

Detroit's jovial community

from *Having Little Being Much*

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In 1969 [when Fredy and Lorraine moved to Detroit], the “underground” newspaper the *Fifth Estate* addressed itself to the Detroit radical and counter-culture community. Fredy sought out the staff, and except for a brief period (when there was an attempt to make the paper a commercial success), was an ardent but critical supporter of the paper, extending his friendship to the numerous remarkable collaborators. In addition to his criticisms, Fredy's typing skills were welcomed. Over the years, Fredy took part in the paper's production. At his death in 1985, only one staff person, Marilyn Werbe, had more typesetting seniority than Fredy.

When we arrived in Detroit, the *Fifth Estate* office was on the corner of Warren and the Lodge Freeway. On the floor above lived the White Panther collective which advocated aggressive militancy. One of the ways they practiced it was by procuring guns; the group was pleased to be photographed brandishing them from the rooftop of their headquarters.

Detroit police cars proclaimed their occupants to be “Protectors of Liberty”; “Perpetrators of Violence” would have been a more accurate characterization. The liberty they practiced was their freedom to harass young people who flouted conventions. In the confrontational days of the early 1970s, even the *Fifth Estate's* equipment included a shotgun. Staff members willingly displayed the weapon, but their martial arts were restricted to karate and verbal attacks on government, corporations, and their flunkies.

Peter Werbe, *Fifth Estate* stalwart, took Fredy to the adjacent print shop operated by a seventeen-year-old mechanical whiz, Joel Landy. Fredy was impressed by the tall, skinny teenager and often recalled his first view of Joel crawling out from under the gears and rollers of the press he was adjusting. Joel welcomed Fredy, gave him a key, a ten-minute lesson on darkroom techniques, and encouraged him to start printing.

Fredy responded eagerly...

From Practice to Theory in the Cass Corridor

Fredy and I were part of a circle of lively individuals loosely gathered around the *Fifth Estate*. These men and women were in no way adherents of a party or platform, but we did hold similar views about the indignities of wage labor, the pernicious effects of racism in the US, and the unhealthy nature of a consumer society. Most people in the group had jobs, but not professions. We identified with drop-outs and scorned mainstream tastes and activities.

Rejecting middle-class conventions was not a wrenching choice because the inner-city Cass Corridor area where most of the dissidents lived was the center of Detroit's bohemian community. Many residents of this area viewed the neighboring state institution, Wayne University, as an encroaching threat rather than a resource, and they made efforts to organize cultural and self-help activities which they could control. The food co-op and cinema club were undertakings which had long histories. An auto co-op did not last as long, but its goals to teach mechanical skills and to provide a service aided residents' self-sufficiency. Local bands performed at street fairs

and in neighborhood bars. There were frequent poetry readings and original theater presentations. The Unitarian Church furnished meeting space for many gatherings, both political and social. In the late 1970s, Ralph Franklin and friends established another non-commercial space: the Grinning Duck Club. The various locations of the *Fifth Estate* office were always in the Cass Corridor area.

A permissive atmosphere prevailed in this part of midtown Detroit.

Restrictive conventions were associated with the distant suburbs, while people committed to counter-cultural activities found mutual support among the residents of this area—students, drop-outs, artists, dissidents. The claim to “community” may have been exaggerated, but in this racially integrated neighborhood, there was tolerance for misfits, respect for those who preferred poverty to jobs, the recognition of a common bond that linked people one met, whether they were there by choice or necessity.

Detroit’s radicals did not sit idle waiting for theoretical guidelines to appear in Black & Red publications. An institutional framework for radical activity was rejected long before any of us read either Brinton’s essay on the leader principle or Camatte’s *On Organization* or *The Wandering of Humanity*. A succinct two-word slogan characterized the position of *Fifth Estate* friends on this matter. Their “Fuck Authority!” posters and t-shirts were widely distributed. A number of audacious actions which put into practice the spirit of this motto preceded its appearance in 1975.

In the summer of 1973, Pat Halley publicly threw a pie in the face of a guru who claimed divine attributes. Pat’s well-planned gesture received much media coverage, but it nearly cost him his life. One of the guru’s disciples brutally attacked Pat and left him with a fractured skull; the man had come to Pat’s home as a guest claiming he wanted to share his own critique of the guru.

The goals of career-oriented feminists and of *Ms. Magazine* were debunked in a poster distributed by the FE at the end of 1974. The parody of the “feminist” position showed a tenant happily accepting eviction since it was done by women authorities; another woman proudly displayed the recognition plaque given her for superior shit-shoveling. Ironically condemning the State’s torture apparatus as an acceptable tool for furthering a worthy cause, the poster carried to its logical conclusion the principle of using any and all means to assure success.

In the spring of 1974, an exhilarating evening of street theater took place in front of Cobo Hall, Detroit’s convention center, where affluent civic leaders were assembling for a dinner. A hundred malcontents dressed as bums and wasters gathered outside, lined up for the free soup (provided by the bums themselves), panhandled, sold pencils, and distributed a pamphlet, “To Serve the Rich,” which included recipes such as “Hearst Patties” and “Split Priest Soup.”

One spring Sunday in 1975 found a poster affixed to a number of Detroit churches announcing “Christ’s Body Found, Easter Canceled.”

