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## Column -- "My Friend Dave"

By: **Craig Fischer**

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## COLUMNS



Monsters Eat Critics

## My Friend Dave

BY CRAIG FISCHER OCT 25, 2013

### Alphabet

In his book *The Avant-Garde Finds Andy Hardy* (1995), Robert Ray argues that film studies has fallen into a rut where most writing follows “the routinized procedures of any academic field,” and where the typical title for a publication or conference presentation is “Barthes, Brecht, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and all those other people, and *Robocop*” (5). Ray then suggests that we rouse film studies out of stagnation by abandoning traditional scholarship, at least for a while, in favor of playing *surrealistic games* with our subject. Movies surprise, infuriate, delight us: unconventional forms of criticism might do the same.

One of Ray’s games involves the alphabet. Borrowing a method from Roland Barthes’ eponymous biography, Ray suggests writing criticism in a series of short, “alphabetized fragments, including at least one for every letter” (120). These “alphabetized fragments” can be epigrams (à la Nietzsche), metaphors, anecdotes, lyrical descriptions, short bursts of analysis: what they won’t be is a predictable elaboration of an over-determined thesis. Ray then subjects the *Andy Hardy* films—sixteen old-time movies starring Mickey Rooney as a plucky, all-American boy growing into manhood—to the alphabetical method, discovering that even these films offer up strangeness to those willing to tinker with them. For the letter “M,” for instance, Ray lists three instances of “Mise-en-abyme,” three moments where the fiction of an *Andy Hardy* film is punctured by self-reflexivity. One such mise-en-abyme is this triptych of photographs, from *Life Begins for Andy Hardy* (1941):

Ray’s commentary is terse: “Shot-reverse-shot sequence [Andy intercut with a billboard advertising “Golden Ham]” (158). Yet when I got Ray’s joke—that this shot-reverse-shot refers to Mickey Rooney’s status as MGM’s “golden ham” during the early 1940s—I laughed out loud.

Can the alphabetical method be used to write criticism about a comics artist? What artist should we choose? Should it be an artist whose work is as corny as the *Andy Hardy* movies?

### Berg

My knowledge of the life of cartoonist Dave Berg (1920-2002) is shallow, limited to facts I’ve read in a handful of sources. In the section on Berg in *MAD Art* (2002), Mark Evanier notes that Berg was born in Brooklyn, in a family whose father had once studied to be a rabbi; that as a child, Berg loved comic strips and movie comedians like Laurel and Hardy; that at the age of ten, Berg displayed enough talent to take advanced art classes, and at the age of twelve earned a part-time scholarship to study at the Pratt Art Institute. Then, according to Evanier, Berg “later studied at Cooper Union, then went back to Pratt” (60).

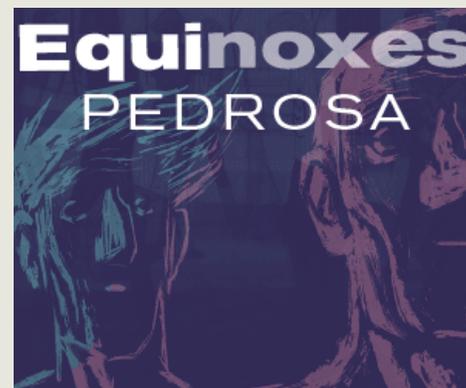
While at Cooper Union, Berg served as an assistant to Will Eisner (some obituaries identified Berg as an inker of *Spirit* backgrounds), and then served in the Navy during World War II. After returning to domestic life, he freelanced for various comics companies (Fawcett, Archie, and Timely) until the mid-50’s comic book implosion left him underemployed. One example of Berg’s freelancing career is “Fire Mission,” a collaboration with Harvey Kurtzman originally published in *Two-Fisted Tales* # 29 (1952) and reprinted in Fantagraphics’ *Corpse on the Imjin* book; Jared Gardner is right when he writes in *Corpse* that “Berg’s satirical edge comes perilously close to dissolving the tale of tragic heroism into

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parody” (79). Berg also wrote a satirical pitch (“Sports Cars”) for Kurtzman’s short-lived *Trump* magazine, but Kurtzman instead directed Berg to *MAD*. “Berg went to *MAD* and never left,” writes Evanier. “‘Sports Cars,’ illustrated by Bob Clarke, appeared in *MAD* #38, but by then Dave had sold other ideas to Al Feldstein and even started drawing them. His first *MAD* appearance was in #34, cover-dated July 1957—a piece about modern furniture with himself as the central character” (61).

Berg introduced “The Lighter Side of...,” his iconic feature of naturalistic gags, with “The Lighter Side of the Television Set” in *MAD* #66 (October 1961). “The Lighter Side” appeared in every issue of *MAD* from #66 until #356 (April 1997), and frequently thereafter, until Berg’s death on May 7, 2002. The final “Lighter Side” strips by him were published in # 423 (November 2002). (Many of the issue numbers and dates throughout this article were compiled with help from [Doug Gilford’s Berg checklist](#) on the “*MAD* Cover Site,” an excellent resource.)

There will be more attention given to Berg very soon. In November, Running Press will publish *MAD*’s *Greatest Artists: Dave Berg: Five Decades of “The Lighter Side of...”*, a collection of strips and sketches that will also include an introduction by Drew Friedman and an essay by Berg’s daughter Nancy. While we wait for this book, though, we can still learn a little about Berg’s cartoons by subjecting them to alphabetical exegesis: *The Lighter Side of Sequential Art Commentary*.

