They Don’t Call it *Sub*Genius 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.

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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/Contragate-type language: What did Stang know and when did he know it? I was told by a Sub-Genius 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
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.

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(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.)

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 “improved 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 cas-

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 prepie 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 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

sette bomb was mailed (bearing a phony Florida return address) from Wausau, Wisconsin. According to Postal Inspector Walmsley, Hagen-Brenner was ID’ed 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 re-
port 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 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 dou-
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 regretfully, 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
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 creative activities. 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 posterizing, 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.