

# Alternative press never dies

Continued from Page 3B

Cerebus is your average three-foot aardvark barbarian intent on conquering anything he can get his hands on. He was once the President of Palnu but politics and military dangers forced him out of office. Now, through the same devious dealings that ruined his political career, he has been made Pope, and boy is he a holy terror.

No, these aren't plot synopses for upcoming science fiction novels, and they aren't new NBC fall shows. These are simply three of the best comics on the market today — "American Flagg," "Love and Rockets" and "Cerebus the Aardvark."

Don't be surprised if you've never seen these on your local 7-Eleven comic stand or near the Safeway check-out counter. You won't. These are part of the ground-level press, a col-

lection of titles put out by small companies aimed at the collectors' market.

The idea was to provide an alternative for comic-book readers who didn't go in for the drug and sex humor of underground and head comics but were tired of the bland superhero and swords and sorcery titles of the majors. Thus a middle ground between the underground and legitimate presses — the ground level market — was formed.

Generally, small print runs (by industry standards) of artist/writer controlled titles are sold to comic book collectors through mail order and specialty shops, like Eugene's Emerald City Comics and Comics Plus. The originality and artistic control is what is stressed.

The history of the ground

level press is difficult to pin down. Roots can be followed back to the underground comics of the head shops, "Heavy Metal," which originally appeared as a translated reprint of the French "Metal Hurlant," and "Star-Reach" and "Hot Stuf," the first (fatal) stab at the alternative market.

For practical purposes 1977 can be pegged as the birth of the ground level press. In that year "Elfquest" and "Cerebus" made their auspicious, though not altogether successful, debuts. "Elfquest" only went a couple of issues before Wendy Pini's cute little epic of elves, trolls and a serious quest caught on with the fantasy market.

The differences between this press and the earlier alternative movements are important. These were, and are, titles produced by their writer/artist or creative team, who hold the copyright of their creation. They are continuing stories, not anthologies or gag strips, and they are aimed at an audience with a little more attention span than the seven-year-old mentality the majors work with.

The hallmark of this press is creative freedom and control of the title and characters. This freedom has lured industry professionals like Howard Chaykin and Mike Grell into the alternative fold and brought legends like Will Eisner and Alex Toth back from a seeming retirement with unique new projects.

The boom may soon be over. With Marvel and DC challenging the alternative market, their own creator controlled titles (Marvel's infamous Epic line leads the call) and most of the successful comics under the guidance of miniature presses like First Comics and Eclipse, only the strong will survive. Already one seemingly strong company, Pacific Comics, the publishing branch of a distribution outfit, has gone under, and one of the promising little presses, Capital, folded a year back.

The market has also been glutted with far more titles than it can support. In the mid to late '70s there was room for growth; now the industry has over-extended itself and companies will soon be scrambling for survival.

Finally, the whole idea of the ground-level press has been pretty much diluted in recent years. Only a few of the small companies still offer a true alternative to the superhero stories of the two corporate super-companies. With a new Avengers or X-

Men rip-off emerging every month from some basement press in Texas or Wisconsin or wherever the hell they come from, the inconsequential books will be pushing the creative alternatives off the racks and into oblivion.

The ground level isn't dead

yet, though, and a few of the better titles might pull through the so-called Dark Years ahead. My vote's already cast. If you want to see what the ground level press puts out at its best, just check out these titles.

Sean Axmaker



**AMERICAN FLAGG (First Comics)** — Howard Chaykin's satirical science fiction adventure is not only exciting and funny, but it's perceptively political to boot. The art style is classic Chaykin with more polish than ever and his writing has never been better. Just don't grab it in the middle of a story run — you'll never figure out what's going on.

**AMERICAN SPLENDOR (Harvey Pekar)** — Just try finding one of these comics; all I know of it is what I've seen reprinted, and it is fantastic. Pekar literally writes from real-life experiences and they read just that way. You'll never get a superhero tale, but you might meet his mailman, go with him to the bank or have dinner with his friends. And you may never forget the experience.

**CEREBUS THE AARDVARK (Aardvark-Vanaheim)** — What began as a Conan parody is now a subtle study of political machinations and church manipulations set against an almost slapstick style. What else do you expect with a cast that includes Groucho Marx as Lord Julius, a wandering Albino king who talks a better story than he fights and a psycho named Cootie who reappears every few issues as yet another superhero parody.

**LOVE AND ROCKETS (Fantagraphics)** — A collection of continuing stories by Los Bros Hernandez — Mario, Jaime and Beto. Jaime brings in the saga of the mechanics, featuring the lovable Maggie and Hoppy, every issue and is the highlight of the book, but don't overlook Beto's "Sopa de Gran Pena," the story of a small Mexican village that defies description.

**WILL EISNER QUARTERLY (Kitchen Sink)** — Will Eisner is the grandmaster of comics storytelling and creator of one of the greatest heroes to walk the pages of the four-color press — the Spirit. The quarterly is a sister to the high gloss reprints that appear in a smaller format but it is, by far, a more interesting and rewarding publication. Eisner's new work is a grand opera of interweaving stories that take place within New York's Jewish ghetto during the depression. Some of the highlights are amazing.

S. A.

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