

# William Stout

**The brilliant artist and illustrator deigns to discuss his Firesign Theatre connection with Chromium Switch.**

**(We lied, we said we were from Rolling Stone. By the time he figures it out, we'll be in print!)**

*Editor's Note: Artist William Stout is a legend in underground comics and is renowned for his illustrations and work for the film industry. He served as the "House Artist" for the Firesign Theatre and designed many of their most iconic images including the Bear Whiz Beer label and the cover for In The Next World, You're On Your Own. The following is an e-interview conducted by Chromium Switch via e-mail exchanges with Mr. Stout. Due to the unusual format, you may notice Mr. Stout had provided answers to questions we asked further into the interview. This is just a case of the artist being ahead of the curve once again while your insipid intrepid correspondents muddle throuh in their usual fashion. It appears here just the way it was originally written, verbatim. You'll just have to deal with it.*

**PF:** You have a long and impressive resume, and your work has been seen (and appreciated) by millions, so, how did you get involved with a group of ne'er-do-wells like the Firesign Theatre?

**WS:** My friend, comic book dealer Dave Gibson, got permission from the Firesign Theatre to collect and reprint *The Mixville Rocket* (as well as the *Firesign Duck*), a sort of neighborhood humor fanzine/chronicle that used to be put together and published by The Guyz. Dave asked if I would do the cover for this collection. Being a Firesign fan, I jumped at the chance. I thought my keen interest in duplicating the old Harvey Kurtzman *MAD* style of comic art would be a perfect visual complement to what the Firesign was doing aurally. They loved the cover and asked to meet me. When I met them at a recording session, I was delighted to hear that Kurtzman was one

of their influences. I was also fascinated with their recording process and was greatly impressed by their technical abilities in the studio. It was like watching four guys making a movie for your ears.

**PF:** Were you familiar with Firesign Theatre before you worked with them? When did you "get on the bus," so to speak?



**WS:** I was a Firesign fan from the beginning. Actually, before the beginning; I used to listen to the guys when they did their Radio Free Oz show (live from the Magic Mushroom?) on KRLA. Being in the L. A. area had another added benefit years later, Firesign-wise. The Guyz used to do their own live narration of the annual Rose Parade here in Pasadena on New Year's Day. All you had to do to enjoy it was to have your TV on with the sound down and then turn your radio up to hear their hilarious

commentary. They did that for years.

**PF:** Phil Proctor was quick to point out that you also did the label for "Bearwhiz Beer" which has become a beloved icon among Fireheads. What were some other assignments you had for FT?

**WS:** The Mixville Rocket cover got me the job of creating the cover to their next LP, *In The Next World, You're On Your Own*. I designed it so that it had two front covers. That way the potential buyer was looking at a front cover no matter which way the record was facing in the bin.

Besides the original Bear Whiz Beer shirt, I also designed and drew the Hooker, California shirt and the Nick Danger – Third Eye shirt (which became a Rhino Firesign LP cover, as did an altered version of the Mixville Rocket cover; it became the cover to the Lawyer's Hospital LP).

Then I was invited to participate in the making of their *Everything You Know Is Wrong* movie. I designed and built a lot of the film's props (including a bottle of Bear Whiz Beer) and appeared in the Blue

Moss party scene as an extra. That was my very first film work.

**PF:** How did the concept for the cover of "In The Next World You're On Your Own" come about? Did you work directly with The Guyz, or did you go through an Art Director?

**WS:** I worked directly with The Guyz, as initially Columbia did not want me to do the cover. The Guyz were adamant, however, about using me. The record company was worried because I was this

kid who had never done a record cover (they weren't aware of my bootleg record album covers; I kept it that way). Once they saw my finished product, however, everything changed. I came through for CBS like a champ so Nancy Donald, the brilliant chief art director at Columbia Records, began to hire me to do other CBS covers. It was the start of a great relationship.

The process of working with The Guyz on the cover was pretty straightforward. They gave me cassettes of the LP and invited me to their recording sessions. I listened to the cassettes and made notes during the sessions. Mad comics-style, I tried to cram as much of the aural material as I could on to the covers with loads of what Kurtzman called "eyeball kicks," lots a small gags sprinkled

throughout the art. My goal was to create the visual equivalent of what it felt like to listen to a Firesign Theatre record. Just as listeners heard new things each time they played the Firesign's layered discs, I wanted the viewers of the covers to have multiple new discoveries each time they picked up a cover and perused it.

