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Interview with Paul Krassner

Paul Krassner

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LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #238
KRASSNER, Paul

KRASSNER, Paul

Satirist, author, anti-war activist, creator of the Underground Press

Interviewed: July 30, 1992, undated

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 51 minutes, 1 second

Abstract: In his July 1992 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Paul Krassner described his time as an anti-war activist during the 1960s and his current work. Krassner covered topics of satire, drugs, other activists, the Chicago Conspiracy Trial, the FBI and its involvement, Groucho Marx, and other conspiracies. He also detailed events like the levitating of the Pentagon and America's Youth March on the Democratic Convention. Krassner, known as being the father of the Underground Press, was then continuing his satirical writing, critiquing the world. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: satire, *The Realist* (Krassner's magazine), acid, Chicago Conspiracy Trial, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, *The Winner of the Slow Bicycle Race*, FBI conspiracies and involvement, Freedom of Information Act, Harry Reasoner, levitating the Pentagon, counterculture, LSD, Groucho Marx, Venice Beach, *Hustler* (magazine), investigative satire, America's Youth March on the Democratic Convention, Horowitz and Collier, journalism taboos, Lenny Bruce, Kennedy conspiracy

Interview Session I (July 30, 1992): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:02:46 *Question:* How do you define satire? *Answer:* PK said satire was a vehicle to reveal the truth about some contradiction.

00:03:16 *Question:* And it's an art form? *Answer:* Yes. PK said that it may not necessarily make one laugh.

00:04:02 *Question:* How long have you been writing satire? *Answer:* PK started *The Realist* in 1967, but he worked in the '50s as a freelance writer. PK wrote the senior play in high school, which he thought started it.

- 00:04:36 *Question:* Do you fall into writing satire? *Answer:* PK said that as a child, humor was his religion. He used writing as a way to express himself and share the absurdity of the world with others. PK also used comedy as a reality check.
- 00:05:34 *Question:* What kind of tips would you give someone who wanted to try writing satire? *Answer:* PK said one should read as much satire as possible, and to write about what they know.
- 00:07:01 *Question:* Can you learn satire or is it an innate quality that helps one write in this form? *Answer:* PK said it was a combination of both. In PK's case, humor was a way of life. PK asked if one could learn passion because writing satire (and writing, in general) is a form of passion.
- 00:09:08 *Question:* It is a form of humor? *Answer:* Satire has a moral point to observe. Humor can just be silly, but the two terms are often used interchangeably.
- 00:10:12 *Question:* There are many different types of satire, right? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:10:15 *Question:* You mentioned your investigative satire? *Answer:* PK said he investigated so that he could have facts and ideas to work with.
- 00:11:54 *Question:* What other tips can you give on how to write satire? *Answer:* PK gave a list: avoid preaching, double-space, and don't send a query letter to an editor because it often gives away the punchline.
- 00:14:30 *Question:* When writing satire, you follow the same rules that you use for other genres? In terms of the lead, transitions, and verbs? *Answer:* PK said it depended. One saves the punchline for last, like the unfolding of a novel or any other piece of writing.
- 00:15:40 *Question:* How do you know if it works? *Answer:* PK started with how he knew a joke worked in standup. If the audience laughed, then it worked, if they didn't laugh, then there was a communication failure on his part. Or the joke was not funny at all to them for various reasons. In terms of writing, without the immediate feedback, one must read the piece from a stranger's point of view, and then have friends read the piece and judge it.
- 00:17:54 *Question:* How do you choose the subject for satire? *Answer:* Ideally, the subject would choose you. PK said that the topic would strike someone because different things strike people as funny.

- 00:18:51 *Question:* Are there any subjects that are taboo for satire? *Answer:* Yes. The usual taboos about sex and violence, but satire could go further, according to PK. *The Realist* existed because it did not adhere to the usual taboos. PK said the worst taboo is self-censorship.
- 00:20:16 *Question:* What are some of the satirists that write today that you like and admire? That you think aspiring writers can learn from? *Answer:* PK liked some works by several satirists.
- 00:21:45 *Question:* Do you know of anything else you want to add? What's the most difficult part of writing satire? For you? And maybe other satirists? *Answer:* PK said it was being sure that the piece would work.
- 00:22:59 *Question:* What are some of the top markets that you know of that buy satire? *Answer:* PK said there was a wide range, so there was a lot of competition. Every serious publication welcomed comic relief.
- 00:25:37 *Question:* So there are more markets than writers think for this form of writing? *Answer:* The humor market is much larger than others because it combines all of the markets.
- 00:26:43 ***End of Session I***

