

AN AFTERNOON with ZIPPY

■ chatting with creator Bill Griffith ■



During the Festival of Festivals, *Excalibur's* Heather Sangster and special contributor *jwcurry* — proprietor of Room 302 Books and editor/publisher/printer of *Industrial Sabotage* — were able to take an hour from the busy schedule of comic book artist Bill Griffith, creator of the infamous Zippy The Pinhead, to discuss his work. Griffith and Zippy both appear in Ron Mann's latest film, *Comic Book Confidential*. The following are excerpts from the interview.

JWCURRY: You just want to zip right into this?

Bill Griffith: Sounds appropriate.

JWC: The only book I had access to was *Pointed Behaviour*. That's a recent one?

BG: Two books since then. One is called *Are We Having Fun Yet?* and there's one from last year, called *King-Pin*. Zippy has become a daily strip in the past couple of years. *King-Pin* is the first years of the Zippy daily. *Are We Having Fun Yet?* is in a graphic novel format divided into chapters with the pretense of some sort of guide book — but it's basically a romp through Zippy's left and right brain.

JWC: In *Pointed Behaviour*, all these comic characters keep appearing. The Jetsons, Wilma Flintstone, Queen Elizabeth...

BG: They are Zippy's friends. They are as real to Zippy as anything else.

JWC: Are you using these as just visual icons, or is there a bit of the homage in there?

BG: Yeah, well sometimes it's a bit of a reverse. It isn't always an homage, a

like some kind of creation that's like a big brown suit; there's these guys inside him like the Muppets — you know the way they make the Muppets work with those big rods. He moves his head and some semblance of life comes out.

JWC: I also found reference in certain strips to Pip and Paula and Jolly Jimmy and the Dufus Duo. Are these guys really exhumed from somewhere?

BG: These are actual cartoon characters — Pip and Paula — and they lived for about eight weeks. The other ones are made up. Fiction and non-fiction blend in comics as they do in life. Zippy is merely a funhouse mirror reflecting the flotsam and jetsam of the culture we swim through.

JWC: Somewhere else in the strip, Zippy mentions Moon Zappa's lawsuit? Does this betray some interest in Zappa too?

BG: Yea, I saw the Mothers play in the mid-'60s when they first came on the scene in New York at the Electric Circus in the East Village. I still listen to his stuff. It's just as great today as it was then. There was so many people from the '60s that I was sort of embarrassed that I liked, but Frank Zappa was never one of those.

JWC: So has he influenced you, too?

BG: Yea, indirectly. More or less. He's a complicated character who doesn't to Top Ten. He doesn't even do Top Hundred. He does what he wants to do. He has a lot of satire in his work. He's confusing to people at first; he puts off a lot of people at first. He jams his work full of metaphors at a rapid pace. He doesn't care if you get three out of six, or one out of 100, that's okay.

I find a certain sympathetic relationship there. I tend to jam a lot of stuff into my work. I present a kind of shotgun approach to satire. I satirize as many subjects at once within the shortest time possible. Once in a while, I slow down.

That's one of the problems I've had



THIS IS MY LIFE: Bill Griffith laughs with a live rendition of Zippy The Pinhead.

ite cartoonist, to be known like *Peanuts*, or *Garfield* or whatever.

JWC: You have other references popping up in your strip. *Alfred Jarry* and his buddy, *Pa Ubu*, show up. Can I infer from that that you have an interest in pataphysics?

BG: Yes, I think I'm a member in bad-standing in the pataphysical society. Alfred Jarry was one of the inspirations for Zippy — his seemingly random way of talking. He's the father of surrealism and Dadaism and Zippy has a lot in common with those movements. Jarry is like a godfather to Zippy. He was present at the birth. He eased Zippy out into the world.

JWC: Zippy is obviously not non-sensical?

back. It's been in and out of print sporadically. It's not exactly a best seller, shall we say.

Zippy is actually a tapered version of *Pere Ubu*, Jarry's creation — based on his physics teacher. The way Zippy looks is derived from this guy, William Henry Jackson, who was a circus side show freak. My name is William Henry Jackson Griffith, and after I started drawing Zippy, I found out this guy's name. That caused me to drop my jaw considerably. That was my great-grandfather's name. Pataphysics at work. These connections... When I heard about that, I knew I was meant to do Zippy — and I decided not to go into engineering.

JWC: Do you follow the big boys, like *Marvel*, or *DC*?

BG: That was never my interest. As a kid, I never followed the super heroes. All I cared about was *Uncle Scrooge* and *Nancy and Sluggo* and I read *Little Lulu* under the covers because I thought it might be for girls and I wasn't supposed to do it. *Little Lulu* really holds up. Her stories are wonderful writing.

JWC: Now you do a guy called *Mr. Toad*, too, in Zippy. What else do you do besides Zippy?

