

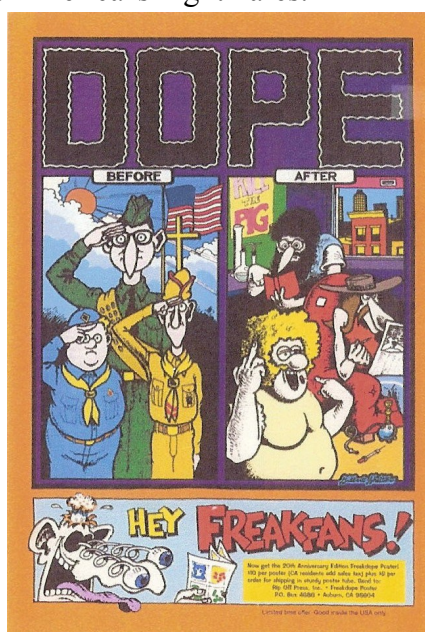
**“FAR-OUT, UNBATHED LEFTISTS.” THE FABULOUS FURRY FREAK BROTHERS
AND MIDDLE AMERICA**

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Universally known as fearless heroes of the counterculture—or “those idiots” to the rest of us—the Freak Brothers have a timeless appeal and are as relevant now as when they first blah, blah, blah...¹

Over forty years after their creation, Gilbert Shelton’s cartoon characters, the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, continue to prosper with the publication of an omnibus edition of the strips and magazine covers, a website and a long-projected stop motion animated film.² Thirty million copies of the fourteen Freak titles have been sold around the world, translated into almost every language except Chinese, Russian and Arabic. “Those idiots” do indeed appear to possess a “timeless appeal.”

Creatures of the hippie sixties, “alternative” in look and in their single-minded pursuit of sex, drugs, beer and every kind of (free) self-gratification, impervious to anything approaching a work ethic, Freewheelin’ Franklin, Phineas, Fat Freddy and their associates are the incarnation of Middle America’s nightmares.



¹ Letter from the Office of Fat Freddy’s Cat in Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers’ Omnibus* (California: Rip-Off Press and London: Knockabout Press, 2008) 467.

² The first Fabulous Furry Freaks Brothers strip was published by Gilbert Shelton in 1968. The comics were published in a number of underground magazines. Shelton founded his own Rip Off Press in 1969 and published the first long (52 pages) Freaks comic book in 1971. Thirteen Rip Off Press Freaks books were published over the next twenty years with a series of separate books featuring Fat Freddy’s Cat launched in 1975. From 1974 Shelton collaborated with other artists, notably Dave Sheridan and Paul Mavrides. The 1970s also saw the Freak Brothers make their first appearance in the (relatively) “straight” press with publication of the board game *Feds and Heads* and the strip *Winter of 59* in *Playboy*. The Freaks publications were often distributed with difficulty. There were police raids on the “head shops” that sold the magazines in the USA and the UK importer, Hassle Free Press, suffered constant police raids for importing work “tending to corrupt and deprave.” The film, *Grass Roots*, has been in progress – and has changed hands often – since 1993. *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Omnibus* was published by Rip Off Press in the USA and Knockabout Comics in the UK in 2008.

But they do not, in fact, present any sort of real threat to the nation's ideology and morals. Like Chaplin's tramp, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy and the Three Stooges, they are simply individuals whose attempts, however well-meaning, to understand and engage with the "real" world lead to inevitable chaos because their perceptions of what is expected and acceptable in society are constantly slightly out of focus.³ The point, in the case of the Freaks and their comic predecessors, is that none of them has a fundamental quarrel with the social order as such. They may be its victims, they may disagree with the applications of order, they certainly perturb it—but the disruption is often caused by inadequate attempts to fit in, or at least to live and let live, rather than any desire to destroy and renew. The Brothers are, perhaps, "far-out" and "unbathed." "Leftist"—in the sense of purveyors of a coherent political alternative to contemporary American society—they are not! The Freaks are simply hedonists. Their ambition is to use what the U.S.A. offers, not to achieve wealth and social prestige but to consume vast quantities of mind altering substances and, as Fat Freddy often puts it, "get drunk and get nekkid and lie in a great big pile."⁴ Now, these things can be done quite satisfactorily within the variant of the capitalist economy frequented by the Freaks. Like the rest of America they acquire money, buy, sell, consume, look for good value ("Don't get burned!") and turn their considerable talents to doing no more nor less than their fellow citizens—getting by in the existing environment in the best possible way.

