

Paul Krassner on the Very Zen Art of Hustling a Porn King



Michael Goldberg

(and vice versa)

By Leslie and Michael Goldberg

A suave secretarial voice answered, "Larry Flynt Publications."

Is Paul Krassner there?

"One moment please." Pause.

Another equally honeyed voice purred, "Mr. Krassner's office."

So it was true! Paul Krassner, self-described "court jester to the revolution," founder of the Yippies, creator/editor of that outrageous, sacrilegious, taboo-exploding magazine, *The Realist*, friend to Lenny Bruce, Abbie Hoffman, Ken Kesey and a slew of counter-cultural characters, was now working for Larry Flynt, convicted panderer of obscenity and publisher of the most graphic mass-circulation sex rag on the stands.

Paul Krassner, 45, is a small man, slightly built. Though his hair is longish and his eyes flash intermittently, giving him the impression of youthfulness, he seems almost elderly with his somewhat battered-looking face and a delicate, almost fragile, physical presence. His voice is highish; like a little old man.

He began his career as a nightclub comedian in the tradition of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl. Though he shifted his energy from stand-up to writing, he has been a funnyman ever since.

He also has the reputation of being something of a kook, a five-star radical paranoid. His major creation, *The Realist*, which began in 1958 as an "anti-clerical" publication, evolved by the late '60s into a sounding-board for convoluted FBI/CIA conspiracy theories. By 1972 Krassner was describing Mae Brussell in *The Realist* as "Saint Mae" and his last published column (in *Crawdaddy*) before our interview, made the rather dubious connection between the bust of drug dealer Dennis Perone and the suicide of Art Linkletter's daughter due to LSD.

But in an interview two weeks before he took the *Hustler* job, we found Krassner completely rational, self-assured and delightfully witty. The revelations of Watergate have vindicated him, he felt. "Since everyone else is into conspiracy now," he said, "I can go back to being funny." Not a frivolous task, according to Krassner.

Sounding much like his one time good friend, Lenny Bruce, Krassner continued, "The comedian has the high mission in that he can serve as a demystifier. When something needs to be demystified, it's because people fear it. And laughter is a kind of antidote to fear. So if a comedian can make people laugh at what they're afraid of, it demystifies it. Also, when people laugh they get six times more oxygen than from ordinary breathing."

Krassner was a key figure in the counter-cultural movement of the '60s, a participant in the LSD experiments at Millbrook, a constant speaker at anti-war rallies and cofounder/namer of the Yippies. According to Krassner, the initial inspiration for a "celebration of life" at the 1968 Democratic convention came when "Abbie Hoffman and Anita Hoffman and I went to Florida for a vacation. We took acid and Lyndon Johnson was speaking on television and we said, 'We just have to go to Chicago!'"

Krassner described coining the word "yippie" at a meeting of radicals, including the Hoffmans and Jerry Rubin, who were making preliminary "celebration of life" plans, on Dec. 31, 1967. "I was getting real stoned on Columbian and I was trying to think of something that was necessary for the media. Then I had a flash, the kind of flash where you just knew it was pure knowledge, knowing it was a natural. First I had Youth International and I was looking for a word beginning with a 'p' so it would spell 'yip' and then 'yippies' would come from that. And then the word party came to me and it was so perfect because of the two meanings of the word party. Later that night I took acid and people thought I was crazy 'cause I was babbling, 'It's going to become a word.' You can't force your visions on anybody. You have to let them take their own course."

Some might argue that Krassner has gone well over the edge by becoming the

publisher of *Hustler*. Over the phone from his executive office at *Hustler* magazine, Paul Krassner explained his move.

Describe how you became publisher of Hustler.

I was at the *Hustler* Christmas party and Dick Gregory came up to me and said, "Larry's going to give you the whole thing." I didn't know what he meant but then Flynt got up and said that he was making me publisher of *Hustler*.

But you said, when Flynt announced that he had been born again, that you wouldn't write for a religious magazine. What changed your mind?

Well, at the party Flynt explained about his being born again. He said that Christ was not a better teacher, necessarily, than Buddha and that neither Christ nor Buddha were better than any individual. And that was the turning point for me in terms of his conversion because it obviously wasn't "this is the way" or "there is no other way."

Then Dick Gregory introduced me and I was up there being funny and then somehow the funniness led up to what my instincts were telling me and I said, "As long as Larry made the offer publicly, I'll accept publicly." 'Cause this was after I was making all these jokes about the scratch and sniff Virgin Mary and Flynt was laughing as hard as everyone else, so as long as his reverence wasn't going to interfere with my irreverence, I felt okay about it.

How did you feel?

I had been fasting for four days, so I was pretty high already. And the realization that after the kind of stuff that I had published in the '60s, you know, like "The Parts Left Out of the Kennedy Book," things which were considered in such incredibly bad taste and that now, in the '70s, I was being brought back as redeeming social value, it just blew my mind. I don't know how you can describe your mind being blown, but that's what happened.

Has it occurred to you that Flynt might be using you to prevent further obscenity charges?

Oh, I had an even more paranoid flash than that which was that I was being set up.

Set up? For an obscenity bust?

Yeah, then I realized that I was prepared to go to prison for what I had the right to do.

But it does seem you are being used.

Well, I said to myself, it's blatant that I'm being brought in as redeeming social value. But I don't feel used. Because it's totally open. I mean what I've just said, I've said in front of Flynt, in front of an audience and he laughed. It's mutual. I'm using him in the same sense he's using me.

Well, do you really feel that since Flynt's conversion that he's really concerned about doing something positive with his magazine?

He was concerned before. They did the stuff on child abuse before the conversion. So it was a direction he was already going in. I mean it was a gradual evolution on his part. He's always had a philosophical bent. It just got stronger with him.

What do you think of Flynt?

Even before I met him I knew him from phone conversations. I knew he was sharp. He's self-taught. He's got a strong sense of irreverence. We share an interest in Lenny Bruce. Larry Flynt is good company. I'd like to hang out with him even if I weren't working for him. It's like Castro. Before I went to Cuba I had a media image of him, even though I knew the media lied.

How will Hustler change? The portrayal of women, for example?

That's going to change. I mean I don't see anything wrong with erotic material, but women being there alone as masturbatory objects in a meat rack context was exploitative and it's going to evolve into something else.

How?

First of all, there won't be just women alone and they'll be in different settings. One thing we're planning to do is Bible

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