Given the attitudes about consumption in the FE circle, an individual who acquired a new commodity often felt self-conscious and obliged to offer an explanation. But no one ever felt constrained to offer excuses for the consumption of food, even luxury food. We ate together frequently, sometimes in restaurants, more commonly in our homes. The pot-luck dinners—orgies of good food, laughter, and conversation—were usually set up to commemorate an event or to introduce a visitor, but sometimes they were ad hoc gatherings.

The verbal prowess of the men in this group continually impressed Fredy. He listened with admiration—almost timidly—to their anecdotes, their succinct portrayals and devastating put-downs. But when theoretical issues were discussed, Fredy’s historical analogies and logical reasoning captured everyone’s attention. Fredy never considered himself skilled at repartee, but he knew he could characterize divergent viewpoints, show their origins and implications, and convincingly articulate his position. Fredy used these gatherings of friends as a forum for expressing a synthesis of his current reading as well as his evolving insights. In addition to sharing these insights, his friends kept him up to date on events in Detroit and the world.

This circle of *Fifth Estate* friends has always had a unique genius. The choice made in one’s daily activity, how one earns and spends money, are scrutinized closely. Over the years there were—and still are—heated arguments about recycling and consumption, about who to collaborate with on demonstrations, whether it is possible to use the mass media to communicate a radical perspective. Demonstrations and defenses of spectator sports arouse passions. The principles involved in buying a luxury bicycle, handsome clothes, or a new car; the pros and cons of using electronic musical instruments, of copyrighting something one has written—these issues call into question

everyone's practice and give rise to intense debates. Within the group, individuals are judged critically, but a sense of solidarity generally pervades even vociferous arguments. Support is always forthcoming when an individual acts as a rebel in an oppressive situation.

When there are out-of-town visitors—especially European ones—everyone makes great efforts to impress the guests with the group's integrity and wit. The setting of these festive pageants is Detroit, starting with the devastated part. Visitors are shown the abandoned buildings along the wide thoroughfares which extend for miles, thoroughfares where the main signs of life are other automobiles and an occasional party store. Europeans always insist that these areas look like war zones.

The guests also see the auto plants scattered around the city, many of them boarded up like so many other structures. Then, for contrast, there's a glimpse of an affluent suburb looking like the export version of the American lifestyle. And one of the city's few "gems" is on the itinerary: Belle Isle, the city park in the middle of the Detroit River.

The initiation continues on a more intimate level in the apartment or house of friends—in Detroit, but somewhat removed from the most blighted sections of the city. As people gather with food they have prepared, the conversation becomes animated. We are our own favorite audience and performers, but the presence of guests makes us aspire to new heights. Food and drink mellow the company; stories about local politicians, on-the-job sabotage, discrediting a bureaucrat or leftist politico reinforce the impression that a joyful community can flourish in the midst of an American wasteland, that these inventive rebels will surely succeed in re-shaping society. Sometimes music and song further beguile those in attendance. Uninhibited attempts to speak the visitor's language add charm if not coherence.

Collective Magic

I am obliged to use the present tense to write about this collective magic since a current victim of this enchantment, a visitor from West Germany, just asked me what I thought the selling price would be for a house displaying a "For Sale" sign down the street.

Food, drink and conversation were not the only pleasures that Fredy and I shared with *Fifth Estate* friends. There were outings to Point Pelee in Canada and to Michigan parks; we took bicycles, swim suits, or cross country skis with us, depending on the season. Although Fredy was fifteen years older than many of these friends, it was a "community" of equals. He was attentive, but not condescending, toward views expressed by women; if he disagreed, he challenged them. Fredy was often light-hearted, willing to exchange silly stories. His cat imitations charmed all children and most adults. These were oral imitations but Fredy attributed his talent in this domain to certain other cat-like attributes he noted in his behavior.

When visitors came for a meal he bustled around the kitchen, happy to have company while he cooked, eager to share his recipes. He was proud of his cooking skills and like to be praised for the food he prepared.

Within the large circle of friends there were some who were prone to anti-intellectualism. Fredy regarded as legitimate one aspect of this tendency—the urge to discredit authorities. In discussions, Fredy himself criticized severely many social theorists, but never on the grounds that an analysis was too complex, too complicated to grasp in an instant. He was intolerant of the unacknowledged and narrow criterion of some friends who grumbled about the difficulty of texts. These individuals found words they had learned before they were eighteen to be "acceptable" but words others had learned after they were eighteen to be "unacceptable."

Fredy put so much work into his writing projects he felt they were an extension of himself. He regarded endeavors of others accordingly and took care to follow and encourage his friends' creative projects, performances, and exhibitions.

He sometimes found things to criticize in his friends' efforts. Fredy thought that theatrical works purporting to satirize a television program actually enhanced the authority of the media in general and the television personality in particular. Fredy held definite views about carelessness in printing projects. He thought sloppy writing, layout or printing, far from giving a personal touch to the words or images, suggested minimally, indifference to the reader, and sometimes arrogance—as if the proffered words had such a magical, irresistible quality that the form chosen to present them was irrelevant.

He found it baffling that friends who found time to read the newspaper every day were unable to find time or unwilling to make the effort to read his books. Their lack of interest was all the more disappointing as Fredy felt his texts offered insights about issues that concerned his friends and were sometimes a synthesis of experiences they had in common.

fifth Estate

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/368-369-spring-summer-2005/detroits-jovial-community>
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