



“A Mad Look At Toes: A Tribute To Al Feldstein.” (Part Of A Celebration Of *Mad* Editor Feldstein)

By: **Craig Fischer**

Abstract

I’m bugged by much of the mainstream media attention given to Al Feldstein’s passing, because it feels less about the editor himself than about websites providing Boomers with yet another opportunity to wax nostalgic: “Mad’s editor died? Too bad. Hey, do you remember ‘2001: A Space Idiocy?’” For me, Feldstein’s 28-year editorial run shouldn’t be simplified to clichés about Mad’s irreverence. Feldstein’s achievement is more ambivalent than that, as much about Fordist efficiency and lost opportunities as about the supposed cultural subversions of the “usual gang of idiots.”

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FEATURES

On Al Feldstein

BY THE EDITORS MAY 5, 2014

A Mad Look at Toes by Craig Fischer

I'm bugged by much of the mainstream media attention given to Al Feldstein's passing, because it feels less about the editor himself than about websites providing Boomers with yet another opportunity to wax nostalgic: "Mad's editor died? Too bad. Hey, do you remember '2001: A Space Idiocy'?" For me, Feldstein's 28-year editorial run shouldn't be simplified to clichés about Mad's irreverence. Feldstein's achievement is more ambivalent than that, as much about Fordist efficiency and lost opportunities as about the supposed cultural subversions of the "usual gang of idiots."

This ambivalence creeps into the interviews Feldstein gave to the *Comics Journal*. In the interview with Gary Groth posted on TCJ.com last week, Feldstein talks lovingly of the friendship he and Bill Gaines developed as they worked together on the E.C. Comics, after Gaines had been through a painful divorce and while Feldstein's own first marriage was failing. Feldstein has harsh words, though, for E.C. business manager (from 1952-54), First Amendment advocate, and publisher Lyle Stuart, who encouraged Gaines to speak at the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency ("definitely not a good idea," says Gary Groth, understatedly) and also probably broke apart Feldstein and Gaines's collaboration. As Feldstein says in last week's interview:

I don't know how it happened, when he [Gaines] made this decision that he no longer wanted to spend nights reading and to bring in springboards, and that I should work with other writers and give up that particular pattern of creativity that we had worked on for so long. He then announced to me that he was going to give me my own office, one story up, for me to entertain writers and to do my work—and actually the intention, I assume, was to get me out of the office, so I wouldn't know what's going on as far as Lyle's advice to him was concerned.

Stuart wasn't too fond of Feldstein either. In *Squa Tront 12* (2007), Stuart described Feldstein as "an inadequate personality. His values seemed superficial and he seemed to be a plastic man" (53). Whatever the reason—Stuart's interference or other factors—the relationship between Gaines and Feldstein had become strained; the gleeful co-conspirators of the early E.C. days had become publisher and editor, employer and employee. Then, after Feldstein took over as Mad's second editor, Gaines increasingly divorced himself from day-to-day operations, sometimes only looking at an issue immediately before it went to press, while Feldstein turned the magazine into a post-war publishing sensation.

Did Feldstein enjoy his career as Mad editor and employee? In his interview in *The Comics Journal* #225 (July 2000), Feldstein tells stories about the good times—posing for satirical ads (several of which can be found here), going on the legendary staff trips—but includes some serious grievances about the way he was treated at Mad too. He argued with Gaines for a "piece of the magazine" (a percentage of gross profits) after Gaines sold Mad for tax reasons in the late 1950s (p. 68), and he complained about being "written out of Mad's history" after a *60 Minutes* piece focused exclusively on the current "gang of idiots" (p. 68). More trenchantly, Feldstein believed that Gaines' model of running Mad refused to evolve with the times:

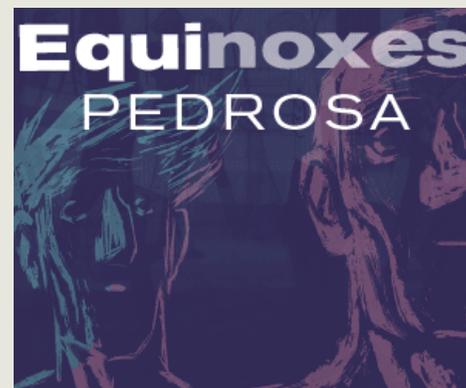
That was part of the problem I saw when I decided to retire in '81. We weren't going anywhere. I wanted to bring the magazine into the '80s, the '90s, and Bill didn't want to have any part of it. We had a lot of...discussions [laughs] about the future. I felt the future was bleak. (p. 79)

