuel for You Hardhats?” all came from there. The “Chinchilla Show” performance was actually recycled from a fan tape of their 2/22/1970 Radio Hour Hour broadcast, and we now have that in stereo for the first time, which is cool. The episode of Dear Friends that’s the most top-heavy with bits that ended up on the Columbia double-LP was probably actually “Power Is Trouble & Trouble’s Not Funny” (10/25/1970). “Small Animal Administration” and “Giant Toad” and “Mark Time” and “Coal” and “Poop’s Principles” and “T.B. Guide” all came out of that one. Or there’s “Deputy Dan Will

Find Us No Matter Where We Go” (11/1/1970)– this is an episode that Firesign did during a KPFK pledge drive, and they didn’t particularly want to be there that night, and yet they ended up delivering a whole slew of bits that were completely unplanned and more or less went on to define Firesign for a generation of fans, like the Deputy Dan reading or “I Was a Cockteaser at Roost-erama!” The one where the light was truly coming up through the table, though, must be “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Inquisition” (10/18/1970), which sadly we only have 38 minutes of because they split it in pieces for the syndicated series and they didn’t save the trims. They’re in a comedo-religious ecstasy during that show that they never matched elsewhere, except maybe during the giddy early days of Radio Hour Hour when Live Earl Jive

first started engineering.

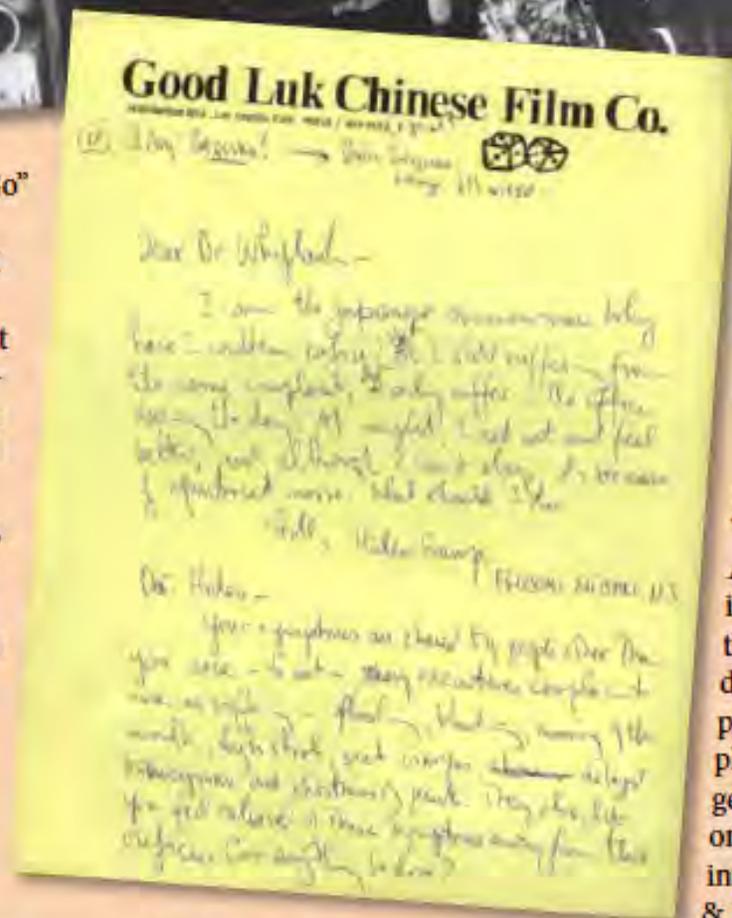
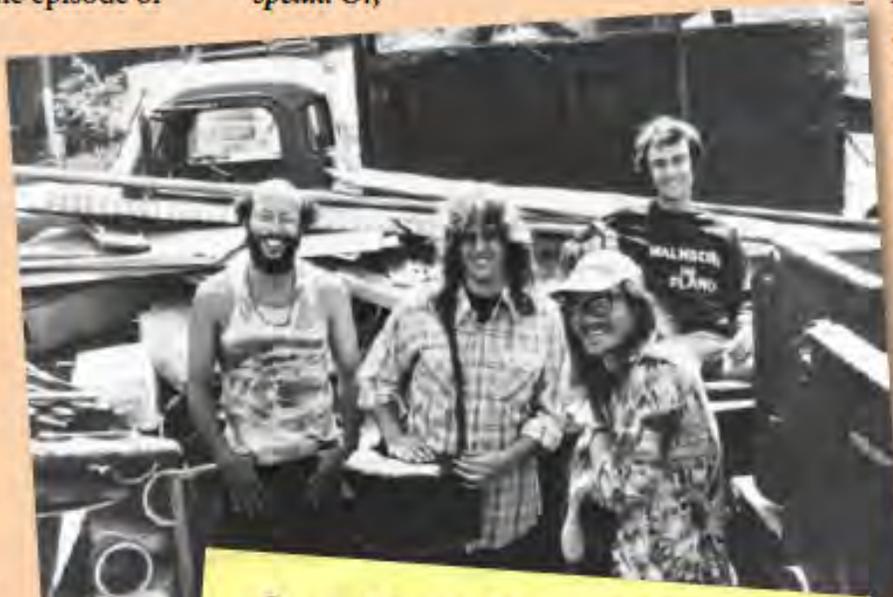
For the most part, the shows contained on DOMM were originally broadcast on Los Angeles radio. For fans outside of Southern California DOMM may be their first chance to hear Firesign Theatre in their natural habitat, so to speak. Or,

