

'Berg's-Eye View'

Dave Berg 'Beneath the Comic Mask'

By Mark N. Grant

A great moment. The legendary Roger Kaputnik had just brushed by me, gangwaying through a jammed-to-the-aisles Hoyt Hall. But wait—no, it wasn't Roger Kaputnik. This dude lacked the square jaw and the look of arch middle-class schmuckery. He stepped on-stage, drew up a stool, unbuttoned his shirt to mid-chest, and thereby dashed my preconceptions.

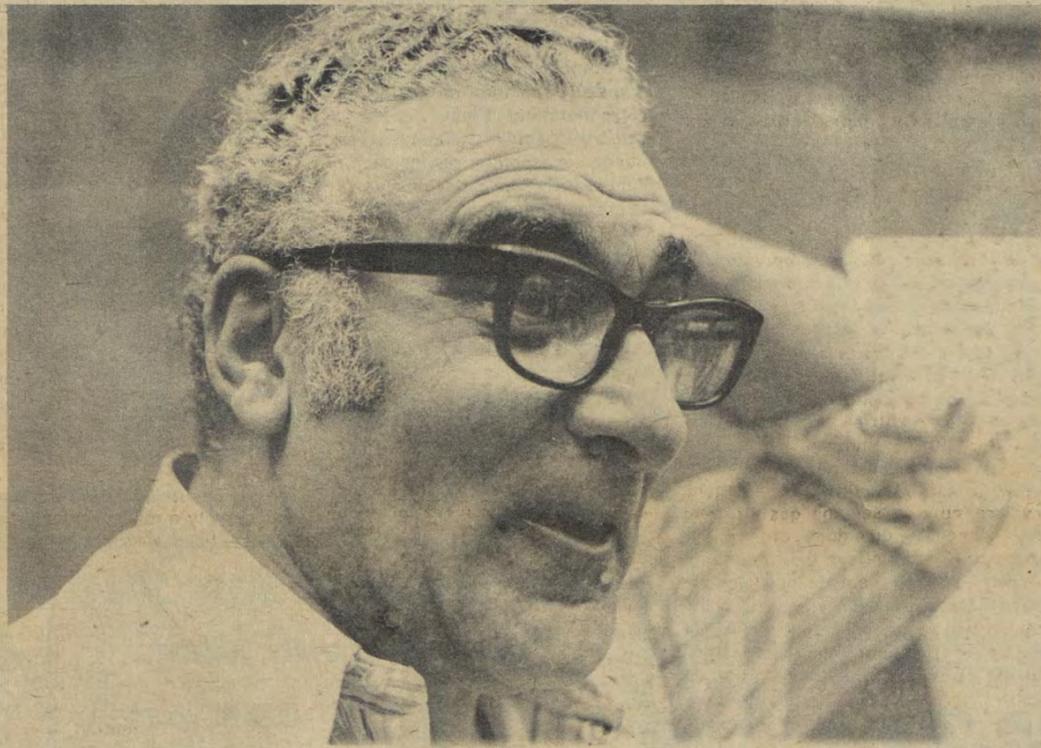
It was Dave Berg, all right, announced the Outside Speakers' representative, and right away came thunderous cheers and mock (?) hisses, tokens of the kibitzing between speaker and audience that characterized the evening. Dave Berg, the cartoonist whose "Lighter Side" has grown to be one of the three institutions without which MAD magazine would be unthinkable (the other two clearly are Alfred E. Neuman and Don Martin). MAD magazine is that mutant chapter in American cultural history, one of the few char-

The other cartoonists in the school of pop psychiatry comic strip—Feiffer, Charles Schulz, even Garry Trudeau—all stylize their drawings. Berg's thing is in a sense tougher to do, because he has to graft those Feifferian insights onto near-photographic replicas in his artwork. He himself hit on this in his talk: "Novelists tell me that the kind of writing I do is the hardest in the world because you have to make a point and still be funny." Where does he get that endless supply of topics for the Lighter Side? "I steal them. When you steal from one book, it's plagiarism; when you steal from many, it's research." (Big ovation).

Berg took to the platform with a swaggering, Rabelaisian spontaneity. He backed his way into a drawing demonstration saying, "Didn't you have anything better to do than watch me, why don't you go out and spread VD or something?" There was nothing

most forms of wit and humor are consciously or unconsciously derived from hostility. How many times have you made a devastating remark to a friend and then said, 'I was only kidding'? Most humor is based on discomfiture and the unpleasant situation of another person. You see somebody slip on a banana peel and you laugh—why? It didn't happen to you, it happened to him." To hear how funny Berg made these remarks sound, you had to be there.