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Spain Interview

In this two-part interview, Gary Groth talks to Spain about Catholicism, working in a factory, rebelling against authority, teaching, the underground comix movement and Zap, and

Nightmare Alley. [Continue reading →](#)



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So Feldstein served out his last contract with Gaines (from 1981-84) and then left the magazine. It's odd that he resented Gaines' unwillingness to update *Mad*, since I've always believed that Feldstein's own editorial policy was based on stasis as well. He was undoubtedly superb at recognizing talent when he saw it: he and Gaines recruited Aragonés, Berg, Drucker, Martin and Prohías, among others, to *Mad*. Once these stellar talents were working regularly for the magazine, however, Feldstein appears to have encouraged (or at least allowed) them to do the same material from year to year: The Lighter Side of Spy vs. Spy Movie Parodies. Consequently, *Mad* became a fad that the kids in my neighborhood outgrew—when we were 11 years old, we were thrilled by its irreverence, but we stopped reading it at age 13 because we were tired of its formulas.

One of my favorite comic books of recent years is Bongo's *Sergio Aragonés Funnies*, because it's a venue where Sergio was free to draw folk tales, puzzles, and autobiographical stories (some of which chronicle his career at *Mad*). In *Funnies* #12, the most recent and (for now) final issue, Aragonés recalls his encounters with Japanese actor Toshiro Mifune: meeting him on the Mexican set of the film *Ánimas Trujano* in 1961, having him over for dinner at his family's home, catching up with him two decades at an L.A. parade. The second-to-last panel of the story features Sergio summing up his impressions of Mifune and his talents:

Sergio watches Mifune's magisterial turn in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), but note that the title of the strip on his drawing table is "A MAD Look at Toes." Is Aragonés bored with *Mad*'s shticks too? What kind of magazine would *Mad* have been if Sergio's personal stories had been published there? Or if Gaines and Feldstein, both fully committed to collaboration, had brought some of the energy and transgression to *Mad* that they'd devoted to the early E.C.s?

When I met Feldstein in 2008, I found him a gracious and generous man—generous enough to allow me (and Ben Towle, Roger Langridge and Richard Thompson) to interview him for a Heroes Con panel. He made a lot of money with his "piece of the magazine," he was universally adored by adolescent smartasses everywhere, and he had three decades of an artistically fulfilling third act as a painter after leaving *Mad*. He deserved his success. He won. Yet Feldstein's 28-year run as *Mad* editor is perpetually eclipsed by the 23 comic-book issues Harvey Kurtzman wrote and edited, and when I try to read issues of the Feldstein-edited *Mad* today, my attention slides off them like they're frictionless. I wish this good man had left a more vibrant legacy.

The Power of Albert B. Feldstein, the editor of *Mad* by Mark Newgarden

Part 1.

"My name is Albert B. Feldstein and I am the editor of Mad."

"My name is Albert B. Feldstein and I am the editor of Mad."

"My name is Albert B. Feldstein and I am the editor of Mad."

