

They Don't Call it *SubGenius* for Nothing

Bob Black

I fell out with the Church of the SubGenius in 1987. A few years later, one of their bigshots, John Hagen-Brenner, mailed me a bomb and ended up copping a guilty plea in Federal court, and I spread the news far and wide. After a couple years in denial, H-B's high-school friend Doug Smith/"Ivan Stang" took to the Internet — correctly assuming I wasn't there to respond — to disparage the "Black Lies." But though I wasn't present, I had friends who were, through whose help I not only saw what Stang was saying but posted the following response.

* * *

Greetings. Through the good offices of the Black Legions (we are everywhere) I've read Ivan Stang's defamatory sputtering of February 3. I appreciate the publicity (good for book sales) almost as much as the satisfaction of knowing that every minute he put into it was time lost to his life purpose, *making money*. I told him over 7 years ago that in me he finally had an *effective* enemy. I never lie, and I'm always right. If he ignores me, I win. If he engages me, he loses. It's hard to see a way out for him unless somebody mails me a bomb or something. Say, come to think of it ... somebody *did* mail me a bomb.

Which (Stang insists) had absolutely nothing to do with SubGenius. It was the sheerest *chance* that the mail bomber was John Hagen-Brenner, alias Hellswami, alias Satellite Weavers, who did the cover art for the first edition of the *Book of the SubGenius* and was co-responsible for the rest of the art. By some *quirk of fate*, the bomber and Stang grew up together in Dallas. And it was a *coincidence* that the assault followed the publication in several places of my scathing review of *High Weirdness by Mail*, the first significant public criticism Stang and his SubGenius racket ever received. And Stang, as he made abundantly clear on February 3, can't *stand* criticism.

I mean, it's not as though Hagen-Brenner had any beef of his own with me. We've never met or communicated. I'd never done anything to, or even said anything about Hagen-Brenner. He was just a name to me. If he didn't bomb me on behalf of Stang, why *did* he bomb me? To impress Jodie Foster? Did anybody notice that Stang has been *extremely vague* about this?

To pose the question in Watergate/Conragate-type language: What did Stang know and when did he know it? I was told by a SubGenius known as GOBI (Suzanne DeGrasse) that — before Hagen-Brenner was arrested for it — his "prank" gave much pleasure to Ivan Stang. Did Stang have prior knowledge of the hit, which in that case had his tacit if not explicit approval? I can't prove than he did, any more than anybody can prove that Hitler ordered the Holocaust, but

Hagen-Brenner by all reports has a passive personality and no history of violence or crime (hence his light sentence) — he sounds like the sort who'd have to be put up to something so reckless. Then again, they don't call it *Sub-Genius* for nothing.

I am reminded of the famous clash between King Henry II of England and his ex-friend Archbishop Thomas Becket. The King did not, in so many words, order four of his barons to assassinate Becket. But he did say, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" They took the hint. Henry had, in CIA jargon, "deniability." So does Stang. A word to the foolish is sufficient, and if anything is obvious, Hagen-Brenner is a fool.

The "mail bomb incident" is, Stang assures us, "a *total lie* based on nothing but a lone nut's word in a crank letter." A lone nut? Who, me? Or Albany Police Department detective George McNally who collected the pieces of the bomb? And who produced the best quip of the case when he observed that this was *really* "high weirdness by mail"? Or Postal Inspector T.H. Walmsley who traveled from Albany to Rochester (a 5 hour drive) to elicit Hagen-Brenner's name from GOBI (to whom he'd admitted the crime) and flew to Los Angeles, where Hellswami lives, to interrogate him? Or the Federal district court judge who accepted Hagen-Brenner's guilty plea as recorded *on a tape I used to retail*? If these were *total lies*, why did Hagen-Brenner plead guilty? To impress Jodie Foster?

