

Cathartic chums

Brown Bomber, Diva and Rupert Kinnard receive their widest exposure yet with the publication of a collection of Cathartic Comics

by Albert Cunningham

Rupert Kinnard (a.k.a. Prof. I.B. Gittendowne) had a passion for superheroes. He became frustrated with the fact that he never saw his skin color reflected within the otherwise colorful pages of the comic books of the day. In 1973, he and a friend created a character called "Superbad." Superbad was just the opposite of Captain America; sporting a red, black and green costume, as opposed to the good captain's red, white and blue. After a couple of years having Superbad trash everyone white in sight, the "militant period" ended. Superbad was replaced by a truly "kinder and gentler," non-violent superhero in the form of Eric D. Gambrell—the Brown Bomber. Starting in 1978 B.B. graced the pages of the Cornell College student newspaper for a number of years before coming out of the closet as the world's first black, gay, superhero fairy cartoon. After graduating from Cornell and moving to Portland, B.B. was eventually joined by Diva Touché Flambé, for the first time, in the pages of Just Out. That was September of 1984, and Cathartic Comics was born.

In a shrewd career move, Kinnard, B.B. and the Diva left Portland for the Bay Area in Dec. of 1985. During the next five years Cathartic Comics ran in publications from San Francisco, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Memphis, Tennessee. With the publication of B.B. and the Diva: A Collection of Cathartic Comics by Alyson Publications, this winter, the "darling duo" achieves their widest exposure yet.

included as part of the Cartoon Museum's newest show, "Black Ink: An exhibit of African-American Cartoonists." This may also become a traveling show.

I feel very connected to what could be seen as an explosion of African-American gay male visibility happening recently in the media. In my mind, the current wave of BGMania began a couple of years ago, with the publication of Joseph Beam's anthology, *In the Life*. This was followed by Marlon Riggs' film *Tongues Untied*, Issac Julian's *Looking for Langston*, the anthology *Other Countries*, the theatrical piece *Fierce Love* by Pomo Afro Homos, the publication of *Brother to Brother* and the recent films, *Paris is Burning* and *Young Soul Rebels*. It's too early to predict the possible impact of *B.B. and the Diva*, which, as a collection of cartoons, probably won't be taken nearly as seriously as these other media events. I feel that I have benefitted from all that has been happening lately.

I think the recent crop of writings and art are coming from fairly fresh perspectives. African-American gay men are becoming a bit more assertive about who we are without any apologies. It seems to be the exploration of pain and joy in a new voice. Maybe other people are also slowly being able to listen to these new voices and perspectives without feeling as defensive as they have in the past. To some extent BGMs are creating art for one another and hopefully the general population will continue to experience all there is, within that art for them to embrace.



BAM! ZOWIE! It's Rupert Kinnard with some of his creative work. Cowabunga Dude!

world of comics and he was the most powerful of them all. After that, I realized I wanted to create a hero who was a bit gentler, totally nonviolent and more whimsical. I eventually came up with the Brown Bomber. I decided that I would have this little character editorialize. I think it is unusual that something that started out as a hobby is going to be published into a book. I am a graphic designer, and an art director, and B.B. has been an outlet for my creative desires.

I stuck with the character of the Brown Bomber and several years after creating him, Diva Touché Flambé came along. They work as a really good team. So many social issues that I read about usually come from a white, straight perspective. Even growing up, I remember just how unusual it was to see African-Americans on television, talking about issues. We would watch television if we knew a black show was going to be on, because we knew that it was going to represent a part of our reality. You had to be excited about those things, because you knew they were a rare occurrence. That is what still happens today. In a lot of the comic strips I do, I'm very intent on revealing to society at large some of the perspectives I have as a black man. For example; I remember doing a comic strip about the Brown Bomber being upset that Lionel Richie was referred to as 'a black Barry Manilow,' Billy Dee Williams was referred to as 'a black Clark Gable,' Spike Lee was referred

sadden and anger me. I find Cathartic Comics to be a place where I can shed these feelings of hopelessness and frustration. It comes out in the comic strip. The minute I hear something, like Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, what I want to do is purge myself of the anger. I try to find something that's whimsical or ironic about the situation.

