

Trickster delights state fair

by Bill Sutherland
Staff Writer

With the monogram of DM on his breast there could be no mistake. This really was Dave Merrifield—"The Space Age Super Sensation" pictured on the back of his own sweater as sitting languidly on a trapeze swing under a helicopter.

But Dave was too approachable, too urbane to be a sensation. He did not have the square chin, or the muscular build one would expect of a superperson superstar. As far as appearances were concerned, Dave belonged on Wall Street in the brokerage firm his father runs rather than on a swing under a helicopter going 65 miles per hour.

But as part of the grandstand festivities of last weekend's State Fair in Raleigh, Merrifield was on the ground, returning from his trailer and approaching a group of chilled Hell Drivers and Hanneford Circus people.

Costumes began to appear. Some girls, bundled in coats, with fishnet stockings linking them to the ground, had two-toned lipstick jobs and false eyelashes that looked too heavy for all but the strongest eyelids to lift. With their long artificial falls and fluffs of hair, from afar they could be taken for blonde venuses.

The announcer, a large man with rosetinted glasses, used his showman's spiel to welcome the half-full grandstand to "the great North Carolina State Fair." Meanwhile, a few, muffled snickers passed between some workmen.

A not-so-white mule was escorted to the ring on the track by the blonde venuses. The mule cavorted about the ring, rolled in the thin layer of sand on the clay track, and was said by the announcer to hate men. A couple of stooges came down from the crowd to prove this a lie. The mule brilliantly exemplified his inherent obstinance by chasing, biting and finally climbing on top of one of the men.

The circus was abruptly followed by the deep-throated roar of Jack Kochman's white and heavily decalated chargers mounting the



Rides, a helicopter trapeze act, freak exhibits and hootchie-kootchie shows are just a few of the many amusements at this year's State Fair in Raleigh

Staff photo by Peter Ray

track. The drivers introduced themselves by roaring down the track and quickly going into a sideways spin towards the guardrail. The object was to miss the rail by the thinnest hair conceivable, and one driver in his runaway enthusiasm hit the rail to the delight of the crowd.

Much of the act was devoted to the comedy of Happy the clown. Happy, dressed in a seersucker suit, cracked jokes in between acts ("I'm the sucker who bought it at Sears.") and made himself the target of mud-spewing cars. Two cars raced by either side of him, spinning him with their speed. Happy is told by the announcer to kneel under one of the ramps while cars jump over him.

Later he is tied to the back of a car and dragged down the track. Then he is placed on a step behind the car, and the driver takes him through a line of fire with his pants falling down in the process. "Happy's got more balls than any of 'em," one official commented.

Before the show, loudspeakers promised Evil Kneivel's motorcycle but without the original master. The beast, however, was amenable to a new rider, who did wheelstands in various positions under full throttle in front of the grandstand.

Dave had described his act as the logical extension of the jet age transformed into a performance. Yet donned in his velvet cloak, bejeweled with silver and red glitters, Dave seemed almost timeless.

The drum roll began and Dave whipped off his cloak, handing it to a blonde venus. Reduced to only a glittering pink jumpsuit, he was no less supra-human. He gave the crowd a long bow, and made for the helicopter.

The crowd was getting excited. Dave waved to them from the helicopter as it ascended. After circling the track, the pilot held the machine in a low hover as Dave climbed out and down to the trapeze hanging underneath. Some of the Hell Drivers waved back.

The helicopter jumped forward and Dave swung with it around the track and back to a hover. This occurred after each trick. Dave hung from his knees—his ankles—and his neck. He feigned falling and caught himself with one ankle.

For the finale, the helicopter soared, as the announcer said, "up into the sky, higher than a kite." At 600 feet, there is not too much of Dave to see, but someone observed, "Goddamn, he's still waving."

"We love this work," he added, and with a sweep of the hand seemed to include even the rhesus monkeys and the not-so-white mule.

Dave was inspired at an early age by this line of work, he said. "When I was a kid, I went to the Ringling Bros. Circus, and decided the trapeze was the greatest. So I just practiced."

He has been doing this act for sixteen years. On mention of perhaps using something like a rocket ship, Dave quietly replied, "There'll be changes in the act, but I think I'll stick with the helicopter. It's fairly ideal."