**PF:** There's a lot of what Bill Elder called 'chicken fat' on the ITNWOYO cover (sight gags, ephemera, etc.), was that all of your own invention or did you incorporate suggestions from The Guyz? (By the way, it's an exquisite piece of work, Wally Wood would've been proud!)

**WS:** Thank you! I worked as an assistant to both Kurtzman and Elder on Little Annie Fanny for Playboy in 1972. Yup; Elder called those gags "Chicken Fat"; Kurtzman called them "Eyeball Kicks." Most of the small sight gags on the cover came from or were suggested by what was on the record. I

**WS:** Working on Annie was one of the best experiences of my life. It wasn't that long --- just a few months in 1972 (Harvey said I was "too creative" for the strip, that I should be doing my own stuff) --- but I learned an enormous amount from those two guys, as well as becoming lifelong friends with them.

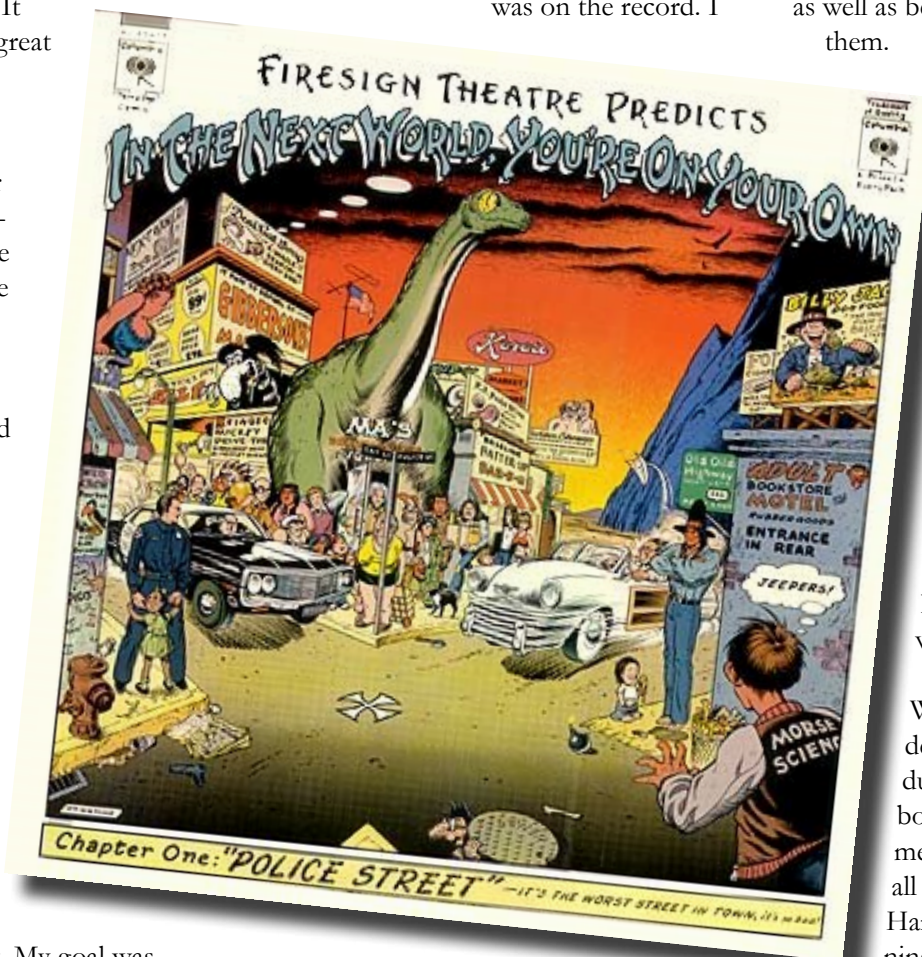
The actual work process of creating Annie would take up a page or so of this interview so, in that regard, if you'd like to read about it in detail, I'd direct you to what I wrote about it in the special Kurtzman issue of The Comics Journal or in the big art book on Willy Elder. Each page was an enormous undertaking. Eventually, Harvey asked me to take over Little Annie Fanny. I had to decline; too much work for too little pay.