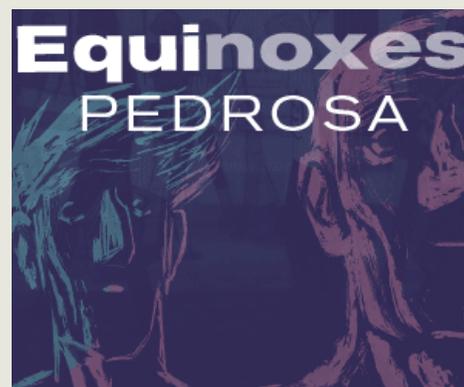
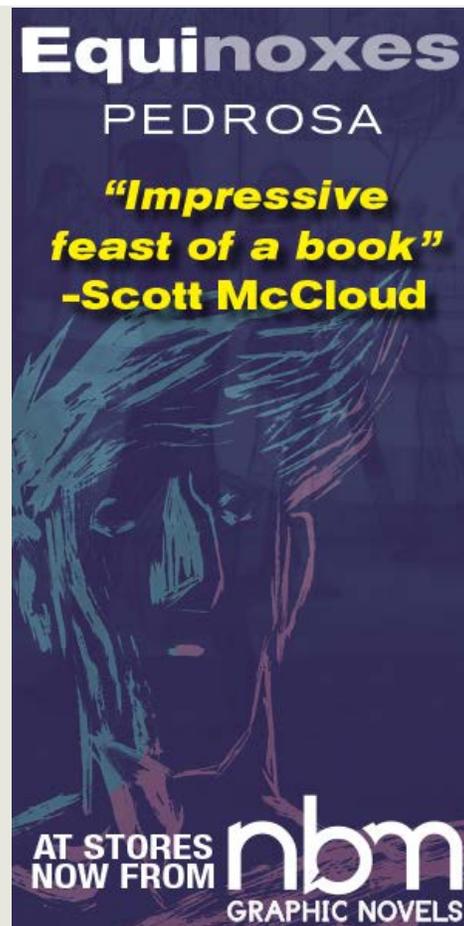
My copy of the little square cardboard *Meet The Staff Of Mad* flexidisc skipped here and it never, ever occurred to nudge that needle forward. It only got funnier. One rainy night I let it play for a good 45 minutes until my little brother began to cry.

Part 2.

Towards the end of fifth grade I apparently considered Albert B. Feldstein my favorite author and registered this information for posterity on the appropriate blank line in my groovy purple PS 45 graduation autograph book. I subsequently felt a tinge of guilt since I knew this wasn't the sort of literary figure that the autograph book manufacturer had in mind for me and amended it with a qualifying "(EDITOR.)"

Part 3.

I later learned that the *Mad* paperback reprints that I loved above all were the work of Harvey Kurtzman, the editor of *Mad*, not Albert B. Feldstein, the editor of *Mad*. And today I learned that Albert B. Feldstein



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was dead at 88 and had taken to painting wild west scenes in his golden years. *The New York Times* covered the story with this headline: “Al Goldstein, the Soul of *Mad* Magazine Dies at 88.” I was also informed by Drew Friedman that the recorded voice on that flexidisc was in fact associate editor Jerry De Fuccio impersonating his boss, whose speaking voice was deemed “too Jewish.”

So now I'm at a complete loss.

(But God bless Albert B. Feldstein, the editor of *Mad*, anyway.)

FILED UNDER: [Al Feldstein](#), [Craig Fischer](#), [Mark Newgarden](#)

13 Responses to *On Al Feldstein*

Plastic Sam says:

[May 7, 2014 at 12:34 AM](#)

Perceiving some kind of subversive critique in the “A MAD Look at Toes” gag is sheer projection.

It's worth noting that Kurtzman's 23 comic book issues are packed with filler. Sure, creators deserve to be judged on their best work, and by that standard Harvey Kurtzman is forever an A+++++. But if you re-read and re-re-read “Bop Jokes” and “Bop Dictionary” and the “From Eternity Back to Here/Stalag 18/Cane Mutiny/Under the Waterfront/The Barefoot Nocountessa/The Countynental” parodies and “Baby Quips” and “The Countynental” and the “How's your mom, Ed?” “jokes” and the non-Elder illustrated poetry with decades of continued pleasure, you're a better man than I. Yet Feldstein's MAD doesn't get judged by its many high points, but by the fact that they always did movie parodies or “Spy” cartoons.

It seems you would have preferred that Kurtzman had stayed at MAD and turned it into a better-funded Humbug. That certainly would have made collecting MAD a simpler task, as it would have ended in 1960 or so. Alas, MAD fell into its frictionless repetition, while Kurtzman soared to newer and ever greater non-formulaic horizons with “Little Annie Fanny.”

