

"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." ~ Dr. Seuss

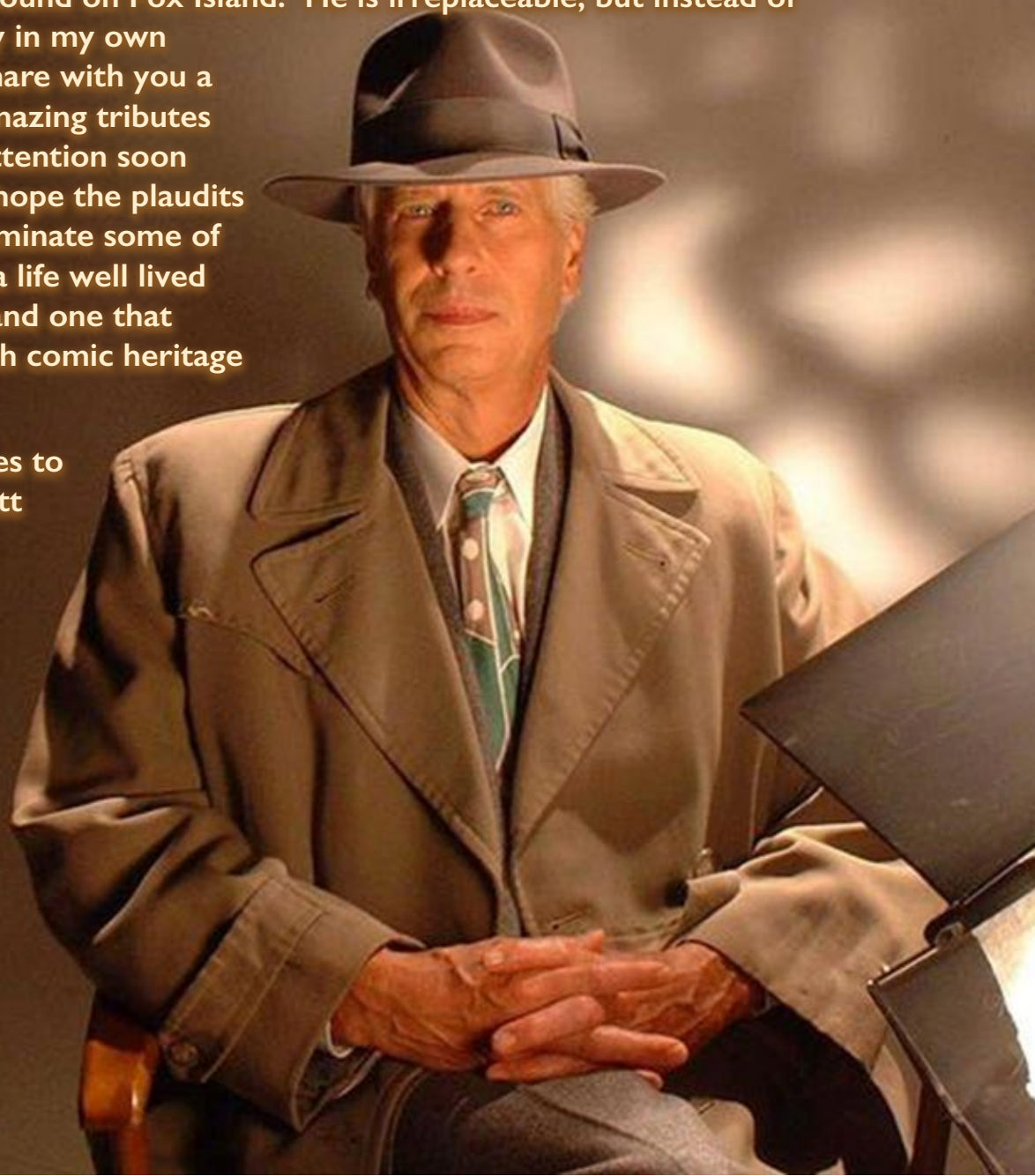
PLANET PROCTOR | 2015 | THE NINTH ISSUE

Planet Austin

• FROM THE OTHER PHIL •

As I prepare to turn 75 on July 28, I mourn my longtime partner and talented brother, **Philip Baine Austin**, more than ever: Melinda and I – the Ginbags, Fizz and Ginny – were planning to celebrate with him and **Oona**, his beloved wife of 44 years, at the McCocktails' compound on Fox Island. He is irreplaceable; but instead of eulogizing him only in my own words, I want to share with you a few of the many amazing tributes that came to my attention soon after his passing. I hope the plaudits that follow will illuminate some of his attainments in a life well lived and well realized, and one that leaves us with a rich comic heritage for all eternity.