### **Copyright Infringement**

The 15-page parody of *MAD* that ran in the October 1971 *National Lampoon* (the “back-to-school” issue) could, at first glance, be misrecognized as an actual issue of *MAD*. Art director Michael Gross designed the *Lampoon*’s visual satire to imitate perfectly the object of ridicule, and their *MAD* section includes a caricatured film parody (*Citizen Gaines*, a brutal “movie” about Bill Gaines betraying the ideals of *MAD* and driving Harvey Kurtzman away), a “Horrorifying Clichés” page (about *MAD* itself, of course) where Ralph Reese perfectly imitates Paul Coker Jr.’s art style, a “*MAD* Fold-In,” and a single-page jab at Berg’s “Lighter Side” drawn by Marvel staffer Stu Schwartzberg. One of Schwartzberg’s Berg parodies:

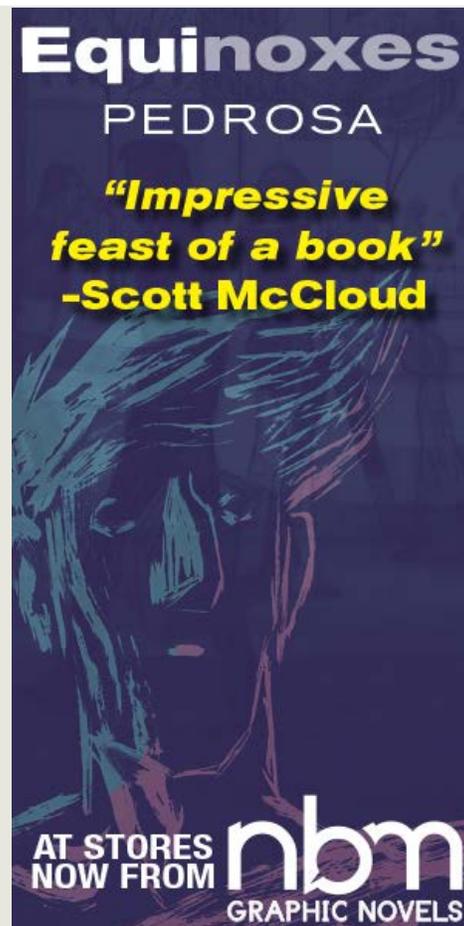
[Evanier tells a story](#) about comic fan and dealer Dave Gibson, who approached Berg at a 1972 comicon and began to deliver the dialogue in the opening panels of the “boy, are you an asshole” strip. Berg responded with, “That’s me, young man,” and “That’s right, youngster,” and Gibson believed that Berg was in on the joke—until he called Berg an asshole, and, according to Evanier, “there is silence. In fact, of all the silences I have heard in my life, this one most closely approximated the sound of floating adrift in deep outer space. It was finally broken only by the noise of Dave Berg sputtering and fuming and storming off. Turns out Dave Berg had never seen the *National Lampoon* parody.”

About twenty years later, “in 1991 or 1992,” Sam Henderson and some unnamed friends put together a zine titled *The Lighter Side of Copyright Infringement*, featuring Berg *MAD* art with rewritten, raunchy words in the balloons. (Henderson is proud that they found a font similar to *MAD*’s mechanical typography.) Two examples from *Copyright Infringement*:

The editors of *MAD* began to practice Berg-*détournement* themselves when they introduced (in #487, March 2008) their “Darker Side of The Lighter Side” feature, a recycling of Berg’s images with new word balloons. Now Berg’s delicately-drawn characters deliver jokes about murder and sex offenders in the pages of the magazine itself. Late capitalism can recuperate and profit from *anything*, including the subversion of its own laws about property ownership, but the inspiration for “The Darker Side of The Lighter Side” goes back to the earliest comic-book issues of *MAD*, where Harvey Kurtzman wrote new, supposedly funny word balloons for previously published E.C. horror stories (“Murder the Husband!” / “Murder the Story!” *MAD* #11, May 1954) and slapped captions on pictures of babies (“Baby Quips!” *MAD* #13, July 1954) to save money on contributors’ wages and keep ahead of crushing deadlines.

### **Dave (Rachels)**

In January, my friend Dave Rachels asked me if I wanted his extensive *MAD* collection. Six months later, on their way to South Carolina, Dave and his wife Angie stopped in our hometown and gave me three magazine-sized long boxes of *MAD*s. The Rachels collection extends from issue #78 (April 1963, the month before I was born) to #465 (May 2006), although the ‘60s are represented only by a handful of



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mostly coverless *MAD*s. There's a generous sampling of *MAD Super Special* reprints, and a complete run of issues from #162 (October 1973) to #465. I asked Dave about his long-term devotion to the Usual Gang of Idiots, and his thoughts on Dave Berg, and here is his reply:

*"I bought my first issue of MAD in the summer of 1975 at the UtoteM convenience store four-tenths of a mile from my house in Miami, Florida. I was eight years old. Looking back, I find it hard to believe that my parents let me walk to the store alone, but I'm glad they did. At the UtoteM, I spent my modest income (I can remember distinctly when my allowance was 35¢ per week) on my childhood things: Fun Dip, Now and Laters, Pixy Stix, Wacky Packs (we never called them 'Wacky Packages'), baseball cards, and MAD.*

*"I know I bought other reading material at the UtoteM. There was at least one issue each of Time and Sports Illustrated during the 1976 Summer Olympics and a comic book or two that looked funny (superheroes were not my thing—could I have dabbled briefly in Archie?). But only MAD took root. I do not know how often my parents let me walk to the UtoteM, but it was often enough that I never missed an issue, despite MAD's strange publication schedule that I never quite managed to learn. At some point I realized that I had become a collector, so I sifted through the debris of my room for my back issues. One or two were tattered to the point of missing covers, which I found and stapled back on. I had a few years to go before Mylar bags.*

*"MAD, of course, was a special club for us kids who enjoyed feeling superior to grown-ups, as we laughed at the stupidity of their movies and learned to parry their stupid questions with snappy answers. My favorite MAD writers were Don Martin and Dave Berg, which I always assumed was true for everyone who read the magazine. As MAD's Maddest Artist, Martin didn't fit the MAD mode because he wasn't topical. His zaniness was hit or miss. When he was good, he was the best thing in the magazine, but he wasn't as reliable as Berg. Reliability was Berg's specialty.*

*"Dave Berg was like macaroni and cheese. For more than 25 years after my fateful purchase at the UtoteM, 'The Lighter Side' was my literary comfort food. I loved macaroni and cheese as a kid, and I love it now. Why wouldn't I? It might be a little bland, but it's warm and filling, and it makes me feel good. That was my relationship with Dave Berg. When Don Martin left MAD for Cracked, I never thought of switching brands, but if Berg had left, I might have been tempted.*

