



**HE'S READY FOR MYSTERY!
HE'S READY FOR EXCITEMENT!
HE'S READY FOR ANYTHING!**

HE'S...

PHIL AUSTIN

**THE MAN BEHIND
HAPPY HARRY COX,
BEBOP LOBO AND
NICK
DANGER**

**SUBJECTS HIMSELF
TO THE
RUTHLESS,
RELENTLESS
GRILLING OF
FANS & FRIENDS
IN THIS, THE
LATEST INSTALLMENT
OF THE
CHROMIUM
SWITCH
INTERVIEWS!**

Actor, writer, musician, producer, radio host, songwriter, Philip Austin wears many hats (some with eyeballs and others you don't want to know about). But, most of us know him as a founding member of The Firesign Theatre. Austin is best known for playing the troupe's most enduring (and endearing) character, *Nick Danger, Third Eye*.

Today the 73-year-old Austin lives on the waterfront of Fox Island, Washington with his lovely wife, Oona (affectionately known as The Big Blonde) and a bevy of canines that, more or less, run the place.

Chromium Switch caught up with the Austins via Email and with help from Facebook Fireheads submitted written questions to which the couple graciously supplied answers. So, as Lt. Bradshaw might say, "Sit down Dinger, and cough up the goods!"

Chromium Switch: Of course, you will be forever associated with the character, Nick Danger, Third Eye. Firehead Kurt Ericson would like to know if Nick was based on Philip Marlowe, the literary tough guy.

Phil Austin: Initially, he's based on the Hammett Sam Spade character, but as I got more into writing him over the years, he's become much more like Marlowe. I love Chandler's writing.

CS: Tell us a little bit about how you came to be such an accomplished actor. Where did you hone your chops?

PA: Kind of you to characterize me as accomplished. To me, what I mainly do is make fun of actors and acting. I spent a lot of my twenties in Shakespeare and stage work in

SF and LA, and my first TV job was on a Saturday performance of the famous anti-war piece called "Company K" on CBS in - I think - 1962 or 63. I was in the UCLA drama department when Ray Manzerek was there. I did stage work at Bowdoin in the late fifties and was with the Actor's workshop in SF (King Lear) and the Mark Taper Forum in LA. KPFK gave me huge amounts of time to fill. I once read the entire "The Idiot" in serial form. Did I mention that Company K was hosted by - get this - Charlton Heston? Ostensibly introducing a bunch of new, young actors!

CS: Is it tougher being a disembodied Voice Actor or is the physicality of stage acting more challenging?

PA: Any time people are judging you on how you look is tougher for me. Peter and I used to characterize the comfort of voice acting with the "Cripples on the Radio" phrase. Who cares what you look like?

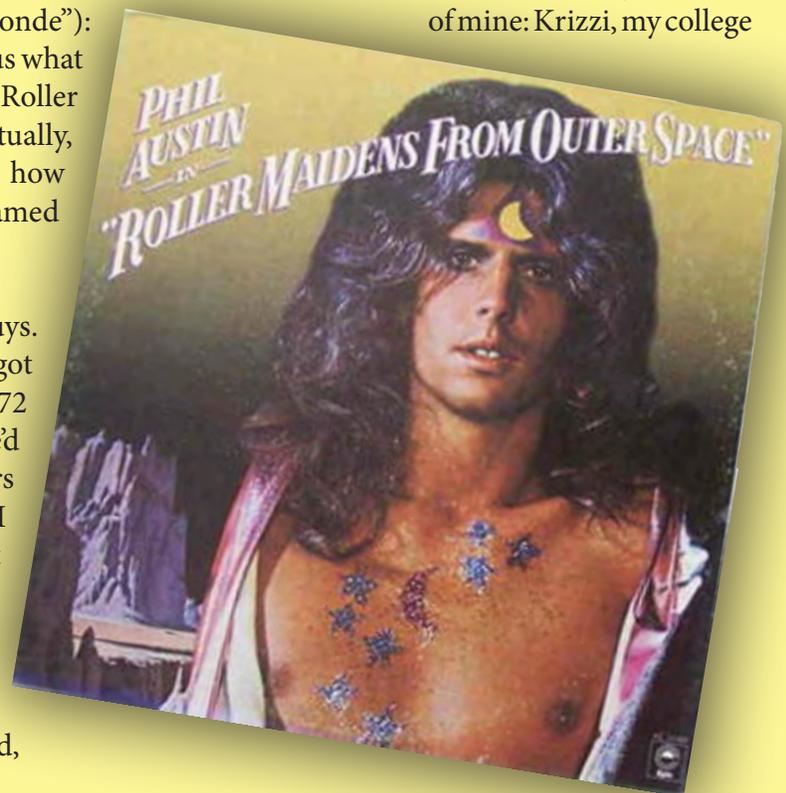
CS: Question for the lovely, Oona (affectionately known as "The Big Blonde"): Could you tell us what it's like being a Roller Maiden? Actually, we're curious how you and PA teamed up:

Oona: Hi, guys. Philip and I got together in '72 although we'd met a few years earlier when I was sixteen at a party for the Beatles with The Fool. The Beatles never showed,

but Philip and I locked eyes and figured something was in our future. My older sister had married the program director at a major LA AM radio station and I got to go south from Tacoma and see major acts like the Rolling Stones and hang out with a nice group of people in the Hollywood Hills. I made many friends with whom I'm still close.

