

Paul Krassner

Birth of The Realist: Fire Hydrant of the Underdog

A split had developed in the organization behind a freethought magazine, *Progressive World*, and Lyle Stuart proposed to the publishers – an elderly couple from whom the publication was, in effect, being stolen – that a lively *new* freethought magazine should be published, and that it could be launched with their mailing list.

“With you as the editor,” Lyle told me. “You’ll be perfect.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You’re the only one I know who’s neurotic enough to do it.”

America had a powerful tradition of alternative journalism that could be traced back, from contemporary periodicals – *The Independent*, I. F. Stone’s *Weekly*, George Seldes’s *In Fact* – to Brann’s *Iconoclast*, published in the 1890s in Waco, Texas, all the way back to Benjamin Franklin and Tom Paine during revolutionary times. Now I was being given an opportunity to become part of this tradition. While I was contemplating the possibilities, I read an article in *Esquire* by Malcolm Muggeridge, former editor of *Punch*, the British humor magazine. He wrote:

The area of life in which ridicule is permissible is steadily shrinking, and a dangerous tendency is becoming manifest to take ourselves with undue seriousness. The enemy of humor is fear and this, alas, is an age of fear. As I see it, the only pleasure of living is that every joke should be made, every thought expressed, every line of investigation, irrespective of its direction, pursued to the uttermost limit that human ingenuity, courage and understanding can take it. The moment that limits are set (other, of course, than those that are inherent in the human situation itself), then the flavor is gone. Humor is an aspect of freedom, without which it cannot exist at all. By its nature, humor is anarchistic, and it may well be that those who seek to suppress or limit laughter are more dangerous than all the sub-

Paul Krassner

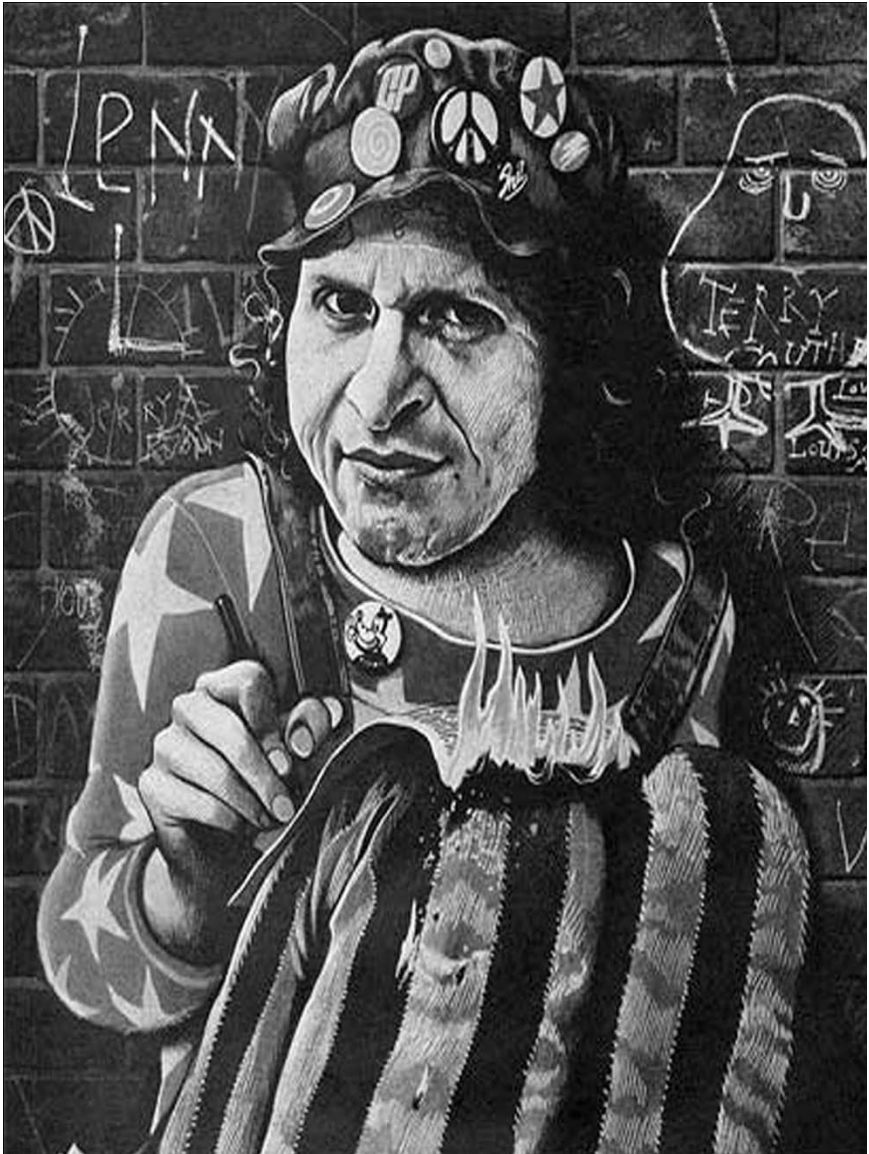


Illustration © 1975 Playboy Publications

versive conspiracies which the FBI ever has or ever will uncover. Laughter, in fact, is the most effective of all subversive conspiracies, and it operates on *our* side.