He repeatedly alluded to the pain beneath the comic mask. "Dirty jokes are based on fear—people do not joke about things that make them happy—they joke about things that frighten and disturb them." Best example of all, from a proud Jew: "It has been said that Jewish humor is the best in the world, which makes it the worst because it comes from trouble. So don't be proud of it."



CT Photo by Terry Atlas

ter members of modern pop culture (MAD started back in the '50's, remember?) that have survived intact through the whirlwinds of change.

We had been informed by silk-screen posters that, at 8:30 on this Thursday evening, the lecture "Dave Berg Looks at Our Sick World" would be given at Hoyt Hall. But Mr. Berg, admitting that he was tired and unprepared to give an organized lecture, turned in more of a stand-up night-club performance, winging it with jokes and one-liners mixed in with some of the ideas he's been kicking around (his opening remark was "I hurt my foot kicking around some ideas"—his foot was hurt, and that's why he sat on the stool). The resulting mixture did not always come off, and whenever a joke fell flat, Mr. Berg would tend to overdo his "Aaagh, ya rotten kids" bit. But there was still plenty of meat in that scraggly delivery, something almost Lenny Bruce-like in its pithy head-rambling.

I have always dug "Berg's-Eye View" tremendously. Some ten or more years ago when the feature started, its artwork and writing were primitive compared with its present artwork and writing, but even then it was immensely appealing. Evolving as he went along, as all good artists do, Berg honed his perceptions to a keener edge, until the characters he drew and the things they said had an incredibly real-life particularity to them.

particularly paternal about him, little that suggested a New Rochelle commuter or any other character you might see in his drawings, and as far as the generation gap goes, he didn't make you conscious of any. He appeared hip to everything, as so many guest-lecturers these days so conspicuously do. This chameleon-like hipness leads one to wonder where he's really at—hence, the *National Lampoon's* labelling him as "wishy-washy liberal fink" (more on that later).

One could argue that the super-panvision of "Berg's-Eye View" sees through the multifocals of opportunism, like Nixon's opinion-poll convictions. But Mr. Berg's real-life personality, as well as his remarks about humor, made it very clear where he's at, dispelling the notion that he might actually be Roger Kaputnik. He impressed me as just a plain honest man; he doesn't scruple to be honest, he just is honest, and he seems remarkably free of the inner vendettas that taint other humorists' material.

"What I try to do is say you all stink and I'm no better. Behind that liberal phoniness, we're all a bunch of bigots, and we won't admit it. I do," Berg said beligerently, adding that this is the reason why "All in the Family" is so popular on TV. After a graphic demonstration of how optical illusions work in the creative act, he said that "humor is the greatest of illusions; it gives the illusion of gaiety. Freud said

From remarks like these it became obvious that Berg doesn't believe in sugar-coating anything. So how can you call him a wishy-washy liberal fink? Would a wishy-washy liberal fink say this: "The generation gap has a bridge. It's called hypocrisy. It's on both sides. The funner makes a large fortune while his son is making a small fortune selling drugs to other kids." The *National Lampoon* in the October 1971 issue did a parody on MAD. Some of it was very clever and funny, in keeping with the *Lampoon's* usual .200 batting average, but much else, notably the Bergshit (ha-ha?) section, was more typical of this sophomoric, snot-nosed ragsheet.

A little analysis is in order. The *Lampoon* is a child of the "new wave" of humor brought on by the youth-drug-rock culture of the last five years. The main standard-bearers of the movement have been such people as Frank Zappa, R. Crumb and Zap Comix, lately the Firesign Theater, and even the Chicago Seven. When Abbie Hoffman named his kid America and Grace Slick named hers God, we arrived not at black comedy, not at theater of the absurd, but at the comedy of giving the finger, the laughter of I-don't-give-a-shit. We all know this; we all know that the avowed aim of Zap Comix is to gross you out, period.

There's a sequence in the *Lampoon's* take-off on Berg that has a delivery boy bringing a package to Dave Berg's door. "Say, aren't

you the same Dave Berg that draws for MAD magazine," says the kid. "That's me, young man," replies Roger Kaputnik, and the same exchange is paraphrased for several boxes in true Lighter-Side format. Finally, the punchline: kid goes, "Boy, are you an asshole!"