We raise our glasses to you, Edward Everett McCocktail, and to your beautiful, funny widow, Edna. Down the hatch!



"At Last - success! It wasn't easy and it took generations but I have finally made it. Debt free, cancer free, the kids gone, therapy over, teeth straightened, house painted, car serviced, laundry folded - death imminent."
~ **Sevan Minasian**

TO PHIL FROM BILL

Our great friend and producer **Bill McIntyre** had the following to say about Phil Austin:

Phil Austin, who changed lanes on the enteric plains of the Antelope Freeway a month ago, created an amazing world of **Firesign Theatre** characters over the last five decades; among them LA's astral Detective, **Nick Danger**, Third Eye, probably his most celebrated surreal voice characterization masterpiece. And there are so many more, as Firesign fans will tell you - all gems. They'll also tell you their beloved Firesign Theatre is the most famous comedy group you've maybe never heard of - yet your ear knows them from the zillion little Firesign audio clips subliminally fed to you by FM radio DJs over the last 50 odd years.



AUSTIN TIMES
Early days on the radio, above,
recently on Fox Island with Oona, left,
and *Waiting for the Electrician*, below.

Public Affairs Director at **KPFK**, the famed Pacifica FM radio station in North Hollywood.

As media-fate would have it, the station's director of drama and literature was another covert electro-poet named **David Ossman**, and when **Phil Proctor** reconnected with his Yale classmate **Peter Bergman** it sparked the completely accidental emergence of the Firesign Theatre, composed of a **Leo** (Proctor), two **Sagittarians** (David and Pete) and an **Aries** – Mr. Austin.

The spontaneous satirical comedy of the four horsemen of the laughter apocalypse became so popular as part of **Radio Free Oz** – Bergman's daily late night counter-culture call-in show, which Mr. Austin produced – that it triggered the first Firesign Theatre album, *Waiting for the Electrician or Someone Like Him*, on Columbia Records in 1968. The rest is history.



"It is never too late to be
what you might have been."
~ **George Eliot**

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THROUGHOUT
THE 'PLANET,' CLICKING
DARK RED TYPE
OPENS A RELATED
INTERNET LINK.

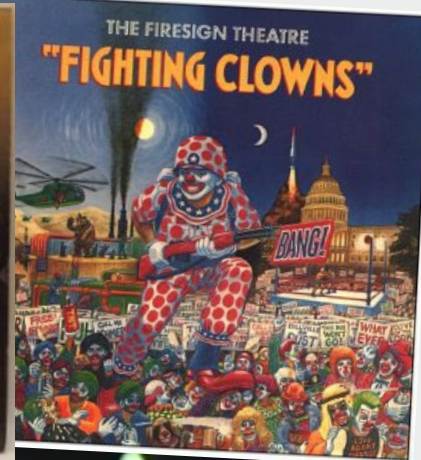
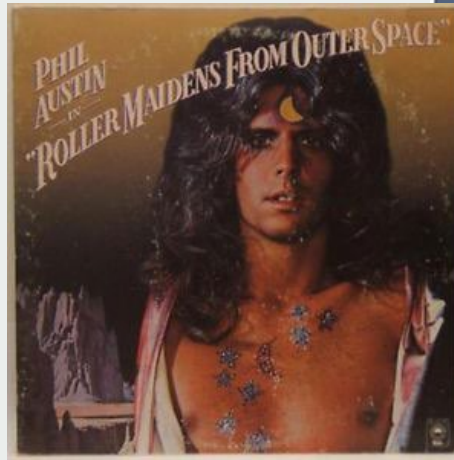
ultimately land him in Hollywood.