of the era?

What I love about these shows, other than the mind-blowing laughs, is that listening to them gives a much richer, deeper picture of the millions of ideas that were going into all those classic albums. As you listen to Radio Hour Hour evolve over the Spring and Summer of 1970, while Firesign was writing and recording Don’t Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers, you can literally pluck a dozen lines from these shows, taken from items that Firesign were quoting directly from found news articles and books and ad fliers, all of which were later repeated verbatim in Dwarf.

More importantly, though, by listening to these shows I got a sense for the first time of what the *idée fixe* of Firesign’s whole existence actually was. In any long-form art project, the artist can go on a million different tangents without necessarily telling you the fount that their art springs from – but if you listen hard enough and long enough, eventually you might hear them name it. It’s like Steely Dan’s “Giant Girlfriend”, the mythic Anima Camden who they say inspired all their songs, a Titan that everyone dated who never dies and who never returns your phone calls – yes, she’s a metaphor, but in fact we’re probably getting a lyrical peek at what was once a real, photographable event in “My Old School”, when Fagan & Becker reference standing on a train platform waiting to take the

Wolverine up to Bard College as a female companion gave one of them “35 sweet goodbyes”. Something important happened, and if you’d been there, you could have taken a picture. And



at least, in the milieu that garnered them a great deal of attention and bolstered their standing on the counter-culture landscape. How do you see the radio shows differing from their “official” Columbia releases

I've listened to *Puzzling Evidence* for years, that early-morning-Friday SubGenius show on KPFA, and you can tell from casual listening and from the SubGenius books that their lodestones are the Kennedy assassination, Bible-belt preachers, and really bad science fiction movies of the fifties – and then sometime in 2010 I was listening to the show and I heard co-host Doug Wellman describe a very specific surrealist-traumatic event from his past, ending with “Yeah, that’s when I first went down the rabbit hole.” Something important happened, and if you’d been there you could have filmed it.

These radio shows will reveal a wide survey of the night sky around planet Firesign, and if you look long enough you will eventually get snapshots of the various bodies in orbit that are exerting some kind of gravitational pull on them. For instance, at one time or another, they all saw a local TV ad opening with a shot of former boss jock Les Thompson sitting in a radio booth saying “Hi, I’m Les Thompson, and here it is, the big number one on the Booooooossss Thirty!” and segueing into “Hip Hug-Her” by Booker T. and the MGs – at which point he turns to the camera and says “Does my job look interesting to you?” before launching into a spiel for the West Coast Trade Schools. I wish I had a copy of this, but I’ve never seen it. That’s one of the major moons, rich in iron ore and a compost of wonderfully insincere radio pitchman bullshit. It delighted them and made them laugh, and Austin riffed on it in virtually every show of the second half of the *Radio Hour Hour* series. The “Dr. Memory” riff was another one that kept popping up in *Radio Hour Hour* and lasted all the way through *Dear Friends*, and their ruminations on the

act of remembering and forgetting were strong enough that they recycled him as the master control program at the heart of *I Think We’re All Bozos On This Bus*. Now you get to hear where that came from. And when I was looking for a title for the whole project, I finally settled on the one orbiting body that was in the sky the whole



**THIS IS YOU
if you own a tree**

time, the mythic used car salesman. Aleister Crowley of Duke of Madness Motors, Dick Nixon of Dick Nixon Chevrolet, Edgar Allen Poe of Bird of Prey Motors, Ralph Williams, Chick Lambert – from the first show to the last there was always a guy in a suit with a dog named Storm waiting to jump in and sell some Dusters.