Interview Session II (undated): Digital File

- 00:01:25 *Question:* How did you come to Venice? *Answer:* PK said that Venice Beach was very connected to the '60s because it was an artistic community. PK lived in NY until 1971, and moved to Venice Beach to work at a theatre in 1984 for a six month run of a show.
- 00:04:17 *Question:* I imagine it would give you a lot of material for your comedy. *Answer:* Yes. PK said it was physically therapeutic to walk barefoot on the beach. He saw it as an island because he didn't have a car and LA was the mainland.
- 00:04:38 *Question:* Is it by choice that you don't drive a car? *Answer:* Choice and circumstance. PK did not drive in NY, where he was raised, but bought one when he moved to San Francisco, but never learned to drive it.
- 00:05:08 *Question:* You mentioned that you don't do comedy clubs. Why is that? *Answer:* PK said that it was a different rhythm; the comedy club audience liked short jokes, smoking, and drinking. PK wanted to present to people who wanted to listen to him and connect with them. PK preferred more intimate settings.

- 00:06:26 *Question:* What kinds of people come out to see you? *Answer:* PK said that those who had heard of his work and enjoyed his work or people who his work was recommended came to see his shows.
- 00:07:16 *Question:* What are some of the topics that you cover in terms of politics? *Answer:* PK was covering the campaign, Supreme Court decisions, and the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas situation.
- 00:07:50 *Question:* Is it as interesting today as it was in the '60s? *Answer:* PK said it was more interesting because everything was escalating. Everything was happening publically, instead of just underground.
- 00:08:42 *Question:* When you do your shows, do people expect you to touch on the '60s? *Answer:* PK did not think so, but thought that they could if it were relevant to something else. When he did television shows, they expected him to talk about the '60s, but he refused.
- 00:09:20 *Question:* There's a danger of being a relic. *Answer:* Yes, a psychedelic relic.
- 00:09:25 *Question:* Many people would be surprised that you're sixty. Has that had any impact on your view of life? *Answer:* PK was surprised that he was sixty. PK could understand how depressing aging could be, but was taking it in stride.
- 00:11:11 *Question:* I guess you could say that you're frozen in the '60s and they'll feel sympathetic. *Answer:* No. The credo of the '60s was to live in the moment and so if he were to be in the '90s and still frozen in the '60s, then it would make a lie of that credo.
- 00:12:09 *Question:* You think there is a counterculture? Where is this taking place? *Answer:* All over, internationally. PK said that there was a momentum building of the wool being pulled off of people's eyes.
- 00:12:49 *Question:* Do you see any kind of movement toward commitment, toward social change? *Answer:* PK thought that Clinton and Gore were ahead of Bush in the polls, which was a sign of changing times.
- 00:13:49 *Question:* Can we make an analogy? *Answer:* Just as the counterculture of the '60s came from the blandness and repression of the Eisenhower-Nixon years, there was a counterculture emerging from the blandness and repression of the Reagan-Bush years.
- 00:14:16 *Question:* So, the '60s ['90s] for you are going to be exciting? *Answer:* Yes, for many reasons. People were going to be pushed into mainstream awareness.

- 00:15:00 *Question:* Are there many differences between the youth of today and the youth of the '60s? *Answer:* Yes, of course. What his generation struggled for, the youth in the '90s did not. However, they had different problems, like the economy. The old counterculture was in an affluent context.
- 00:16:32 *Question:* If the counterculture is forming again, you're not really nostalgic for the '60s, then? *Answer:* PK did not think he was ever nostalgic for the '60s. If he missed anything, it was the sense of community. He found the '90s youth to be interesting and gave him hope. PK thought that most people of the '60s had kept their value systems.
- 00:18:56 *Question:* Most critiques assume that the counterculture faded in the '70s at the end of the war and disintegrated. *Answer:* PK said that the critics did not know because they lived separately from the rest of the world.
- 00:19:57 *Question:* You must miss the camaraderie. *Answer:* PK did not miss the camaraderie because he was still friends with the friends he made in the '60s. They were like an extended family and they did not abandon each other after the movement was over.
- 00:20:46 *Question:* You're still close with the people you ran with in the '60s? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:21:03 *Question:* Some people have really changed, like Rubin. *Answer:* PK stuck up for Rubin and said he was not evil, just a workaholic. Rubin was using his organizing skills in other ways. PK said that people had to survive and had to take jobs that they would rather not have. "A liberal is a radical with a family."
- 00:24:44 *Question:* One guy that never changed was Abbie Hoffman. What kind of relationship did you have with Abbie? *Answer:* Intimate and stormy. PK said that they were very good friends, like brothers, but when he took acid during the Chicago Conspiracy Trial, Abbie stopped speaking to him for ten months.
- 00:25:08 *Question:* Why was that? *Answer:* Because he thought it was irresponsible and Abbie was scared because he did not want to go to jail.
- 00:25:35 *Question:* Up until his death, did you still have a relationship with him? *Answer:* Yes, they had reconciled.
- 00:25:40 *Question:* When did you reconcile? *Answer:* Ten months after the trial.
- 00:25:47 *Question:* Were you shocked by Abbie's death? *Answer:* Yes, of course.