For \$3 postpaid I will send to anyone interested a compilation of court documents and others relating to Hagen-Brenner's case. And for \$10 postpaid I'll send my latest book *Beneath the Underground* (Feral House 1994) which devotes a chapter to the "Pullers of Wool: The Church of the SubGenius," including the offending *High Weirdness by Mail* review and the bombing which followed. What Stang calls a prank the charging document (reprinted in BTU, p. 60) calls an "improvised explosive device." have no drag with law enforcement. I am sure that Hagen-Brenner got to plead guilty to a misdemeanor, although he'd committed a felony, in part at least because his lawyer told the pigs that I was a sinister anarchist whereas Hellswami was a respectable, married, home-owning affluent self-employed businessman.

There's a parallelism — a *modus operandi*, a signature — in Hagen-Brenner's "prank" as in Stang's defense of his meretricious self-review in *MONDO 2000*. It's called having it both ways. If your bomb goes off, great — it was a bomb, bombs away! If it didn't, it was a "prank." If your self-review escapes notice as such, great — it was a favorable review. If not, it was a "joke," and *aren't you stupid for not "getting it"*? It's for real if you get away with it. It's a joke if you get caught.

It is indeed "technically a crime," as Stang says — his lawyer-dad could confirm this — to mail 4 (actually 5) firecrackers through the mail. It's a crime to mail anything explosive. Hagen-Brenner did not, however, mail me merely 5 Black Cat firecrackers (Stang must have learned the brand name from Hellswami, it's news to me), he mailed me "an improvised explosive device consisting of an audio cassette holder wired with four cadmium-type batteries, four flashbulbs, and five firecrackers." Opening the cassette would throw a contact switch whereby the batteries would set off the flashcubes whose heat would in turn ignite the firecracker fuses.

How effective a bomb this was I am not competent to say. I do know that the old-fashioned photo flashcubes generated enough heat to be used in bombs as igniters. Whether these flashcubes could too I don't know, because I never opened the package, I threw it against the wall. There was a flash (the flashcubes) and a puff of smoke but the firecrackers did not go off. This was fortunate for Hagen-Brenner since he could claim, as he did, that he only meant to "startle" me with the flash — and startle me again when I saw the firecrackers — not blow me up. But

if I got caught having bungled a bombing, that's what I'd say too. Even on Hellswami's account it was a terrorist attack. I think of a "prank" as something you play on a friend, not someone you've targeted as an enemy. In the event, as Neal Keating remarked, "the only thing that bombed was the Church of the SubGenius."

If this was a "prank" it was one which Satellite Weavers put a lot of effort into (but why?). His confidante GOBI, who ratted on him, told me that H-B is technically adept, plays with model trains, etc. For a living he does special effects for Hollywood films (*The Abyss* is one of his credits). He owns, or owned, a house in "the Valley" (as in *Valley Girls*) which couldn't come cheap. H-B lived, and lives, in LA. I lived, and live, in Albany, New York. The cassette bomb was mailed (bearing a phony Florida return address) from Wausau, Wisconsin. According to Postal Inspector Walmsley, Hagen-Brenner was ID'd as having mailed a package from there. So he must have traveled halfway across the country just to mail me a "prank." Sounds like maybe H-B suspected that, legally, this was much more than a prank, else why go to so much trouble and expense to disguise its point of origin? Why not take public credit for such a splendid jape?

Anyway, to quote an old poem, "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" Why doesn't Hagen-Brenner explain himself? He's paid his debt to society, he'd be in no legal jeopardy coming clean now, and I have no animus toward the pathetic fool-and-tool, I just want to know who was behind his foolish attentat.

So great is Doug Smith/Ivan Stang's anxiety over all this that he gets very, very sloppy. He says I "have a little law school training in the past and likes to sue any chance he gets." Smith's dad has "a little law school training" — he's from a prominent old-money family (a labor lawyer) affluent enough to have put Doug, despite his drinking problem, through a prep school and a private university and buy him and his wife a house in a chic suburban-like Dallas neighborhood. Smith protests his parents aren't "rich." His very sincerity confirms that they were: this level of wealth, far above what most Americans (myself, and *my* parents, included) have ever come close to, isn't "rich" to Smith compared to the much richer pigs he's always hung out with. I know somebody who felt poor at Bard College: her parents made only \$100,000 a year. I was recently homeless for three months; I'm on welfare now. Terms like rich and poor are, of course, relative — but not *that* relative.