*"From the time I bought my first issue of MAD, I have always thought of the magazine not as a whole but as a collection of writers. As long as they were there, I was there. It hurt when Martin left in 1988, but Berg's death in 2002 was worse. I kept subscribing to MAD until 2006, but that was just momentum. The core of what I loved was gone, and there were no writers that MAD could have hired to fill that gap. When Berg died, I was 35 years old, and 35-year-old me could never have fallen in love with a cartoonist the way that eight-year-old me did. It was a physiological impossibility. That mac-and-cheese pleasure center in my brain was closed to new cartoonists. I found Dave Berg when my brain needed Dave Berg. It was only when Berg died that I found the need was gone."*

## **Eyes**

In the final panels of his "Lighter Side" strips, Berg often emphasizes his punch lines by having a non-speaking character, the butt of the joke, look directly at the reader with a glare that breaks through the fourth wall. In *MAD* #302 (April 1991), four of fourteen "Lighter Side" strips feature this double-take:

Berg isn't interested in creating a coherent, voyeuristic story space; his characters *know* they're on stage, and look to us for pity as the gag smacks them. Berg's style is a throwback to older, less "realistic" forms of mass media: the performativity of vaudeville and the circus, the direct address of the cinema of attractions, and those comic strips featuring a character flipping out of a panel, with only their feet visible to us, as they hear the same bad joke as we do.

## **Feldstein**

At the 2008 Heroes Con, Ben Towle and I, aided by panelists Roger Langridge and Richard Thompson, conducted [an interview](#) with EC writer and *MAD* editor Al Feldstein, who reminded us that Berg was part of a second wave of creators who replaced the cartoonists defecting from *MAD* to work with Harvey Kurtzman on *Trump* and subsequent projects: "When I took over *MAD*, Harvey had gone off with everybody: Davis, Jaffee, everybody. I had to get a whole new staff and do it fast! [...] I was lucky. I'm an

atheist, and *thank God* [laughter] into the doorway came Dave Berg, Sergio, Prohias...I was very lucky that I was able to fill my needs.”

### **Gags**

In an essay on Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* translated by Dwight Decker and published in the last issue of *Nemo* (#31, January 1992), Thierry Groensteen argues that the conventional rhythm of a four-panel newspaper cartoon is the steady build-up of a situation “in a logical, progressive, and linear manner from the first panel to the third” (31), followed by a disjunctive surprise in the fourth panel that undermines the situation and creates the effect of the punch line. In this construction, Groensteen notes, “the third panel can often be deleted without harming the intelligibility of the gag” (31).

Berg’s four-panel “Lighter Side” gags often follow this structure, with his third panels serving as an unnecessary amplification of a state of affairs already established in the first two panels. Several strips in “The Lighter Side of Shopping” (*MAD* #103, June 1966), for instance, could drop their third panels and remain intelligible and amusing:

During the early years of the “Lighter Side,” Berg’s default construction is the four-panel gag. In *MAD* #103, there are fourteen “Lighter Side of Shopping” comics crammed into four pages, and all are four-panel gags, but by *MAD* #261 (March 1986), fourteen “Lighter Side” strips fill five (instead of four) pages, and only one strip takes up four panels. (Five have three panels, and eight have only two panels.) This simplification of the “Lighter Side” isn’t too painful—Berg simply drops the disposable third panel and reduces his gags to their essentials in this late period. In a decisive repudiation of the Kurtzman /Elder Chicken Fat aesthetic and the playful extravagance of Aragones’ marginalia, “The Lighter Side” got simpler and blunter in its humor.

### **Happiness**

The characters in a typical “Lighter Side” strip believe themselves to be normal and well-adjusted, with personalities and behaviors that remind me of Eric Wilson’s description of Americans in his book *Against Happiness* (2008): “They tilt their heads to the side, feign amusement, and nod knowingly. They clinch their eyes in looks of concern. They blink a lot, bewildered. They murmur truisms about overcoming adversity. They say that they love their parents and puppies and all babies. They devour bestsellers about the wisdom of children or coaches. They can be smarmy war-mongering conservatives or passive-aggressive peace-loving liberals. They can be Christians hiding their meanness or New Agers hungry for power. They adore the Lifetime channel. They are happy campers. They want God to bless the world. They want us to ask them about their children. They believe that a hug is an ideal gift; one size fits all. They think that kind words make good echoes. They join Book-of-the-Month clubs and identify with sympathetic characters. They sign their e-mails with chirpy icons. They swear by the power of prayer. They swear by the power of positive thinking. They dream of having Norman Vincent Peale as a dinner guest. They would eat Jell-O and Cool Whip. They would eat turkey too and make an endless Thanksgiving.”

And they are, of course, all hypocrites. “The Lighter Side” was a central reason why teenagers love *MAD*: teens realize that all adults are two-faced, and saw that fundamental truth in Berg’s cartoons.

### **Inertia**

Near the end of a long interview with *The Comics Journal* (issue #81, May 1983), Bill Gaines objects to some of the material that *MAD* was then publishing; he considered throw-up, pot and dog shit jokes offensive, but was reluctant to impose his “conservative” sensibilities on his staff. Was the predictable, safe, PG-rated (at worst) “Lighter Side” more to his taste? Or were there other reasons why Gaines and the post-Gaines *MAD* editorial staff published Berg’s cartoons for forty-five years?

Slightly earlier in the interview, answering the charge that *MAD* lacks originality, Gaines says, “You want *MAD* to be innovative, I’ll fire all the writers, fire all the artists, fire all the editors, start all over with a bunch of young kids, and it’ll be very innovative. But what happens to all the people I fired? They starve? You can’t do that” (82).

