

Sounding Out! *pushing sound studies into the red since 2009*

**November 27, 2017**

- by jbraddoc
- in Article, Music, Performance, Radio, Radio Art Reflections, Recording, Rock Canon, Sampling and Remix Culture, Sound, Sound and Pleasure, Sound Studies
- Leave a comment

## The Firesign Theatre's Wax Poetics: Overdub, Dissonance, and Narrative in the Age of Nixon



The Firesign Theatre are the only group that can claim among its devoted fans both Thom Yorke and John Ashbery; who have an album in the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress and also coined a phrase now used as a slogan by freeform giant WFMU; and whose albums were widely distributed by tape among U.S. soldiers in Vietnam, and then sampled by the most selective classic hip hop DJs, from Steinski and DJ Premier to J Dilla and Madlib.

Formed in 1966, they began their career improvising on Los Angeles's Pacifica station KPFK, and went on to work in numerous media formats over their four-decade career. They are best known for a series of nine albums made for Columbia Records, records that remain unparalleled for their density, complexity, and sonic range. Realizing in an astonishing way the implications of the long playing record and the multi-track recording studio, the Firesign Theatre's Columbia albums offer unusually fertile ground for bringing techniques of literary analysis to bear upon the fields of sound and media studies (and vice versa). This is a strategy that aims to reveal the forms of political consciousness that crafted the records, as well as the

politics of the once-common listening practices binding together the disparate audiences I have just named. It is no accident that the associative and referential politics of the sample in “golden age” hip hop would have recognized a similar politics of reference and association in Firesign Theatre’s sound work, in particular in the group’s pioneering use of language, time, and space.



The Firesign Theatre (wall of cables): John Rose, Image courtesy of author

The Firesign Theatre is typically understood as a comedy act from the era of “head music” — elaborate album-oriented sounds that solicited concerted, often collective and repeated, listening typically under the influence of drugs. But it may be better to understand their work as attempting to devise a future for literary writing that would be unbound from the printed page and engaged with the emergent recording technologies of the day. In this way, they may have crafted a practice more radical, but less recognizable, than that of poets —such as Allen Ginsberg or David Antin, both of whose work Firesign read on the air — who were also experimenting with writing on tape during these years (see Michael Davidson’s *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* ([https://www.amazon.com/Ghostlier-Demarcations-Modern-Poetry-Material/dp/0520207394/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1511756665&sr=8-1&keywords=Ghostlier+Demarcations%3A+Modern+Poetry+and+the+Material+Word](https://www.amazon.com/Ghostlier-Demarcations-Modern-Poetry-Material/dp/0520207394/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1511756665&sr=8-1&keywords=Ghostlier+Demarcations%3A+Modern+Poetry+and+the+Material+Word)), in particular 196-224). Because their work circulated almost exclusively on vinyl (secondarily on tape), it encouraged a kind of reading (in the strictest sense) with the ears; the fact that their work was distributed through the networks of popular music may also have implications for the way we understand past communities of music listeners as well.

The period of Firesign’s contract (1967-1975) with the world’s largest record company parallels exactly the recording industry’s relocation from New York to Los Angeles, the development of multitrack studios which made the overdub the dominant technique for recording pop music, and the rise of the LP as a medium in its own right, a format that rewarded, and in Firesign’s case required, repeated listening. These were all factors the Firesign Theatre uniquely exploited. Giving attention to the musicality of the group’s work, Jacob Smith has shown (in an excellent short discussion in *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* (<https://www.amazon.com/Spoken-Word-American-Phonograph-Cultures/dp/0520267044>

/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1511756768&sr=1-1&

keywords=Spoken+Word%3A+Postwar+American+Phonograph+Cultures) that is to date the only academic study of Firesign) how the group's attention to the expansion of television, and in particular the new practice of channel-surfing, provided both a thematic and a formal focus for the group's work: "Firesign [...] uses channel surfing as the sonic equivalent of parallel editing, a kind of horizontal or melodic layering in which different themes are woven in and out of prominence until they finally merge. Firesign also adds vertical layers to the narrative in a manner analogous to musical harmony or multiple planes of cinematic superimposition" (181). But more remains to be said not only about the effect of the Firesign Theatre's work, but about its carefully wrought semantics, in particular the way the "horizontal" and "vertical" layers that Smith identifies were used as ways of revealing the mutually implicated regimes of politics, culture, and media in the Vietnam era — at the very moment when the explosion of those media was otherwise working to disassociate those fields.

Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me The Pliers ~ The Fire...