I have (as Smith well knows) more than a bit of law school training, for better or for worse. I have a J.D. from Georgetown and an M.A. from the Jurisprudence & Social Policy Program, University of California (Berkeley) School of Law. I did it with little family money and no family pull (I'm the first lawyer in my family). I report this to set the record straight, not to assert a claim to fame — I have better ones.

Probably precisely *because* I know so much law I am always loathe to resort to it. Anyway I never was a litigator. The credulous reader might suppose that I go around suing SubGenii. Actually, SubGenii (Stang's local lackeys) sued *me* in Boston in 1987–1988 and got quite a shock: when I established that they had to *post a bond*, forfeit to me if their claims were not substantiated, they very hastily settled out of court.

The sloppiness (this is a charitable characterization) continues. "I was never reduced to writing my own reviews" because, says Stang, I (Bob Black) never thought to try. Nor anybody else, I suppose, in the entire course of human history until the great Stang conceived and executed this bold new strategy. — Except that (as I've known for 15 years or so) lots of writers, Walt Whitman notably, have done exactly that.

Whether *MONDO 2000* knew Stang was jacking off or not is irrelevant. Whether the *MONDO 2000* techno-yuppies were in on or out of Stang's hilarious joke — he *reviewed his own book*, what a *laugh riot* — doesn't matter. Stang knew. And his megalomania is getting quite out of hand if he thinks he is so famous that everybody knows, even to this day, that Ivan Stang = Doug St. Clair = Douglass St. Clair Smith, much less that everybody knew it four years ago. If so, why the "Doug St. Clair" dodge? Why get so *upset* that *I explained his funny joke* to those like myself who were too dumb to "get it"? The humor-impaired should be pitied, not hated.

This sort of thing is routine for Smith. As I wrote in my *High Weirdness* review:

"According to Stang, his book is 'essentially a collection of snide put-downs of hundreds of well-meaning, sincere people in all walks of extremism.' With few exceptions, everyone listed is insulted except for Stang's SubGenius cronies and people he owes favors to. Nowhere in the book, though, does he disclose the double standard as he did in a form letter (January 12, 1987) to *Book of the SubGenius* contributors such as myself:

"*Like other mutants*, HWM not only lists addresses but also has a one-paragraph description or commentary ... most of these are sarcastic, i.e. [sic] when describing rival cults, but occasionally are rave reviews, such as when I'm mentioning *your* material, if you sell anything. See, although it mostly lists *free* stuff, it also tells the reader to send *money* in the certain cases such as my *pals*. (This isn't a SubGenius book *per se*, but might as well be.)"

Since it is more than 3 years old, my *MONDO 2000* letter is out-of-date on some points of detail. The letter itself didn't get into my next book because I misplaced it. "Notice he doesn't say *which* book," harumphs Stang. Who gives a shit? The next book was supposed to be *Beneath the Underground*, but the original publisher fucked up and *Friendly Fire* came out first (Autonomea 1992). But BTU is the better for the repeated revisions necessitated by the repeated delays. As for the "Arise" bootleg, the bootlegger was swamped by serious personal problems before he could produce more than a few, but not before provoking an unintentionally amusing reaction from Stang as explained in BTU pp. 63–64.

According to Stang, my talent abruptly evaporated when shut off from its presumptive fount — the Church of the SubGenius — and only Stang, it seems, was *smart enough* to notice this. Refusing to take no for an answer, Blaster Al Ackerman would not allow his book *Blaster* to be published until I wrote an intro for it. Rev. Crowbar would have no one else introduce his *Popular Reality* anthology (forthcoming from Autonomea, as is *Zerowork: The Anti-Work Anthology*, which I coedited). Loompanics keeps commissioning articles from me (such as "FIJA: Monkeywrenching the Legal System" in the 1995 Main Catalog). Andrei Codrescu inexplicably keeps publishing me in *The Exquisite Corpse*. Even the *Wall Street Journal* commissioned a text from me several years after I was weaned off the SubGenius teat. What does Stang know that nobody else does? Or, as Groucho Marx asked, "Is there anything else you know absolutely nothing about?"