- 00:25:53 *Question:* Suspicious? *Answer:* No, even though PK was a conspiracy nut. PK said that Abbie was clinically manic-depressive and committed suicide.
- 00:26:26 *Question:* It's settled how Abbie died? *Answer:* In PK's mind, it was settled.
- 00:26:34 *Question:* How would you assess his place in history? *Answer:* PK thought Abbie would be legendary. Abbie was unique and would serve as a role model for people to see that you can fight City Hall creatively.
- 00:27:35 *Question:* You were posed by two different producers to write a script about Abbie? *Answer:* Yes, right after Abbie's death. PK said it felt like they were vultures circling around a carcass.
- 00:28:48 *Question:* Is that why you've published the *The Realist* for so long? For this artist integrity and control? *Answer:* Yes. PK said it was not really a business, it was an art and he only charged for it to limit the audience.
- 00:29:09 *Question:* And you do, compared to what you had in the '60s. *Answer:* Yes, and there wasn't any competition in the '60s. There was a hunger for that type of writing.
- 00:30:04 *Question:* RC's friend told him that there was a rumor that *The Realist* was starting. Showing how low-key *The Realist* had become. *Answer:* Exactly. The book that PK was writing would serve as a reminder that *The Realist* was still around.
- 00:30:26 *Question:* You don't seem to mind being in the spotlight. *Answer:* PK said there were big spotlights and mini spotlights. PK did not want/need his ego to be in the spotlight, but he wanted to reach and influence as many people as he could.
- 00:32:00 *Question:* You don't need *The Realist* to make a living? For your material or cultural survival? *Answer:* Yes to his cultural survival, but had not been able to rely on it for material survival. It was operating in the red.
- 00:32:23 *Question:* Is the new *Realist* much different from the old *Realist*? *Answer:* Yes, besides the format. In the old, PK admitted to getting self-righteous. The taboos had changed greatly, so there was more freedom.
- 00:33:17 *Question:* Aren't you credited with bringing four letter words into polite journalism? *Answer:* Yes, before they were using asterisks. It was not the first thing that came to mind when PK was thinking of things that he was proud of. He also first used "Yippy" and "soft-core" pornography.

- 00:34:22 *Question:* Looking back on the '60s, what impact did you really have with *The Realist*? How influential were you? *Answer:* PK said that most people said it woke them up. He then read a letter from someone who wrote to him.
- 00:36:18 *Question:* Do you get a lot of those letters? *Answer:* Yes, when people subscribed, they often were people who had been influenced by *The Realist*, or their parents had been influenced.
- 00:37:00 *Question:* You've had your detractors, too. Harry Reasoner, the darling of the media, attacked you for lack of decency. *Answer:* Reasoner said that PK attacked decency.
- 00:37:39 *Question:* Did critics like that ever get under your skin? *Answer:* No. What did bother PK was that when Reasoner was voted most respected journalist, Reasoner said that what he wrote about PK was just to make a point. What also bothered PK was when an FBI agent posted anonymously threatening and character assassinating articles.
- 00:39:45 *Question:* How did you find out about that? *Answer:* The Freedom of Information Act and his FBI file.
- 00:39:51 *Question:* When was this? *Answer:* There were two different things. Sometime in the '70s, he found out about the poison pen letter. He found out about the FBI trying to create rifts between Blacks and Jews through another person's FBI file.
- 00:40:23 *Question:* You did write a lot of shocking things in *The Realist*, I guess the most famous is the Lyndon Johnson article. What was the point of doing that type of article? *Answer:* It was a literary exercise to nurture the incredible in a credible context. People believed it, just because of the way it was written.
- 00:41:51 *Question:* Did you ever fall flat on your face when you wrote something and it didn't work the way you wanted. *Answer:* PK could not think of a time, but said it was individual perception. You are your worst critic, so if it made PK laugh, then he had to assume it would make others laugh. And if they did not laugh, then it was a failure of communication.
- 00:42:54 *Question:* Were you ever sued for slander? *Answer:* No. PK was threatened. He was sued for something he wrote in *The Rolling Stone* while he was researching the Manson Case.
- 00:43:06 *Question:* What happened there? *Answer:* PK accused a man of being Navy intelligence while posing as a hippy artist. It was a false lead.