Boy, are you assholes, *National Lampoon*. You really piss me off. You were whelped on MAD's knee, yet all you are capable of now is to give the finger to a false image of Dave Berg. The thing is, there was no comic statement behind your calling him an asshole (Berg: "They didn't have me do anything assholeish"). MAD has point of view; so does *Esquire*, another genuinely amusing magazine. Painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa is a brainless act that may at best elicit a momentary heh-heh. Besides, there's nothing new about armpit humor. Read Eric Partridge's "Shakespeare's Bawdy", and he'll point out the difference between the amusing scatological and the sniggeringly anal. In dealing with profanity the Bard always chose the former way; the *Lampoon* thinks that the shortest distance between two points is reached by the latter.

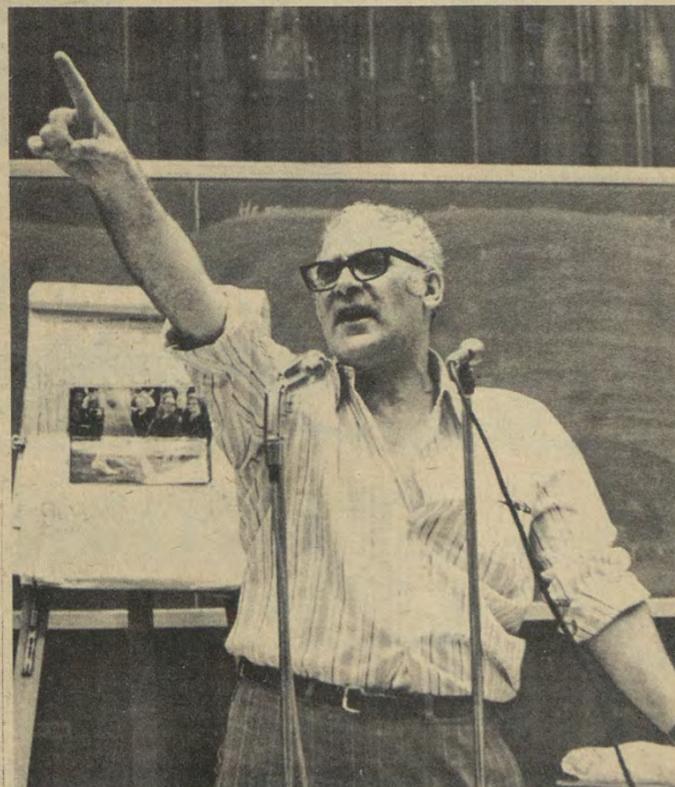
Maybe we really are witnessing something new. Previously it was always thought that there had to be a point of view behind humor. But you can't speak of wit and comic sensibility in the same breath with Phi Zappa Krappa". To infer that Zappa's humor has a self-conscious point of view behind it is just as misleading as simplistically to misconstrue Dave Berg, in print or in person, as a wishy-washy liberal fink. I'm told that the film "200 Motels" is a totally inane put-on, even for Mothers freaks. It may be this kind of

vacuity that gave Zero Mostel his name.

It's obvious that we have several different cultures, subcultures of time periods (the '30's, the '60's) caught in the bind of co-eval existence. I don't mean to expand this to Charles Reich proportions, but how else do you explain why the Art History 107 students laughed at the mere credit sequences of a silent film last semester, driving curator James Card to growl, "What's so damn funny about that?" Is drugs the only earmark of our own time-subculture's comedy? Why do so many of us feel we have to blow dope in order to get the most out of, not just "Yellow Submarine", but Mickey Mouse? Firesign's comedy-through-word-overload is just as grass-inspired (or -induced) as the Nicholson-Hopper pot scene about the planet Venus in "Easy Rider".

I submit that all it really boils down to is the distinction between humor that is art and humor that is not. At the lecture, in response to a question about the *Lampoon*, Berg said, "With them, they have two rules: if it's unfunny, put it in; if it's in bad taste, put it in." I'm not sure that this isn't all there is to the difference, culture lag or no. Berg also related the notorious tale of how a disguised *Lampoon* reporter ripped off files from MAD. Really fine, gang. If you can't beat 'em, cheat 'em.

"I laugh at myself in MAD magazine. The *Lampoon* came out and continued the exact same thing I was doing. They were laughing at me laughing at me." Imitation is the highest form of flattery, except when you throw in dirty words for no conceivable purpose. Then it's just cheap imitation.



CT Photo by Terry Atlas

State of the Press

It is by now a well known fact that the Appropriations Committee plans to crack down on funding of publications. In the past week, *Forum* and *Black Press* have witnessed this new hard line.

Clearly, those who support a firm ceiling for funding of publications are correct in stating that some of the existing publications can function under tighter budgets. But one must ask whether this concept does justice to services rendered or whether it is a case of misplaced priorities. While it is true that any view we can offer here is biased, we wish to point out that services which publications render are both considerable in comparison with other activities at this university, and essential to the intellectual and cultural environment of the community.

