



THE CHROMIUM SWITCH INTERVIEW

JOEL HODGSON

CREATOR OF MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000

HAS THE FARCE WITH HIM

(AND A LITTLE FIRESIGN THEATRE IN HIS SOUL)

BY TOM GEDWILLO & PHIL FOUNTAIN

Joel Hodgson is the creator of *Mystery Science Theater 3000 (MST3K)*, the award-winning television show which began in 1988. It continued for eleven years and almost 200 episodes. From the early days on KTMA, a Minneapolis-St. Paul UHF station (now WUCW) through the final season on the Sci-Fi Channel, MST3K topped every “cult show” list over the years. The program won a Peabody Award in 1993 and was nominated in 1994 and 1995 for a Prime-time Emmy Award.

Cast:

JH = Joel Hodgson
PF = Phil Fountain
TG = Tom Gedwillo

TG: Mr. Hodgson, thank you kindly for answering a few questions for our readers. What do you recall about hearing a Firesign Theatre album for the first time?

JH: It was “Nick Danger” – and I just heard a little piece of it, but that was all you really need. I bet it was probably on the alternative FM channel in Green Bay, WIXX, around 1976.

Also, I was in a “one act play” competition in the “bay area” and some really smart and funny kids from West High school did a selection from “the Tale of the Giant Rat of Sumatra” – incredible.



TG: You took a “Theatre of the Absurd” class in college. That seemed to be the foundation for your comedy, like Firesign’s improvisation or stream of consciousness style.

JH: My Theatre of the Absurd class taught me how to use the natural tension of performing and forced me to be deal with being myself in front of others and faucet (sorry) – It was a “feeling” more than anything that I got from performing absurd pieces that I was then able to carry into my stand up. Also, Theatre of the Absurd seems to have a great little “can’t fail” device built into it. For instance: someone would have to be a real jerk to say what you’re doing isn’t absurd so it’s very hard to criticize (unless you’re so old and stupid). It took the stress off me in a good way at the time when I was just starting to perform and needed it most. On that same note, and around the same time: my junior year in college, I had started listening to “Just Folks” and I loved it so. “Good grief: a stiff idiot is the worst kind”

Also within Firesign, I found another sort of “can’t fail” device: because simply, there wasn’t the usual emphasis on the “punchline” at the end of it all – the funny was in the approach, and the way it changed, and coming upon something

you could never expect --the whole thing was bundled up in this package of invention AND comedy. I don't know: Firesign Theater was way funnier than any punchline I've ever heard. Jeepers! So I tried to use that too, I never really told any jokes, never felt comfortable with that and still don't sir. I just tried to present ideas and things in a style I thought people needed or wanted to see, and I thought could be funny. It worked.

TG: Your career began as a performing artist (comic/magician) and expanded into television. The Firesign Theatre began in radio on the FM dial. Was live radio an outlet you considered as a performing artist, though you were more visual?

JH: Let's just say it's a dream of mine. In England, they use radio so much more than here in these United States, the best comedy writers all get started in radio, even now it's so much cheaper and faster at realizing an idea. It baffles me that there hasn't been a more vital market for comedy on the radio in the US. You get the feeling it's the same reason there are no streetcars in Los Angeles anymore, and not to be cryptic but -- Shoes for Industry.

TG: In the first season of MST3K (on KTMA-TV), we hear "Boy, he's no fun, he fell right over!" You would often reference a Firesign Theatre line during the show. Was that scripted or just an ad-lib?

JH: Everything on KTMA was ad libbed: we didn't have time to watch the movies prior, so we just sort of winged it --and I loved dropping Firesign Theatre references when ever possible. Once we landed an order from the Comedy Channel for the show I insisted that we start writing it, so I'm the one who put the kibosh on improvising on camera, but as you noticed, the Firesign quotes remained.

TG: Many of the Firesign quotes you used during the movie riffs were voiced by the characters Servo and Crow. Were Trace, Josh and Kevin also fans of Firesign?