First, he read comics over the college air of **Fresno State Radio** [as I did on WPIX-TV in NYC]. He hit the boards with local performance groups and tape-recorded home grown skits with pal **Richard Schulenburg** on the hot new reel-to-reel tape recorder. A swimmer, Austin scored an Ivy League scholarship at **Bowdoin College** in Maine. When not in the pool he was on stage, publishing poetry in the literary magazine, writing dramatic criticism for the newspaper, hosting his own campus radio show, and before he could say "**Regnad Kcin**," he was firmly ensconced as the News and

PHIL HUMS AND STRUMS

According to a tribute by **Mike Tiano** on **SOMETHING ELSE**, Phil was dubbed our “official lead guitarist” and first demonstrated his extraordinary musical skills in “Back From the Shadows Again” on *I Think We’re All Bozos on this Bus*. Later, on his solo album, *Roller Maidens from Outer Space*, Phil incorporated a series of songs inspired by **Red Greenback** and **the Blueboys** that relates directly to the storyline. And of course, on Firesign Theatre’s *Fighting Clowns* CD, with cover art by the great **Phil Hartman**, Phil’s rock’n’roll chops as a composer and singer were never better demonstrated, unless you include his on-camera turn as a rock idol in “The Case of the Missing Yolks” video, produced by **Michael Nesmith**.

Tiano goes on to observe that “In their live performances, the Firesign Theatre wouldn’t simply recite lines when they recreated their recorded works. Being true comedians, they would improvise when inspiration hit. In this way they were a



lot like **The Grateful Dead** in the way they would “jam,” using words instead of music. In that context, it was fitting that in the late 1980s, Phil was commissioned to write a screenplay for The Grateful Dead. Phil said that **Jerry Garcia** had “insisted” it be called *The Dead Sell Out*. (The plot involved a firm trying to get songs from The Dead to use in their TV commercials.)

In Tiano’s story, Ossman quotes Phil as recalling how he got his start: “I got a job in a radio station because I could always do that [thing] with my voice — could make you believe that I was committed to the words coming out of my mouth. I mistakenly believed, therefore, that I was an actor. I’m not. I’m a musician. Interesting that it was the sounds of the words that got to me most.

The Firesign Theatre was the vehicle that allowed me to make that discovery.”

The group played major venues nationwide, including **Carnegie Hall**, **Town Hall**, the **Santa Monica Civic**, the **Greek Theatre** and the **Beacon Theater** in New York in the 1970s. Later, benefiting from a tide of ‘60s revivalism, it staged a comeback and produced another burst of Grammy-nominated CDs for **Rhino Records**, culminating with *Bride of Firesign* in 2001. Their last live appearance was at the 2012 memorial for Peter Bergman.

■ **CONTINUED**

LEADING MAN

Playing ‘lead guitar’ at the group’s Martian Space party, left; album covers for *Roller Maidens*. . . and *Fighting Clowns*, top; and Firesign Theatre on The David Susskind Show in 1974 with Austin far right. [Click photo to view a video excerpt.](#)



"In the midst of the sense of tragedy or loss,
sometimes laughter is not only healing, it's a way of
experiencing the person that you've lost again."

~ Alan Alda

FRED AND PHIL

*Frederick C. Wiebel, Jr., the author of **Backwards Into the Future**, a 2006 book about us, said:*

Phil Austin's goal was to fool people into laughing by looking at themselves and their beliefs and shaking out the truth. What was silly, profoundly humorous and surreal about the America of the '60s and '70s is now being bought and sold as a normal exchange in our violated temples and becoming more and more so every day.

Coming from a stint in the psychological warfare unit in the US Army and the theatrical stage, Austin was able to use his training and meticulous craftsmanship to convincingly deliver the words and the juxtaposition of themes and images to present them in a multi-level of meanings that your brain could digest all at once, partially or not, and still be funny.

I hear his voice mainly in modern commercials that use humor to sell. I hear it so much that at times the pitches are almost word-for-word reproductions of the satirically cynical "fake commercials" Austin and his colleagues were so fond of delivering in such realistic form and oh so tempting to drop in regular programming for a few laughs. I just had to do it all the time in my years behind the radio microphone.

I hear it in cartoon shows like **Sponge Bob**; I hear in **The Onion**; I hear it in the mouths of disc jockeys; in the legions of comedians; media executives, all raised and

hard-wired on the stuff; in the conversations of strangers that speak them in rote and reference and recognition. You're one of them and they're one of us... everywhere that surreality bumps up against reality to sell ideas and even somehow in the words of **Rush Limbaugh** and **President Obama**. I hear it just about every place; but especially on **Fox News** because Phil Austin's goal was to fool people into laughing by looking at themselves and shaking out the truth.