I started listening to FST and the Mothers of Invention and Richard Pryor and the Python in college and used to joke that I was going to wind up married to Philip or John Cleese. After the University of Washington and over a year in Europe, Philip and I would talk for hours on the phone. I was living at The Farm in Dark Canyon and he was in Mixville in the Silverlake hills and we realized we were both competitive swimmers, both scarily compatible with each other and fell in love and moved into the Willow Glen house and never left (although we finally sold it last year and live on Fox Island full-time now.)

The Roller Maidens are all girlfriends of mine: Krizzi, my college



roommate, Elizabeth Diltz, (Henry the photographer's wife) Lynn Taylor and Cyrus Faryar's then girlfriend Jennifer. The photo session for the cover was fun. We rented a big backdrop and Henry shot pictures. My favorite moment, though, was singing backgrounds for the songs on the album, paired up with Lesley Gore. I'm close to 6'1 and she's 4' 10. I stood on the floor and she was standing on the stage and we sang "C'mon Jesus, show yourself" and had fun. He and I were fairly unusual in that, along with our considerable love for James Brown and the great musicians of the time, we had bonded over George Jones and Merle Haggard and the Happy Goodman family, particularly Vestal.

CS: For PA, of the myriad of characters you've played, is there one you feel especially close to?

PA: I think it's *Bebop Loco/Lobo*. At his poetic best.

CS: Your career encompasses not only the performing arts but your writing is marvelous. Is it more accurate to describe you as a writer?

PA: Thanks, yes. Although the Firesign Theatre is such a unique writing and performance experience that at a certain point it's hard to separate the two. We've been incredibly lucky with the amount of control we each have over our individual stuff. Good partners make all the difference.

CS: You do pretty well on your own judging by what I've read on your "Blog of the Unknown," by the way, what's going on with your novel, *Beaver Teeth*?

PA: I think *Beaverteeth* is way overwritten at the moment and I want to do some major cutting.

CS: We're going to ask the obvious question that every Firesign wants the answer to; Will FT perform again?

PA: Very unlikely. Our last show was in Seattle for Pete's memorial and that seems fitting. Live performance was never the biggest part of our lives together. Our writing and production, audio and video, remains, for me, the biggest chunk of time spent together. I think we



only did three or four genuine national tours.

CS: OK, some of our Facebook Friends have some questions, Danny Matthews: Is the Third Eye functional or decorative?

PA: It's functional, but he wears his hat down over it so it's function is impaired, at best.

CS correspondent, Kevin Jones: Are you acquainted with the BBC radio serial of Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy, and if so, is there anything in that approach to radio theatre that you find encouraging?

PA: I've never been a big Hitchhiker's

follower and know little about it. Sorry, it's one of those blank areas in my education. Like "Dr. Who."

CS: Firehead Cat Simril Ishikawa wonders why Firesign has done so many Nick Danger episodes, comparatively speaking.

PA: I think it's just because I've written so many. I can't really think of anyone else's take on the material, although surely Proc and Berg must have tried.

CS: Dear Friend, Richard Dale Carlson would like to know if "Tales of the Old Detective (And Other Big Fat Lies)" will be made available again:

PA: I'm putting those five stories together with my other stuff in a collection I'm calling "Long Stories and Short Stories," and trying to figure out about self-publishing. If anyone's got any advice for me, I'd love to have it.

Richard has another question: What did Nick have to do, what did everybody have to take off and how did Nick actually solve the case called *Cut 'em Off at the Past*?

PA: How the hell would I know? The Past could easily be considered side one of the record. That help? Their clothes, obviously. It was the Sixties.

Phil Pebcak: Name your favorite metaphor. If confidentiality is required a pseudonym may be used:

PA: She was like a metaphor in bloom, as Porky Samuelson used to say when discussing Esther Qwertuyiup.

Robert Belew: I've heard you

are an avid NASCAR fan. Ever make it over to the world's fastest half mile?

