

THE CHROMIUM SWITCH INTERVIEW

BILL GRIFFITH



A REAL DING-DONG DADDY

THE CREATOR OF ZIPPY THE PINHEAD (PERHAPS THE WORLD'S MOST BELOVED DADA-CLOWN SAVANT)
TALKS ABOUT HIS PROCESS, THE POETRY OF THE SEQUENTIAL PANEL COMIC STRIP,
LIFE IN THE MATERIAL WORLD, AND EVEN A LITTLE ABOUT THE FIRESIGN THEATRE.

CONTINUED...



TOMORROW: UNDERSTANDING TH' GRIFFY / ZIPPY RELATIONSHIP!

One of the great aspects of producing *Chromium Switch* is being afforded the opportunity to do features, stories and interviews with the artists whose work has most inspired and amused us. We make the assumption here at *Switch* that if the work is important to us that there's a fair chance that it means something to you as well. This shared aesthetic, whether real or perceived, gives credence to our efforts to talk to and write about the people contributing to the culture (and the gestalt) in ways that we find exciting.

Bill Griffith's career as a cartoonist, observer and graphic bodhisatva has roughly paralleled that of the Firesign Theatre. I first became aware of his work around 1969 and followed him closely



through the '70s and remained a faithful reader all the way through to the present. Griffith's most enduring (and endearing) character is the child-like Seeker-In-Polka-Dot, Zippy The

Pinhead. Zippy has managed to infiltrate the McCulture and has appeared regularly in over 200 newspapers, proving to be one of the more successful forays into the mainstream by any so-called "underground" cartoonist (or "alternative" artist of any kind for that matter).

The following is an "e-interview" conducted via The Internet wherein Mr. Griffith typed his responses to our questions.

Chromium Switch: First of all, Mr. Griffith, thank you for participating in our little exercise. Can we begin by asking if you're familiar with *The Firesign Theatre* and their work?

Bill Griffith: Of course. I think, especially in the early underground days, I was mining similar veins as were The Firesign people. Most of the cartoonists I knew and worked with in the 1970s were fans.

Certainly one of the striking similarities in both your work and the Firesign canon is the obvious love of wordplay. Few artists have explored the "surreality" of words

and used them as a creative device as effectively. Do you "write" your cartoons and then devise images to juxtapose against the written word, or do you see the graphic element and develop dialog based on the visual?

I usually start with images—I pencil the characters in a panel-to-panel flow that feels right to me and then let that visual "narrative" suggest the dialog and the subject or theme of the strip—unless I decide beforehand that this will be a strip "about" something in particular, like a news event or social phenomenon. Once I've created a "set-up" in the first panel, the remaining two to three panels will grow out of it, though not necessarily in a linear fashion. I try to do minimal editing at this stage—to see what will happen. But once I've looked it over a few times, changes will often be made. What may appear to be "non sequiturs" are far from that to me. It's more like I'm working inside an alternative logic system, with rules of its own. I try hard to listen to some mysterious inner voice—I've

learned to trust the strip to tell me where it wants to go.

Zippy loves to play with language, almost like a musician with his instrument, riffing and improvising. I try to compose my word balloons as a kind of poetry, attuned as much to the rhythm and color of the words as to their meaning. A syllable in the wrong place can render a "joke" less funny.

Another similarity I see in your work with that of the FT is your refusal to "play down" to your audience. Having worked in the newspaper industry myself, I'm sure your cerebral, and delightfully bizarre, sense of humor has made it challenging to get your work past editors who fear their readers "won't get it". At what point did you decide to choose "art over gold", as it were?

I always go with my instincts, which have been remarkably and consistently uncommercial over the last 40 years. I make comics to please myself and a handful of people I know—and, thankfully, just enough readers to pay the bills. Email has put me in direct—and immediate—daily contact with people who seem to appreciate what I do, for which I am grateful. I always assume that my strips appeal only to a small (and incredibly intelligent and sophisticated), "cult" audience—and I'm happy with that.

I've been amazingly lucky with editors over the years. Papers that pick up Zippy usually know they're getting something weird—if they don't, I'm out of there quick. But I've never been "edited", not by newspaper editors or the people at my syndicate, King Features. My strip is too odd—and too uncommercial—for any editor to want to tinker with it.

Fans of comic art and its history can't help but be grateful for your contributions to the form. Your lineage (working with Art Spiegelman and Jay Kinney and in such illustrious forums as Arcade, Screw, East Village Other, Berkeley Barb, etc.) is truly staggering. Where do you see yourself in the Grand Cultural Icon Universe?

