

# THE CHROMIUM SWITCH INTERVIEW

## ROCOCO SPEAKS!

An e-mail conversation with Philip Proctor

By Tom Gedwillo and Phil Fountain

**M**r. Proctor, thank you for agreeing to do this e-interview. I hope the format is not too cumbersome or tedious. Of course, there is no deadline. Answer them all, or just what you like. Heck, make up your own questions if the Great Spirit moves you! Have fun... and thanks again.

**Phil Fountain:** Mr. Proctor, you and your cohorts recently finished a wonderful run at the Barnsdall Gallery Theatre in L.A. that was, by all accounts, brilliantly performed and warmly received. The material that made up, "Forward Into The Past" was basically a "greatest hits" — how difficult was it to condense over forty years of bits into a single show?

**Phil Proctor:** That never crossed our mind, really. The Monterey show was stitched together by me and Pete and Dave and then tweaked by Mr. Austeen when we got to the Golden State, and it was "inspired" you might say, by the homage to old radio we released as a single in the '70s called "Forward, Into the Past." The latest show was assembled primarily by David and remained essentially as he suggested with a few eliminations and additions added around the table at Bergman's place in Los Feliz a few days before we stood it up.

**PF:** The Barnsdall shows differed from your Monterey performance (April, 2009) with the inclusion of an abridged version of "Anythyngge You Want To; Shakespeare's Lost Comedie" taking up a good part of the second set. What brought about the decision to include "Anythyngge"? Was it the fun (and, I'm sure, challenge) of doing "Anythyngge"? Or, was there some dissatisfaction with the second set at Monterey?

**PP:** We have always wanted to present a condensed rendition of "Anythyngge" after have performed fully costumed and produced

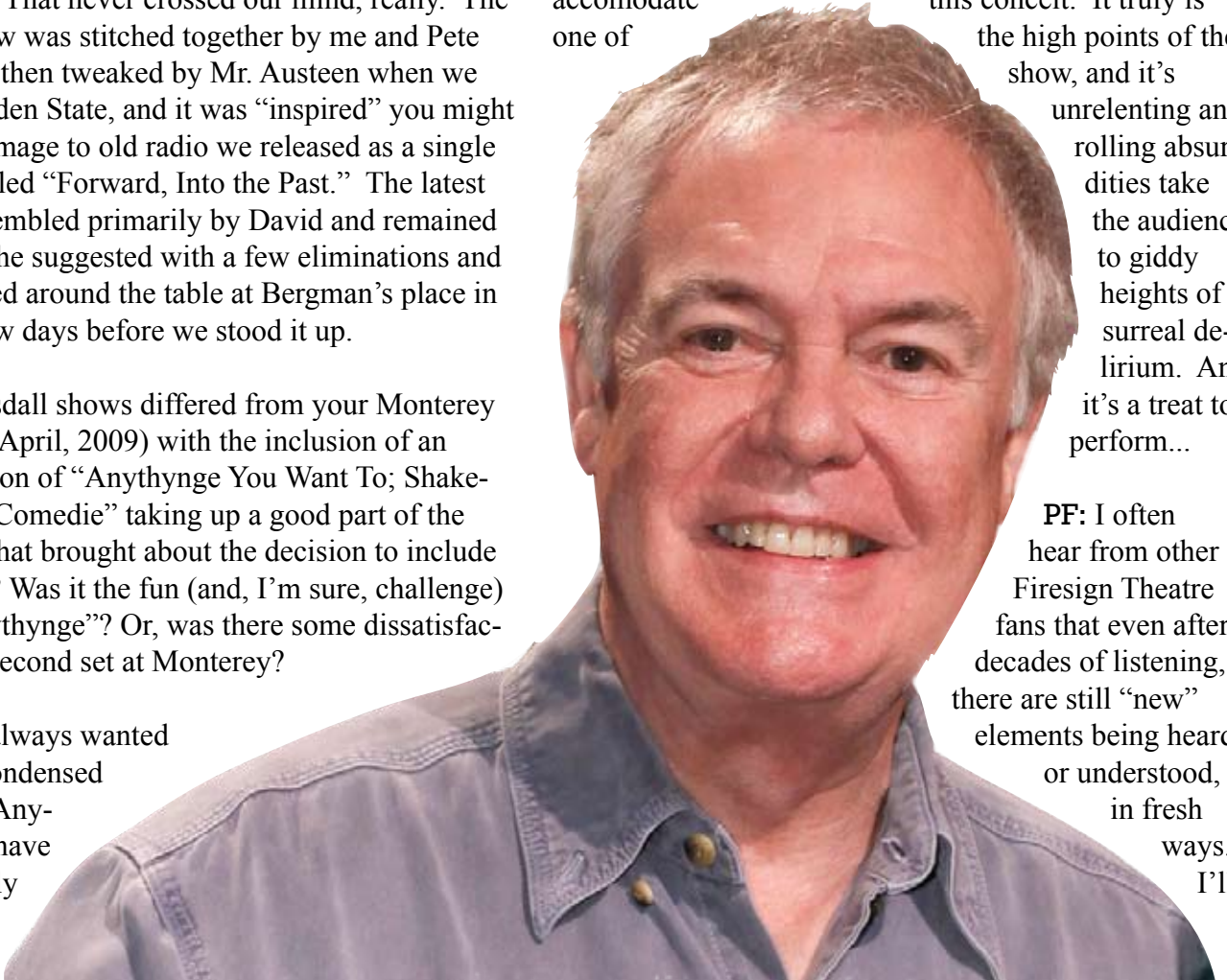
scenes in the past, but being freed of those constraints in this full frontal audio presentation, we are now experimenting with the best way to present the most entertaining abridged version we can create and thus encourage others to purchase the full acting edition and mount a production of their own.