### **Jaffee**

Berg was a strange mix with the other *MAD* personnel. According to [Wikipedia](#), “Berg held an honorary doctorate in theology. He produced regular religious-themed work for *Moshiach Times* and the B’nai Brith newsletter. His interaction with *MAD*’s atheist publisher Bill Gaines was suitably irreverent: Berg would tell Gaines, ‘God bless you,’ and Gaines would reply, ‘Go to Hell.’” A critical take on Berg’s personality was offered by Al Jaffee, in an interview for the book *And Here’s the Kicker: Conversations*

with *21 Top Humor Writers on their Craft* (edited by Mike Sachs, 2009):

Sachs: *What was Dave Berg like as a person?*

Jaffee: *Dave had a messianic complex of some sort. He was battling...he had good and evil inside of him, clashing all the time. It was sad, in a sense, because he wanted to be taken very seriously and, you know, the staffers at MAD just didn't take anybody seriously. Most of all, ourselves.*

Sachs: *Do you think Dave Berg's inner battle later expressed itself in his strip "The Lighter Side of..."?*

Jaffee: *It came out in a lot of the things he did. He had a very moralistic personality. I mean, he moralized all the time. And his gags were very suburban middle-class America. Plus, he was very religious. He wrote a book called My Friend God. And, of course, if you write a book like that, you just know that the MAD staff is going to make fun of you. We would ask him questions like, "Dave, when did you and God become such good friends? Did you go to college together, or what?"*

*I think Dave had a feeling that his contribution to the success of MAD wasn't appreciated enough. And I think this bothered him. He once told a staff member that he received so much fan mail they had to hide it from him. And he really believed this. Naturally, most of us would just roll our eyes, because we didn't expect tons and tons of fan mail; and if there was fan mail, we always received it. I guess Dave felt like he was carrying the whole magazine, and he should have been treated royally. (223)*

### **Kaputnik, Roger**

Berg inserted himself, or at least a character that looked like him (short hair, glasses, a pipe perpetually stuck in his mouth, a distillation of the Eisenhower era), into "Lighter Side" strips under the pseudonym "Roger Kaputnik." In the latter years of the strip, the crabby Kaputnik doppelganger would almost always be paired in gags about hypochondria and medicine with a mustachioed, likewise misanthropic doctor. Here are two such face-offs between Kaputnik and his physician (from *MAD* #290 [October 1989] and #349 [September 1996]):

Binky Brown, Harold H. Harold, Richard Rory, "Kirk Morrison": why do comics writers smuggle themselves into their narratives, even while hiding their own names? Eddie Campbell became "Alec MacGarry" and renamed all the members of "The King Canute Club" because he feared that the Club's activities could, years later, still be punishable by law. The first version of Debbie Dreschler's story "Visitors in the Night" (in *Drawn and Quarterly* volume 1, #10, 1992) identifies a sexually abused child as "Debbie," although subsequent reprintings change the girl's name to "Lily": Dreschler had heartbreaking reasons for putting distance between herself and her protagonist. But why did Berg create Kaputnik? To take the piss out of himself? To make autobiographical marks, literally and figuratively, in art that otherwise left little room for self-expression?

I'm going to write and draw a graphic novel for DC/Time/Warner with Kaputnik as its hero. In the first chapter, Kaputnik's brother Henry will die from complications of open heart surgery; then Kaputnik will search for Henry, inexplicably alive, in a kibbutz in Israel; then Kaputnik will have open heart surgery to cure impotence, and bleed out on the operating table. The book will conclude with a resurrected Kaputnik visiting Israel and coming to a deeper understanding of his Jewish heritage ("Do you know what it's like being a Jew when the subject of Jews arises?" said Kaputnik, puffing his pipe, trying to come up with a wry witticism to lighten the situation.") I'll call my GN *Earth Prime: Crisis of Infinite Counterlives*, and my *nom de plume* will be "Pierre Menard."

### **Last**

In issue #427 (March 2003), five months after the final "Lighter Side" strips by Berg were published in *MAD*, the editors assigned gags that Berg "had written, but not illustrated" to other established *MAD* artists, as a "Tribute to 'The Lighter Side of...'" Creators of Berg's generation who participated included Aragones, Jaffee, Mort Drucker and Paul Coker Jr. Angelo Torres' strip has a caricature of Charles Kochman, then the Editor of Licensed Publishing for DC Comics and *MAD*, and today the Executive Editor at art book and comics publisher Harry N. Abrams:

Some of the younger *MAD* illustrators drawing Berg's words were John Caldwell, Tomas Bunk, Hermann Mejia and Drew Friedman (who snuck a stippled portrait of Bill Gaines into his two panels). My favorite of all the tributes is by Jack Davis, not because it's a particularly funny gag about fungus on locker room floors, but because this is Davis' last appearance (so far) in *MAD*. The Berg/Davis collaboration is neither

man's best work, but Davis exits gracefully from *MAD* by saying goodbye to an old friend.

### **Mystery**

On September 18, 1999, Mike Nelson, Tom Servo and Croow! of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* aimed their allusion-heavy mockery at the low-budget film *Merlin's Shop of Magical Wonders* (produced, directed and written by Kenneth J. Berton, 1996). *Merlin* features two horror tales linked by the presence of Merlin the magician (George Milan) from King Arthur's Round Table, who time-travels to the present to re-ignite in the modern world a passion and interest in magic. The horror tales and Merlin vignettes are presented as nested stories told by an old man (Ernest Borgnine) to his grandson (Mark Hurtado).

The first horror story is about a reporter and callous husband, Jonathan Cooper III (John Terrence), who begins to age prematurely as a result of his dabbling in magic. Forty minutes into the film, during a sequence where he's force-feeding potions to his cat, Terrence is shot in an unflattering, bug-eyed close-up, which prompts Tom Servo to joke, "He's drawn by Dave Berg!"

Does a mention on *MST3K* define you as part of the canon, universally familiar, or are you instead consigned to the dustbin of forgotten, ephemeral pop culture?

### **Nazis**

Every year from 1960 to 1987, *MAD* publisher Bill Gaines paid for an annual exotic vacation for himself, members of his editorial staff, and steady *MAD* contributors. In 1960 the *MAD*men (and all the travelers were male, until 1980) went to Haiti; in 1974, Tahiti. Gaines' last trip before his death was to France, in 1987, where he and the *MAD* tourists did a gastronomic tour through rural France.

