

Interview with Wavy Gravy

Interviewer: Tim Miller

September 17, 1996

Q: We are interested in -, well I guess for openers this is the greatest surge of communal living in American history. You know there were Shakers and things like that before but nothing in this kind of grand way and I was just wondering if you have any insights on how it got started. Why suddenly was there this great eruption of brotherly, sisterly love and community.

A: Well, the Hog Farm came about through sheer coincidence. Which is a miracle that God doesn't take credit for it. My wife and I were living in a one bedroom cabin in Sunland, California and were in the process of posing for a cover of Life magazine on psychedelia with the Merry Pranksters and the Grateful Dead. As we were arranging ourselves for the camera Ken Babbs stole the bus further and lit out for Mexico to join Kizi who was down there on there on the land as they say, leaving my wife and I with forty-some house guests. The landlord came by and witnessed this and went semi-ballistic screaming that we can't have forty-seven people in one bedroom and we were evicted, served with our eviction notice. An hour and a half later a neighbor, Bud Peltsu came down the road and said that old Saul up there on that mountain had a stroke and they need somebody to slop them hogs. And so we were given a mountain top rent free in exchange for tending an equal number of hogs the size of Davenport. In fact I remember going up that night to take a look at the spread and there was Burbank arranged beneath me like jewels on black velvet and I stood up on this knoll to get a better view and the knoll stood up and started walking with me on top of what was this enormous black sow. Then people began to come there from all over, we discovered an experiment. The New Republic was our first write-up as a matter of fact.

Q: Really, the New Republic.

A: The New Republic and then followed by Avant Garde, the same writer. Every Sunday we would have an open house with a different theme there and we began to -. At first we had all separate jobs, my wife was a television actress and I had severed my ties with the committee in San Francisco and gone to live with the Hopi Indians and came back to the Los Angeles area and began teaching improvisation to neurologically handicapped kids in a small school in Pasadena. So I was the school teacher from Pasadena, [unintelligible] like that. And we had a computer analysis guy and somebody who was going for their masters in cinematography at UCLA, there were an incredibly diverse group of people. At one point we all took over a rocket [unintelligible] doing that we would also take turns with the life support, with the one person a day seeing to the cooking and another person to the logistics of getting everybody to work and stuff they were the dance master or dance mistress, a little sexist but the Colonel came from [unintelligible] at that time. The person that was cooking was given something like five dollars a day to cook for fifty people and we would augment our monetary supplement with what we could get out of dumpsters and the markets adjacent to [unintelligible] which we didn't during [unintelligible]... not much dumpster diving. We began to do light shows and energy games at the Shrine Auditorium and that was usually on Saturday night with the biggest rock bands in the country which were then just forming then you know [unintelligible], Cream like that and then Sunday we would have our free afternoon with different themes each Sunday. We also began working on a bus that our mechanics purchased and brought up the mountain as a surprise for us one Christmas morning. And then while I was having my first back surgery the Hog Farm was hired by Otto Crimenger to do his acid movie, we were extras in his acid movie call "Skidoo", where Groucho Marx played God. And with that money we were able to take our Sunday freak show on the road calling it the "Hog Farm and Friends; an Open

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Celebration." We were on the road from about 1966-1972.

Q: When did you [unintelligible] Hog Farm?

A: Sometime in 1965.

Q: In '65, that early?

A: Yeah, it [unintelligible].

Q: So it's really just an accumulation of friends that kind of never broke up it sounds like.

A: Well, people come and go for instance one bus changed into eight buses and we were traveling with eight buses for a long time but then when we did [unintelligible] which was Warner Bros. desired to be in [unintelligible] Woodstock, two buses and a bunch of us continued on [unintelligible] two buses all the way [unintelligible]. I think in '72 or '73 we brought some buses [unintelligible] to the U.N. conference for the environment and dressed it up like a whale and drove it through the streets of Stockholm. And then achieved fifteen minutes of [unintelligible]. It was really helpful in getting the moratorium against the killing of whales. Then at the end of the conference we tried real hard to get an moratorium against the killing of human beings. Although it was a dazzling event, we did not come remotely close to the impact we had with the "whale" driving through the streets of Stockholm. You never know what's going to hit. They were all standing around with their thumbs up their ass waiting for the whale. [unintelligible]

Q: Has there ever been any real structure to it? There has to be some, right?

A: Yeah, especially when we're on the road, it really shakes down. We have the drivers, the technos, the band. We had this traveling show, and everybody would help set it up, we had these domes, we have this film about it too.

Q: The Medicine [unintelligible]?

A: No this is this is the [unintelligible] celebration. Excellent movie made by this guy...David Lee Brook. [unintelligible]. It's the first four years in forty minutes. It happens just before Woodstock.