"I imagine they were probably based on real people Gilbert might have known, plus a healthy dose of fictional influences like the Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges...there are three of them, it's a classical comedy situation. [...] It's safe to say that Gilbert would be hanging out and someone would come by to visit and say, 'Boy, you know what just happened to me...' and it would find its way into a comic strip. Because these things were happening simultaneously everywhere, Gilbert had a huge audience of people who were relating to what he was commenting on."⁵

The "huge audience" was of young people, caught in the Woodstock tide, and who bought the underground magazines containing the work of Shelton, Robert Crumb and other cartoonists in "head shops" in the States and in alternative book shops in the U.K. In his *Freak Brothers' History*, Gilbert Shelton traces the strip's publication history from its first appearance in the Austin, Texas garage magazine *Feds 'n' Heads* in 1968 to the stand-alone Freaks and Fat Freddy's Cat comic books produced by his own Rip Off Press from 1970.⁶ The Freaks and the Cat, at the most successful moment of their underground career were drawn for a number of comics published by Rip Off, syndicated to at least fifty more and, not illogically, simply ripped off by a great many others. Shelton's work was printed in weekly and monthly publications and appeared as single page narratives or as one page weekly installments.⁷ Whatever the form, the strips were a massive success on both sides of the Atlantic with a direct appeal to the children of the sixties living in worlds that were still essentially repressive. "Straight" people were—or were said to be—terrified of the corruption implicit in sexual liberation, of the questioning of the work ethic and of the virtues of gathering wealth, and hedonism, whether drug or alcohol-focused. Hippies, for Middle America—and Middle England—were the Other, a nebulous source of danger,

³ According to Gilbert Shelton the first the Freak Brothers strips were drawn after he had seen a series of Marx Brothers and Stooges films. See *Freak Brothers' History* by Gilbert Shelton (Shelton 621).

⁴ For example see Gilbert Shelton, *Getting Up To Vote*, 1972 (Shelton 127).

⁵ Paul Mavrides in Wesley Joost and Jon Randall, *Slack or Bust, An Interview With Paul Mavrides*, Goblin Archives, <http://sonic.net>.

⁶ Shelton 621-23.

⁷ For example, the weekly *East Village Other*, the monthly *Gothic Blimp*. The *Los Angeles Free Press* serialized the stories.

“Communists” in the most general and abstract sort of way. Their works of corruption and propaganda were carried out through the inferior art forms of small band/single singer music and comics. The latter were especially dangerous.⁸ The “head shops” found themselves the object of the attentions of Nixon’s police, not because they were selling cigarette papers and pipes, “tobacco accessories,” but because the proximity of underground comics suggested their possible use with something other than finest Virginia. Similarly, in 1982, the British Freaks publisher, Knockabout Press, found itself facing court proceedings for publishing material tending to deprave and corrupt.⁹ The “alternative” young not only had to find the “straight” world absurd, they also had reason to fear it.

“There was good reason to be paranoid, the people that were busted got into a lot of trouble, like fourteen years for a lid. And the authority people were a lot less likely to cut people slack back then too. All the trouble making that was going on was mostly on a lot lower level than now. If you had the right look you could expect to get hassled.”¹⁰

