

The horror, the humour

Honi Soit
John Cale
A&M SP 4849

Fighting Clowns
Firesign Theatre
Firesign Records/Rhino Records
RNLP 018

review by Jens Andersen

What is the modern world coming to? Resurgent right wing paranoia, revolutions gone sour, economic strangulation, bizarre religious cults, drug epidemics ... ugly idiotic wars ... a thousand and one species and sub-species of escalating human idiocy.

What can it all mean?

Well, unlike the cocksure commentary cranked out by experts of the church, faculty, newspaper office and beer parlor, the above artists propound no explanations or cures. They content themselves with painting a vivid picture of Our Troubled World Today.



John Cale has been a specialist in the grim and ghastly since his Velvet Underground days, and theoretically he should

be right at home in this grim and ghastly era. On this album, however, his occasional tendency to deteriorate into agonized vocal gargling and excessively horrifying lyrics has grown more pronounced than ever before, and the listener is forced to endure a lot of anguished gabbling about black communist surgeons, maggots in despair, open heart surgery creatures and similiar bogeyman.

Fortunately Cale eases up on this nonsense once in a while, and in many cases the music behind the words is quite good, as on "Dead or Alive", "Honi Soit", "Streets of Laredo", and portions of the other songs. However, it is too much to ask someone to listen to the noise of something like "Strange times in Casablanca" to unearth its tasty guitar line.

As such, this good-awful album, can only be recommended to hard core Cale aficionados. Hopefully, having gotten this bilious album out of his system, he will now compose some songs to match his former masterpieces.

Another "Charlemagne" or "I'm not the Loving Kind" would be a great relief after "Honi Soit".

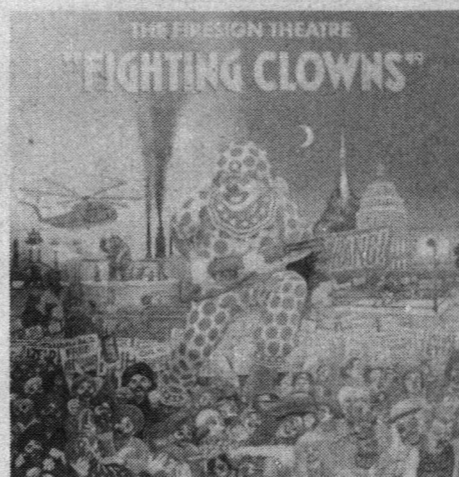
In contrast to Cale's black despair, there is Firesign Theatre's mordantly satirical *Fighting Clowns*. At the prospect of the imminent belly-up of Western civilization, their response is a sneer:

*I met a funny bearded fellow
from the Gulag Archipela-go
Oh... they let him go!
He said the Russian bear was mean
let's wipe them off our TV screen
let's practice being Soviet shooters
on our family home computers
Russkie pow! Russkie pow!*

Unlike previous outings which have been essentially recorded plays with a few musical interludes, *Fighting Clowns*, is almost entirely musical: two skits and nine songs, including a reggae anthem for

middle-class whites, a schmaltzy showbiz number celebrating Ronald Reagan and his Superman colored hair, a goose-stepping march (suitable for half-time shows), and a wicked punk rock parody that suggests the punk phenomenon may have chemical rather than social roots:

*Your mother had to take three
Valiums a day just to get up/she smoked
three packs of low tar menthol cigarettes
nine months before you were born/she had
to drink six cups of coffee every day just to
stay awake/yeah, she had to take Quaaludes
to sleep with your dad/who worked in an
insecticide factory/so how else could you
expect to be anything but violent juvenile
FREAK-O'S!*



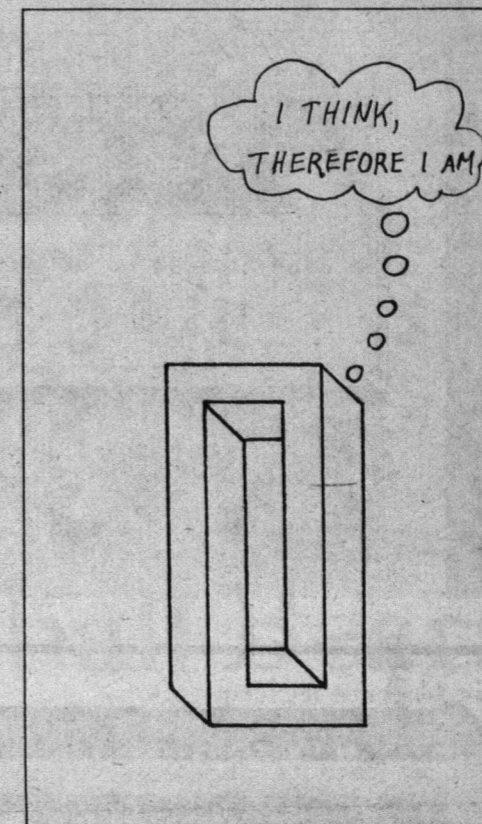
The musical mimicry on the album is excellent - the tunes alone are a coroner's report on popular music. There has been nothing as good since the days of the Bonzo Dog Band.

The current threat of war hangs over both albums. Cale, in "Fighter Pilot," gnashes his teeth at the spectre, but the Firesign Theatre just sneers again, and sums up the album with "This Bus Won't go to War" - a mock antiwar song by someone with a voice that is a dead ringer for

Country Joe Macdonald.
The message?

Only that the western world is too far gone in hot tubs and other forms of decadence to either fight a war or oppose it.

Not a cheerful moral, but the Firesign Theatre milks it for every last drop of black humour. It is a shame that there isn't much of a market for this sort of thing, and that the Firesign Theatre has declined in twelve years from the best-selling comedy act on the market to their present position on an obscure label. Especially when one considers the shallow humour of things like *Animal House*, or *Rexy!*, or *Cheech and Chong*.



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