BG: Well, Zippy is my life. It's taken over. When you do a daily strip that's what happens. *Mr. Toad* was the first comic book creation. It was in 1968, when I started doing underground comics for the underground newspapers in New York. I started working for the *East Village Other*.

JWC: Did you do a lot of *Mr. Toad*?

BG: Well, for the first three, four years. What happened was that Zippy was *Mr. Toad's* sidekick when he came into the comics. *Mr. Toad* was an egocentric, bad-assed character. He was my brash, young rebellious self. He was basically angry at the world. He

wanted to push everybody aside and tell them what to do. After a couple of years of that I changed. It wouldn't have been very amusing to keep that up my entire career. And so Zippy became someone to me that I could balance *Mr. Toad* with. Or, at least be a foil to, or something, so that *Mr. Toad* wasn't out there spilling his ego all over the place.

I made Zippy as opposite as I could. Someone without any concept of the difference between himself and the chair he's sitting in. No ego. No concept of time or logic, except linear logic.

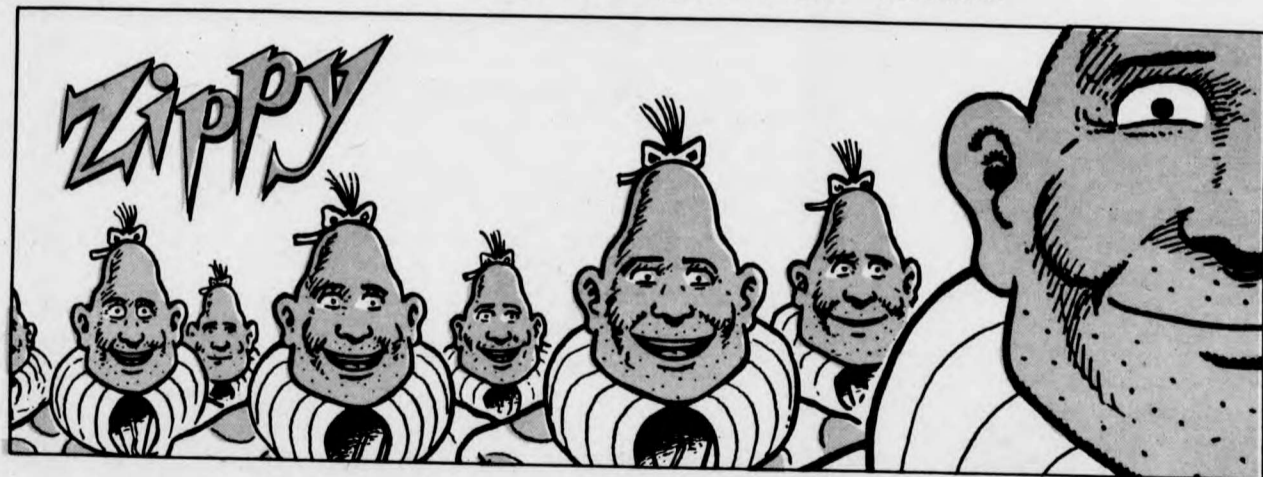
Within about a year or two, *Mr. Toad* was Zippy's sidekick, and then by '74-'75, *Mr. Toad* was pretty much a backseat character — makes the occasional appearance just to scare me. He's a scary character to me. He's not easy to do.

JWC: Did you start off by self-publishing, or did you luck out and find people who were willing to do your stuff?

BG: No, not really self-publishing. From '68-'72 — which was heyday of underground comics — there were so many titles published that it was so easy to get your stuff published. Basically, you just had to draw them in black ink on white paper, and relatively proportionate to a comic book or newspaper page so it could be reduced. There were very few requirements other than that. It was kind of a free-wheeling, crazy time.

So I was published in various, underground newspapers and then I came out to San Francisco in 1970 and immediately had my first comic book published. I was a teenage beatnik, you know. In my high school days I lived on Long Island, and travelled into Greenwich Village on weekends.

I went to an Allan Ginsberg poetry reading of his famous *Howl* poem in 1959 and he was totally wiped out on



sincere homage, sometimes it's more like a satirical homage. Visually, they are quite iconic but, beyond the visual, you don't get much meat on the bones. These are pieces of popular culture that Zippy focuses on. Fred Flintstone has as much reality to Zippy as Ronald Reagan. Maybe Fred Flintstone has more reality to him than Ronald Reagan.

I'm not quite sure about him. He's

with people that read my strips. People say, "I've finally got into reading your strip but it took me like six months, because the references came by so fast I had to put up a shield at first because it was too much to handle, too confusing, or too arbitrarily seeming." But then after a while, once they get into the rhythm of it, people will accept it.

I don't try to be everybody's favour-

BG: He is for the first few months that you read him. But if you keep reading him, your brain will eventually adjust.

JWC: Where else does pataphysics show up in your strip?

BG: Well, it's not always there. But I did do a biography of Jarry. I illustrated the text. It came out a couple years