This is a good place to correct an error perpetuated by Stang's fawning introduction to *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*: "Sometime in 1980 I began receiving these intense one-sheet flyers from what looked to be a fanatical anti-establishment group called 'The Last International.'" Actually, it was 1979, and actually, it was Doug Smith who made contact with me as with many other marginals he might have a use for. My reaction was cautious. I wrote back to the effect that we seemed to be pursuing parallel projects but I wasn't trying to make money off mine. He wrote back reassuringly — nobody brown-noses like Doug Smith — the sales hype was just part of the JOKE (sound familiar?), he barely got enough money to pay for printing, etc. For a long time I believed him.

In any event, I participated in SubGenius as a sideline to my own creactivities. My opinion then was that it was a good gimmick as far as it went, but too limiting. That, quite aside from the terrorist attacks and the consumer fraud, is the problem with SubGenius: it is *all used up*. Its possibilities were exhausted a long time ago. This was quite obvious when recently I reviewed *Revelation X* for Steamshovel Press. If you've read the *Book of the SubGenius*, don't bother with *Revelation X*, "less of more of the same" as I once put it before I lost my sense of humor. People with far more taste for SubGenius than I have tell me they can't get through *Revelation X*.

This was bound to happen even for a project with a more expansive concept, and more able players, than SubGenius has. The point is (as I once put it before I lost my talent) "without being a quitter, to know when to quit." It's about *moving on*. My Last International poster project, for instance — the one Stang praised to the skies — was an outstanding, a liberating vehicle for me. But I ended it after a few years because I felt I'd reached its limits, at least as compared to other projects which beckoned. I could do this because I had few "fans" and, most important, no *customers*. I'd found that when I was doing it *for myself*, then and only then was I doing something for others too. But it was up to them to keep up with me if they could and if they cared to.

Posters freed me to express myself fully AS myself because they were unmediated. During the 70's I'd found it increasingly impossible to say what I had to say, especially the way I wanted to say it, in print media. I was tired of pulling my punches only for them not to connect. But a funny thing happened. It turned out there were places where my *posters* could be published — punkzines, avant-garde art magazines, anarchist newspapers, even *The Stark Fist of Removal*. Indeed posterists like myself helped spur the zine explosion by supplying stuff for the zines to print. More and more I made contacts by mail, even as returns from postering, always low, soon diminished. And there is only so much you can say on a one-sheet poster. I had more to say than that, and now there were places I could say it. I still poster (when I can afford to), but the mail-based marginals milieu — which Stang, having milked it dry, no longer conceals his contempt for — is for now my central point of reference.

When I invented the 90's in 1977 I never suspected that I had begun to write *books*. Heh!

Now there's far too much shit in Stang's diaper for me to wash it all out right now. That "hate" dialog he attributes to me, for instance, I cannot recall and is at best badly distorted. It's Stang toady Ken DeVries ("Orton Nenslo"), not me, who purports to hate the Universe. (It takes a *big man* to find the time to hate the Universe — I am *impressed* — especially at the same time you are holding down a day job.) I am rather precise about what I do and don't hate. But consider what *Stang* wrote about hate in the introduction to my first book: "Indeed, it is our very *hate* of the work that keeps us going. I want *revenge* for all the years they've *already taken*." When he wrote that mine "was some of the, uh, wittiest hate humor [he'd] ever seen," that was meant as a compliment.