- 00:45:08 *Question:* Did you have had to retract? *Answer:* *Rolling Stone* did, PK believed he may have had to write a letter.
- 00:45:24 *Question:* That happens to every writer, especially investigative reporters if you're going to be a good one. *Answer:* PK's defense attorneys said PK should not be taken seriously or literally.
- 00:45:40 *Question:* What's your opinion of the alternative press today? *Answer:* PK said it was a career move, but good for people because it had information that was not shared by the mainstream press.
- 00:47:10 *Question:* A lot of the alternative press looks like mainstream press with the big ads and mainstream issues. *Answer:* PK wondered if the advertising affected the content. PK said the alternative press still had a role to play.
- 00:48:40 *Question:* Are you still involved in protest activities? *Answer:* PK said he did in his own way. He mostly attended events and spoke at events, but did not run around in the streets like he did in the '60s.
- 00:49:52 *Question:* Did you have fun in the '60s? Were you involved in things like levitating the Pentagon and dropping dollar bills on the NY Stock Exchange? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:50:25 *Question:* Humor was a very important part of counterculture activism, right? *Answer:* Yes.
- 00:50:46 *Question:* How did you see your role in the counterculture? *Answer:* Part chronicler and part court jester of the revolution. PK said he was like the Bob Hope of the counterculture.
- 00:51:37 *Question:* The media has changed so much. Do you think it would be difficult to develop opposition to the war through counterculture because the media is so manipulated by establishment forces? *Answer:* The media was probably afraid of continued censorship, but the people in the media were beginning to realize their responsibility.
- 00:53:09 *Question:* You're such an optimist. *Answer:* PK guessed he was.
- 00:53:18 *Question:* Were you heavy into the drug scene? *Answer:* There was a period of heavy use.
- 00:53:38 *Question:* Was that good or bad in terms of being a productive person? Did it affect the way you looked at the world? *Answer:* It was impossible to know whether it always affected his idea-making process.

- 00:54:27 *Question:* You think that it actually helped you? *Answer:* Yes, but there were people who probably disagreed.
- 00:54:37 *Question:* Are you using drugs today? *Answer:* Yes, but not at the same level as in the '60s.
- 00:54:56 *Question:* Given the climate today, it's not as much fun as in the '60s? *Answer:* The fun was in the process, not in violating the law. PK thought the drugs were of a different quality, so it was just a different context. In the '60s, drugs were new and had a romantic tone.
- 00:55:50 *Question:* Looking back, did you think that the drug subculture had a positive or negative affect on the counterculture? *Answer:* PK said it was inexplicably tied to the counterculture. Drugs allowed people to get in touch with the way they wanted to live and allowed people to connect more intimately.
- 00:56:44 *Question:* Many people associate the big events with Hoffman and Rubin, but you initiated many things, as well. Didn't you propose America's Youth March on the Convention? *Answer:* No, PK said he just gave it a name.
- 00:57:42 *Question:* One of the books RC read credits PK with coming up with the idea of the march. *Answer:* PK continued to explain that it was not his idea.
- 00:58:06 *Question:* Did the action at the Democratic Convention play a significant role in the election? *Answer:* PK did not think so. Nixon and the Democrats defeated the Democrats by selecting Hubert Humphrey.
- 00:59:16 *Question:* What significance did the Yippy Party have? *Answer:* It forced people to see a police state in action.
- 00:59:36 *Question:* It was a short-lived movement/party? *Answer:* Sort of. However, at the time of the interview, there were still second generation Yippies.
- 01:00:23 *Question:* Could there have been counterculture without Vietnam? *Answer:* PK thought there could have been a counterculture without the war.
- 01:01:23 *Question:* Did you really believe a revolution was taking place? *Answer:* PK believed personal revolutions were taking place.
- 01:02:12 *Question:* Have you read the Horowitz and Collier book? *Answer:* No, and PK did not agree with '60s legacy that the book declared.