According to staffer Frank Jacobs, in an article titled "What Were the *MAD* Trips? (in *Totally MAD*, edited by John Ficarra, 2012), Berg was pranked during this 1987 trip, during a small-town French lunch, when writer-artist Duck Edwing stood up and announced to an entire restaurant, "Seated here is former sergeant Dave Berg, who saved this village when he single-handedly wiped out a nest of Nazi machine guns." Edwing was kidding, of course—Berg had served instead in the Pacific during World War II—but everyone in the restaurant exploded into applause.

In his introduction to *Totally Mad*, *Daily Show* writer Eric Drysdale asks the (unanswered) question, "What about Dave Berg's unmasking of suburban hostility?" Given how gentle and middle-of-the-road Berg's cartooning is, I'm not sure I accept the "unmasking" argument, but Berg's work *is* undoubtedly gentle and suburban. World War II affected on many cartoonists—I'm thinking of Charles Schulz's free-floating angst and the forgotten men that haunt Will Eisner's post-war *Spirits*—but the war seems to have bounced off Berg without an impact. All of Berg's characters are the same genial hypocrites underneath their surface differences: the hippie pothead spouting counter-culture clichés is a hairier version of the suburban pipe-smoker, and though riddled with foibles, neither of them is truly evil.

### **Oubapo**

Berg's feature underwent a significant and lamentable change in *MAD* #218 (October 1980). Previously, all the "Lighter Side" strips in any given issue connected to a single topic: the strips in *MAD* #217 (September 1980), for instance, addressed "The Lighter Side of...Inflation." In #218, however, Berg shifted to a format where each individual gag addressed a new subject. This inaugural installment of the smorgasbord version of "Lighter Side" includes strips about "Making Ends Meet," "Intruders," "Summer Romances" and "Breaking Up," among other topics. The unifying theme was gone for good.

Various comics creators, most notably the international members of **Oubapo** (*Ouvroir de bande dessinée potentielle*, French for "Workshop of Potential Comics Art"), believe in the power of self-imposed constraints to stimulate creativity. Oubapo artists create comics that operate like palindromes, or repeat the same image from panel to panel while changing captions and dialogue; when I read an Oubapo comic, I'm charmed by the ingenuity and effort the artist brings to the challenge of adhering to the constraint. (Oubapo comics, and literary works written under constraints, are one inspiration for my alphabetical organization here.)

For almost twenty years, since the first "Lighter Side" in *MAD* #66, Berg conducted a prolonged exercise in Oubapian aesthetics, challenging himself with every issue to invent enough jokes focused on a central topic. Turning "Lighter Side" into a series of unrelated gags, though, brought the exercise to an end. "Lighter Side" shifts from being a multi-faceted, constraint-driven meditation on a modern-life issue to a gag spread. Berg continues the smorgasbord version of "Lighter Side" until his death in 2002, but it's a lesser achievement than the focused exercises of the first nineteen years.

### **Production**

Beginning in the late 1980s, Berg began to reserve the top strip on the fifth page of his "Lighter Side"

feature for a gag about “The Office,” noteworthy because most of these strips are a roman á clef satire of the *MAD* magazine offices, complete with a wily boss character that looks like Bill Gaines. An early example, from #285, March 1989:

The portrait that emerges of “Bill Gaines” in these “Office” strips is not flattering: in one (#304, July 1991), he bores his employees to sleep; in another (#306, October, 1991), he tells an employee at the bottom of the business hierarchy that he’s “found his niche.” Soon after Bill Gaines passed away in June 1992, however, Berg retired “Gaines” from “The Office,” representing him solely as a photograph on the wall, responding to the antics of the *MAD* staff.

### **Questions (A Found Poem for the Middle Class)**

**How many** of you have a **musical background**?

**Why** did they have to **list us** as one of the “**Top Ten Cities to Live In**”?

**Remember** when we **first met**?

You called me an **incurable romantic**?

**How’s things**?

**Retired**?

**You’re retired**?

**Leftovers again**?

What are you **talking about**?

Do you **know what it is**?

Dad, do you **think Santa** will **bring** me a **dollhouse**?

What’s with the “**Santa**” **stuff**?

Kaputnik, you take **great pride** in **calling yourself** a “**self-made man**,” don’t you?

Then **why** the hell did you **make** your **stomach** so **big**?

(All questions from the “Lighter Side” feature in *MAD* #362, October 1997.)

### **Random**

I picked a box of the Rachels collection at random, took off its lid, closed my eyes, and pulled out an issue. Keeping my eyes shut, I removed the issue from its bag, opened it, and touched the page with my index finger. I repeated this until I found myself pointing at the following panel from Berg’s “Lighter Side” (#269, March 1987):

### **Sex**

“C’mon baby...**GIVE!!**” What do we want more, the sex or the joke? (From “The Lighter Side of Sex,” *MAD* #136, July 1970.)

The gag is corny—why shouldn’t a woman be desirable for *both* his personality and her body?—but there’s real sensuality in Berg’s pen work. He contours bodies with delicate holding lines; the woman’s limbs, and the side of the man’s face, are drawn with lines as thin as the wispy, outlines of the lamp and chair behind the characters. The thin lines are complimented by Berg’s willingness to lay in spot blacks (the man’s slacks, the stripes on the woman’s dress) and to dash in those hundreds of pen marks to denote hair waves. The result is a clear picture that still reads as complex and graphically diverse enough to be lifelike.

When I posted on Facebook that I was writing an essay about Berg, comics scholar Peter Sattler responded with, “I love Daniel Clowes!” My reply: “Daniel Clowes—the love child of Dave Berg and John Forte?” Peter was right: Berg and Clowes are linked by their love of caricature, by their attention to the shifting emotional planes of the human face. For Berg, the face is the sexiest part of the body.