It is surprising that some students at the UR actually feel that publications should be watched more closely. Indeed, this is one university which gives only token support to many of its publications. A more admirable solution involves effective and realistic distribution of funds to support those organizations which have the greatest impact on the campus community.

If there is anything we can learn from the recent dispute between the Appropriations Committee and *Forum* it is this: the Appropriations Committee is entitled to regulate the financial state of campus publications, but publications should not be forced to operate under the fear of economic reprisal. Let us not fall to the ego trip that student governments and publications can potentially become; let us rather work together for something which will better serve the community we represent.

So, What's the Story?

One week has passed since the conclusion of the University Affairs calendar drive, and Chancellor Wallis is now in possession of some 800 letters addressed to him by the student body. Gregory Staple, chairman of the University Affairs Committee, and other students who voiced their opinions are anxiously awaiting some reply from the administration. As of this moment, none has been received.

The attention given to this issue assures us that students are willing to put effort into anything which will guarantee their part in the decision-making process. For this participation to occur, the administration must make public certain pieces of information, including relative feasibilities, costs, and support for the respective calendar proposals. It is absolutely essential that this information be disseminated to members of the university community. It is equally essential that members of the community take part in the decision.

The *Campus Times* urges Chancellor Wallis to make public the desired information. We, as students at this university, demand the right to take part in decisions which affect us.

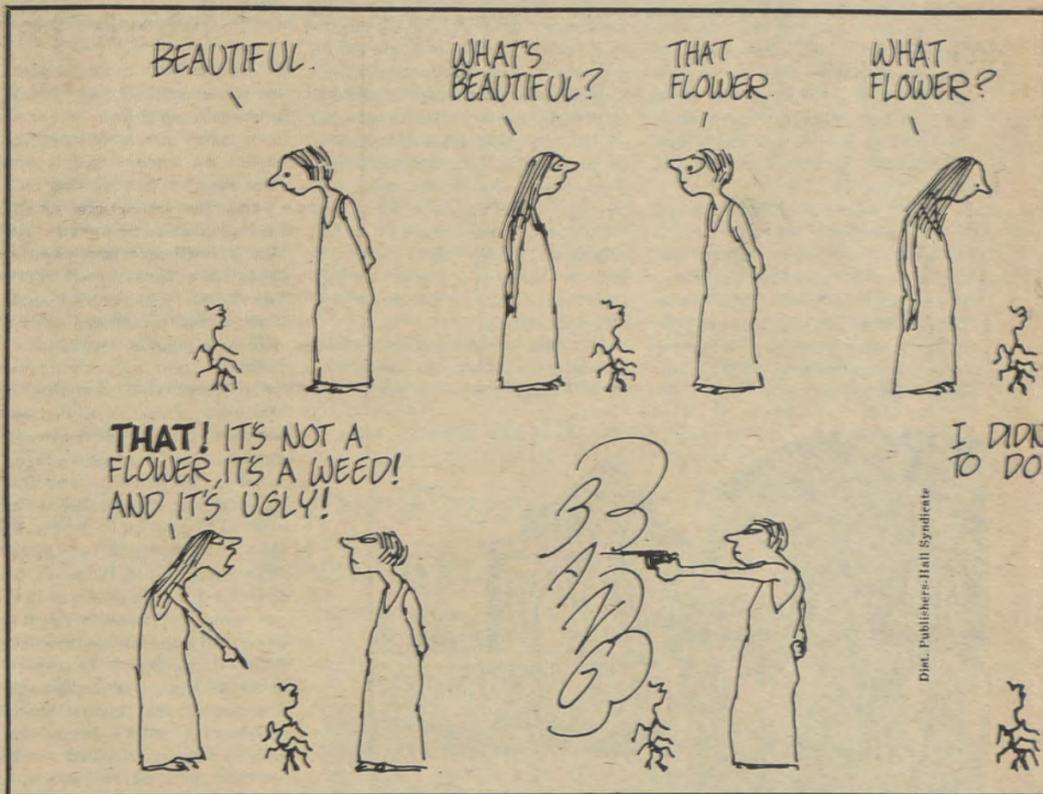
Jeffrey Newcorn
Editor-in-Chief

Robert Safran
Business Manager

Maria Rabar, Terry Atlas
Managing Editors

The editor-in-chief is responsible for all editorials.