Craig Fischer says:

[May 7, 2014 at 7:00 PM](#)

I could respond to your comment, “Plastic,” if you had listed some of the specific high points of Feldstein's MAD rather than just asserted that they exist. The level of craft and talent in Feldstein's MAD is high, but my point was that channeling the talent into the same formats and gags ad infinitum was a big editorial mistake. But as they say: your mileage may vary.

I praised Kurtzman's comic-book MAD, not “Little Annie Fanny,” and I'd agree that there was some painful filler in the Kurtzman-era MADs. It's tacky to quote one's previous work, but I wrote about that filler in 2009, as part of a review of Kitchen and Buhle's ART OF HARVEY KURTZMAN:

<http://www.thoughtballoonists.com/2009/12/three-questions-for-kitchen-and-buhle.html>

Plastic Sam says:

[May 8, 2014 at 5:36 AM](#)

Kurtzman was already repeating formats and gags before the comic book was done (two “Lone Stranger”s, two “Dragged Net”s, two “Shermlock Shomes”es, running gags from article to article, so many old poems).

And who cares? “Dragged Net 2” and “Shermlock 2” were great. If Kurtzman's format/gag repetition wasn't ad infinitum, it may be because Kurtzman's tenure at MAD was finitum.

Was there more repetition in MAD Magazine than the comic book MAD? Absolutely yes. But Feldstein also

oversaw 10,000 pages to Kurtzman's 600. If we can excuse Kurtzman's filler, it's unsporting not to extend MAD Magazine the same courtesy.

It also seems funny to ding Feldstein for unKurtzmanlike performance when Kurtzman himself couldn't maintain his peak. But then, I also don't get how MAD is eternally a Sharks/Jets rumble, where we must declare for one side and knife the other.

I wouldn't go through 10,000 pages of Feldstein-edited issues to respond fully. But here are some terrific articles, both in and out of standard MAD formatting, during the period that Feldstein's circulation numbers rose to their all-time high.

"America the Beautiful – Revisited" (Brandel, 1967)
"Will Success Spoil Charlie Brown?" (Siegel/Rickard, 1968)
"A Nostalgic Look at Sandlot Baseball" (Norman/Coker, 1968)
"A Psychedelic Diary" (DeBartolo, 1968)
"The MAD Poetry Round Robin" (Jacobs/Woodbridge, 1969)
"The Guru of Ours" (Jacobs/Drucker, 1969)
"A MAD Portfolio of Appropriate Comic Strip Sound Effects" (Doud/Clarke, 1969)
"Dr. Benjamin Spock – Teenage Care" (Siegel/Clarke, 1969)
"The Month Before Christmas" (Jacobs/Martin, 1970)
"True Fat" (Siegel/Drucker, 1970)
"I Remember, I Remember the Wondrous Woodstock Music Fair" (Jacobs/Aragones, 1970)
"The MAD Book of Magic and Other Dirty Tricks" (Jaffee, 1970)
"The Richard M. Nixon Presidential Primer" (Brandel, 1970)
"If There Were Only Two Survivors of World War 3 Left on Earth" (Silverstone/Schild, 1970)
"Put*On" (Siegel/Drucker, 1971)
"Catch-All-22" (Hart/Drucker, 1971)
"Reality Street" (DeBartolo/Davis, 1971)
"This is America..." (Brandel, 1971)
"A MAD Guide to "TV Late Show" Cliche Movie Props" (Porges/Torres, 1972)
"When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again" (Brandel/Thurston, 1972)
Cover of #151 (Mingo, 1972)
"The MAD Religion in America Primer" (Siegel/Coker)
Cover of #154 (Prohlias/Mingo, 1972)
"The MAD Car-Owners Hate Book" (Jaffee, 1972)
"The Odd Father" (Siegel/Drucker, 1972)
"Clodumbo" (Silverstone/Torres, 1973)
"The MAD Christmas Hate Book" (Jaffee, 1973)
"You Can Never Win with a Bigot" (Jacobs/Coker, 1973)
"Rewriting Your Way to a Ph.D" (Koch, 1973)
"Tell-Tale Comic Strip Balloons" (Edwing/Clarke, 1973)
"Planned Obsolescence in Everyday Products" (Jaffee, 1973)
"A MAD Look at Sheet Music" (Brandel/Jacobs, 1973)
"Crime Foilers for the Average Citizen" (Jaffee, 1973)
"Malice in Wonderland (or 'Watergate Through the Looking Glass')" (Silverstone/Clarke, 1973)
"Paper Goon" (Siegel/Drucker, 1974)
"An Architectural Triumph" (Jaffee, 1974)
"The MAD Game of Basebrawl" (Jaffee, 1974)
"A MAD Guide to Status Symbols" (Koch/Coker, 1974)
"Trademark Graffiti" (Jaffee, 1974)
"The Zing" (Kogen/Drucker, 1974)
"MAD's Solutions to Biug City Doggie-Do Problems" (Jaffee, 1975)
"What's Entertainment?" (Jacobs/Drucker, 1975)