Working for Kurtzman & Elder all happened coincidentally during the first E. C. comic book convention, so I got to meet and become friends with all of the old E. C. guys, too. Harvey told me at the beginning that I'd learn many things. I might not be aware of what I

was learning at the time, he said, but the knowledge would eventually bubble up and surface in my work. He was amazingly prophetic in that observation and prediction.

Crazy Willy had calmed down by the time we worked together. He had become very thoughtful and philosophical and was incredibly kind and patient with this wild-eyed long haired kid from Hollywood.

**PF:** I was helping to schlep merchandise at the recent Barnsdall Theatre shows, and there were examples of your work



also couldn't resist throwing in some stuff of my own that I felt was funny and appropriate to the cover.

B'TW, I'm a huge fan of Wally Wood's work. He was a big influence on me. I met him my second night in New York at a party on Staten Island.

**PF:** As a hack cartoonist, I have a great deal of admiration for your work. But, what I am most jealous of is that you actually worked with the legendary Harvey Kurtzman and Will Elder. You HAVE to tell me what that experience was like (sorry, I think I made a puddle).



all over the place, Mark Time, etc., (they were EXTREMELY popular with the fans) do you ever run across something you did for FT in your travels? What do you think when you see a piece they used?

**WS:** I run across my Firesign stuff everywhere. Fans always bring Firesign material for me to sign when I appear at comic and sci-fi conventions. I'm proud of the work I did for them and of my association with them. It sometimes felt like I was the Terry Gilliam to their Monty Python.

**PF:** All right, this probably never happens to you, but some of us get stuff rejected or sent back to be redrawn. Did you have to deal with any of that with your Firesign Theatre work? (Please say 'yes')

**WS:** Uhhh...not really. The only changes I recall The Guyz making were to the dialogue balloons on the cover of *Lawyer's Hospital*. I had penciled in dialogue that I thought was funny and Firesign appropriate. They (primarily the Phils, as I recall) rewrote at least half of it, making it even better and funnier. Outside of the Firesign world, however, I still get stuff rejected all the time (feel better?).

**PF:** Well, yes, yes I do.

**TG:** Have you been in touch lately with any members of Firesign, and would you ever consider doing some graphics for them again?

**WS:** I'd LOVE to do more work for The Guyz! We haven't been in touch for a long time, although I still run into Phil Proctor on occasion because we're both in the film industry which is a pretty small world (Hi Phil!). We began drifting away when I fell into the film business and began making movies, a very time-intensive undertaking. I've worked on

about 35 features so far.

The last time I saw all of The Guyz was a few years ago. I went to a videotaping they were doing for PBS (a fundraiser for KCET, I believe). I think they taped two complete shows then used the best takes from each for the public broadcast. As I recall, I was at the first taping. Harold Bronson, VP and co-founder of Rhino Records, brought me. Their new material was fantastic! Brilliant! I didn't say "Hi!" because they looked very, very busy and focused on doing their show. I didn't want to distract them.

**TG:** If you could pick a "desert island" album from the oeuvre of the Firesign Theatre, what would that be?

**WS:** Because as far as I know it hasn't been released, I would pick Austin & Ossman's "Radio Laffs of 1940." I did the advertising for that show and saw it performed live. It stood up to the very best of the Firesign's work and had that elliptical structure of theirs that I just love. And it had a new Nick Danger piece! It was absolutely brilliant and I'd love for it to be released if it was ever recorded. I'd love to do the cover for a "Radio Laffs" release, although the pitifully small format of the CD would make it difficult to do something as happily detailed as "Next World" or "Lawyer's Hospital." It would be hard to come up with something so complex that could be easily read without a magnifying glass. Maybe reproduced as a fold-out poster inside the CD packaging? As far as the regular Firesign releases go, any of their first three LPs would do me fine, especially the elliptical work with the Kafka-esque overtones that combined fear with comedy.

**TG & PF:** Thank you!

**WS:** My pleasure!

## More of Stout's handiwork...