I really like the cartoon to be challenging. In so many communities, the African-American community and the lesbian and gay community, it's easy to fool ourselves into thinking that we have all the answers. Through things like Cathartic Comics, we are challenged to question some of our perceptions about our communities.

Living in San Francisco has made me realize that many communities are really starting to believe in self-evaluation. You get to a point where [European-American] lesbians and gays within the community are out there fighting for their rights. They begin to realize how important it is to build coalitions. Then they start wanting to attract more of a diverse group of people to support the cause. In doing that they are put into a position where they have to confront their racism. Gay men certainly have to confront their sexism, and how we discriminate against people who are older and people who are handicapped. In a city like San Francisco, that's really apparent when you're involved in different groups. I feel that if I can find a way to show how absurd it is for the black community to be homophobic, or how absurd it is for the [European-American] lesbian and gay community to not really encourage African-Americans or people of other backgrounds to join the fight, then I'm doing my job.

There's a great wealth of things that are absurd. You have gay men who are anti-women, and they don't realize the connection between homophobia and sexism.

I think right now is an exciting time. There's a giant scope of things that have happened in the past couple of years. I feel very fortunate to have a collection of the work that I do going out there to become a part of it. I'm very, very excited. The work that other black gay men are doing encourages me and influences me, a lot. As much as I really enjoy it, I'm still concerned about my form of expression being taken seriously. Film is always taken seriously. Theatre is taken seriously, certainly literary works are taken seriously. There's a lot I want to say within the form that I have chose, which is comics.



As long as I've been doing the comic strip I've wanted to bring it together into one collection. I thought that that would give people a sense of the personalities of the characters involved.

"Early last year, at the OutWrite '91, lesbian and gay writers conference, I was invited to lead a cartoonist's panel. I was really excited about that. I decided to put together a number of 'books' and present them to publishers. It's a lot of work to put together the prototypes of a book, trying to select cartoons and arranging them. I ended up putting together ten prototypes. I met Sasha Alyson through a good friend of mine, and gave him the first copy. Shortly afterward we met again, and he said they would be very interested in publishing what I had shown them. Sasha said he wanted to incorporate the Brown Bomber and Diva into one of their books that was going into a second printing. The book is *Young, Gay and Proud*, edited by Sasha Alyson. I'm really proud about that, because it's an educational book for young people, answering questions they might have about being lesbian and gay.

I was recently invited to become a part of the artist-in-residence program at the San Francisco Cartoon Art museum. Cathartic Comics join *Doonesbury*, *Peanuts*, *Life in Hell* and *Lynda Barry* as part of the museum's permanent collection. This month the strip is scheduled to be

I grew up in Chicago, and I think a major part of how I developed as an artist has something to do with growing up in a family of four sisters, my mother and my father. I did a lot of creative things as a child. I never really wanted to go out and participate in sports or do anything with other people. I tended to stay home and do more solitary kinds of creative things. I liked to punch out these little hobby kits and construct buildings and little towns. Then I got into plastic models. From there I graduated to comic books. I used to draw a lot of the characters that were featured in comic books at the time. I found that after a while I would look at the characters I was drawing from the books I was reading and I realized that none of them reflected the people around me, the people I grew up with. The comic books and the people I was drawing were white. I thought it would be an unusual thing to create my own comic characters.

One of the first ones was a superhero called "Superbad," who was the African-American equivalent of "Captain America." Instead of red, white and blue, he wore red, green and black, and was a very violent superhero, reflecting how I was feeling at the time. That was the start. I created "Superbad" with a good friend of mine. That was pretty cathartic for us, because we felt there was a lot of injustice going on against African-Americans. We visualized our hero being set in the

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to as 'a black Woody Allen.' I just thought, 'I'm really sick of this,' so I did a comic strip making fun of that. I ended up having white people saying, 'Wow, I never thought that that could be looked upon as a negative thing.' It made them think about it, and they thought, 'Yeah, that must be really irritating, to hear a black person referred to as 'a black white something.' This is one of the reasons why I feel that there's a unique place for Cathartic Comics in the comic world. It's specifically lesbian, gay, African-American perspective on a lot of the events that happen in the world.

Growing up in places like Chicago, there's a real frustration with what goes on in the world, and it's really by no fluke of chance that the name of the comic strip is Cathartic Comics. There are a lot of injustices going on; I see a lot of things that