



The Making Of  
**MARTIAN SPACE PARTY**  
With Filmmaker/Producer  
**Steve Gillmor**

**FIREZINE: HOW DID YOU FIRST MEET THE GUYS?**

**STEVE GILLMOR:** Actually I first met the guys on record, as did we all. I was doing a radio show in Boston, at Brandeis University, where we were starting to pioneer underground radio. We were playing The Firesign Theatre a lot. I was an enormous fan. After I left Brandeis I went out to California Institute of the Arts, their film school. At the same time I was also doing a radio show on KPFK. The person in the next slot, after me, was David Ossman. I knew who he was, and was just thrilled to get a chance to meet him. This was in probably '71. I started attending afternoons at his house, just sort of hanging out with him, drinking in from the great... you know. Part of my agreement with Cal Arts was that I was an assistant in video and film. I was the TA for Nam June Paik, the well known video artist. Nam June had obtained the first 5 Sony black and white Port-a-pacs, that had come into this country. So I took it upon myself to abscond with these units and give them to all the people in my class. And as one project we went up to Phil Austin's house and video taped a writing session, I believe for "Bozos".

I was at a recording session of "Bozos" where they were doing some crowd stuff. I believe that I'm in the background of one of those crowd scenes, maybe the President's ride or something, but I don't think even I knew the group so much as David at that point.

In any case, I began to make suggestions to the group, that perhaps we could do something on film. We had a meeting at one point where David and I had discussed this plan of shooting a live performance that was being done at KPFK for a pseudo documentary on The Martian Space Party convention. The group was excited about that and it went from there.

**FZ: COLUMBIA FUNDED THAT PROJECT THEN?**

**SG:** The terms of Firesign's recording contract funded the recording part of that. And there was an additional \$5,000 that Columbia fronted to us for the actual production of the film, which was obviously a very small amount of money. But because of the way we blocked and were very careful about our budget and various considerations, we got a very high quality feel and look. And of course the soundtrack probably would have cost \$20 - 30,000 in the real world. As you know the Firesign Theatre is a state of mind and how that sort of extends out via their audio sweetening, I think, lends enormous production value to the finished product. The whole show was filmed with the exception of some camera breaks. There was material that we knew in advance that we weren't going to concentrate on. We were only making what we thought was going to be a half hour film. The entire concert was of course recorded on two 16 track machines in a Columbia Records truck. The whole thing is on audio, assuming that they haven't wiped the archives.

**FZ: DID YOU DO ANY SECOND SHOTS AT ALL OR WAS IT ALL DONE AT THE SHOW?**

**SG:** No, it was all done at the show. We filmed it before a live audience, but the filming was carefully scripted and blocked so that we covered some camera changes with certain material that isn't in the movie. Some of the "Anything You Want To" stuff was covered by camera changes, but we did sweeten the soundtrack. It was quite a long session as a matter of fact at Columbia Studios, a few days later, which was really a terrific session where the group added a lot of their famous sound effects, and echos. Really the audience took on an enormously different character as a result of the animals and beings that were added to the soundtrack. I think it was really almost a recording in itself. It was fascinating.

**FZ: YOU DID SOME STUDIO SHOTS OF THE LITTLE MODELS AND SUCH, DIDN'T YOU?**

**SG:** The cover of the video tape release of "Martian Space Party" has a long shot of what is referred to as Monster Island in the film. In fact that's the late great, probably still in Phil Proctor's basement somewhere, mythical city of Fudd, which was the cut-outs and monsters and various kinds of small objects. In those days, and probably still, the writing sessions were taken up by various people, mostly Proctor, sitting there and assembling these models, and they would go into Fudd. Fudd was residing in Phil Austin's house, in Mixville. We shot the climatic scenes of Glutamoto's escape, or demise, or whatever happened, on his porch.

I filmed the actual Apollo 16, which had just taken off and there's footage I illegally recorded off of television at the time with a film camera of that launch, which is included. We used whatever we had, what was available to us at the time. It was a lot of fun doing that. The out-takes from that would make a new movie in and of itself.

**FZ: DID COLUMBIA HAVE AN INTEREST IN PUTTING IT OUT AS AN ALBUM?**

**SG:** There was never any discussion of that, that I was aware of. I do know that the group subsequently went in and started to develop some of that material and take some of the tracks from the recording and sweeten them, and some of that exists on the "Not Insane" album. I wasn't really involved in that. There are some things you can hear on the "Not Insane" record that have an audience in the background that are clearly from that but they also did some recording subsequently. We didn't film any of that, nor was it included. What you see in the film is precisely, I guess you could call it, location shooting on Monster Island, and some of the exteriors were filmed at Phil Austin's MGM studios, whatever you want to call it. Ha, ha, ha. If you want to pretty it up. But other than that it was strictly the 3 camera shoot, and some sweetening. It was shot on 16 mm and for the New Line release it was blown up to 35.