Mike Hunter says:

May 8, 2014 at 6:36 AM

Plastic Sam says:

...It seems you would have preferred that Kurtzman had stayed at MAD and turned it into a better-funded Humbug. That certainly would have made collecting MAD a simpler task, as it would have ended in 1960 or so.

Hah! That jab hit the bull's-eye...painfully!

Craig Fischer says:

The level of craft and talent in Feldstein's MAD is high, but my point was that channeling the talent into the same formats and gags ad infinitum was a big editorial mistake.

It was an *Artistic* mistake — how fine it would be if, issue after issue, year after year — the MADmen could've found ever-new and original targets and methods of satire...

...yet absolutely the RIGHT editorial decision. Here in the real world, creative people who actually have to crank out great masses of product on a deadline (if you miss the allotted slot, the printing companies charge big-time for being late), know that routine, variations on a theme; "frictionless repetition" eases the process of production.

Steven Ringgenberg says:

Feldstein was the logical choice [to edit "Mad"], of course, because he had never had the kind of deadline problems the temperamental Kurtzman always ran into.

[<http://www.tcj.com/al-feldstein-obituary/>]

It also doesn't hurt that, aside from the artistic and critical-minded, people *love* predictability, "variations on a theme."

In comedy, John Belushi and the other Saturday Night Live players grew to despise the "Killer Bees" routine — as Carol Burnett felt of her sappily sentimental charwoman character — yet audience demand forced them to keep repeating themselves. Arthur Conan Doyle grew tired of Holmes, yet eventually felt compelled to resuscitate him. Old comic strips and murder-mystery sleuths are kept going through their pleasantly predictable paces even after the talents who have sparked life into them have passed. And as any parent forced to undergo the repetition of a Spongebob Squarepants video or tell the exact-same bedtime story dozens of times in a row knows, this instinct is bone-deep.

What about work that's absurdly limited and formulaic (the unexplainably acclaimed "Road Runner" cartoons, for instance), yet still are popular *and* critical successes?

Even deadline-missing Kurtzman himself, moreover, within his short span running "Mad," resorted to "painful filler": "Bop Jokes" and "Bop Dictionary" and the "From Eternity Back to Here/Stalag 18/Cane Mutiny/Under the Waterfront/The Barefoot Nocountessa/The Countynental" parodies and "Baby Quips" ...and the "How's your mom, Ed?" "jokes."

The two issues of "Trump" are here — <http://booksteveslibrary.blogspot.com/2006/09/harvey-kurtzmans-trump.html> — said to "may just be the pinnacle of Harvey Kurtzman's influential career," yet looking at the page samples, though beautifully illustrated, one is not exactly bedazzled by satirical derring-do.

Michael Barrier here (<http://www.michaelbarrier.com/Commentary/Humbug/Humbug.html>) comments upon how Kurtzman — again, left to his own devices — produced satire that was relatively tame compared to

what more iconoclastic comedians were doing at the time.

Mike Hunter says:

May 8, 2014 at 9:27 AM

Along the vein of this argument, can't help but remember the "National Lampoon" parody of "Mad":

<http://kittysneezes.com/2010/01/12/what-me-funny-the-national-lampoon-mad-parody-577/> .

Check it out: <http://johnglenntaylor.blogspot.com/2009/12/what-me-funny.html>

Zimmerman says:

May 8, 2014 at 2:02 PM

When the Lampoon went with the "it all went to shit after Kurtzman left" storyline, they couldn't have known that their own heyday was gonna be identical in length to Kurtzman's 23-issue run.