I knew Phil personally and worked directly with him on various projects over the years. He always knew exactly what he wanted, how it was to be presented, how to achieve it, and how to have fun and make a living from it at the same time. He had a completely analytical mind bordering on genius, if not crossing the line from time to time.

When I interviewed Phil for publication or on a live broadcast, he came across as an incredibly warm human being, brutally honest and extremely protective of his own work and the **Firesign Theatre's**. Phil encouraged me greatly in my writing in a way that was not goal-oriented or patronizing. But get on his bad side... look out brother...when that door opened, the cat runs out and never comes back.

Phil Austin once told me, "As long as I'm living and breathing there will always be a Firesign Theatre." **The Library of Congress** has made sure of that, preserving their recordings for all time and people and generations to come.



"People with a sense of humor tend to be less egocentric and more realistic in their view of the world and more humble in moments of success and less defeated in times of travail."

~ Bob Newhart

ESS IS MORE

Ramsey Ess is a freelance writer for **Splitsider** and his webseries **Ramsey Has a Time Machine** just launched a second season featuring **Chris Elliott**. I didn't know him before I found his profound and revealing tribute to Phil, which I'm happy to share with you now.

To get your own comedy seen in today's media landscape, all you have to do is put it online and make sure it's really good. It wasn't so easy in the 1960s when all of your major channels – TV, radio, records, and movies – were controlled by gatekeepers who may not have been all that interested in shaking up the status quo. Somehow during that time however, the **Firesign Theatre** managed to squeeze through those gates and send some truly creative comedy out into the world. With the recent passing of their second member, **Phil Austin**, creator of perhaps their most enduring character, **Nick Danger**, today we look back at his life and the legacy of the Firesign Theatre.

The Firesign Theatre began as live radio performers in Los Angeles, which explains one of the three origins of the troupe's name. It has been said that the "Firesign" in their name is meant to invoke the "Fireside Chats" of **President Franklin Delano Roosevelt**. Related to that, NBC aired a program in the '50s called "Fireside Theatre." And finally there is the fact that all four members of the troupe are, astrologically speaking, fire signs...

If you're not familiar, the Firesign Theatre's style of comedy is almost always described alongside the term "stream of consciousness." This is due to the group's improvisational feel, random left turns, and large numbers of pop culture references scattered throughout their routines, despite



the fact that the majority of their work was scripted when performed. The members have cited **The Goon Show** as an influence, and it's these qualities that truly exemplify that.

Though they started in radio, it was on vinyl where they truly made a name for themselves. The group produced a remarkable amount of material and much of it has been lauded by many, including the **Library of Congress** who called the foursome "the Beatles of comedy" when inducting their third album, **Don't Crush That Dwarf, Hand Me**

the Pliers, into the National Registry. This album distinguished itself by featuring one full narrative spread across two sides; they're first to tell a single story as opposed to a collection of sketches. According to Phil Austin's notes in a re-release of the album, "**Dwarf** is the story of the five ages of Man and in particular, the five ages of one **George Leroy Tirebiter**; a man named after a dog."

More so than their commitment to using the album as one conceptual whole, the thing I love about this record is that the surrealism isn't limited to the confines of this one album. The record ends with the main character running outside to catch an ice cream truck, the music of which is heard at the beginning of their next album, tying it together.

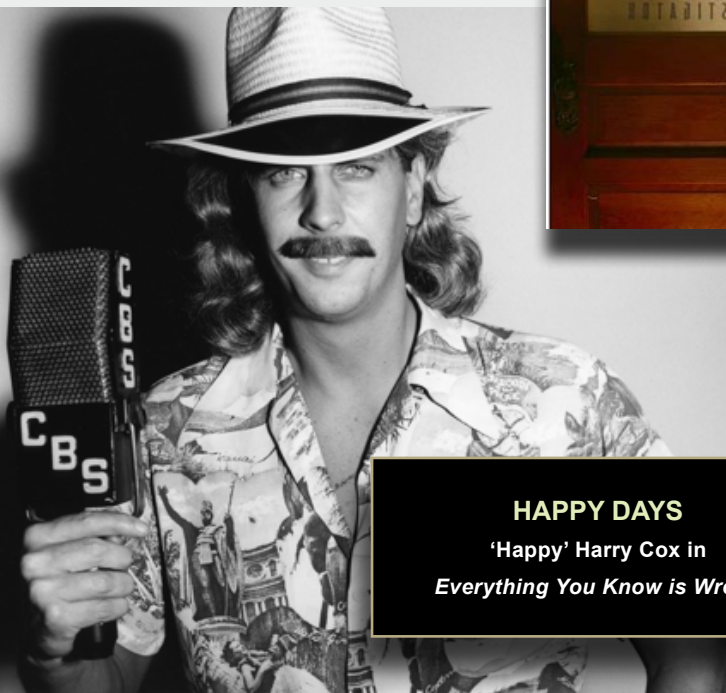
Also on this album, Tirebiter attempts unsuccessfully to order a pizza. On this album we only hear this character's side of the phone conversation; but the other half was heard a year earlier on their second album, **How Can You Be Two Places at Once When You're Not Anywhere At All?** in a call to Nick Danger.