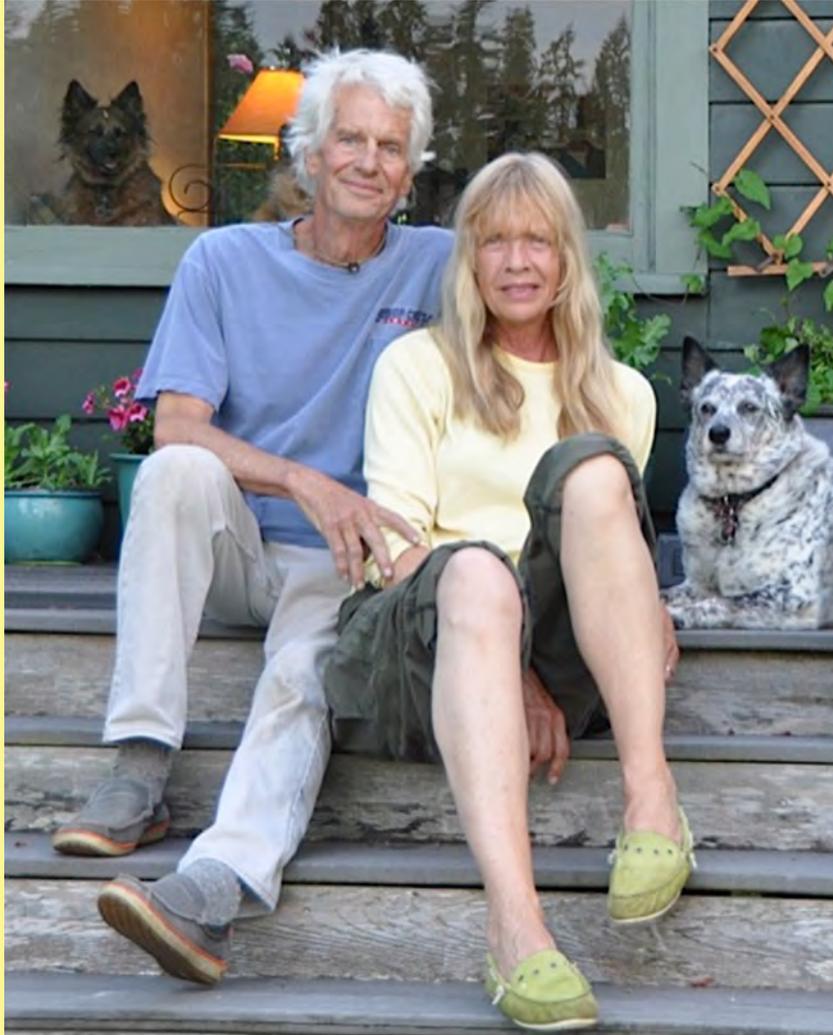
PA: I've been to Bristol, but not during a race. Friends have told me its just unbelievably loud. I'm afraid most of the fan went out of me with the death of Earnhardt, although like most older guys I hang onto loyalties to Junior and his generation, now the old people in the sport. Sunday last, I was rooting for Ryan Newman or -migod - Jeff Gordon. No matter how stupid the Chase format is, no matter how young the drivers and crews, nothing has changed with the sheer artistry of pushing what are essentially ground-hugging airplanes in circles at careful and dangerous speeds. It's the one sport I can think of where you're rooting for everyone to survive, and that means Everyone.

Richard Dale
Carlson: Who are your favorite guitar players?

PA: My absolute favorite band is Los Lobos and Cesar and David would be my first favorites as guitarists and singers. The Wolves remind me a lot of FST and they're one of the few bands where you can hear everyone listening to everyone else. And the complexity and intellectual weight of their rhythm tracks have long made me a believer in the Latin approach to music.

As songwriters and performers, I'm real fond of James McMurtry and Lucinda Williams.

Tom Biddle: How did you first meet the other three guys and how did you get your original start in radio? (Now 56, I've been a fan since I was 15!)



PA: Longish story. I had been elevated to Drama and Literature director at KPFK and our program manager at the time had instituted a pledge drive - called a Marathon. Must have been '66. David was called back -he'd moved from KPFK to ABC in Hollywood - to help with the endless on-air host and begging chores. He left to go home to kids late at night and I stayed on to interview some guy named

Bergman, who'd made a film in Germany. Several weeks later, Pete introduced us to his actor friend from Yale, the "Awesomly Mod" Proctor.

I went to an experimental grade school in Fresno for a couple of years and started reading the funny papers on the air. What station it would have been, I don't remember.

Paul C. Shugrue: Will Nick Danger and Dick Private ever get to open a bottle of capers together?

PA: Never. Their re-runs have never crossed digital paths. And those bottles are hard to open.

CS: Finally, is there anything on the horizon you'd like tell us about? Any great message or wisdom to impart upon us?

PA: Wisdom is not my strong point. I have been known to have a couple of good ideas and get a couple of laughs here and there. I

think that's more than enough. I'm a fortunate person, mostly because I had the amazing experience of falling in love with Oona. It's easily the biggest deal in my life. Turns out she likes me, too.