The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers expect to be—and do—get hassled. But far from being the Other, they are simply Hippie variants of the Middle America that fears them. They live, sometimes, at 372 East Trashview Court, in the centre of a town which is said to be an amalgam of Shelton’s own three cities, Austin, San Francisco and New York. They are siblings in the loosest sense with two different surnames. Fat Freddy is Frederick Freekowtski, Phineas is Phineas T. Freakears and Freewheelin’ Franklin is simply that! Physically and intellectually they are quite different (Phineas is small, dark, mechanically-minded and clever, Freewheelin’ Franklin is a tall, blond, streetwise urban cowboy, while Fat Freddy is, unsurprisingly, obese and the buffoon of the trio). Fat Freddy is from West Cleveland, Phineas from Texas, Franklin, having no known parents, has no idea.¹¹ The rest of America, real or imaginary, is glimpsed through the Brothers’ travels and through minor characters such as Cousin Country Cowfreak from Cow Pie, Texas or the teeny-bopper groupie from Council Bluffs, Idaho.¹² The Freaks’ world is populated by (rarely) other, friendly Hippies, representatives of a less friendly underground (Dealer McDope), the law (Norbert the Nark, private detective Tricky Prickears and various policemen called indeterminately Floyd, Clyde and Leroy), politicians (State Governor Rodney Richpigge and the more sympathetic Oat Willie), inner city street hooligans, an assortment of ordinary citizens, some living particularly reactionary lives in suburban Birch County, all of mature years and all afraid of Hippies and, finally, General Cockroach and his army, various small street and domestic animals and Fat Freddy’s Cat.

⁸ Psychoanalyst Dr Frederic Wertham’s anti-comics onslaught, *Seduction of the Innocent*, had been published in the USA in 1954 by Rinehart of New York (a UK edition followed in 1955). The subsequent Congressional Inquiry into the deplorable effects of comics on the minds of the young in general and on the rate of juvenile delinquency in particular, led to the establishment of the Comics Code Authority in September 1954. Obviously, underground comics’ writers and publishers remained unfettered by the Code. For a good thirty years (the Authority was quietly discontinued in 2011) the “straight” world would make a clear distinction between “good” and “bad” comics and be persuaded of the corrupting effects of the latter.

⁹ Shelton gives an account of the attacks in his *Freak Brothers’ History, The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers’ Omnibus* 621-23. Curiously enough the British Obscene Publications Act had already received a very bad press ten years previously with the overturning on appeal of the 1971 conviction of the editors of *Oz* underground magazine for their *Schoolkids* Issue.

¹⁰ Joost and Randall

¹¹ Shelton 93; 85.

¹² Certainly coincidentally the starting point of the Mormon Trail...

The events and characters of the early “hippie sit-com”¹³ strips were caricatures, then, of the everyday “Them and Us” Hippie experience. The world of the Freaks in these stories is a relatively straightforward one. The narratives are incident-based with the Brothers, with or without Fat Freddy’s Cat, in their local environment and reacting to whatever situation, friend or foe the day has in it. Drawn in black and white, the simplest comics, if not necessarily the earliest, are one-page narratives constructed around a single theme (Fat Freddy buys fake hash and “gets burned”, Phineas is arrested while carrying a suitcase containing—for once—only clothes, and so on). Longer narratives of between two and eight pages, still in black and white, continue to develop a single theme. One of the first published Freak Brothers comics, *The Freaks Pull A Heist*,¹⁴ for example, is an eight-page story in which the Brothers, possessing dope but no money, find themselves unable to buy food to quell the appetite fuelled by the dope in question and so organize a grocery store heist which involves persuading the shop owner that Freewheelin’ Franklin is the director of an episode of Candid Camera and that the thorough robbing of the store by Fat Freddy and Phineas is, in fact, a bit of televised fun to which it would be ridiculous to react. A constant feature of the strips is the need for the Freaks to wheel and deal their way out of trouble. Danger is everywhere—in the hostile attitude of ordinary citizens, in the dishonest intentions of street criminals and, especially, for Dealer McDope, in the omnipresent police.