**PF:** I really enjoyed the "solo" turn you each took during the Barnsdall shows. Where did the material for your monologues come from?

**PP:** The School Menu material all came from the twisted imagination of Phil Austin, but he allowed us to embellish on the material by presenting us as characters from the academic world, and creating a wraparound to accomodate this conceit. It truly is one of the high points of the show, and it's

unrelenting and rolling absurdities take the audience to giddy heights of surreal delirium. And it's a treat to perform...

**PF:** I often hear from other Firesign Theatre fans that even after decades of listening, there are still "new" elements being heard, or understood, in fresh ways. I'll



still hear passages from your earlier work and go, “Oh!” and it’ll crack me up as if it were the first time I’d heard it. What about for you? When you dive back into your catalog for a project like Barnsdall or Monterey, are you ever surprised by what you’ve written? Does it still make you laugh?

**PP:** Abso-fuckin-lutely! Especially when we revisit “Anythynge” which astounds me to this day. I know we expanded on our original broad comic Shakespearian send up which we first performed on stage at an early Renaissance Pleasure Faire adopting it to an hour format for NPR’s Earplay show, but it really is so rich and complex and poetic, that I personally wonder if we weren’t actually channelling the bad Bard himself. I can hardly remember even writing it, to be frank... and as to revisiting some of our early classic pieces as we do in this current production, I find that the “acting” of the work reveals new meanings every time I approach it, and particularly in relation to the other guyz. We all love to play anew with the words and characters and stories we created LIVE on stage, to experience new nuances and surprise one another - and hopefully our fans as well.

**Tom Gedwillo:** In an interview some ten years ago, you said “We’re artists, and artists are timeless.” The success of your recent concerts would seem to validate that point.

**PP:** Well, we do have a unique history of writing and acting (and fighting) together over many decades and I would submit that the fact that we still love and respect one another through the many storms and strifes of life says a lot about our human and artistic values.

**PF:** When you’re writing for the Firesign Theatre, what’s the process? Do you write something on your own and bring it to the others? Or, do you write everything for the group when you’re all in the same room together?

**PP:** Writing with the group has its own dynamics and can be very laborious and painstaking, but we are always free to contribute independent material at any time whether it seems to pertain to the theme at hand or not. Sometimes we are also inspired to flesh out an idea or a character between sessions and bring the suggestions into the next meeting.

I often wake up at odd hours of the night with something I simply have to write down, as if it’s being dictated to me. But the most intense collaboration occurs when we are actually in studio, when the characters and situations come together in reality for the first time. Intense rewrites start as scribbles all over the scripts and then may need to be transferred to new pages.