### **Teeth**

*The Comics Journal* #132 (November 1989) features an interview with Lynda Barry, and near the beginning of that interview is the following exchange:

Barry: *I had to write something for Blab! on how MAD magazine and EC comics affected me, and they didn’t! Except for I like MAD magazine mainly because—who did “The*

*Lighter Side of... ”?*

Thom Powers: *Dave Berg*.

Barry: *See, that’s an example. Anybody who’s into comics would know it was Dave Berg, right? But all I know is that he draws really good teeth; I was obsessed with the way he drew teeth.*

Circumstances drive us to our obsessions and joys. In her [blog tribute](#) to the comic strip *Family Circus*, written on the occasion of artist Bil Keane’s death, Barry writes that *Circus* was desperately important to her because she was “a kid growing up in a troubled household. We didn’t have books in the house but we did have the daily paper and I remember picking out *Family Circus* before I could really read.” *Circus’* portrait of a lovely, stable family gave Barry her first glimpse of a kinder world. I picture her as she pictures herself in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, sifting through piles of forgotten newspapers and magazines, and digging for poignant stories in “lost and found” classified ads. And maybe she borrowed her brother’s *MAD* magazines to stare at Dave Berg’s precise rendition of teeth, and dreamed.

### **Unities**

You might remember the Three Unities from high school. Derived from a Renaissance reading (some say a misreading) of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE), the Unities are based on the belief that a work of drama is most effective when it (a.) focuses on a single action or plot that (b.) takes place in a single day and (c.) unfolds in a single location. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (429 BCE) was considered by Aristotle’s neoclassical critics to be perfect drama precisely because it follows the Three Unities. *Oedipus Rex’s* flashbacks—such as Oedipus’ inadvertent slaying of his father—are narrated in dialogue rather than dramatized. The “present time” of the play occurs solely in Oedipus’ palace, and zeroes in on the King’s dawning realization that he’s violated the incest taboo.

Given their brief length and joke-telling function, most humorous comic strips stick very closely to the Three Unities, though there are exceptions and qualifications. Sometimes, when a character has a comic-strip flashback, the images show us the past in concrete visual terms, as in this Richard Thompson *Cul de Sac* daily:

As Alice reminisces, we see Big Shirley and a photo of her Grandpa in panels two and three. This is a slight variation on a strict Three Unities production of *Oedipus Rex*, where the memories of characters would be spoken about, but never actually visualized on stage. According to the Three Unities, violating dramatic space with three-dimensional flashbacks would undermine the play’s sense of realism.

A more serious comic-strip subversion of the Three Unities is what we might call the *ironic final panel*, where a strip’s gag depends on a dissonant shift in time and space between the penultimate and last panel. Here’s an example from *Doonesbury*:

The joke is the contrast between Mike’s earnest soundtrack (“Midnight Train to Georgia,” “By the Time I Get to Phoenix” and “America”) and J.J.’s new performance-art hipster persona. To create this ironic juxtaposition, Garry Trudeau breaks the Unity of space by jumping from Mike’s train in panel three to J.J.’s pumpkin performance in the final panel.

For this term, I re-read all the “Lighter Side” strips published in *MAD* in a single year (from #196-203, January thru December 1978), and couldn’t find any examples of Berg deviating from the Three Unities. All the strips are brief, occurring only over the time it would take for the dialogue to be spoken aloud, and all rush single-mindedly to their gags. The only leaps in space are those which shift from one side of a door to the other, as in the first strip in #196, which begins with a wife speaking at a closed bathroom door, and then shifts, in panel two, to her husband behind the door and in the bathtub. Though some elements of his art shiver on the paper—like Caniff, he’s adept at zooming in on characters’ faces, and pulling out for “long shots,” especially if doing so is integral to the joke—Berg remains the most theatrical of cartoonists, and I’d love to see a night at the theater of non-stop Berg vignettes, a rapid-fire cavalcade of “Lighter Side” gags performed with vaudevillian *chutpah* and a take-no-prisoners assault on the fourth wall. Too much light makes Dave Berg go blind.

### **Vanilla**

From [Terre Thaemlitz’s essay](#) “How *MAD’s* Dave Berg and Roger Kaputnik Introduced Me to Post-Modernity”: “Berg considers himself representative of Middle America, while at the same time having a sneaking suspicion that undesirable conservatism and narrow-mindedness inhabit the core of dominant cultural forces which formulate his ‘normal’ existence. The result is a sense of paranoia and surveillance typical of the White Liberal subject who desires both cultural order and individuality. Berg’s need to police his own desires so as to keep from assimilating with the conservative cesspool, coupled with a fear

of social ostracization for being too ‘radical’ or ‘left-wing,’ keeps him emotionally on edge, civic minded and politically passive.”

### **Will**

In *MAD* #287 (June 1989), there is a three-page preview of Will Eisner’s *City People Notebook*, a book of sketches and vignettes about urban life released later in 1989 by Kitchen Sink. The drawings and captions of Eisner’s material included in this issue concern smells, about how “short dwellers tend to be very aware of city odors” and about how the “smellmanship” of a hot dog cart can lure in customers. Eisner was an odd fit with the more slapstick *MAD* aesthetic, and I wonder how Dave Berg felt when he saw his old boss in the pages of the magazine. Did Berg feel a rush of happy memories, or perhaps a sense of proprietary pride about his own long career with *MAD*? Was Berg surprised when he saw the “@ 1989 Will Eisner” caption at the bottom right of the first page of the *City People* excerpt? Did he wish for copyright ownership of his own work? Did in fact Berg read *MAD* on a regular basis?