The Freaks’ universe of the “Hippie sitcom” period was, therefore, a recognizable one for the Woodstock generation. Underground comics in general, including those of Rip Off Press, were the “house journals” of the Hippie movement, so to speak, reflecting and satirizing the constant “straight”/“alternative” clash. The Brothers, however, reflect very little and, again, not much in the outside world preoccupies them beyond an urgent desire to keep out of trouble while obtaining maximum drug-enhanced satisfaction. They feel affection for other drop-outs (Fat Freddy dresses “straight” for a jury selection in the hope of helping the accused, “some poor Hippie”),¹⁵ and suspicion, of course, for the conventional world and exercise particular caution in the face of the extreme Republican right. Otherwise the Freaks’ political awareness is limited. They feel an affinity to the pizza-distributing local candidate Oat Willie and in 1972, inevitably, Fat Freddy “gets burned,” missing out on pizza because he has not registered to vote. The narrative ends with a footnote strip, “Fat Freddy Says: Don’t forget to register and vote.”¹⁶ In 1973 Phineas finds the possible re-election of the President “the most offensive thing I’ve seen in my whole life”¹⁷ and, in the same year, he dreams that he is offered the job of President of the USA as the only honest candidate in a long time—having admitted that he has no qualifications, work experience only as editor of an underground journal in Zilch, New Mexico and an excessive affection for alcohol and drugs.¹⁸

Conventional national political concerns, then, pass the brothers by. So do the major alternative political and social movements of the Woodstock years and beyond.¹⁹ Homosexuality,

¹³ The term is used by Wesley Joost and Jon Randall in *Slack or Bust, An Interview with Paul Mavrides*. They distinguish between early “hippie sitcom” strips and the later, usually pluri-authored and coloured “outrageous fantasy.”

¹⁴ Gilbert Shelton, *The Freaks Pull a Heist*, 1969 (Shelton 27-34).

¹⁵ Gilbert Shelton, *The Adventures of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*, 1973 (Shelton 123).

¹⁶ Gilbert Shelton, *It’s Those Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* 1972 (Shelton 127).

¹⁷ Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* 1973 (Shelton 112).

¹⁸ Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* 1973 (Shelton 120).

¹⁹ In the Freaks’ wider world, the Students for a Democratic Society were active from 1962 to 1969, the anti-war and Black Power movements gaining ground over the same period. The Radical Feminist movement pressed for and obtained progress in the form of the Equal Rights Amendment of 1972 and the Roe vs Wade judgement of 1973. The “other side,” as it were, saw the re-election of Richard Nixon for a second term in January 1973, the setting up of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority in 1978 and, soon after, the beginning of Ronald Reagan’s war on drugs.

by extension Gay Liberation, is non-existent in the Freaks' universe. Their America has few Blacks and no Native Americans, and the Brothers are totally unreconstructed in their attitudes to women's rights, Fat Freddy and Franklin especially devoting considerable energy to the pursuit of "teen queens" and "teeny boppers."²⁰ In the 1976 long strip, *Grass Roots*²¹ the Freaks, having moved to "a 27-acre spread in the Shark River National Unreachable Wilderness Area" with three women hitch-hikers, face unexpected feminist resistance to their plans (and habitual inefficiency):

"You guys have been calling all the shots ever since we met, and so far everything has gone wrong! You guys seem to expect us women to hang about round here and do your work for you. So while you were gone, I drew up this charter for our organization here! Right off, everything will be communally owned! Also we're going to run this place democratically with free elections and secret ballots and plain old majority rule!" (306).

Rather than accept permanent relegation by the democratically-elected Chairwoman to the Kitchen Subcommittee, the Brothers rewrite the charter to their advantage:

"Be it resolved, henceforth and forevermore, that the common chores be performed in accordance with the ancient, honorable and natural law, meaning that the women shall do the cooking, sweeping and washing and that men shall be in charge of defense" (308).

In doing so, they almost spark "an embarrassing repeat of Lysistrata's ancient victory" (312) which is avoided only by the near-sacrifice of Fat Freddy. The narrative here is as chaotic as usual with the Brothers falling into and climbing out of trouble through a sequence of more or less unlikely coincidences. The point is the triple satire on rural Hippie communes, on the male response to women's liberation and on the use and misuse of the democratic process which is initially slightly perverted by the women who rig the first vote before being grossly perverted by the Brothers. The women lose in the end, of course. Phineas and Franklin are happy to "torture" Freddy (by tying him to a tree and refusing him food) until the women, hearing his "pitiful shrieks" agree to "do anything you say" as long as they "stop whatever it is you're doing to poor Freddy" (312).

