

Remembering George Demmerle

Portrait of a Police Informer

By David Bonner

When Frank Zappa died in 1993, I wrote his obituary in the *Dallas Morning News*. The next day, I got a phone call from a total stranger named George DeMerle, who claimed that my article touched his psychedelic heart. It turned out that this George fellow happened to live only a couple of miles from where I did, so I invited him over. He was about 65 then – some 30 years my senior: a kindly, haggard old hippie, who projected a vibe of peace and love at all times.

Having begun our acquaintance with an obit, it seemed only fitting that I end it with one following his death last October. But I never got around to it until now, one year later, as George comes back to mind, thanks to the McCain campaign suddenly discovering Barack Obama's ex-Weatherman "pal," Bill Ayers. Upon meeting, the first thing George told me was that he "used to run with Abbie and Jerry." Being something of a Sixties buff, I of course knew who Hoffman and Rubin were, even though I (like Obama) was only a child during their heyday. George continued by saying that he had founded an offshoot of the Yippies, called "The Crazies." Then he topped it off by revealing that he had been an FBI informer all the while.

Naturally, I thought he was full of shit. However, after he went home, I went to my shelves and consulted Jerry Rubin's 1971 book *We Are Everywhere* – and there was George, pictured in full glory on page 217. His name was spelled "Demmerle" back then, and he was "the craziest yippie of them all," according to Rubin. "George was the craziest cat around. If you wanted anything flippy done, call George. He lived on the streets and worked with the people. He never took off his yippie button. When the Crazies were born, in an attempt to get an identity distinct from yippie, George nicknamed himself 'Prince Crazy, Son of Yippie.'"

Further research lent support to Rubin's account. Bill Etra, a photographer for the Manhattan-based underground newspaper *Rat*, said that George "always went around as if he were on one big, big trip." The *Rat's* art director Paul

Simon called him "the craziest person I ever met." According to the newspaper's editor Jeff Shero, "Whenever there was a meeting, he'd get up and say to people, 'Anyone who wants to get arrested, come with me.' A lot of people thought he was very cool and very radical." He would "sit at Yippie planning meetings playing with his own toy bombs," reported the *East Village Other*. Dave Dellinger remembered him bringing a "bloody pig's head" to an anti-war meeting, and then accusing everybody there of being capi-

The Rat described George as a "familiar sight on 8th Street and 6th Avenue, strutting in his lavender jeweled Nehru shirt and Day-Glo pink helmet with two feather dusters on top like a Roman guard."

talist dupes. Apparently, George was also the inspiration for the "Quick Kill Merle" character in Ed Sanders' hilariously profane Yippie novel, *Shards of God*.

During our first meeting, George presented me with a fairly rare pressing of *Mothermania*, an ironic "greatest hits" LP by Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. But it was quickly apparent that he really didn't have much understanding of what Zappa was all about. He was visibly disappointed, for example, when I mentioned that Frank was anti-drug and didn't get high. George did get high, and over the next few months he would come over regularly, as I would try to extract details of his former life, in return for me providing him with a safe haven for smoking pot, which was prohibited in his own home.

As with his take on Zappa, George seemed to have only the slenderest understanding of the scene which gave him

his fifteen minutes of fame. He talked more like a hippie from *Hair* than a hippie from real life. Shortly after we met, he told a Dallas newspaper: "I loved Jerry and Abbie. I don't want the ideals they stood for – love and freedom – to die with them. The ideals of the Yippies are the last hope for America." I do think he really believed his rhetoric, but I also believe that his politics ultimately were more about himself than anything else. For George, politics were something to dress up to.

And that he did. The *Rat* described George as a "familiar sight on 8th Street and 6th Avenue, strutting in his lavender jeweled Nehru shirt and Day-glo pink helmet with two feather dusters on top like a Roman guard." He would "show up at demonstrations in a purple cape and plumed helmet," noted Jane Alpert in her memoir *Growing Up Underground*. The *East Village Other* recalled the time he appeared at a demonstration "dressed as a dead Green Beret."