Maybe we can *put a wrap on* what's wrong with "Stang on the Black Lies." According to Stang, when Black lies, and especially when he doesn't, he *lies*. But when *Stang* lies, it's a "joke." When a SubGenius mails me an "explosive device," and *admit in open court* that he did so, it's a *total lie* for me to say so. But when Stang, citing nameless "people who knew [me] in San Francisco," falsely accuses me of *arson*, a crime with which I have never even been charged and indeed was never committed on the occasion that Stang, without explaining anything, alludes to, that's for real. But let's pretend that I, say, "was seen" pouring gasoline outside the office of a Marxist nut-cult, *Processed World*. Why wouldn't *that* be a *prank*, a *joke*, intended to "startle" the Commie bastards as Hagen-Brenner told the judge he intended to "startle" me?

The fact is that, perhaps regrettably, nobody ever torched the PW office. In almost 10 years no witness has ever come forward saying that I, or anybody, ever tried to. So far as I can tell, if the accusation was ever even made to the police (no evidence of that either) they never took it seriously. Surely they would at least have questioned my then girl friend, another victim of PW harassment, SubGenius Donna Kossy, but they did not.

I was by then in Los Angeles for a summer job with the ACLU — a felony fugitive would not have stayed in the state for 4-1/2 months for work/study wages. Or put up many posters (mostly run off at work) with the new mail drop address he took out. Or revisit San Francisco several times. Or publish, under his own name, a review of the Loompanics Catalog in the *LA Reader*. Or sign off on legal briefs he wrote in victimless-crimes cases which were submitted to several California courts. Or perform in a reading of an adaptation of “Animal Farm” at the libertarian “Future of Freedom Conference” in Long Beach. Or, as long prescheduled, present a paper and serve on a panel at the annual convention of the Law and Society Association in San Diego. Short of notifying *Processed World* of my new home address — which seems like asking a lot, since they’d burglarized a previous apartment, pinned a death threat to its door, and assaulted me outside of it — how much more conspicuous could I have made myself?

Now let me appeal to the reader’s common sense. How likely is it that Ivan Stang is in any position to know that *everybody* I ever knew in San Francisco will confirm that I committed an arson crime that never occurred? Do you think Ivan Stang, a lifelong Dallas resident, knows *everybody* who knew me in San Francisco, where I lived for 4 years (and in the Bay Area, for 7)? And that everybody I knew there confirms my guilt? I had very, very minimal contact with Stang’s main Bay Area contacts (Paul Mavrides, Jay Kinney, Doug Wellman, Hal Robbins). It is noteworthy that Kinney and Mavrides were both contributors to, and apologists for, *Processed World* and always endorsed whatever line PW put out although they had no personal knowledge of anything that ever went on between PW and its many critics such as myself. Kinney is a personal friend and artistic collaborator of the most unsavory authoritarian of the PW control group, one Adam Cornford (who, ironically, 13 years ago told me how much he despised SubGenius), nephew of an English Communist so prominent in the Party, until he was killed fighting in Spain, that After the Revolution his comrades wanted to rename London “Cornfordgrad.” I’m not making this stuff up, folks. I *couldn’t* make this up. (Regarding the PW debacle, consult my first and worst book, *The Baby and the Bathwater*, \$10 from Feh! Press, 200 E. 10th St. #603, New York NY 10003.)

Returning to the key to all this — the double standard, having it both ways — let’s take up the *seemingly* worst accusation against me which might *almost be true*. In his yuppie coffee-table book *High Weirdness by Mail*, Stang (as he admits in a letter I’ve already quoted) holds up extremists to derision, as mere entertainment. As I said in my HWM review, he exploits extremists — including those he’s led on and cultivated — to exhibit as freaks for their entertainment value. They perform the tricks, but Stang takes the gate. I’d find this profoundly disgusting even aside from the way it equates “extremists” I think have something important to say with those I think are simply sick. (I also think these categories overlap and we ought not to dismiss the genuine insights of Charles Fourier or Wilhelm Reich or Friedrich Nietzsche because to some extent, sooner or later, they went over the edge.) Extremists are usually wrong. They have to be, since they contradict each other. But the play-it-safe sorts are *always* wrong, for they never embrace the (small minority of) extreme positions which turn out to be true. Innovation of any importance is necessarily extremist. If there is any such thing as progress, extremism is its motor.