### **X (The Unknown)**

From the letters page of *MAD* #211 (December 1979):

### **Yahweh**

In 1972, Signet Books, the company responsible for hundreds of *MAD* paperbacks during the magazine’s heyday, published Berg’s book *My Friend God* in the same format. Even though *My Friend God* is designed to look like a *MAD*/Berg collection, the book is different enough to warrant the following disclaimer on page nine:

**The Publisher of MAD Magazine,**

**William M. Gaines,**

**asked me to announce that**

**I DO NOT SPEAK FOR HIM,**

**or for the Editor,**

**Albert B. Feldstein,**

**or for the Associate Editors,**

**Jerry De Fuccio and Nick Meglin,**

**or for the Art Director,**

**John Putnam,**

**or for any of the other**

**USUAL GANG OF IDIOTS!**

**For while there is METHOD to their**

**MADNESS,**

**I AM MAD WITHOUT ANY METHOD WHATSOEVER! (9)**

Ever the atheist, Gaines disassociated himself and *MAD* from *My Friend God* because the book is a prose treatise on Jewish beliefs and the late-’60s counter-culture, occasionally punctuated by full-page Berg illustrations. In the first chapter, “A Week before Once Upon a Time,” Berg discusses Jewish contributions to world culture (music, literature, theater, mitzvahs, guilt), although claiming that the chapter has a stable “topic” ignores how relentlessly digressive Berg’s writing is. He writes in a kind of hipster, free-verse style—very few lines of print in *My Friend God* actually stretch over to the right margin—and he habitually interrupts the flow of his writing with extended jokes and tangential stories:

There is another old story that proves

that Jews are not smarter

than anyone else.

It is said:

“Thirteen Jews started  
the Catholic church.  
Today it’s one of the  
richest organizations  
in the world.  
If Jews are so **SMART**,  
how come they let all  
that **MONEY**

**GET OUT OF THEIR HANDS?”** (17)

Other topics covered in *My Friend God* are racism (“So you see / **EVERYBODY IN THE WORLD / IS COLORED** / Except for some **DULL PEOPLE** I know, / who are **COLORLESS**” [52]), anti-Semitism, and the role of Israel in the modern world. “Israel: The Land of Milk and Chutzpah” begins with an illustration of monstrous Arabs pointing machine guns at a tiny David, armed only with his slingshot, while a hippie runs across the foreground of the image carrying a sign that says “Israel is the Aggressor.”

The last chapter of *My Friend God* is “The Lower Life of Higher Education,” Berg’s wry take on the hippie counter-culture. Berg’s ideas here are, perhaps unsurprisingly, conservative; he argues that student dissent is the product of “the over-thirties” making things too easy for their kids (“You took away **CHALLENGE!**” [131]), and cartoons furiously against drug use:

*My Friend God* must’ve been somewhat successful, because Signet published a sequel titled *Roger Kaputnik and God* (1974), which I haven’t yet read. In 1994, SPI books (“The Small Publisher...with BIG Books!”) issued a version of *My Friend God* in 1994 that is—judging from the pages from the SPI *God* available on [Google Books](#)—substantially different from the original Signet paperback. One Amazon commenter complained that the new edition “took out some of the sections that I thought were humorous. I was a little disappointed.”

### **Zero (...and Back to ABC)**

In her article “The ABCs of *MAD* Magazine: Reading, Citizenship and Cold War America,” published in *The International Journal of Comic Art* (8.2, Fall 2006), Kristin L. Matthews argues that during the height of the Cold War, when America’s leaders and tastemakers fretted about the influence Communist ideas could have on a gullible populace, *MAD* was a “source of legitimate social critique” (248). Matthews begins by discussing how various anti-Communist “primers”—Job Brinton’s *Communist Primer* (1950), Anthony Bouscaren’s *A Guide to Anti-Communist Action* (1958)—combine the “various pedagogical tools one would find in elementary reading books” (pictures, and simple language and repetition as in the *Dick and Jane* series) with “a systematic endeavor to school folk on ‘acceptable’ social norms and to contain difference or dissent” (250). This format, however, was satirized by such *MAD* features as Larry Siegel and Wally Wood’s “The *MAD* Celebrity Primer” (#74, October 1962), Stan Hart and Bob Clarke’s “The *MAD* Suburban Primer” (#101, March 1966) and Hart, Frank Jacobs and Jack Davis’ “The *MAD* Primer of Bigots, Extremists, and Other Loose Ends” (#129, September 1969). These mock-primers, along with the magazine’s other irreverent content, was, in Matthews’ words, “revolutionary, for its form and content challenged the nation’s ruling powers, democratized readership, and called for a more perfect union, all the while disarming its opposition with a grin and a question: ‘What, me worry?’” (263).

Maybe. After wading through the Rachels collection and reading into the new millennium, though, I see *MAD* as considerably less subversive and “revolutionary” than Matthews does. I understand her point about the primer parodies, and the 1960s *MAD*s in general hold up well (though my judgment is undoubtedly influenced by nostalgia), but Berg’s decades-long run on “The Lighter Side” is for me the quintessence of the magazine: vaudevillian, formulaic, beautifully crafted, and utterly toothless, more Borscht Belt than Lenny Bruce. My alphabetical tools and I went hunting for strangeness, and found less of it than I’d hoped.

FILED UNDER: [Dave Berg](#)

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## 24 Responses to *My Friend Dave*

[Sam Henderson](#) says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 10:34 AM

I know this is nitpicking, but I needed to correct one fact. The original “Lighter Side of Copyright Infringement” was handwritten, as computers were not yet the accessible household object in 1992 or so. The font was added when I posted it on the internet a few years ago.

---

**Craig Fischer** says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 11:02 AM

Thanks for the correction, Sam—and for the very funny COPYRIGHT INFRINGEMENT strips!

---

**Andrew Mansell** says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 12:12 PM

I wish just once you'd put some real thought and actual effort into these essays of yours (excerpted from the Lighter Side of Sarcasm)

---

**Daniel C. Parmenter** says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 1:00 PM

Good article!

But I really feel like more could have been said about the Dave Berg/Daniel Clowes thing. This came up over at The Hooded Utilitarian a while ago and the above-mentioned Peter Sattler provided this rather startling example of a very Clowes-esque Berg strip:

[http://www.lewiswaynegallery.com/img/\\_categories/\\_images/Comic\\_Art/Mad\\_Art/Berg\\_Dave/13878\\_5.jpg](http://www.lewiswaynegallery.com/img/_categories/_images/Comic_Art/Mad_Art/Berg_Dave/13878_5.jpg)

I'm still not sure whether Clowes would admit to a specific Berg influence beyond the fact that Berg was a MAD artist and that Clowes was deeply influenced by MAD, but it's difficult for me to view strips like this without seeing their Clowes-like qualities, rather similar to how Borges notes Kafka-esque moments in writers who came before Kafka in *Kafka and His Precursors*: “The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.”