Shortly after Jerry Rubin died in 1994, Paul Krassner devoted an issue of his satirical magazine *The Realist* to the theme "Who Killed Jerry Rubin?" One of the imaginary conspiracy theories that Krassner concocted was "The George Demmerle Connection." This was unreal, of course, but he did preface it with a truthful and useful summary of George's background: "Demmerle had started out with the reactionary John Birch Society, switched to an ultra-right-wing militia, the Minutemen, then tried to join the FBI, which took him on as a volunteer – and later paid – informant ... When the Yippies held a pre-Chicago event on a pier at the Hudson River, nominating a pig for president, Demmerle played the role of a stereotypical anarchist, using for his prop a black bowling ball complete with fuse. Before he could carry out his mission to assassinate Pigasus, he was thrown into the water. After a while, the role began to play him."

His double role as informant and Crazie couldn't last. Here, in a nutshell, is what happened. In the summer and fall of 1969, a collective of Weathermentype radicals – Jane Alpert, Sam Melville, Dave Hughey, and Patricia Swinton – perpetrated several politically motivated bombings of prominent targets in New York City. (They targeted property only, but one attack did cause minor personal injuries.) At the Woodstock Festival in

August of that year, Melville struck up a friendship with Demmerle, who was manning the Crazies booth; soon thereafter, Melville revealed to Demmerle incriminating secrets about the bombings. In due course, Melville enlisted him in one of the collective's bombing plots, and Demmerle, in turn, snitched to his FBI handlers. The two men were busted as they attempted to place bombs under Army trucks at the 69th Regimental Armory in Manhattan.

"Then a day later," wrote Jerry Rubin, "I read that George was released without bail on the prosecution's motion and he was going to testify for the government. My heart stopped. I felt so shitty. George's emergence as an FBI informer ... dealt a temporary blow to the freaky movement in New York."

GEORGE DEMMERLE: THE PIG WORE A DAY-GLO HELMET. That's how the headline in the *East Village Other* summed it up. Among movement people, the reaction of Bill Etra was typical: "I just can't believe that he was an agent all along. It's really hard for me to conceive of a police agent being tripped out constantly." Nor could Paul Krassner, who flatly admitted, "I was fooled by Demmerle." As Jane Alpert noted, "Very few actually suspected him of being an agent," though her co-conspirator Dave Hughey "actually believed he was an undercover agent" and was furious with Melville for having entrusted him. In a 1998 email to me, Stew Albert professed the same: "I suspected him, so we didn't hang out ... I actually suspected he was a cop (and this was the only time I wasn't fooled by infiltrators)."

Once his cover was blown, Demmerle's reputation as a superspy commenced – a reputation that has been preserved in memoirs, counterculture histories, and academic sociological studies. Jane Alpert believed that "Sam fell completely for the trap George had been laying for three years." Jerry Rubin worried that "the goal of undercover pigs like George is to demoralize us and make us so paranoid that we suspect each other and become totally ineffective." Stew Albert, many years later, was still contemplating the extent of George's reach. He told me to "ask Demmerle about Leslie Bacon and if he had any role in her troubles. Also Judy Gumbo and me."

Was George really a devoted spook, whose goal all along was for things to

turn out as they did? That seems highly implausible. On the contrary, I see him as typical of the dubious characters, who regularly appear as informants "of known reliability" (meaning reliably unreliable) in the average FBI file. Jane Alpert, despite her comment about George cleverly laying a trap, knew that Sam "couldn't have made it easier" for him. By the time George stumbled into Sam's life, I think he had evolved to the point where Prince Crazy was, indeed, his primary passion, but his self-perceived James Bond role as an informer remained too irresistible to give up. Stew Albert: "George was the ego maniac Prince Crazy. Even Jerry and Abbie didn't pose that much (they let

The arc of his life had much in common with his contemporary, Charles Manson. Both were born to broken families during the early Great Depression, condemned to foster homes, then ending up immersed in a counterculture, and finally making headlines in 1969.

other people name them). Narcissists like George don't have loyalties – they only follow their ego." Even though his heart was almost certainly with his counterculture associates, once he perceived that it was for his own good to betray them, that's what he did. And, in the immediate aftermath, he even managed to publicly berate Abbie and Jerry and the rest, while basking in right-wing adulation of what he'd done.

Not surprisingly, George had a rotten childhood. At some point it occurred to me that the arc of his life had much in common with his contemporary, Charles Manson. Both were born to broken families during the early Great Depression, condemned to foster homes and orphanages, decades of rambling, then ending up immersed in a counterculture with people much younger than themselves,

and finally making headlines in 1969. Change a few variables and Demmerle might've become Manson, or vice versa.