But, back to Smith, who is having a lot of trouble keeping his stories straight. On the one hand, he defends his *MONDO 2000* jerkoff on the ground that *everybody* except poor dumb humorless Bob Black knows that Ivan Stang is Doug St. Clair is Douglass St. Clair Smith. But then, with high indignation, he bleats that I reported his “*real’ name and my family’s street address*” to one of the extremist groups he takes cheap shots at in HWM. I mean, is he a household word or isn’t he? If *everybody* knows the Great One’s “real” or “human” name, then *anybody* can look it up in the Dallas telephone directory and get his home address and phone number. If Doug Smith thinks he is in the trenches battling the evil racists who (he darkly insinuates) are out to assassinate him (with my help).

Yes, throughout the 80’s this yuppie bastard published his home address — not only in lots of early SubGenius literature — but in the telephone book where any Nazi or Space Banker could look up Smith’s household word of a name. I just checked the 1991–1992 Southwestern Bell directory for Dallas (the most recent one to be easily found around here) and, sure enough, our Hero is still at 5320 Victor, Dallas TX 75214, although I wouldn’t know if his phone number is still (214) 823–8534. If he were doing even *slightly* threatening to anybody he’d have delisted his number (and consequently also his home address) many years ago.

As usual, Stang accuses me of exposing him and his cronies to *hypothetical* risks like those he and his gang have *in reality* subjected me to. Not even Stang claims anybody has ever come around to bother him, much less bomb him or try to kill him, although I have had exactly these experiences from Stang’s cronies and those he defends or whose slanders he repeats. He must not be the valiant champion against Bible Belt fascism he pretends to be. (Incidentally, Dallas is not in the Bible Belt — especially this preppie bastard’s chi-chi neighborhood.) It takes *real* to tell Greenwich Village yuppies what *dirt-bags* rural Georgia sub-Nazis are. Talk about *going out on a limb*. Imagine denouncing Anti-Semitism in Manhattan! In a book published by a Jewish-owned multinational publisher, Simon & Schuster!

I operate differently. I don’t say anything *about* anybody that I won’t say *to* that anybody. Thus I don’t defame my enemies on the Internet knowing that they’re not on the Internet, as Smith did to me. But I won’t cover up for my cowardly enemies either. If Smith wants to make money playing to the galleries by insulting convenient villains, let him, but he takes the risk — probably the only one he ever *did* take, and that one unwittingly — that those he vilifies for profit might hear about it. I’ve spoken out and I’ve suffered for it, disastrously — notably from Smith’s *Processed World* allies, to a much lesser extent too from his hapless SubGenius underlings. I took those chances. That doesn’t make it right what they did to me, but at least the lines of responsibility are fairly clear.

I was wrong about Douglass St. Clair Smith. Because he had a way with words and wit almost on a par with my own, I let myself be persuaded (and he was very persuasive as well as evasive) we were pursuing much the same goal in our own ways. There were so many artistes and ideologues so obviously wrong that I was in no hurry to conclude that the amiable, the obsequious Stang was too. Far from falling afoul of my legendary purism and/or pathology, Smith got a long free ride from me as from others. I never said I don’t make mistakes. I do. Some were catastrophic. But I always bound back, to the exasperation of enemies like Stang who have started believing their own propaganda that — beginning just when we clash, unnoticed before — I am a derelict at death’s door. I truly wish I’d had an easy life like Smith has — I plan to commence one at the earliest opportunity — but adversity did toughen me up. Nietzsche wrote, “That which does not

destroy me, makes me stronger.” Right now I’m as *poor* as I’ve ever been, but I’ve never been stronger.

* * *

(I’m not on the ‘net — this is a guest appearance. I can be reached at P.O. Box 3142, Albany, NY 12203-0142, especially if you’d like to buy, for \$10 postpaid, *The Abolition of World and Other Essays*.)

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