The editing process was really fascinating. We cut it on a flatbed that I rented from Michael Wadleigh, who had just finished the editing of "Woodstock" and he had about 10 of these. The editing process was really a lot of fun and I know that the group had a good time. At the end of the editing, when we were all done - and it happened rather rapidly, over a several week period - the group presented me a book Paulen Kael had written in conjunction with the screenplay of Citizen Kane. It was a book about Orson Welles and I thought that that was very nice of them to kind of pigeonhole me as doing my first good movie and of course disappearing into oblivion as Orson did. At the time I was quite honored and have never made any movies quite like that one since. So perhaps I was doomed by that association but I do know that David reveres Orson Welles by the evidence of his naming of his son.

It was a really wonderful time and the group I don't think was ever happier in terms of their expectations and their view towards the future, at that point. "Bozos" had just come out to great reviews and they were at the height of their powers. It was really a magical time and I was honored and, obviously, very excited to be involved in it.

**FZ: HAD YOU ANY OTHER PLANS TO DO ANYTHING IN THE FUTURE OR WAS THIS A ONE-SHOT DEAL?**

**SG:** We had talked about moving forward with the whole group in doing a feature product. There was some discussion about a project that they had done some writing work on, called "The Big Suitcase". They had been working on that with another producer who had unfortunately died in an accident in Hawaii. So we were talking about seeing whether that would happen again. The plans were being discussed again after the conclusion of "Martian Space Party", and while it was being shown to Columbia. There was a screening at the Directors Guild and I took it back east and there was a concert at Towne Hall in NY, which was a combination of a number of things, including some performances by John Simon, a great Firesign friend and producer of "The Band" and other great records. John was the producer of the music for the "TV Or Not TV" film, as a matter of fact. So John performed there and the film was played before the audience and again then broadcast live, the soundtrack of the film, over the Pacifica networks. There was this kind of synergy going on there.

I then took it up to Boston, where I told you I had gone to school, and gave it to the Orson Welles Cinema in Boston to show. They had shown a student film that I had made at Brandeis in competition that had won some sort of prize so I was basically coming back to them saying, "Well if you liked that, here's a real one." And they liked it and asked if they could show it. Through that engagement, Robert Shaye, who was the president of New Line Cinema, called me up one day and said that he'd seen the film at the Orson Welles Cinema, and would very much like to be able to release it as a companion piece to "Reefer Madness", that they were showing at that time. So we made a deal with them and it became, I think, at the time and probably still is one of the best selling, grossing, short films. It was seen all over the country and did very well.

**FZ: HOW LONG WAS IT IN RELEASE?**

**SG:** Years. Subsequent to the making of the "TV or Not TV" record, Phil and Peter and I did a film version of that, and that was paired with "Martian Space Party" and a film that Peter had been the producer of and the star, "Love Is Hard To Get", which Anton Green had directed, and that went out as "Firesign Funnies", in a package. At that time the film was blown up to 35 mm and distributed in that form and extended its release by another couple of years. The 35 print I supervised the blow-up of, using some, at the time, very new technology called "liquid gate"

technology and so it really looks like a million bucks. Luckily so, because through the magic of divorce and mis-deeds, the original negative may be out there; for anybody who's reading this, if you know of it let us know. I was able to get a hold of a couple of 35 prints, transfer that to tape and do a bunch of editing to try to pull the best for restoring it. And that's what you see on the video tape.

**FZ: YOU PERSONALLY SUPERVISED THAT THEN?**

**SG:** Yes. Earlier last year, in '96, I received a call from Richard Fish who was very apologetic and indicated that he was about to release a version of the film until he discovered that I knew nothing about it. He was wondering if it was OK and I said, "No, it's not OK, because I doubt if you have a very good copy of it." Indeed someone had gotten a very poor quality dub of it, that was very difficult to hear. To my mind, that is destroying much more than 50% of the film. So at that point I told Richard what New Line had sent me. Bob Shaye, several years ago, was in the process of having New Line bought up by Turner Films, I believe, and at the time was interested in making sure that I got a hold of what they had left. He shipped that down to me a few years ago and it just sort of sat here because I had no idea that there was any interest.

Apparently it's doing quite well for Lodestone. It was really a trip to crack that open and take a look at it after 20 years or so. My feeling, and I know I've talked with most of the guys about it, it really is a funny film, even now. In particular, everybody is terrific in that.

**BACK**