JH: I don't think Firesign was in Josh's wheelhouse at that time, he was just seventeen (you know what I mean). Trace has quite a deep lexicon of comedy and is a Nick Danger Man: at your cervix. Later, I

remember first noticing Kevin Murphy doing a riff on "Dead Cat Soap" in the writing room, so after that we were kindred spirits when it came to things Firesign. Conceptually, we tried to fan the Firesign references to the bots because they were supposed to be learning about the world from absorbing the world's media, the robots handled more of the non-sequiters: it fit their beaks a bit better than mine.

PF: Did you ever see the Firesign video, "Hot Shorts"? They replaced dialog on some old Grade D movie shorts with their voice-overs as opposed to the running commentary you used so effectively. Did you ever consider that technique for MST3K?



JH: I have heard about it, but unfortunately, never saw it -- I'm sure it would blow my ever-loving mind. Obviously, along those lines, I'd seen "What's up Tiger Lilly" which was in heavy rotation on the art house circuit when I was in college. Also, while I was in college was a group called "the L.A. Connection" that had a syndicated TV show where they would re-voice old movies. Interesting note about the LA Connection: they were funny, but they didn't do anything conceptually to explain WHY they were re-voicing these films. It bothered me. I think it made me work harder when I was first tinkering with the idea of movie riffing to curve the MST3K universe so it justified why we were forced to watch these cheesy movies and then had to riff on them.

TG: In the early 1980's when you moved to L.A. you began a very creative phase, performing often at the Comedy Store and the Hollywood Magic Castle. You also made ap-

pearances on Letterman and SNL and HBO. What are some memories from those days?

JH: That time in LA was when I drank the deepest from the Firesign Theater cup: I had a roommate who couldn't make rent on a pretty consistent basis so he paid me in NRBQ, Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers AND Firesign Theater Albums: "Don't Crush The Dwarf" "Bozos on this Bus" "Just Folks, a Firesign Chat" "In the Next World you're on your own" and "Everything you know is Wrong" plus David Ossman's "How Time Flies" -- your basic bozonanza. Just so you know how deep this goes, I even pieced together the little cutout album liner diorama featuring Mark Time swinging over Panoramaland 2000 from "How Time Flies" and everything.

TG: How did you come about designing The Bots for MST3K? There must have been several versions.

JH: After doing my stand-up I returned to Minneapolis and was sort of in the wilderness creatively for a year or two, so I dabbled in toy design, some art/craft projects, and creating and selling comedy/magic style props for other performers. I also started making these robots out of found objects. I was inspired by a documentary on Star Wars where they introduced the concept of "kit bashing" which is basically using model kit pieces to make completely

different models. It's how they made the various space ships for the original movie. Also around the same time I saw a Picasso retrospective show at the Walker Art Gallery, there in Minneapolis, and noticed one of his three dimensional sculptures of a Baboon whose head was a metal toy truck -- so I think those two bits were the reference points for the bots. I had found a nearly endless supply of plastic items at the Salvation Army store, and started using that to make robot sculptures. There was a store in Calhoun Square called "Props" that would buy them from me, and over the course of a year probably purchased about 30 to 50 of my robot pieces. I also would make them for friends -- If you are able to find a copy of Gary Shandling's first show "It's Gary Shandling's Show", Gary put one of my robots onto the set of his front room on the show -- this is before MST3K. So, basically, a few days before we shot the MST3K pilot, I built the sets and all the props for the pilot

but I waited until the end to make the robots because I had some experience with that – long story short: I ran out of time, and basically pulled an all nighter to finish the robots. I made Gypsy, then Crow T Robot, and the last one, which I now admit was a pretty lazy concept for a robot, was called “Beeper” and was supposed to be a baby robot. After the pilot, it was really clear that “Beeper” wasn’t working, so I went back down to the basement and popped on a gumball machine, and he became “Servo” and later, through the help of Josh Weinstein became “Tom Servo”. Those puppets remained that way through the 22 shows at TV23, The UHF channel in Minneapolis were the whole thing started. Then once we got money from the Comedy Channel to do a brace of new shows I took the time to redesign and rebuild Gypsy and Tom Servo – different paint, but many of the original parts. Trace, who’s a far better builder than I, was already starting to modifying Crow t. to the form we see him now.