Firesign may not look back on their radio work with a lot of enthusiasm – Austin in particular says they were into making one really good album

after another, and anything that kept them out of Columbia studios, including these radio shows, was torture – but I think that to judge these radio shows by album standards would be a mistake. These aren’t narratives per se, they’re just a fleeting glimpse of the fabled Fifth Guy. After one of the *Radio Hour Hour* broadcasts in 1970 a Canadian journalist taped a recording with Firesign on the street outside KPFA (you can hear the interview in the extras section of the DVD-ROM), and he interrupted one of their typically divergent, anarchic non-answer answers to one of his earlier questions to ask “What are your writing sessions like?” One of the guys says “Just like this!” And what’s good about this surrealistic torrent of idea jazz is what’s good about hanging out with these guys – you don’t just begin to see where they get all their ideas. You start making connections, you see the world in a new light, you begin to deprogram yourself of all the crapola that the authoritative voices in our media lives want us to treat so very seriously.

DOMM is such a massive undertaking, I mean not only the 80-plus hours of audio but a complete book as well! Which was more challenging – producing the DVD or writing the book?

The book was a challenge, just in terms of drafting endless versions of the essay and worrying about the layout and having no deadline (which is the worst deadline of all). But in terms of man-hours, the DVD takes the biscuit. Between convincing people to ship me open reel tapes, and then busting out an Otari MX5050

and digitizing them, and then working 10, 20, 30 hours to restore a single show due to mike pops, hum, feedback, and mismatched levels – that was like cleaning Falling Water with a toothbrush.

I think the photos and essays are so integral to fully appreciating the audio performances. The book adds so much to their enjoyment. I particularly dug seeing Phil Proctor's amazing collages. I know he used to do such things for "underground" papers of the day (East Village Other, I believe ran his photo-collages). Did you just run across those in a box or did PP help select the ones that appear in DOMM?

Proctor dug them out of his garage one day, and the moment I saw the kid with his puppy looking out the window at a crowd of invading Communist children I knew we'd struck gold. If you've heard the radio shows, these collages are the exact same thing, only for the eye. It's not satire, exactly – it's about spinning your head 180 degrees. A gallery show at La Luz de Jesus in Hollywood is surely in order.

Is DOMM just the beginning of what we can expect from The Archives? Are there more Firesign-related goodies in the works?

Hopefully next we'll be able to produce a DVD reissue of Everything You Know Is Wrong and Martian Space Party. In 2009 Firesign went to Bob Wayne's Sunburst Recording in Culver

City where they'd recorded their Rhino CDs and they did commentaries for each film. Firesign's latest live show of Bozos at Barnsdall Gallery in October was a screamingly big hit, maybe the biggest reaction I've heard from a Firesign audience ever, playing a great script to a packed house,



Philip Proctor

so look for that on a double-CD soon. Bergman, it turns out, still has a copy of his avant-garde Berlin detective film Flowers, which I got transferred a while back – turns out it's great and we should definitely get that out there too. And right now Ossman is putting the finishing touches on a book of

Anything You Want To, the Shakespeare satire to end all satires, coming on Bear Manor press in 2011.

What's in the ol' North Hollywood U-Stor-It anyway? Do The Guyz have memorabilia in their attics? Or do you have all the "good stuff" somewhere?

What we do NOT have, Dear Friends, is the Magic Mushroom shows. Which is why I'm plaintively requesting here, as I do every chance I get, that if you've got an original recording of Firesign live at the Magic Mushroom, please go to the "Got Firesign?" form at www.firesigntheatre.com and tell us about it. Once we've got 'em all, we've got our next box set.

Taylor, on behalf of Firesign fans everywhere I'd just like to thank you for not only your painstaking work on our behalf in putting together this "Firehead's Wet Dream", but for helping to preserve the legacy of one of America's great cultural treasures. Significant work. Thanks. And, thanks for taking time to share with us here at Chromium Switch.

I am being eaten by diamond-mining dwarves. Send help.

"Duke of Madness Motors" is available in stores on February 15, 2011. You may pre-order your copy now by visiting firesigntheatre.com (just click here).