

BOOKS  
AND  
RECORDS  
**in**  
**review**

Monthly Supplement to the Oregon Daily Emerald

June 1974, Eugene, Oregon

## Defining a counterculture

"A History of Underground Comics"  
Mark James Estren  
Straight Arrow Books, San Francisco  
Copyright 1974

For about the past five years, the public has become increasingly aware of one of the finest and funniest products of the counterculture, the underground comic. Publications like *Zap*, *Yellow Dog*, *Fat Lip Funnies* and a host of others, ranging in quality from good to abysmal, have popped up, flourished awhile, and vanished again.

No, these aren't the "comic books" we read when we were kids—those were full of innocent things like crime, war, neurosis, horror, monsters, violence, murder, mutilation, and suchlike childish things. The modern undergrounds carry a good healthy dose of sex as well, and are for adults only.

The field is tremendous, and author Estren, who writes of comics with respect and affection, has done a good job of making sure that all the prominent underground artists are represented here, and many of the obscure ones as well. Estren's chapters on definition, history, motivations, contents, subjects, transitions, suppressions and other oddities are fleshed out by contributions written by the artists themselves.

The book is, of course, profusely illustrated, but contains few complete sequences. It is mostly limited to single panels, or at best single pages.

Robert Crumb, (*Mr. Natural*, *Fritz the Cat*, etc.) gets a great deal of coverage, as one of the most popular—and prosperous—of the underground artists. Gilbert Shelton's *Freak Brothers* and *Wonder Warthog* (The Hog of Steel) are well represented, along with Will Eisner (*The Spirit*), a semi-straight, older artist much respected by underground artists. Harvey Kurtzman, a former *Mad* artist regarded as the master by many undergrounders, has a number of early strips reprinted, and provides his comments on the counterculture comics of today.

Vaughn Bode (*Junkwaffel*, *Cheech Wizard*) is, I think, rather unfairly discounted in this volume.

Then there is a kaleidoscope of work by dozens of good-to-mediocre young artists, capped off by the grisly "appendix" of a genuine E.C. "Horror comics" story from the mid-1950s, when that ghastly genre, supposedly exercising great influence on the undergrounds, had its heyday. A valuable index of underground comics and their publishers, by Clay Geerdes, is also appended.



Composed of about equal proportions of social protest, violence, sex and parody, the underground comics can stand without assistance as works of "art" in their own right. True "comics," not merely propaganda, most of them are actually funny, even where the themes they treat are far from comical.

The Undergrounds' humorous view of the seamy side of life probably began with Richard Outcault's *Yellow Kid* in 1895. The Kid, a tough, moronic-looking waif from the slums of New York, was vaguely anarchistic and tremendously popular.

George Herriman's magnificent *Krazy Kat*, an opus devoutly followed by poets and presidents during its thirty-year run in the newspapers, inspired many undergrounders with its surrealistic plots and constantly-shifting landscapes.

The Undergrounds' direct ancestors, however, are

probably the old *Mad* magazine of Harvey Kurtzman and William M. Gaines—not the slick product of today, but the old comic book—and the old "monster comics," the kind our parents told us not to read, and which a senate subcommittee accused of causing juvenile delinquency.

The systematic ridiculing of icons and flouting of taboos to be seen in the Undergrounds probably began in those old comics, and their preoccupation with sex may have been influenced by the old "Eight-Pagers" (The Kind Men Like) from the 1930s and '40s.

A great deal of their content and mood, however, was generated in these times and in today's youth culture. "The Movement" itself has accused the Undergrounds of being "counter-revolutionary" and/or "sexist." But it is hard to depict single-minded fanaticism without making it either humorous or horrifying, and sex is one of the primary roots of the Undergrounds—eliminate it and they die.

An entire chapter is devoted to the matter of sex in the Undergrounds (Estren comments waggishly, "If you looked up this chapter first, you won't be disappointed, and if you're reading this work sequentially, you won't be surprised"). Sex in the Undergrounds runs the gamut from mischievous lampoons, to the pornographic parodies of Robert Crumb, to the sadomasochistic orgies of S. Clay Wilson, in which sex is debased and violence is as constant and meaningless as the fixed grins of his demonic characters.

Even the liberated female cartoonists, trying to come to grips with the problem of sex vs. "sexism," are unable to resolve it, or else lean over so far backwards as to somehow fall on their faces. Thus it seems that, "causes" or not causes, sex, parody and violence will remain the prime ingredients of the undergrounds.

