

AN INTRO TO THE COMICS: ALTERNATIVE COMICS

By Tom Palmer Jr.

When a typical comic book reader thinks of alternative comics, he or she pictures a cheaply produced black and white comic that comes out once a year.

On the contrary, alternative comics are not limited by any format, and are produced by some of the most daring and exciting artists in the industry who are pushing the boundaries of what the art form of comics is capable of. Because of their diversity and skill, these creators transcend the limits of their format, be it the pulpy newsprint of a black and white comic or the slick pages of a glossy art magazine. The current crop of alternative comics grew out of the underground comics of the '60s and the early independent comics from the beginning of the direct market in the late '70s.

The underground comics were a part of the counterculture movement of the 1960s, but they were inspired by many different sources, most notably the EC Comics of the 1950s (especially their horror line and Harvey Kurtzman's *Mad*). Now-legendary creators like Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Spain, Vaughn Bodé, Gilbert Shelton, Jack Jackson (aka Jaxon), Kim Deitch, and Richard Corben challenged society's norms, as well as what was acceptable in comic

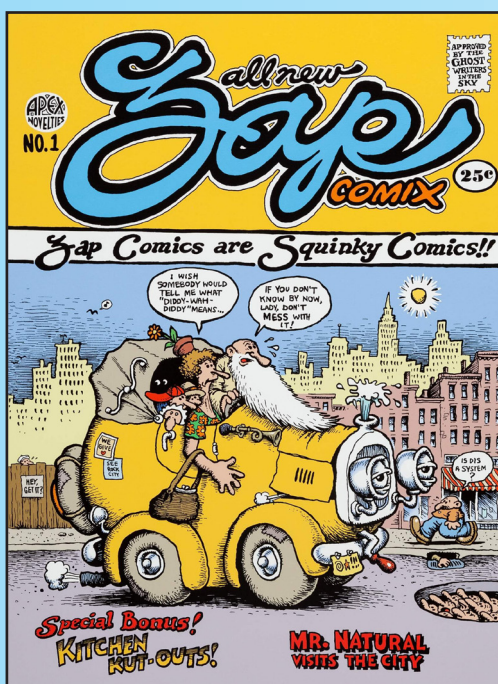
books in comics like *Zap!*, *Slow Death*, *Wimmen's Comix*, *Snarf*, and *Bizarre Sex*. The stories these artists told had a distinctly personal nature that set them apart from the typical comics of the time. The artists stretched what the artform could achieve by experimenting with different styles of writing and cartooning. The undergrounds had virtually no editorial restrictions placed on them since they were not sold through the usual channels for comic books. Instead, they were distributed mainly through head shops, but when the government began closing these stores, the underground movement lost a lot of

sales system allowed for a different way for comics to be distributed. It also gave smaller companies a chance to try their hand against the larger companies (mainly Marvel and DC). These comics were called "middleground" comics, since they were not as radical as the undergrounds, and not as conventional as the mainstream comics. The initial offerings of these small companies included Mike Friedrich's *Star*Reach* anthology, Wendy and Richard Pini's *Elfquest*, and Dave Sim's *Cerebus*. These creators were soon followed by the first of the larger independent companies, including Eclipse, Pacific, and First,

which were the precursors to the major competitors of the "Big Two" today, like Malibu, Valiant, Dark Horse Comics, and Image Comics.

The direct market also gave rise to companies like Fantagraphics Books, Drawn & Quarterly, and Slave Labor Graphics, who offered creative freedom and creator ownership to artists with daring and experimental material. Artists could also take the choice of self-publishing, an option that gives them total control of all aspects of their comic book. Creators of alternative comics have taken these options to create a thriving group of comics that function simultaneously as art, critiques of society and popular culture, and a source of entertainment.

What follows is a sampling of some of the more important artists of the alternative scene and the comics they make (in no particular order):



its momentum.