Nick Danger, Third Eye, was a parody of the noir detective genre, and Austin created Nick and was



HAPPY DAYS

'Happy' Harry Cox in
Everything You Know is Wrong

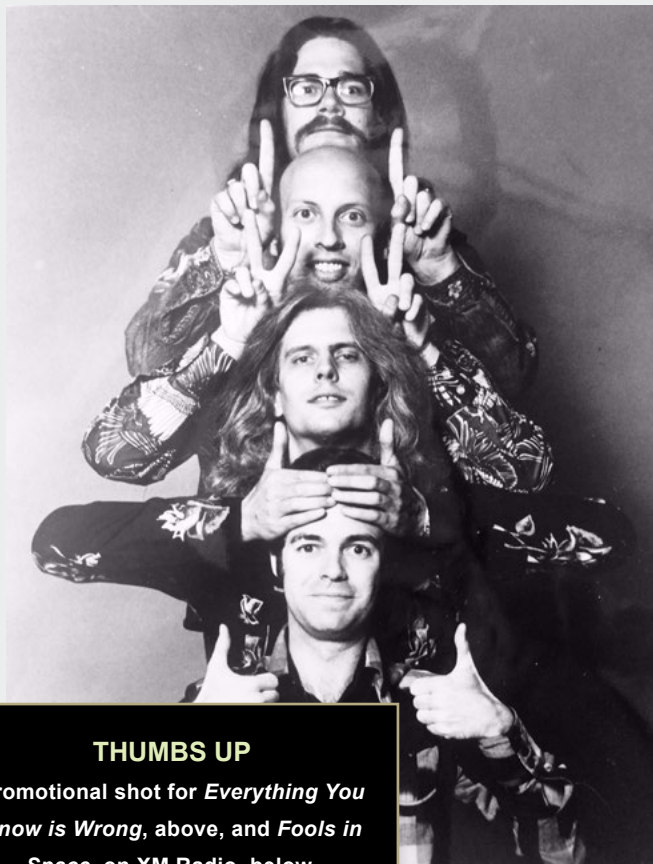


■ CONTINUED

then principal author of his many comedy adventures on record, radio, stage, television, film and even **Pizza Hut** commercials. Nick marked the group's first excursion into sustained comedy material... in the form of a pitch-perfect parody of a 1940s radio show. Like much of Firesign's comedy, Nick's adventures were incredibly joke dense and incredibly odd. In the very opening of his first appearance, the announcer intones "Los Angle-ese. He walks again by night! Out of the fog, into the smog. (coughing) Relentlessly. Ruthlessly. (I wonder where Ruth is...) Doggedly! [Barking] (Hey, now! Get away from me!)" That's a lot of jokes for just 20 seconds. The radio broadcast continues, moving into time travel-induced doppelgangers, until the climax of the program is interrupted by an announcement from President Roosevelt that America has been attacked at Pearl Harbor and that the US will unconditionally surrender to the Japanese.