Q: Is there a non-failing formal structure? Is there a board of directors?

A: Oh, no.

Q: I mean, you owned real estate, and all of that.

A: Yeah, we sure do, we're some kind of a partnership there's something like, thirty "half" owners. The law in the country is designed for people to get their stuff and hold on to it. There's not too many people who want to share their lives, it's just not their. So we had to figure out ways to work that all. Using their existing forms, and be as close as possible to what was real for us.

Q: I presume things must have changed after Woodstock. You were famous before you were famous after that.

A: It was pretty zany. We had secured 12 acres of land in New Mexico. It was a big high mountain plain.

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It was a bunch of little adobe houses. Then we loaded the buses and went to Woodstock, to return to discover our place looked like a DP camp. Hundreds and hundreds of people had loaded there stuff up and hopped into cars. We tried to sort out the people over there for spare change. People that were sincere there, we tried to plug into other communes. We almost immediately went to Texas. Shortly after that, I think it was the fact that we found out about the people's park, we were ready to participate and discovered that it was over. I was not able to participate in a reclusive back to the land kind of phase while genocide itself [unintelligible]. The bus was called the "Asp" because the license plates were a-s-p. It crossed America in three days. The only time it would get stopped was when we saw a cop that would wonder what we were doing. [unintelligible].

Q: But you're not doing much of that anymore, right? That stuff.

A: Well we've been doing the "Nobody for President" campaign since 1976.

Q: Will you be doing that again this year?

A: Yeah, but we don't know how it's going to take shape. [unintelligible]. We've had some complications, so I may just fly around to different cities. But our website has won all of these website awards. Somehow or other nobody is paying for this and no one is in charge, so we don't know how it's going to take shape. Four years ago we went out on buses from sea to shining sea. [unintelligible]. In '68 [unintelligible] we were put up in different homes, we would stay in different homes. [unintelligible] A lot of times we served as the [unintelligible]

Q: Have you had that kind of attention often?

A: Not that many.

Q: The one thing I wanted to ask you about is from the book, the latest book, in there you tell this really poignant tale of people's park and how it's been taken over by biker junkies and all.

A: Alright, what happened, it's just wonderful. First of all, there's a great woman Ross Paine, she was with the newsroom in the 60's. And she is a legal investigator around Burlington. And that [unintelligible]. With her help and the help of the what have you we were able to pass through people's park [unintelligible]. And I went up there and actually gave a dedication. [unintelligible]. It was a really sweet dedication, me and Ben and Jerry and all these hippies and all these rangers and all these environmentalists, it was really a great mix.

Q: I thought it was going to get confiscated there were serious drug dealers going down. I thought the outcome was going to be a great tragedy.

A: Well, it was a semi tragedy. [unintelligible].

Q: Of course the great guru to a free land was Luis Gotley. Was he your inspiration? He was reaching for free land a long time ago.

A: A lot of people sparked it. I don't know everyone, I don't know, was just in the genes. Up the spinal telegraph. Thousands of people in a similar time frame discovered [unintelligible] and put almost ten years in. We tried. And then when government got them into trouble we got these spreading phone

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calls of raise money here, to pay taxes. I always thought, there was a moment when we almost got the rainbow family into [unintelligible] and that would have changed everything. [unintelligible]

Q: Did the bikers do a lot of damage? Cutting trees and stuff?

A: They tried to cut the trees, they started cutting the trees for heroin. [unintelligible] We took all the money [unintelligible].

Q: Now Black Oak is a really different scene.

A: It sure is.

Q: Now that's your place. Not open land.

A: Absolutely not open land. [unintelligible]

Q: So why didn't Black Oak come together.