Dave was back in his large-collared sweater now, and the grandstand was empty. He looked up at the sky and rubbed his hands together. "Tonight's going to be a bitch," he muttered.

Thompson

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It was difficult to tell which statements this soulful searcher took seriously. "You people are weird, man. I've just come down from 20,000 feet while you people are just at sea level," he said.

When Thompson wasn't pontificating or prophesying, he was either swallowing his words or shouting "chickenshits," "goddamns" and "motherfucks."

"Richard Nixon? He's a goddamn punk from the very beginning—a bum, a thug... a fuckin' loser for all his life and all of a sudden he's President... I've beaten that son-of-a-bitch for 20 years and I just wanna have one more shot at him. Nobody's really beaten him like he oughta be beaten."

Whatever has been made of Thompson's violence was manifested in his manhandling during the presentation. With phallic gesticulations, Thompson fondled the microphone, yanked it from side to side and, when it refused to operate, slapped it crudely.

But his real fit of frenzy was a reply to a statement accusing Rockefeller of fostering cannibalism in South America. As Thompson's right arm flew wildly into the air and over his right shoulder, the cupful of liquid he grasped in his hand found its mark all over the velvet auditorium curtain.

say—I'd really like to be in an argument with a bunch of people."

Before his talk, Thompson had insisted his sole performance would involve answering questions written on only 3 by 5 index cards passed out prior to the show.

After perusing the cards (in a rather hasty manner), Thompson threw them into the air indignantly exclaiming, "Is there anybody here who has any type of intelligent question?"

Audience: "What candidate do you think is strong enough to win the 1976 Democratic nomination?"

Thompson: (throwing hands in air) "Jesus... Well you asked a serious question, I'll give you a serious answer.—Mondak." (pause)

T: (addressing same gentleman) "You and I, you and me, why don't we talk? Let's fuck all the others."

A: "Does Terry Sanford have any type of chance for President?" (boos and hisses from the audience)

T: (after glancing around) "I hope not."

A: "What does Gonzo journalism mean?"
T: "I don't know—I made it up. It just runs hounds off the track and confuses professors of journalism—which is not hard to do."

'Gonzo journalism... I made it up. It just runs hounds off the track and confuses professors of journalism—which is not hard to do.'

"He was getting very abusive—damaging property, kicking things around," explained John Miller, Duke Union President who was instrumental in removing Thompson and who had been cautiously pacing and patrolling the aisles during Thompson's performance. "We had let him go on for a long time," he said.

According to Miller, the decision to remove Thompson was basically a student decision, made by all members present of the executive committee and the major speakers committee but also approved by the staff involved.

"This had nothing to do with freedom of speech," he said.

The Union Board will meet today to determine what, if any, action will be taken. Thompson's contract stipulated cancellation if he appeared under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. And, according to his actions and words, Hunter Thompson had apparently imbibed.

"You really gassed them," a young man said to Thompson during the after-hours parley.

"I could tell that," Thompson boasted. Apparently the "drug-crazed outlaw journalist" likes to run his own show.

"I was sent down here like a piece of meat," Thompson said, gnawing on the tip of his cigarette holder.

"I told them I had no speech¬hing to

A: Did you ever lay an Angels' chick? (Thompson riding with the Hells Angels motorcycle outlaws turned into his first book *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*.)

T: "Never...we had a very delicate relationship—I never saw one I'd like to."

A: "What ever happend to Mr. Nixon's silent majority?"

T: "They're right here...all you pig farmers and beer hippies."

A: "What's your new book about?"

T: "You wouldn't buy it anyway. You can't even read."

Thompson's attempts to provoke verbal battery were successful throughout the night as observers chaotically blurted out question after question—banning all rules of order.

But the whining of a baby's voice upstaged them all when Thompson replied, "That's the most coherent fuckin' thing I've heard." Some people walked out on Thompson. Others stayed around until approximately 1:30 a.m., smoking hashish and seeking his autograph.

"What is this bullshit?" Thompson asked a persistent groupie.

Scribbling a line of irrelevant inanities, Thompson remarked, "Shit—that is my name—At least it is when I'm drunk."

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