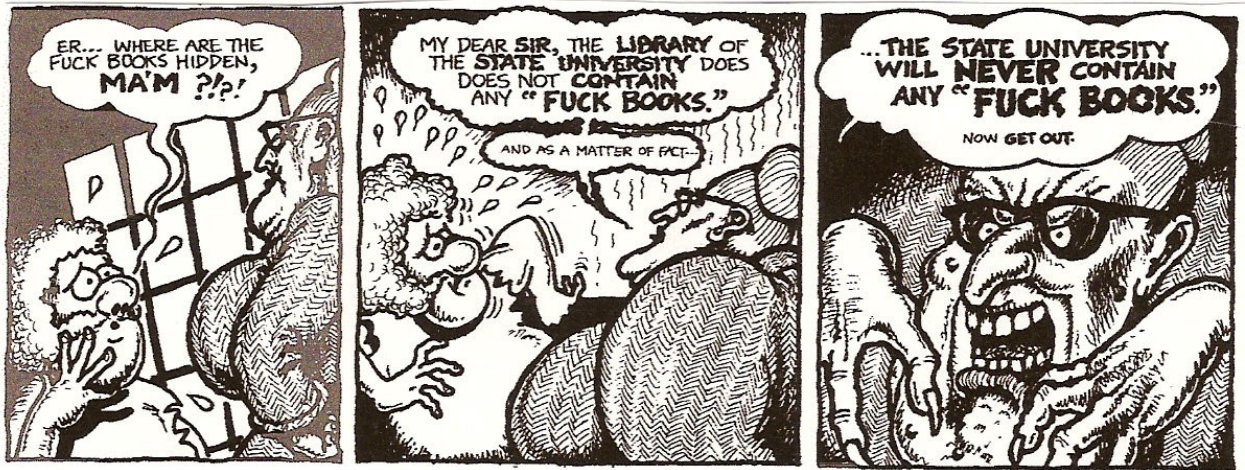
Shelton draws the weaker (kinder?) sex in two ways: the attractive young woman or the hag who is systematically overweight, massively built and repellent. Freewheelin' Franklin's "ex-old lady from eight years ago" who was "a lithe, lissome teen-ager" has become a physically repulsive Jesus-Freak and, incidentally, the mother of an eight-year old boy who is "the spitting image of you-know-who."²² The Head Librarian in *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College*, the only strip that refers to the Students for a Democratic Society campus protests, is also massive and ugly and is possessed of an absolute authority that terrifies Fat Freddy.²³

²⁰ See Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Acquire a Groupie*, n.d. (Shelton 6-9), Gilbert Shelton, *Fat Freddy Gets the Clap*, n.d. (Shelton 10-14), Gilbert Shelton, *Fat Freddy's Cat and His Friends*, 1974 (Shelton 139), Gilbert Shelton, *The Adventures of Freewheelin' Franklin*, *That Fabulous Furry Freak Brother*, 1973 (Shelton 109-11).

²¹ Gilbert Shelton and Dave Sheridan, *Grass Roots*, 1976 (Shelton 300-12).

²² Gilbert Shelton, *The Adventures of Freewheelin' Franklin*, *That Fabulous Furry Freak Brother*, 1973 (Shelton 110).

²³ Gilbert Shelton, *The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers Go to College*, 1969 (Shelton 38-41).



But these are comics; men, especially the supporters of the existing social order, hardly fare better. Shelton (and Sheridan and Mavrides) are, after all, in the business of caricature. The easiest treatment is reserved for the Freaks themselves over the forty years of their existence and in the hands of three different artists. Fat Freddy's Cat, also, is given a range of expressions, situations and dialogues that contribute to its development as a reasonably complex individual character.