The *CAMPUS TIMES*, the student newspaper of the University of Rochester, is published three times per week during the school year except the weeks before, during and after vacation and exam periods. Third class postage paid at Rochester, New York 14604. The subscription rate for 72 issues is \$10.00. Address all inquiries to: *CAMPUS TIMES*, 5008 River Station, Rochester, New York 14627.



The Ivy vs. The Dandelions

To the Editor:

I'm getting sick of hearing and reading about the inferiority of Rochester relative to the Ivy League god schools. I'm especially getting sick of having the student body here referred to as mere Ivy League rejects and having to blush in shame over such a thing. (Re: *Dammit, You Get Rochester on the Map*, February 25.)

First of all, think back to the reasons why someone may not get into an Ivy League school. Remember high school grades, the SAT's, the why-I-want-to-go-to-Yale essays that were the requirements for entry? Universally denounced as insufficient criteria for judging a person's worth, when they work to judge a person's *unworth*, we all accept their verdicts uncritically and completely.

But let's suppose that a person *does* fulfill all the "requirements" for entry. Did you know that a student can be rejected if he doesn't cross his t's and dot his i's? Or if his essays are not typed? Or if the person reading the application is in a bad mood? Or if the application gets lost or misfiled altogether? After a while, it's hard to tell the talent from the luck that works to determine entry.

There's also another consideration—Don't faint

when I tell you this, but not everyone here is an Ivy League reject. Some people *elected* to go here and others (gasp) actually *turned down* one or more of the sacred schools. It may be hard to imagine why a person would do such a thing now that we've been here for more than one semester...but I have a feeling that there comes a time in every person's life when he just can't remember why he has done *anything*....

There are a few reasons which come to mind, though: the lack of many-times phoney tradition which chokes other schools, the lack of a rah-rah "look at us" atmosphere, the potential for seeing and participating in real research before grad school, the campus, the kids. Rochester has things to offer. Maybe we just have to look a little harder to find them instead of merely being able to read them off in the UR catalogue.

Why are we here? Is it just for status? Should it really and truly pain you when people think Rochester is a state school? And is the 5000-dollar tuition the only way you can convince them that it isn't? So maybe here we don't all have the urge to paste Rochester stickers on our cars or keep pencils in a Rochester beer mug. Somehow, I think it's much better that way.

Leslie Schwartz

Zappa Is His Own Man

To the Editor:

Mark N. Grant's editorial on Dave Berg contained several unfounded references to Frank Zappa. Mr. Grant calls Zappa one of the "standard-bearers" of the "new wave of humor brought on by the youth-drug-rock culture." From this statement we would assume that Zappa is in agreement with this youth-etc., culture. This is about as far from the truth as one can get.

On an album released in 1967, the name of which, "We're Only In It For the Money", clearly states Zappa's relationship to this etc.-etc. culture, Zappa included a song called "Flower Punk". This song, in all of Zappa's sarcastic glory, puts down the "trippy hippie" movement. One of the lines from the song, "I'm really just a phony but forgive me 'cause I'm stoned", serves also as an adequate statement of Zappa's view of drug abuse.

Secondly, Mr. Grant informs us that "you can't speak of wit and comic sensibility in the same breath with 'Phi Zappa Krappa' ". This is, for those who are unfamiliar with it, a reference to a poster now being sold, which pictures Mr. Zappa sitting on the toilet. If this had been approved of by Zappa, I would have to agree with Mr. Grant; but it wasn't. Zappa himself, in live appearances and in interviews, is wont to make fun of the sickness of those people, in search of a "quick buck", who released this poster.

In answer to the question asked at the end of the "live" version of "Call Any Vegetable", "What can a person like myself say to a vegetable like you?", Zappa often monotonously, "Duh, I have a picture of you sitting on the toilet on my bedroom wall."

Lastly, Mr. Grant advises us that to "infer that Zappa's humor", (I must admit that I was entirely unaware of Zappa's fame as a humorist - all these years I thought he was a musician), "has a self-conscious point of view behind it" is absurd. In fact Mr. Grant "is told" that "the film '200 Motels' is a totally inane put-on, even for Mother's freaks." To say that this movie has no point and is marked by a lack of ideas is, again, a rash statement, especially when made by one who has never actually seen the movie. The movie is a musical and visual description of the nightmare encountered by rock musicians while touring: bad food, bad hotels, having to take part in "the horse race to cure horniness", and having to repeatedly ask the question "When are we going to get paid for this?"

The feeling that I got after reading Mr. Grant's editorial is that he knows close to nothing about Frank Zappa and this being the case, he should have picked on someone else. Zappa's image is bad enough, and does not need help from Mr. Grant. Jeff Putterman