Once exposed, being useless to the FBI and hated by his former radical associates, George began drifting again, eventually ending up in the Dallas-Fort Worth suburb of Arlington. By the time I met him, he was living the life of a small-time artist, creating weblike installations out of some sort of synthetic material, upon which he would project multicolored lights. (He had constant health problems, perhaps due to the chemicals involved in creating his web works.) Occasionally, he would have an art exhibit, showing up dressed as Prince Crazy, complete with Hendrixian coat and other psychedelic attire. He was a regular at anti-war and other protest rallies, and generally wherever Dallas-Fort Worth weirdos were – such as the rites held by something called the Eulesyian Hot Tub Mystery Religion. His odd behavior and unusual past was a big hit among the young people who shared his company.

What did this George – the George I knew – think of his earlier self? He readily admitted that "I am not innocent of being a slimeball" for betraying people he professed to admire. However, he attempted to justify the betrayal by claiming that he was "trapped" in his role as an informer – an excuse that never rang true. And I never perceived much remorse from him regarding the fate of Sam Melville, who ended up in Attica Prison and was shot to death during the 1971 uprising there. Jane Alpert bitterly observed, "Sam Melville never killed anyone, intentionally or otherwise, while George bears some ultimate responsibility for Sam's death." To which George would respond, sensibly: "Who's more to blame – the bomber or the one who snitches on the bomber?"

Given his history, I'll never be certain that the George I knew was 100 per cent "son of Yippie," as he liked to claim. Maybe he fooled me, as he fooled so many others.

In a Krassnerian myth, he might have infiltrated the Dallas chapter of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), whose rights were being infringed by G-Men about the time George moved to town. And I can't prove that he didn't.

But I do know that the George I knew was well liked – something that was apparently not true back in the day. As

COCKBURN/ST.CLAIR CONT. FROM P. 2

he surrender power even before he gained it. The next day, he told reporters in Clearwater, Florida, that “issues like bankruptcy reform, which are very important to Democrats, are probably something that we shouldn’t try to do in this piece of legislation.” In addition, he said that his proposed economic stimulus program “is not necessarily something that we should have in this package.” Then he worked the phone, hectoring recalcitrants in the Congressional Black Caucus to vote for the bailout, whose paramount importance was as a show of force, as dramatic as nineteenth-century cavalry cutting down demonstrators at Peterloo. As an instigator of beneficial change, the Clinton administration was over six months after election day 1992, when Clinton turned to Al Gore and said, “You mean my re-election hinges on the Federal Reserve and some f---ing bond traders?” Gore nodded, and Clinton promptly abandoned his economic plan to follow the dictates of Wall Street tycoons like Robert Rubin, now a top advisor to Obama. Assuming he wins, Obama beat the speed of Bill Clinton’s 1993 collapse by almost seven months. CP

HUDSON/SOMMERS CONT. FROM PAGE 5

and living standards. The effect has been to decouple saving from tangible capital formation. They need to be re-coupled, and this can be achieved only by restoring the kind of mixed economy by which North America and Europe achieved their economic growth. CP

Michael Hudson is professor of Economics at the University of Missouri (Kansas City) and chief economic advisor to Rep. Dennis Kucinich. He has advised the U.S., Canadian, Mexican and Latvian governments, as well as the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR). He is the author of many books, including *Super Imperialism: The Economic Strategy of American Empire* (new ed., Pluto Press, 2002). He can be reached via his website, mh@michael-hudson.com.

Jeffrey Sommers is a professor at Raritan Valley College, NJ, visiting professor at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga, former Fulbrighter to Latvia, and fellow at Boris Kagarlitsky’s Institute for Global Studies in Moscow. He can be reached at jsommers@sseriga.edu.lv.

Jane Alpert explained, other than Sam Melville, “none of us liked or respected Demmerle, and “no one else thought very highly” of him. By the end of his life, however, George had an adoring wife, Carol, and a large circle of friends who palled around with him. I don’t regret being one of them. CP

David Bonner is the author of *Revolutionizing Children’s Records: The Young People’s Records and Children’s Record Guild Series, 1946-1977*. He can be reached at david@graphicgranola.com.



CounterPunch

PO Box 228
Petrolia, CA 95558

Phone 1-800-840-3683 or visit
our website to find out about
CounterPunch’s new books.

1st Class
Presort
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 269
Skokie, IL

First Class