The group's third album, *Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me the Pliers* is typically understood as their first extended meditation on the cultural phenomenology of television. Throughout the record, though there is much else going on, two pastiches of 1950s genre movies (*High School Madness* and a war film called *Parallel Hell!*) stream intermittently, as if through a single channel-surfing television set. The films coincide in two superimposed courtroom scenes that include all the principal characters from both films. By interpenetrating the school and the war, the record names without naming the killing of four students at Kent State and two students at Jackson State University, two events that occurred eleven days apart in May 1970 while the group was writing and recording in Los Angeles. Until this point rationalized by the framing fiction of a principal character watching both films on television, the interpenetration of the narratives is resolvable within the album's diegesis—the master plot that accounts for and rationalizes every discrete gesture and event—only as a representation of that character's having fallen asleep and dreaming the films together, a narrative sleight of hand that would testify to the group's comprehension of literary modernism and the avant-garde.

The question of what may "cause" the interpenetration of the films is of interest, but the Firesign Theatre did not always require justification to elicit the most outrageous representational shifts of space (as well as of medium and persona). What is of more interest is the way rationalized space — the space implied by the "audioposition" of classic radio drama, as theorized by Neil Verma in *Theater of the Mind* ([https://www.amazon.com/Theater-Mind-Imagination-Aesthetics-American/dp/0226853519/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1511756918&sr=1-1&keywords=neil+verma](https://www.amazon.com/Theater-Mind-Imagination-Aesthetics-American/dp/0226853519/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1511756918&sr=1-1&keywords=neil+verma))— could be de-emphasized or even abandoned in favor of what might instead be called analytic space, an aural fiction in

which the institutions of war and school can be understood as simultaneous and coterminous, and which more broadly represents the political corruptions of the Nixon administration by means of formal and generic corruption that is the hallmark of the Firesign Theatre's approach to media (35-38).

While the techniques that produce this analytic soundscape bear some resemblance to what Verma terms the "kaleidosonic style" pioneered by radio producer Norman Corwin (<https://soundstudiesblog.com/category/tune-in-to-the-past/>) in the 1940s — in which the listener is moved "from place to place, experiencing shallow scenes as if from a series of fixed apertures" — even this very brief sketch indicates how radically the Firesign Theatre explored, deepened, and multiplied Corwin's techniques in order to stage a more politically diagnostic and implicative mode of cultural interpretation. Firesign's spaces, which are often of great depth, are rarely traversed arbitrarily; they are more typically experienced either in a relatively seamless flow (perspective and location shifting by means of an associative, critical or analytical, logic that the listener may discover), or are instead subsumed within regimes of media (a radio broadcast within a feature film which is broadcast on a television that is being watched by the primary character on the record album to which you are listening). According to either strategy the medium may be understood to be the message, but that message is one whose horizon is as critical as it is aesthetic.



Firesign Theatre (pickup truck): John Rose, Image courtesy of author

The creation of what I am terming an analytic space was directly abetted by the technological advancement of recording studios, which underwent a period of profound transformation during the years of their Columbia contract, which spanned the year of The Beatles's *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (arguably the world's first concept album, recorded on four tracks) to Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* (arguably that band's fourth concept album, recorded on 24 tracks). Pop music had for years availed itself of the possibilities of recording vocals and solos separately, or doubly, but the dominant convention was for such recordings to support the imagined conceit of a song being performed live. As studios' technological advances increased the possibilities for multitracking, overdubbing, and mixing, pop recordings such as *Sgt. Pepper* and the Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (1966) became more self-evidently untethered from the event of a live performance, actual or simulated. In the place of the long-dominant conceit of a recording's indexical



relation to a particular moment in time, pop music after the late 60s came increasingly to define and inhabit new conceptions of space, and especially time. Thus, when in 1970 Robert Christgau asserted that the Firesign Theatre “uses the recording studio at least as brilliantly as any rock group” (and awarding a very rare A+), he was remarking the degree to which distortions and experiments with time and space were if anything more radically available to narrative forms than they were to music.

The overdub made possible much more than the simple multiplication and manipulation of aural elements, it also added depth and richness to the soundfield. New possibilities of mixing, layering, and editing also revealed that the narrative representation of time, as well as spatial element I’ve just described, could be substantially reworked and given thematic meaning. In one knowing example, on 1969’s *How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You’re Not Anywhere at All*, an accident with a time machine results in the duplication of each of the narrative’s major characters, who then fight or drink with each other.