My ego isn't bloated enough to presume an answer to just where I stand in the comics pantheon. I've been careful to make sure all my work is published on book stock in one form or another—collections, anthologies, etc.—so that, years from now, it'll be available to future generations (Digital is ephemeral. Paper is archival.). Right now, I'm putting together a 300+ page collection of almost all of my underground work, from 1970 to 1994. It's funny—to readers who knew my stuff from the early days, I'll always be an "underground cartoonist".

And to readers who only know my Zippy strip in mainstream newspapers, I'm in the same boat as the guy who does Funky Winkerbean.

Although you are certainly appreciated for your trademark esoteric work, you've found success in the more conventional world of illustration and cartooning as well. Is there a difference in your approach to a Zippy strip and an assignment from say, the New York Times?

Whenever I get a "commercial" job, like an illustration, a CD cover, etc., the "client" is asking for me because they like my comics—usually because they like Zippy. So I don't have to bend much to do something they'll be happy with. If I had to depend on non-comics work to make a living, I don't know what that would be like. I've been incredibly

lucky to have been able to support myself primarily with work I care about.

When I was at art school in the early Sixties, I always pictured an artist's life for myself—working on what matters to me in my lonely garrett, squeaking by on the occasional sale and gallery show. Well, it happened with comics instead of oil paintings, but that's pretty much the life I've led.

It's hard for me to read Zippy without feeling a bit voyeuristic. There seems to be an ongoing internal dialog going on (particularly between Zippy and Griffy), and I must confess, that aspect of the strip is really appealing to me. Are you conscious of The Quest being shared between you and your readers? I mean, it does seem as though you're trying to come to terms with the same basically absurd existence that many of the rest of us are. Is that something you think about?

Zippy and Griffy are two parts of the divided self that is me—and a lot of other people are built the same way, it turns out. Zippy is un-self censoring and open. Griffy is critical and cranky. I'm probably more Griffy than Zippy, but Zippy is a very big part of me. I know he's the part of me that writes most of my dialog. And, yes, I'm always trying to be funny. With few exceptions, Zippy strips are meant to provoke a laugh, to be entertaining. I'm looking for the "shock of recognition" response in my readers—the moment when they sense that, despite Zippy's "otherness", he's really very human and recognizable. Insert laugh track here.

Am I wrong in detecting a move to include Zippy's "family" in the strip more often? Is there less of that "internal" dialog happening these days? Is Zippy

becoming more well-adjusted? Are you?

A couple of years ago, I expanded Zippy's territory to include the place of his birth, "Dingburg", the city inhabited entirely by pinheads. The town's motto is, "Going too far is half the pleasure of not getting anywhere." I kind of reinvented the strip in late 2007, giving Zippy a whole world of fellow pinheads to interact with. In many cases, Zippy is not even in the Dingburg strips---the town's inhabitants have taken over. I've also done a lot more with Zippy's nuclear family, especially his occasional wife, Zerbina, and Zippy's childhood self, "Little Zippy". I guess, in a sense, this "explaining" of who Zippy is and the forces that helped mold him makes him seem more "well-adjusted". But well-adjusted to what? To a world where everyone has a fractured attention span and thrives on overdoses of polysorbate 80 and Valvoline?

You've lived a large portion of your life with your characters now. Obviously, Zippy, Mr. Toad and The Gang are extensions of yourself, but do you see them as their own entities?

When I dream of Zippy, which is rare, he appears as a 2-D drawing on paper, in color, but he moves as if animated. I wish I could remember how his voice sounds, but I can't. I'd hope for a cross between Raymond Burr and Julia Child. I do hear the "voices" of my characters in my head on a regular basis. Mr. Toad scares the shit out of me.

Is there something you've always wanted to have Zippy do/encounter that you've been reluctant to explore?

Yes. The next unpredictable thing he does.

I guess, logically, the next question would be, is there anything you would never do with Zippy?

I'd never have him be totally rational---except on those rare occasions where he's afraid of something. In a scene from the never-to-be-produced Zippy movie, he's trapped in a block-long L.A. car wash and has a nervous breakdown. The cure: a "My Mother The Car" TV marathon.

Finally, we have to ask... is there a favorite Firesign Theatre album or bit? If you had a choice, is there a Firesign storyline you'd like to illustrate?

"Everything You Know Is Wrong" was a hit with me, especially the New Age parody stuff. I've always thought the only valid reason for being a New Ager is to provide material for the nearest satirist.

Bill Griffith's latest book is, "Ding Dong Daddy From Dingburg", available at zippythepinhead.com

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