The (nameless) cat accompanies the Freaks from the earliest strips. He becomes independent as a footnote strip in 1970. The first full-page *Fat Freddy's Cat and His Friends* dates from 1974 and the series of seven Fat Freddy's Cat stand-alone comic books begins in 1977. The cat provides a useful transition between the "hippie sitcom" and "outrageous fantasy"²⁴ periods being, like the Brothers, present in both. The Cat is the true libertarian of the strips. By far the most intelligent and perceptive of the characters, he is also, in the nature of things, the weakest. He depends on the humans for food, is abandoned at least once and exploited often, especially by Fat Freddy who sees the Cat as an opportunity to succeed in various dubious financial exploits.²⁵ Like the Brothers, he spends much time avoiding danger and attempting to extract nourishment and pleasure from a generally hostile environment. His world is wider than that of the Freaks, inhabited not just by humans but also by a variety of animals including dogs, other cats, rats, mice and the inevitable cockroach army. The Cat's life shadows that of the Freaks, sometimes very closely. The single page strips have the Cat interacting with them, most usually with Fat Freddy, in a feline/human variation of the human to human, "alternative" to "straight" misinterpretations and power struggles of the Freaks-based strips. The Cat, oppressed or misunderstood by the Brothers just as they are oppressed and misunderstood by the non-Hippie world, turns the tables more often, more easily.²⁶

The Cat's close "shadowing" of the Brothers in a footnote strip continues over longer, sustained narratives such as *Grass Roots*²⁷ and *A Mexican Odyssey*.²⁸ In the latter the stories of

²⁴ Joost and Randall

²⁵ See, for example, Gilbert Shelton, *The Burning of Hollywood*, 1978 (Shelton 279-84).

²⁶ The strips may even show the Cat in a clear position of superiority. Shelton's single page of 1973, for example, shows the Cat feeling sorry for Fat Freddy who is "depressed" and deciding, therefore, to "fix his head" with nine frames of dancing, jumping and general curtain-tearing. When a vastly happier Freddy wants to "get footage" of his antics, the Cat refuses to budge on the grounds that the human needs "a zen yoga lesson." Gilbert Shelton, *Fat Freddy's Cat*, 1973 (Shelton 125).

²⁷ Gilbert Shelton and Dave Sheridan, *Grass Roots*, 1976 (Shelton 300-31).

²⁸ Gilbert Shelton and David Sheridan, *The 7th Voyage of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. A Mexican Odyssey*, 1975 (Shelton 141-64.).

the Cat and the Brothers begin and end at the same points of time and space with simultaneous, parallel adventures presented in one-page episodes for regular magazine publication.

Short of cash and about to be evicted, Franklin, Phineas and Freddy head for sea and sun in Mexico, leaving the Cat to the landlady along with the unpaid rent, “the teevee and the record collection and two years of *Rolling Stone*” (142). The humans stumble from crisis to crisis in the top four lines of the strip while the Cat (who has stowed away on the Freaks’ VW Microbus and, very early in the journey, loses them after crawling “into the wrong van at the last Howard Johnson’s” because “all those hippie vans look alike” [145]) has his own one-line, five-frame adventures in the footnote strip on every page. While the Brothers’ lines develop a story, however chaotic, the footnote strips in *A Mexican Odyssey*, usually involving the Cat interacting with other animals, are the graphic equivalent of the stand-up comedian’s verbal one-liners.²⁹



For nineteen episodes the Brothers and the Cat go their separate but parallel ways as they travel through Mexico. Finally, on the last page of the narrative, the two stories converge with the Cat being picked up by the Freaks as they drive back to “The Good Old U. S. of A.” (164).

A Mexican Odyssey is the only long strip to present the two worlds and points of view—cartoon human and cartoon feline—with such consistency. It is also, with *Chariot of the Globs*,³⁰ a 1975 Shelton and Sheridan production in which the Cat finds himself abducted by aliens, the first of the longer, co-authored “outrageous comic fantasy” strips which thoroughly remove the Brothers and the Cat from America and its neighbours and put them into a global environment and a tradition of fantastic voyages and traveller satire.