### Firesign Theater - How Can You Be in Two Places at O...



This crisis of the unities is only averted when a pastiche of Franklin Delano Roosevelt interrupts the record’s fictional broadcast, announcing the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and his decision to surrender to Japan. On a record released the year the United States began secret bombing in Cambodia, it is not only the phenomenological, but also the social and political, implications of this kind of technologically mediated writing that are striking: the overdub enables the formal representation of “duplicity” itself, with the gesture of surrender ironically but pointedly offered as the resolution to the present crisis in Southeast Asia.

To take seriously the Firesign Theatre’s experiments with medium, sound, and language may be a way of reviving techniques of writing — as well as recording, and of listening — that have surprisingly eroded, even as technological advances (cheaper microphones, modeling software, and programs from Audacity and Garage Band to Pro Tools and Ableton Live) have taken the conditions of production out of the exclusive purview of the major recording studios. In two recent essays in *RadioDoc Review* called “The Arts of Amnesia: The Case for Audio Drama Part One” (<http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol3/iss1/5/>) and “Part Two,” (<http://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol3/iss1/6/>) Verma has surveyed the recent proliferation of audio drama in the field of podcasting, and urged artists to explore more deeply the practices and traditions of the past, fearing that contemporary aversion to “radio drama” risks “fall[ing] into a determinism that misses cross-fertilization and common experiment” (Part Two, 4). Meanwhile, Chris Hoff and Sam Harnett’s live performances from their excellent World According to Sound podcast are newly instantiating a form of collective and immersive listening that bears a resemblance to the practices that were dominant among Firesign Theatre listeners in the 1960s and 70s; this fall they are hosting listening events for Firesign records in San Francisco.

It is tempting to hope for a wider range of experimentation in the field of audio in the decade to come, one that either critically exploits or supersedes the hegemony of individualized listening emblemized by podcast apps and noise-cancelling



The Firesign Theatre (mixing board): Bob & Robin Preston, Image courtesy of author

headphones. But if the audio field instead remains governed by information-oriented podcasts, leavened by a subfield of relatively classical dramas like the very good first season of *Homecoming*, a return to the Firesign Theatre's work can have methodological, historical, and theoretical value because it could help reveal how the experience of recorded sound had an altogether different political inflection in an earlier era. Thinking back to the remarkably heterogeneous set of Firesign Theatre fans with which I began, it is hard not to observe that the dominant era of the sample in hip hop is one where it was not the Walkman but the jambox — with its politics of contesting a shared social space through collective listening — was the primary apparatus of playback. However unwished-for, this determinist line of technological thinking would clarify the way media audiences are successively composed and decomposed, and show more clearly how, to use Nick Couldry's words in "Liveness, 'Reality,' and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone," (<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10714420490886952>) "the 'habitus' of contemporary societies is being transformed by mediation itself" (358).

—

*Featured Image: The Firesign Theatre (ice cream baggage claim): John Rose, courtesy of author.*

—

**Jeremy Braddock** is Associate Professor of English at Cornell University, where he specializes on the production and reception of modernist literature, media, and culture from the 1910s throughout the long twentieth century. His scholarship has examined the collective and institutional forms of twentieth-century authorship that are obscured by the romanticized figure of the individual artist. His book *Collecting as Modernist Practice — a study of anthologies, archives, and private art collections* — won the 2013 Modernist Studies Association book prize. Recent publications include a short essay considering the literary education of Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus and an essay on the Harlem reception of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He is currently working on a book on the Firesign Theatre.

—

**REWIND!** . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

**"Radio's "Oblong Blur": Notes on the Corwinesque"** (<https://soundstudiesblog.com/2012/06/25/6606/>)—Neil Verma

**The New Wave: On Radio Arts in the UK** (<https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/12/11/the-new-wave-on-radio-arts-in-the-uk/>)—Magz Hall



**This is Your Body on the Velvet Underground (<https://soundstudiesblog.com/2014/05/15/this-is-your-body-on-the-velvet-underground/>)—Jacob Smith**

Tags: analytic space, audioposition, Columbia Records, Don't Crush That Dwarf Hand Me the Pliers, Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word, How Can You Be in Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere at All, Jacob Smith, Jeremy Braddock, kaleidosonic, KPFK, Michael Davidson, Multitrack recording, Neil Verma, Nick Couldry, Norman Corwin, Pacifica Radio, Pet Sounds, Robert Christgau, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, The Firesign Theatre, Theater of the Mind, U.S. War With VietNam, Vinyl

Sounding Out!

Create a free website or blog at WordPress.com.