The independent comics of the late '70s sprang up at the beginning of the direct-sales market. Mainstream comics were floundering, and the establishment of the direct

ROBERT CRUMB

Zap Comics, Hup

For over twenty-five years, the legendary creator of Mr. Natural and Fritz the Cat has been cartooning and commenting on life in America, with bitter, sexually-charged, and hilarious comics. Crumb was an important figure in the underground movement as the originator of *Zap Comix*, considered to be one of the earliest and most influential of the underground comics, and the creator of some of the most memorable characters and comics from the '60s. He also played a significant role in the independent scene of the early '80s as the founder of *Weirdo*, the premiere alternative anthology of the time. His work is being systematically reprinted in *The Complete Crumb Comics* and he is as prolific as ever, with *Hup*, his own solo comic.

ART SPIEGELMAN

Maus, Raw

An important part of the underground comix scene, Spiegelman is the author of *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, a critically-acclaimed graphic novel that recounts both the horrors of the Holocaust endured by Spiegelman's father, and Spiegelman's strained relationship with his father. Spiegelman, along with his wife Francoise Mouly, is also the editor of *Raw*, one of the best anthologies of postmodern comics.

DAVE SIM

Cerebus

With his partner, Gerhard, Dave Sim chronicles the life story of Cerebus, an anthropomorphic aardvark with an attitude. Sim has committed himself to writing, drawing and publishing 300 issues of *Cerebus* on a monthly schedule, until the series concludes in March of 2004. This very ambitious series has explored just about every facet of life, including power, religion, death, and love.

To make it easy to jump-in during the middle of the story, Sim has kept every issue in print in phone-book size reprint volumes. Sim is also a vocal supporter of creator-rights, advising others to self-publish.

PETER BAGGE

Hate

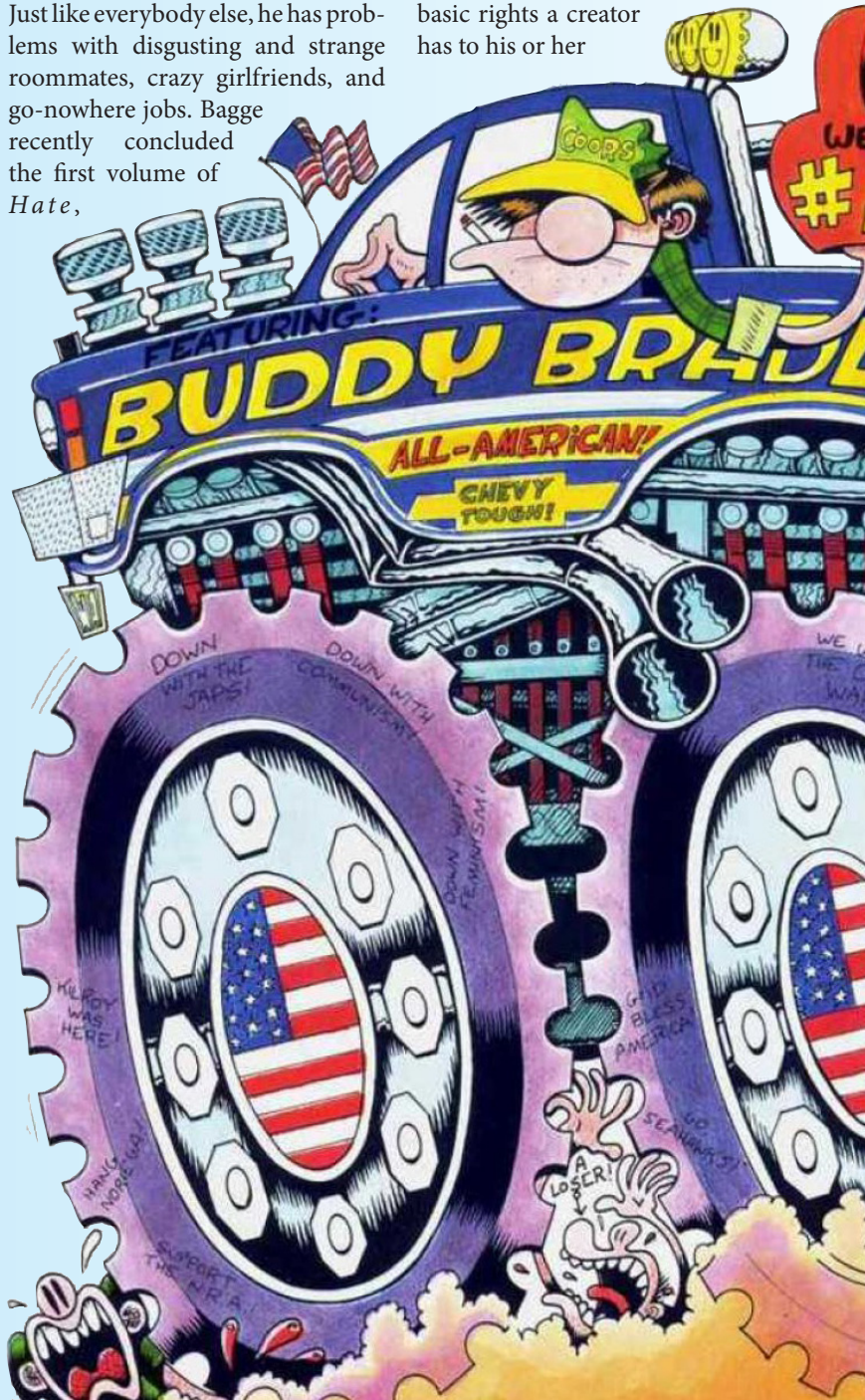
Through his character Buddy Bradley, Peter Bagge is the leading chronicler of the slacker generation. Buddy is an irascible, but nonetheless likable character who struggles through the tortures of modern life. Just like everybody else, he has problems with disgusting and strange roommates, crazy girlfriends, and go-nowhere jobs. Bagge recently concluded the first volume of *Hate*,