The group produced films, plays and live shows, on stage and on PBS, were nominated for three Grammys and a Hugo, and generally created a lot of comedy together. They also created some separately. Writing about his departed friend, **David Ossman** assembled this impressive list of Austin's solo work:

*Phil Austin's many other writing and voice-performance credits include work with **Mama Cass**, **David Cassidy** and **Chad and Jeremy**, narration for **Gary Usher's The Astrology Album** and contributions to **Barbra Streisand's HBO Specials**. Austin worked as a development exec for **Lorimar Telepictures** and had a*



THUMBS UP
Promotional shot for *Everything You Know is Wrong*, above, and *Fools in Space*, on XM Radio, below.



hand in several film scripts, including 1970's psychedelic western, **Zachariah**, and a movie for **The Grateful Dead**, **The Dead Sell Out**. His radio show, "**Hollywood Nightshift**" with **Frazer Smith** and **Michael C. Gwynne** was a cult favorite in the 1980s and his spoken book, **Tales of the Old Detective** collected a few of the many stories he'd published in magazines from **Crawdaddy** to **Screw**. He published the first half of his unfinished novel **Beaver Teeth** on his blog.

Like the Goons before them, the Firesign Theatre created a massive body of work, which was just crammed with jokes. I feel like critic **Eric Salzman** described their unique sensibility best when he

referred to their style as a "contemporary, relevant, multi-level, non-linear theater — a kind of verbal electronic opera." If you haven't experienced the strange ride of The Firesign Theatre, I'd invite you to hop on board.

Before we go, though, I think it's only fair that we give Phil Austin the final word. In an interview for the Firesign fanzine **It's Just This Little Chromium Switch** [click on cover image below left to download issue] Austin was asked if he had any great wisdom to impart:

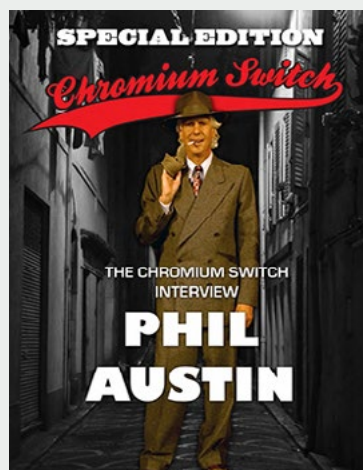
"Wisdom is not my strong point. I have been known to have a couple of good ideas

and get a couple of laughs here and there. I think that's more than enough."

Indeed, Phil, it is.

"To be a surrealist means barring from your mind all remembrance of what you have seen, and being always on the lookout for what has never been."

~ **Rene Magritte**



"The kind of humor I like is the thing that makes me laugh for five seconds and think for ten minutes."

~ William Davis

ENABLERS

Jeff Abraham, Jim Terr, William Kanengiser, Jamie Alcroft, Kenneth Wilhite, Jr., Victor Kopcewich, Robert Riddle, Spider Robinson, Stuart Shapiro, Tom Gedwillo, Timm McCoy, Steve Cooper, Steve Gillmor and everyone who called personally or posted condolences on Facebook.

NOW MORE THAN EVER

It's time to get the **Firesign**

Theatre inducted into the **Rock and Roll** all of Fame!

Let them know what the **Library of Congress** knows about them! Let them know about the recording techniques they created! Let them know **Peter Bergman** coined the term "Love-In" and let them know about the Grammy nominations! Let them know that artists, musicians, actors and creatives were **HUGELY** influenced by the group! Let them know about the group being labeled "The Beatles of Comedy!" Let them know how they brought Rock sensibilities to comedy!

Let them know the group was almost single-handedly responsible for inventing "underground radio." **THEY NEED TO KNOW!!!** Contact The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Foundation. 1290 Avenue of the Americas, Second Floor, New York, NY 10104 or **CLICK HERE**.

"To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children...to leave the world a better place...to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded." ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

PLANETCLICK

DISSEMBLERS



FLY WITH PHIL

CRACKED

PAPIER

APOTHEOSIS

FLASH

WAYNE

GAY

GAY, TOO

UNIONSHIP

KEEP 'EM FLYIN'

In addition to his wife, the former **Oona Elliott**, and their 5 beloved dogs, Mr. Austin is survived by his sister, **Cathy Andreasen**. And, to demonstrate your support for Phil and Oona's unending love of animals, a contribution in Phil's name can be made to **THE HUMANE SOCIETY**.

"Humor is something that thrives between man's aspirations and his limitations. There is more logic in humor than in anything else. Because, you see, humor is truth." ~ Victor Borge

"There are two rules in life: 1. Never give out all the information." ~ Dr. Robert Frederickson

BEARWHIZ BEER <http://www.eagletshirts.com>

FUNNY TIMES: <http://www.funnytimes.com>

FST: <http://www.FiresignTheatre.com>

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