The most spectacular example of the genre is Shelton and Mavrides’ three-part publication, *The Idiots Abroad*³¹ in which the Brothers, “tired of all this sleazy sneaking around in

²⁹ A single row of five frames, for example, involves the Cat shown talking to a bird in the first three—“What kind of bird are you?”/“Mom was a roadrunner and Dad was a woodpecker”/“That makes me a roadpecker”—a drawing of the bird pecking the road in the fourth and the punchline in the fifth as the Cat observes the bird moving away, “I always wondered why the roads here are full of holes.” Gilbert Shelton, *The Adventures of Fat Freddy's Cat*, footnote strip (Shelton 159).

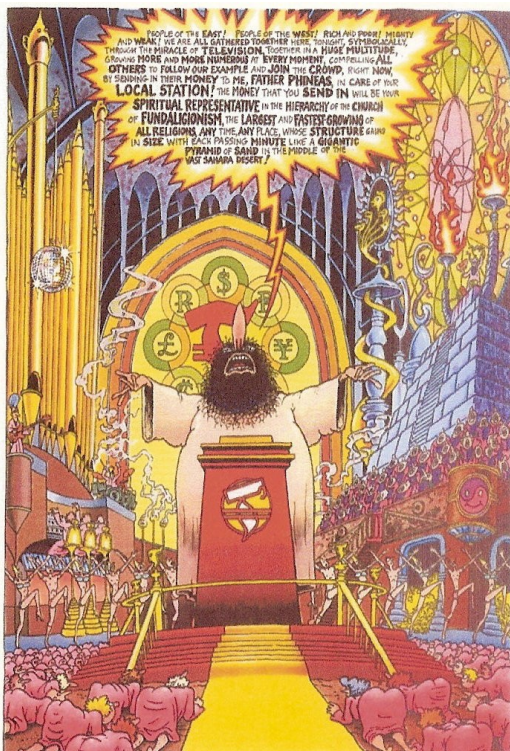
³⁰ Gilbert Shelton and Dave Sheridan, *Chariot of the Globs*, 1975 (Shelton 165-70).

³¹ Gilbert Shelton and Paul Mavrides, *The Idiots Abroad* 1984-1987 (Shelton 177-278).

the slums” decide to source their weed directly from Columbia. The introduction to the third volume offers “a one-sentence synopsis of the story so far” which indicates the complexity of the plot.

“The Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers had really tried to go to Bogota some time ago and had actually gotten as far as the airport, trailed unobserved by the notorious Norbert the Nark. When they become separated, Freewheelin’ Franklin, going first to Central America in a restored WWII C-46 piloted by a mysterious woman who is a member of a group of Survivalists, then almost being shot by the leader of a right-wing death squad, Colonel Gallito and his son, Cadet-Colonel Pichon, then being captured by a boatful of modern-day pirates of the Caribbean and finally being sold as a slave in Africa, while Fat Freddy is conducting a high-speed chase scene throughout Europe pursued by André the Hyena and his gang of international terrorists, Freddy having unwittingly run off with André’s nuclear bomb and lost it in Loch Ness, and after having been rescued by the anarchist artist-inventor Pablo Pegaso, making an unplanned side trip to Moscow where he is arrested for some trivial offense” (246).

The third volume sees Franklin and Freddy working with Phineas who has become a TV evangelist, the leader of a sect preaching Fundaligionism, and now the richest man in the world with plans to take over the universe.



After a number of increasingly unlikely adventures the Brothers are finally saved by a drunken ex-pilot, originally seen at the airport drinking beer with Fat Freddy in the first pages of the strip, and returned to their apartment.