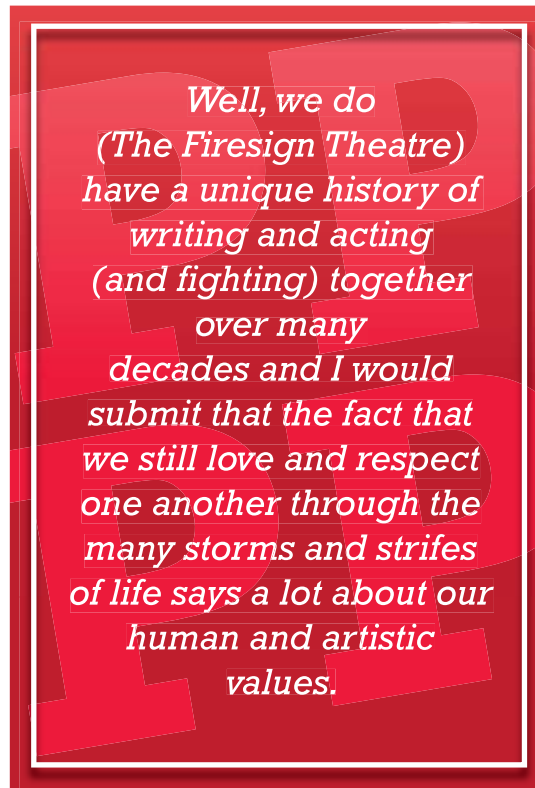
**TG:** You do a lot of voice work, known as ADR. How was that journey and did it involve many auditions for your first role?

**PP:** There is no auditioning process for Looping and Dubbing. Most of the groups who rose to prominence in the early days of the field were members of improvisational groups who would then recommend friends. In my case, the Firesign had been hired to add additional and background voices to some wrestling

movie, and that’s when I discovered I had a knack for the work. I’ve now looped hundreds of films and TV movies and dubbed dozens more, but the most lucrative have been the Disney and Pixar projects, which yielded a goldmine in VHS and DVD rental and sale royalties. The last films I worked on were *Surrogates* (That’s my voice as the newscaster at the end) and in *Princess and the Frog* for Disney.

**PF:** Do you write for the characters you play? I mean does, say, Ossman write for Rocky? Do you write something and think, “Ah! This is a great line for Be-Bop?”

**PP:** We kind of own the characters we’ve personally created, but no one turns down a suggestion for a funny line or action. We just pretend WE came up with it... Also, we sometimes will encourage one another to



write something for the group in the voice of one of our characters, which is fun.

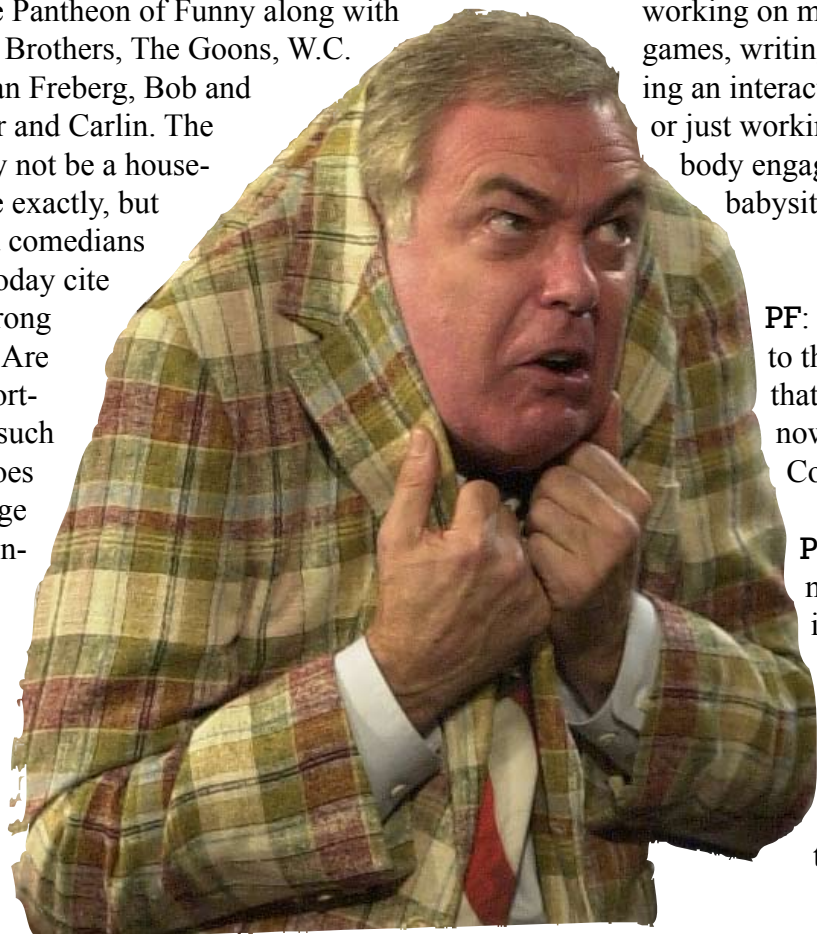
**TG:** Looking at your early career, I fondly remember your appearance on “All In The Family.” How were you received by the cast and crew?