A: Well in our quest for country land, obviously we hurt people's [unintelligible]. It didn't work out as far as the hunt club was concerned. And to be quite frankly it was because it was much too cold. Too many unpleasant experiences of pushing buses through sub zero weather. Hands stick to the bumper. You could drive to visit the snow, but the snow did not come to your door. We sent search parties out, buses would go out months at a time looking for [unintelligible]. First of all when we came back from Europe and Asia, we had another [unintelligible] operation when David Crosby ran into a Pacific Ice wall. [unintelligible]. While I healed into a more conducive environment. Driving around in the buses, you know I was in a body cast with stretchers and that kind of stuff and I'd go to the demonstrations. It was great but it was not conducive to healing and I had to have more surgeries until the point where I had to really stop. [unintelligible] He was really gracious scoring this place for us. Which was an alternative high school. [unintelligible] was written concerning [unintelligible]. We gave that place three years. I became director of [unintelligible]. fired all the teachers and started an organic food co op. Then we migrated to Brooklyn. And what we had was a lot of warm bodies. And we created a telephone answering service for [unintelligible]. Where we all took turns being operators for telephone answering machines. We built it up from one little telephone to a couple of switchboards. And a house on the south side of town which we unloaded when the dope dealers on the streetcorners were sending hot lead up and down the street. This house was owned by Will Scarlett, a hippy landlord, his grandfather owned the house. We sold that house kept [unintelligible]. At the same time, the search parties were coming back, we were up by [unintelligible]. We were in Austin, Texas for awhile and a few places there. [unintelligible]. When we first got in, 500 acres, 200 acres flat for growing. [unintelligible]. And somehow that has evolved to [unintelligible]. We do stuff and nobody gets it, like share. Kevin Engberg was for a long time the mayor of our people's park. He had some bio engineering trip going over there. We put together a crew from [unintelligible]. Which is way cool and getting a lot of attention. That's a hippy's dream to get paid to heal the earth. [unintelligible] Which is why we facilitate organic farms. [unintelligible]. Save [unintelligible] which is my main charity I'm involved in [unintelligible]. One of our businesses there is called In Tents and it's a tepee [unintelligible]. And they have about 150 sheep. The guy who runs the sheep I call the ba ba ba ba, he's a sundancer. We have one doctor and a nurse practitioner and a small clinic.

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Q: Let me just ask you one more question then I'll get out of here, do you have any reading on why the 60's communal thing was quite a fad in a lot of ways. A lot of stuff came and went, why have you guys lasted. I mean you've said there have been changes in personnel and all, but something's continued for sure.

A: Humor. We don't take ourselves that seriously. At the same time there is a real psychedelic spiritual undertone that ties in. The show, and all that early stuff, that really helped, [unintelligible]. Living in those buses was like living in a sailboat. [unintelligible]. The fact we've done a show, a big festival every year for the last ten years. It's also been unifying, something we can all focus on. A lot of tolerance. [unintelligible] And now, we've got all our eggs in that basket, I don't see any of us going anywhere. [unintelligible] I've been doing [unintelligible] for 24 years. [unintelligible]. [unintelligible] We're not trying to create actors or circus stars, Although this may happen and has. We're trying to create universal human beings that can handle anything that comes down the pipe with a little humor and compassion. I call it survival of the 21st century, I ended up with a sense of humor and compassion. And all of our kids have brought there.

Q: Are all of your kids still pretty tight?

A: Oh yeah.

Q: I mean, There must be some of them that have grown up now.

A: They're grown up, a bunch of them have grown up now, and exploring their various lives. But we see them on Thanksgiving. And a lot of them come to work in the camp in the summer time. [unintelligible] Now all that's left there is geezers. I think that we'll start looking at creating an old folks home alternative next.

Q: You know that's what Steven Gaskin is doing right?

A: Yeah. We have justice, nurse practitioner, midwife, and a doctor on our spread also. [unintelligible]. I've taught school at the farm school. [unintelligible]

Q: The farm is much smaller.

A: It needed to be.

Q: Yeah, it's actually working out better.

A: I'm not surprised.

Q: I was there not too long ago.

A: I really like the farm [unintelligible]. I've also enjoyed very much the rainbow gatherings. That are intended before it became too much for me and the camp. [unintelligible] Every time the rainbow gathering spat me out I was a basket case for about a week. [unintelligible]. The rainbow gathering is the gamut, from the very worst to the very best of us. And their aspects of it that are too much to describe. Aspects of it are so gorgeous. I'm sorry I don't have more of me devote to that, because I miss it. [unintelligible] I make up for it more than enough with what I do at camp. All the royalties for my Ben and Jerry flavor go to the camp. [unintelligible] A lot of kids from Indian reservations, we have a full

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spectrum, and kids do well from our scholarship program. [unintelligible]. It's just incredible how different it is from school get more out of [unintelligible] camp. Because it's the focus [unintelligible]. What happens [unintelligible]. A lot of those values that we [unintelligible] in the 60's [unintelligible].

Q: And you have an adult camp too right ?

A: One week for adults, it's a lot of fun.

Q: Well I'll let you go back to your business, I really appreciate it.

A: [unintelligible] We're starting to take on diabetes in Indian country, it's of epidemic proportions. So let's see, the buffalo, bed and breakfast.

Q: Yeah but, they're leaving, Rick and Terry, the people who are running that, they're house was [unintelligible] and it burned. It didn't burn to the ground but was damaged badly. They're really burned out, both literally and figuratively. And they're talking about moving to Australia and they're going to finance it by selling the Buffalo. So the Buffalo is probably dead.