---

**John Platt** says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 8:24 PM

This was 26 kinds of fabulous.

---

**Jaz** says:

Oct 25, 2013 at 9:01 PM

About a month ago, some librarians were cutting up old comics to make buttons for kids—I was very proud that I scored a Dave Berg button!

---

**Tim Schmitt** says:

Oct 26, 2013 at 10:03 AM

Really interesting article to read. I always imagined Berg would be a real modest guy, being grateful he'd get published in Mad at all. I always saw him as the epitome of lame and conservative cartooning — which again makes him so fascinating in an odd way.

---

**Bob Ralph** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 7:12 AM](#)

So what's the deal here? Are we liking Berg now ironically, genuinely, formally (c'mon Santoros, where's the circles and squares on strip formats!? Bunk.) nostalgically or what? Because, frankly, he's a better, funnier cartoonist than 99% of cartoonists who have debuted in the last 20 years.

---

**Frank Santoro** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 10:16 AM](#)

<http://www.tcj.com/layout-workbook-9/>

---

**Daniel C. Parmenter** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 12:41 PM](#)

I can only speak from my own experience, but I've found that Dave Berg's stuff ages really well. Even as a MAD-loving lad, I knew that he was kind of in his own zone within the magazine, and I always loved his drawing style, particularly in his sixties stuff. I also like how even the characters who are supposed to be handsome or pretty end up looking just about as hideous as everyone else that he draws, qualities generally reinforced by their selfish, mean-spirited actions.

His view of humanity as expressed in the Lighter Side strips was actually incredibly bleak, and his best strips still have a kind of sting to them even today: the junkie kid whose parents offer to steal money to support his habit, the man and woman who use each other (she accuses him of using her for sex, he accuses her of using him for love, they glare at each other for one panel and then embrace, exclaiming "use me!"), the ugly guy who revels in his friends' jealousy regarding his pretty wife, etc. And his depiction of married/family life has an almost *Married With Children*-like quality to it; there aren't a lot of happy families in Berg's world.

---

**Craig Fischer** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 3:47 PM](#)

I love Berg for ironic, genuine, formalist and nostalgic reasons. I also hate him for the same reasons.

I'd agree with Daniel that "The Lighter Side" is often anything but, often a parade of familial dysfunction—which again brings us back to Clowes territory.

---

**Daniel C. Parmenter** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 4:08 PM](#)

Nobody did polyester and rage better than Berg!

---

**idleprimate** says:

[Oct 27, 2013 at 7:01 PM](#)

What a great article! Dave Berg was always m favorite part of Mad. I've been looking for some of his work for years with no luck ansince the announcement of the Mad's Greatest retrospective I've been like a kid waiting for christmas. This essay is a great anticipation whetter

---

**Bob Ralph** says:

Oct 28, 2013 at 2:59 PM

That's a page with tiers, not a strip. Sorry, you don't get my \$500.

---

**Frank Santoro** says:

Oct 28, 2013 at 10:15 PM

Ok, I'll get back to you.

---

**DensityDuck** says:

Oct 29, 2013 at 1:47 AM

I've always thought that Dave Berg's work was a spiritual predecessor to the whole "observational humor" thing. Any Dave Berg strip could have been done as a bit on Seinfeld and it would have fit perfectly.

---

**Bob Ralph** says:

Oct 29, 2013 at 2:14 AM

I bet you will, White Jazz, I bet you will. Diddlydooyabba, shabzzhuzzah.

---

**Charles Hatfield** says:

Oct 29, 2013 at 7:05 PM

Craig, Craig, you're killing me. Killing *it*. What a great article. How disarming, though, how frankly acrid, is your closing line! Ouch.

---

**Luke Przybylski** says:

Oct 30, 2013 at 11:52 AM

Ed Gauthier was most certainly the Dave Berg of the TCJ messageboard! Does anyone remember his comics?

<http://www.mredweirdo.com/>

---

**michael L** says:

Nov 2, 2013 at 9:23 PM

when i was a kiddo the only rendition of Satan that ever really terrified me was from a Lighter Side strip. I can't recall the issue, but he was on a poster in a dorm room. Really excellent satan

---

**patrick ford** says:

Nov 4, 2013 at 2:36 PM

"D" addendum.

DEATH PATROL.

<http://members.tripod.com/comicism4/dp01.jpg>

---

**patrick ford** says:

Nov 4, 2013 at 2:43 PM

A bit more.

<http://members.tripod.com/comicism4/dp25.jpg>

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**Doug Skinner** says:

Nov 8, 2013 at 1:11 PM

I'm curious about those syndicated strips Berg did in the '80s and '90s: "Roger Kaputnik," "The Astronuts," "Citizen Senior." Where were they published? Has anyone seen them?

---

**AyameTan** says:

Sep 3, 2015 at 1:55 AM

Does anyone have a link to the "how-to sex manual" comic? That's my all-time favorite.

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## Leave a Reply

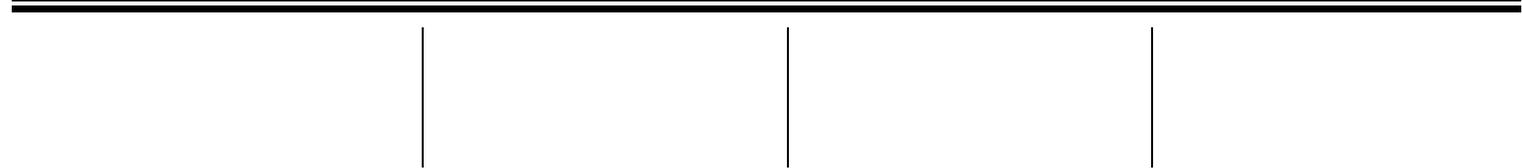
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