The Idiots Abroad casts the Freaks in the role of clowns in a world that is itself absurd. As usual, the Brothers perturb, but here they perturb a universe that is already thoroughly unbalanced. The “straight”/“alternative” oppositions of the early “hippie sitcom” strips no longer exist. Instead the Freaks are sent on a white-water ride through a narrative which, while constantly connected with the real world with, among other things, its sects, gurus, drug dealers, oligarchs, terrorists, military dictators as well as its cruise ships, Scottish rugby teams, English

pubs, Gaudi buildings in Barcelona, bars in Pigalle and Nuremburg Rally décors in Phineas's desert city, is also completely unhinged. Paul Mavrides, who remarks that the only constraints imposed on the authors of group-authored Freaks stories was to draw in the same style to achieve "something seamless"³² attributes the organization of *The Idiots Abroad* to a natural interest in Surrealism:

"They [Shelton and Sheridan] explored that end of it; kind of a hippy fantasy, surreal; acknowledging it was a comic strip therefore anything was possible in it. ... People who were into psychedelic drugs felt a natural affinity towards Surrealism. But who needs drugs, ordinary reality seems to be completely surrealistic at times."³³

The remark on the nature of the comic strip is interesting. The three *Idiots* magazines all begin and end with a monochrome strip showing the drawing of the episodes by the authors who, irritated by the pressure to produce work faster and faster retire to a citrus farm in Greenland (Shelton) and the Mesozoic era on a dinosaur ranch, leaving Rip Off Press in the hands of Computer Boy. Like the artists, the Freaks themselves are withdrawn from their own story in the final "by way of explanation" page of the narrative.³⁴ Back from their adventures abroad, the Brothers visit Rip Off Press to enquire about the recent publication of a three-page condensed version of *The Idiots Abroad* in a high-school anthology of "Great American Literature of the Twentieth Century" published by Computoon F. Eighthousand. Computer Boy and Computoon F. Eighthousand are one and the same, and Computer Boy has so thoroughly organized production that he creates strips by filming miniature robots of the Freaks, the Cat and the cockroaches, automatically turning the film into comic books. The last frames of the page show the full size Freaks being made redundant as comics characters by copies of themselves.

The self-referential nature of the introductory and final monochrome strips as well as the serendipitous "logic" of the construction of the narrative, the constant intertextual references, the saturation of the pages with dialogue and vivid primary colours make *The Idiots Abroad* a work about comics rather than a tale with its feet on any sort of "real" political or ideological ground. *The Idiots Abroad*, a narrative about ordinary, surrealistic reality, is, in fact, a work about the possibilities of the comics medium rather than a tale with its feet on any sort of ideological ground. Here the Brothers are no more and no less "far out" than any of the other characters—in many ways they, or at least Franklin and Freddy, are ironically enough rather more solidly attached to pragmatism than anybody else. Their political sympathies, such as they are, have to do with a rejection of any group or doctrine that is filled with certainties. They mistrust people who intend to rule the world and, most important, who possess a desire to interfere with pleasure. In this sense the Freaks of *The Idiots Abroad* are no different from the Freaks of the one-page monochrome strips of the early days. The difference does not lie in the nature of the "fearless heroes of the counterculture" but in the apparently serendipitous nature of the story which, in fact, is told in an extremely structured narrative in which a series of textual and graphic, temporal and spatial ellipses finally come together, in the classic fantastic voyage tradition, to return the travelers to a single, safe time and place. The constant intertextuality of both word and image, the variety of layouts, the visual saturation of the pages, the complexity of the dialogues, the use of vivid primary colours on extremely detailed drawings, the self-referential introductory and final monochrome strips all add to the density of the work.³⁵ *The Idiots Abroad*, voted one of the top

³² Joost and Randall

³³ Wesley, *Slack or Bust. An Interview With Paul Mavrides*

³⁴ Gilbert Shelton and Paul Mavrides, *The Idiots Abroad* 277.

³⁵ The three *Idiots* magazines all begin and end with a monochrome strip showing the drawing of the episodes by the authors who, irritated by the pressure to produce work faster and faster retire to a citrus farm in Greenland (Shelton)

100 American comics of the century by the respected *Comics Journal* in February 1999, remains a unique exploration of the comics form and evidence that the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers strips could be far, far more than gentle satire on the lives of post-Woodstock “unbathed leftists” in Middle America.

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