- 01:03:44 *Question:* What positives did come out of the '60s? How would you answer that?
Answer: People tried to be responsible, tried to substitute nonviolence for violence, and tried to use caring and sharing as a way of life. They tried to respect and learn from their children. The children of the counterculture were continuing the legacy with their own additions.
- 01:06:07 *Question:* *The Realist* ended in '75, right? Were you burned out? Is that why it ended? *Answer:* The first ended in '74. PK ran out of taboos and money. He was also burned out from all the conspiracy research.
- 01:06:36 *Question:* It seemed like a rough period for you. *Answer:* PK agreed that it was a rough time. He went crazy from information overload. In publishing all of the conspiracy information, he became overwhelmed.
- 01:07:59 *Question:* You must smile with déjà vu with all of these conspiracy theories today? *Answer:* Yes, people came up to PK and told him that they thought he was crazy, but he was right.
- 01:08:13 *Question:* RC started talking about his own investigative pieces of writing in *Hustler*. *Answer:* RC and PK discussed the value of *Hustler* articles and why people refuse to work for them. PK discussed his time at *Hustler*.
- 01:11:28 *Question:* Why did Larry hire you in the first place? *Answer:* PK was hired just because Larry wanted to hire PK. PK did not ask for a contract.
- 01:12:10 *Question:* How about your old friends from '60s activism? Did they make any judgements about what you were doing? *Answer:* Not any of PK's good friends. Some feminists did question him, but he was able to get articles on abortion into the magazine.
- 01:12:54 *Question:* Have you redeemed yourself with feminists? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:13:05 *Question:* How did you get out of the financial mess you were in? *Answer:* PK said he was still in the financial mess and was depending on the book to get him out.
- 01:13:28 *Question:* There's no job security. *Answer:* Right. PK said he was still in a lot of debt, but was beginning to feel a little more secure about money.
- 01:14:35 *Question:* Don't you ever wish you were back running skits? You could be rich, living in Bel Air. *Answer:* PK never considered it a sacrifice and felt extremely fortunate to be unlimited in his expression.
- 01:15:25 *Question:* One of the great things about you is the relationships that you have made.

- You've met some of the most interesting people. *Answer:* PK agreed about the people he had met through his writing.
- 01:16:12 *Question:* Lenny Bruce called you one of his closest friends. That must be a great honor. *Answer:* PK did not think he was one of Bruce's closest friends, but they were very close. Bruce had a big influence on PK as a performer.
- 01:16:39 *Question:* Was he in-tune with the counterculture? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:16:59 *Question:* What about Groucho Marx? Was it the strangest? *Answer:* It wasn't the strangest meeting. PK said it was interesting and Groucho was very human.
- 01:17:50 *Question:* Was he in-tune with the counterculture? *Answer:* Marx was curious about the counterculture, but did have his prejudices against it. Marx liked that the counterculture participants trusted their friends more than they trusted the government.
- 01:18:40 *Question:* Is your biography going to be a tell-all? *Answer:* PK thought so. He knew it would make some people angry, like Jackie Kennedy and members of the Church of Scientology.
- 00:19:03 *Question:* Why will Jackie Kennedy be angry? *Answer:* Because PK was publishing about the Kennedys.
- 01:19:37 *Question:* What's going to happen after that? *Answer:* PK said he could live from month to month after that. He was also thinking of his next project; an anthology of investigative satire.
- 01:20:38 *Question:* Obviously you can't retire. *Answer:* PK said that he retired when he was six years-old. If he retired, he would just do what he had already been doing.
- 01:21:31 *Question:* So, you're happy? *Answer:* Yes, as happy as one could be in a world of suffering.
- 01:22:18 *Question:* How do you want people and history to remember you? *Answer:* PK thought that people remembered others for their own needs. He hoped that his work would serve as a catalyst to wake people up, or just bring them closer to understanding themselves. He would also be happy if they laughed or felt inspired.
- 01:24:18 *End of interview*