Mike Hunter says:

May 8, 2014 at 2:49 PM

Ah, the irony!

Craig Fischer says:

May 8, 2014 at 5:19 PM

That's painfully true about the LAMPOON. I was recently in a bookstore where LAMPOONS from the early 1980s were on sale for bargain prices, and I spent two hours looking through the magazines, hoping to find one (or more) I wanted to buy. I left empty handed.

"Plastic," thanks for that list of Feldstein-era highs. It may just be my lack of discernment, but I'm not entirely sure what makes, say, "Clodumbo" better than other parodies from the period. I suspect it really does come down to taste, and to my tastes, Kurtzman's best MAD achievements overshadow Feldstein's. (Maybe it's better for some culture to be finite—go on too long and you lose your mojo, and people take you for granted.)

Plastic Sam says:

May 9, 2014 at 4:55 AM

"Clodumbo" (you gotta feel sorry for them when they have to come up with the parody titles and so many real titles don't give them a blessed thing to work with) was an interesting and successful mix of comedic styles. Throughout the piece, writer Lou Silverstone mimics Columbo's digressive manner of speech but ratchets it up. At one point, he blathers on so long that a word balloon extends down the panel and behind some furniture where it can no longer be read. Silverstone also put in several instances of physical comedy, including Columbo (sorry, Clodumbo) barging into an operating room during brain surgery and tapping the ashes from his cigar into the dome of the patient's skull resting on a tray, or playing hopscotch on the chalk outline of a dead body. In some ways, the combination was reminiscent of the extended verbal riffs and absurdist visual details of the old Kurtzman/Elder sequences.

Silverstone also includes multiple instances of black humor, including a pretty dark ending after it turns out in the final panels that the man who confessed to the murder was innocent. Columbo wonders why he confessed. POLICE CHIEF: "For the same reason ALL suspects confess when YOU'RE on the case! To get away from your

incessant badgering! Thanks to your cat-and-mouse methods, 27 people confessed to crimes they did not commit! Think of it, Clodumbo! There are 27 innocent people, rotting in jail today!

CLODUMBO: "There are only 16 in jail, sir... Eleven of them were executed!"

Artist Angelo Torres also has a ball with some of the caricatures:

<http://www.columbo-site.freeuk.com/Parodies/Clodumbo2a.JPG>

http://i1127.photobucket.com/albums/l632/ConsummateCulp/Mad%20Magazine%20Spoofs/Clodumbo/008_zps3f350b2c.jpg

It's just a MAD parody firing on all cylinders, which obviously not all of them do. But when they click, it's a result that only Feldstein's MAD (and the staff since then) has pulled off.

patrick ford says:

[May 9, 2014 at 9:56 AM](#)

P.J. O'Rourke was no Feldstein that's for sure.

Craig Fischer says:

[May 9, 2014 at 10:41 AM](#)

I enjoyed reading your commentary on "Clodumbo," Plastic—are your writing on MAD on a regular basis, or maybe for a larger research project?

Plastic Sam says:

[May 9, 2014 at 1:03 PM](#)

Nope, just a longtime reader who thinks there are gems and duds to be mined from any era of MAD, from Melvin's shadow to the current issues. There's a Steve Martin interview on comedy in which he says rightly, "You can only be new once."

Mike Hunter says:

[May 9, 2014 at 4:43 PM](#)

I let my "Mad" subscription lapse after my income plummeted a few years ago. But some a while back I responded to a thread in the old Comics Journal message board where "Mad" was being attacked in the same fashion as those "New Yorker cartoons aren't funny any more" arguments.

I scanned and showed a batch of pages from the latest issue, and people were surprised at how sharp the satire was; on average, far more cutting and adult-minded than in Kurtzman's era. (One chap of the conservative persuasion was pleasantly surprised to find Obama getting gored along with the GOP crowd.)

My personal favorite from the pages of the magazine? It'd be "007: A Mad Musical," Mad #94. Some pages at http://blogs.sfweekly.com/exhibitionist/2012/11/mad_magazine_james_bond_parodies_skyfall.php ...

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