The article was called “America needs a *Punch*,” and I took the implication of that title as my personal marching orders. This was before *National Lampoon* or *Spy* magazine, before *Laugh-In* or *Doonesbury* or *Saturday Night Live*, *Politically Incorrect*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*. I had no role models, and no competition, just an open field mined with taboos waiting to be exploded. My vision was a magazine of “free-thought criticism and satire.” Ironically, this concept was a leap of faith – there just *had* to be others out there who were also the only Martians on their block. The name of the new magazine was suggested by Fred Wortman, a columnist for *Progressive World*. He was the personification of an old-fashioned village atheist. He wrote thoughtful, provocative, witty letters to the editor of his local paper in Albany, Georgia, cured himself of cancer with a grape diet, and was ecologically ahead of his time – instead of throwing away a used typewriter ribbon, he would *reink* it himself. Wortman wrote to me that *The Realist* might be a good name, and I recognized immediately that it was the appropriate one.

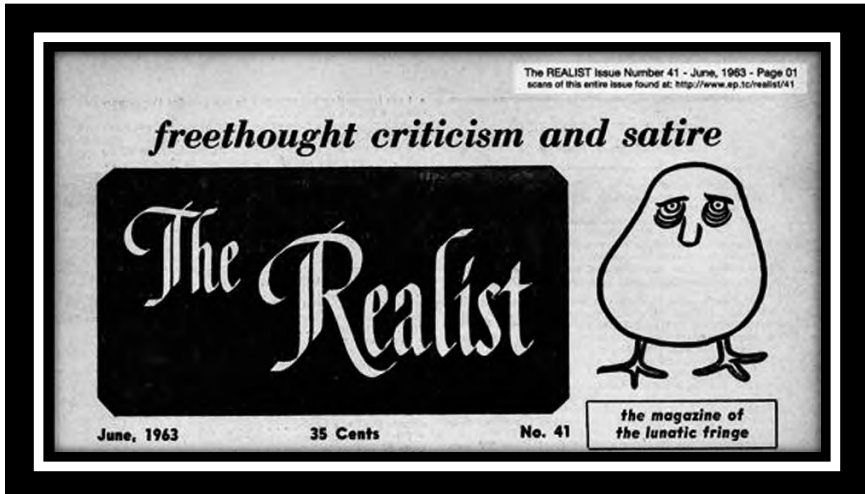
So there I was – the editor of *The Realist*. Now all I needed was a magazine.

I found a quote from Groucho Marx: “Satire is *verboden* today. The restrictions – political, religious, and every other kind – have killed satire.” Then I began contacting writers and cartoonists, exchanging ideas and giving assignments, hoping to help bring satire back to life. I started with John Francis Putnam, the art director at *Mad*. He designed *The Realist* logo, and also became my first columnist -- “Modest Proposals.” Although *Mad* staffers were not allowed to have any outside projects, Putnam was willing to risk his job to write for *The Realist*. Bill Gaines appreciated that and made an exception for him. And then, late one extremely hot night in the spring of 1958, alone and literally naked, I was sitting at my desk in Lyle Stuart's office, preparing final copy for the first issue, to be dated June. In my opening editorial, I wrote:

I am nonpartisan in that I'm not a Democrat or a Republican or a Vegetarian. Not a Communist or a Fascist or a Prohibitionist. Not a socialist or a capitalist or an anarchist. Not a liberal or a conservative or a vivisectionist. Not Catholic or Protestant or Jewish. Not Unitarian or Buddhist or Existentialist. Not hip or square or round. Not even an American – in the sense that, as one book reviewer puts it, to call a man a South African just because he was born in South Africa is like calling a kitten a

Paul Krassner

biscuit because it was born in an oven.



I was supposed to have everything ready for the printer next morning. I felt exhausted, but there was one final piece to write. On an exceedingly hot night in the spring of 1958, with my bare buttocks stuck to the leather chair, I borrowed a satirical form from *Mad* and composed:

A CHILD'S PRIMER ON TELETHONS

See the tired man. He has been up all night. He is running a telethon. He wants the people to send money. It is for leukemia. That is a disease. Little children like you can catch it. Evil.

See the sexy girl. She is a singer. She doesn't know whether the telethon is for leukemia or dystrophy or gonorrhea. Her agent got her the booking. She needs the exposure. Notice her cleavage.

See the handsome man. He *does* know that it's for leukemia. You can tell. He is singing a calypso melody. Listen to the lyrics. "Give-your-money," he sings, "to-leukemia. Give-your-money, to-leukemia." Listen to the audience applaud. He is very talented.

See the sincere politician. He is running for reelection in November. He is against leukemia. He is willing to take