**PP:** AITF was a wonderfully creative and rewarding experience, as the actors had as much input into the writing as did the staff. Very Firesign Theatre. And, of course, everyone knew my connection to the group then, so I was respected and encouraged to “have some fun.” Rob Reiner was also already a personal friend, and all the others, including the writers and production staff were kind and open and totally supportive in every way. Everyone who worked that show felt that way, and rightly so.

**PF:** At the risk of sounding like the sycophant I am, it seems you have reached the part of your career where thoughts are turned to the legacy of the Firesign Theatre. The group has been called a “national treasure” by no less than the Library of Congress. You’ve been praised as one of the 30 Greatest Comedy Acts of all time. Some reviewers (well, me) unashamedly place your work among the Pantheon of Funny along with The Marx Brothers, The Goons, W.C.

Fields, Stan Freberg, Bob and Ray, Pryor and Carlin. The group may not be a household name exactly, but actors and comedians working today cite

FT as a strong influence. Are you comfortable with such praise? Does it encourage your continued creativity, or does such talk leave you with a desire to leave well enough



alone and rest on your laurels? (*Note: Has there ever been a more verbose, long-winded, asinine question?*)

**PP:** In answer to the last part of your question, “No!” Of course, I wish more people had recognized our work when we were on top of our game, but the fact is, we did and do and will always appeal to a hip, bright slice of the American pie, and that’s the way it is. I regret nothing and enjoy every new opportunity to introduce ourselves to a new generation of Fireheads.

**PF:** You always seem to be so busy. You’ve got shows coming up on the East Coast and the Midwest, you’ve just finished the Barnsdall run and you’ll be doing, what? A dozen characters in a Cervantes piece at Whittier College next month. Heck, you’re a grandfather now, aren’t you supposed to slow down?

**PP:** As Hemlock Stones intones in the *Giant Rat of Sumatra*, “To live, a rat must chew” or something like that. Learning complicated lines in plays and musicals with the Antaeus Classical Theatre Company in North Hollywood; performing in “live” radio-style shows, touring with the Boyz or the incredible L.A. Guitar Quartet, working on movies or radio spots or short films or video games, writing a fantasy adventure for kids and developing an interactive social site with my partner Sam Joseph, or just working out - everything I do keeps my mind and body engaged and challenged. And I still have time to babysit for Bowen.

**PF:** So, when are YOU packing up and moving to the Great Pacific Northwest? Rumor has it that three quarters of the Firesign Theatre are now living in a North American rain forest. Could you ever be persuaded to leave L.A.?

**PP:** I’m still too involved in my work and my happy personal life to think of leaving L.A. behind. My dear wife is there, my daughter and son-in-law are there, my grandson is there, my cats are there. Besides, I’m looking forward to jetting up North to work with the other crazee guyz should the need arise, and touring more in the future in general.



**TG:** Has there been any discussion about returning to live radio, ala “Dear Friends” or the “XFM” series?

**PP:** We talk about it all the time, but our busy personal lives preclude the implimentation of a show for the nation even online at this time, since it would require us to be in one place at the same time when we’re not anywhere at all... Playing together on the radio or in an interview situation is quite another thing, though, and we’ve enjoyed talking to Richard Metzger on his “Dangerous Minds” show, for example.

**PF:** Is there anything you’d like to say to *Chromium Switch* readers? Any “exclusive” news you’d like to share? Obviously, the fans want to know if there are any further plans to tour... But, here’s your chance... you’ve got our undivided attention.

**PP:** Looks like I’ll be going to Germany with *Quixote* in mid May. And we’re getting new carpeting and painting the house. And we now haveTHREE cats. And I hope FST can get some more West Coast dates in 2010.

**PF & TG:** Thank you, sir.

**PP:** And I’m welcome...

*Fini*

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