TG: How satisfying is it to return to the genesis of MST3K and work again with former cast members on the new Cinematic Titanic? I’ve already collected all your DVD releases!

JH: Thanks you for your patronage – I am so fortunate to take another run at movie riffing with the people who helped me start it all, I feel like I’m making up for a lot of lost time. Movie riffing live is probably the most fun performing I’ve ever had.

TG: Now the “desert-island” question. What Firesign Theatre album(s) would be “must haves” in your collection?

JH: I think “Just Folks” is still my favorite, “retract your ballpoints guys, I’m in love again”. “I Think we’re all Bozos on this Bus” is conceptually great, and think it would maybe make the best movie. “I lay the asphalt” “Don’t Crush that Dwarf” is

a tour de force production wise and I can’t believe it when I hear the theme song for “Porgy Tirebiter” sung like the Andrew Sisters. Imagine, on a audio recording someone saying “All right, try to stay on camera everybody”, it can’t help but space the mind. Also, the cover for “In the next world you’re on your own” is probably my favorite visual representation of the world of Firesign theater – I don’t know about you, but that’s sort of what I see when I’m listening to them “it’s the worst street in town it’s so bad”. And “Everything you know is Wrong” the single greatest title of anything that was ever created – “your forefathers took drugs!”



TG: Is there anything else you’d like to say about the Firesign Theatre and their influence on your comedy career?

JH: Firesign Theaters influence on me has been very important-- I think it’s because they actually broke apart the formula for comedy and reinvented it to themselves, and then were able to realize such a gigantic world for themselves -- It’s Epic, or at least Columbia. As I mentioned earlier, I especially like it that there is so little dependence on the usual three beat joke with the punchline at the end – this pixelates me in a good-God way. It’s just my opinion but I think that’s what makes it hum so nice: no stress on the traditional punch line with much more emphasis about the accents and punctuation and journey of it all -- there’s so much pleasure in it. Firesign Theater comes at you guns a

blazin’, comes at you at so many different levels, come at you with so many lovely little things: it’s mathamagical! Firesign Theater’s direct influence on MST3K: They are legion.

Number 1: I love the names they give their characters and places and things – some are high concept like “Communist Martyr High” and “the TransBonzoMultiMe-gaStructure” and some seem to be cafeteria style cast off ideas that phonetically may just feel good coming out of the mouth “Happy Harry Cox”, “Nino the Mind Boggler” and “Steve Shallow: Student” to name but a few. I tried to emulate that same sense/mood with the names I gave characters, places, and things in MST3K: Deep Thirteen, Gizmonic Institute (of Naive Science), Tom Servo, Gypsy, Crow T. Robot, TV’s Frank, and Movie Sign.

Number 2: I figured out how to do female voices from listening to Firesign Theatre . Just say “Porgy’s up helping Porcelain make the bed” about twenty times and you’ve got it.

Number 3: There is a great presumption they give the work and the audience – this is probably the most important thing to me - It all hits the ground running, and there was no “hand holding” for the listener. That’s the way I wanted MST3K to be. With each Firesign Theater record the train is leaving the station and you had better be on it or you would surely miss your ride. Seriously, could a Mystery Science Theater 3000 be born into a world that first didn’t have a “Mutt and Smutt’s heli-dock” and a “Martian Space Party”? I strenuously doubt it.

Number 4: My car is called “Wholeflaffer.”

TG & PF: Thank you, Joel, for sharing your thoughts and your affinity for all things Firesign!