The Undergrounds are having increasingly rough sledding today, not only because of flack from the "Movement," but also because of the mundane matter of inflation, and a ludicrous decision by the Supreme Court which enables local communities to decide for themselves exactly what is "obscene." Naturally, this applies pressure to the small shops which carry the Undergrounds, cutting off outlets for the underground publishers, which must, ironically, be profit-oriented in order to survive. The "local option" nonsense is just as foolish and probably just as futile as it was in the days when the Wowers tried to apply it to Prohibition, and it is bound to die soon, but the pity is that it may take a lot of the underground comics with it when it goes.

Walter Wentz

## Visitin' them thar hills

"Mountain People, Mountain Crafts"  
Elinor Lander Horwitz  
Lippincott  
Copyright 1974

If you want a good how-to book on mountain crafts don't get this book. Although this does show the art of making banjos, dulcimers, pottery, weaving, natural dying, whittling, spinning, woodcarving, quilting and rug-making, that is not what Elinor Horwitz is concerned with. The book instead is about three "foreigners" visit to Mountain country.

Roscoe Russell, Whit Sizemore, Kyle Creed and Edd Presnell make and play their own banjos. They talk to the author, not only on how they do it, but on their feelings about their music as well. Their style is "just picking," as relaxed as their step-dancing. "There's no notes to a banjo, you just play it."

Taft Greer weaves coverlets on a loom built some time around 1801. His grandmother Nancy Greer was spinning her own cotton and wool for that loom when she was over 100 years old. She inherited the loom from her grandmother. Greer uses natural dyes in his weaving: "You can get three or four colors of brown out of walnut hulls, elderberry, and bloodroot," he says. He learned about weaving and dyeing from his grandmother when he was a boy.

William Cody and Lucy Cook weave baskets. He is left-handed and she is right-handed, which they explain is a great asset in their line of work. A left-handed basket-maker weaves in a counterclockwise direction and a right-hander weaves clockwise. The bottom of the basket is worked from the inside, and when a basket-maker

completes it and turn up the ribs to start the sides, there is a switch from working toward the left, to working toward the right. "We can do the whole basket of course, but this way is quicker," he explains.

Doll-making is the most common practice in the southern Appalachian Mountains today, and contains the most variables. Dolls are made from wood, corn husks, with heads made from nuts, corn cobs, white bread dough, apples or material scraps.

Toy-maker Willard Watson hails from Deep Gap, N.C. His wooden toys, are flexible, jointed toys, propelled into motion with a flick of a wrist. Demonstrating one of his dolls he says, "Some calls him limbergack, some calls him dancin' doll, and it doesn't matter—he'll answer either way."

The people give a part of themselves to the land, to their crafts, and the book, and if that's what you want to read then it's in "Mountain People, Mountain Crafts." And maybe you can pick up a couple of their skills along the way.

Carol McMullen

## Chauvinistic 'guidance'

"Freelance Writing, Advice from the Pros"  
Curtis Casewit  
Collier Books  
Copyright 1974

Casewit's manual for aspiring freelance writers has one great fault: its title is misleading. The phrase "advice from the pros" would lead any reader to expect short essays from big-name authors about freelance writing. The cover of the book even lists the authors who supposedly

contributed to the manual. But Casewit's book isn't any such "advice from the pros." It's advice from Casewit sprinkled with a few anecdotes from the pros.

The problem is that Casewit's book presents the makings for two good books. First, the idea of bringing together essays about article writing by established authors is great and if Casewit had pursued it, he could have compiled a good manual. Secondly, Casewit has some sound advice for beginning authors and a book filled only with his ideas and none of this "advice from the pros" would have been very helpful for aspiring writers. Here he tries for a combination, but it doesn't come off.

Besides its faults, Casewit's book has several strong points. He gives excellent examples of letters of inquiry to publishers, advises young writers on how to handle editors and frankly discusses the necessity of having an agent. Casewit himself has been a successful writer for several years and he uses his own experiences for most of his examples. He deals with article writing and book authoring of fiction and non-fiction, script writing and photography, and discusses each area in length.

In his book Casewit shows some male chauvinistic attitudes towards women and he is going to alienate many of his female readers, especially the feminists among them. He assumes that freelance authors will usually be men who can expect love and support from their wives. But not all wives are good: "Critics for pay are a little like wives," he writes. "Some are good, some are average, and some are bad to horrid." So since such bad wives exist, some freelance writers may expect troubles from their wives while the poor men are struggling with their careers, Casewit warns.

Somebody had better warn Casewit to omit such attitudes from his writing.

Sandi McDonough