and is set to begin the series again.

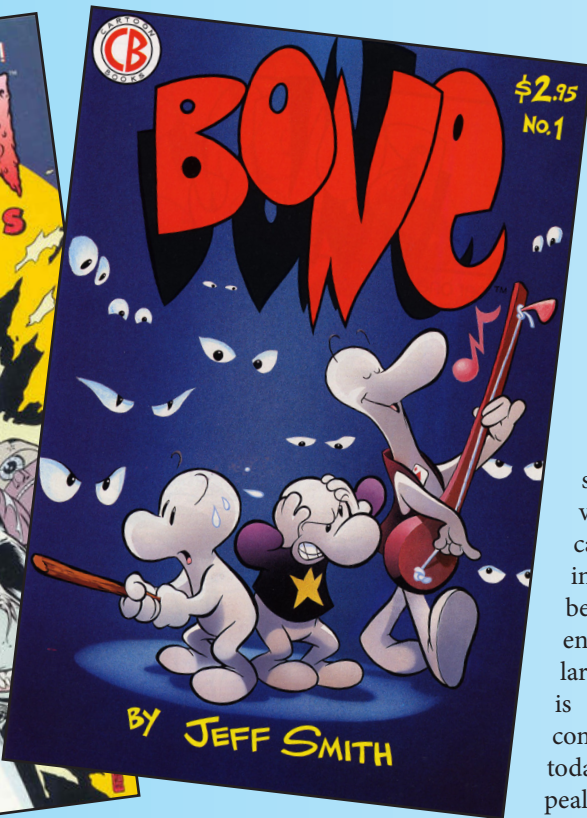
SCOTT MCCLOUD

Understanding Comics, Zot!

McCloud is the author of the first comic published about the art form of comics, *Understanding Comics*. His book examines the particulars of comics as a means of communication, naming the processes between panels that we oftentimes take for granted. McCloud is also the originator of the Bill of Rights for Comics Creators, a twelve-point document that outlines the basic rights a creator has to his or her



Wizard Press



that throws three simply-drawn cartoon characters into a rich fantasy world full of dragons, evil rat creatures, and adventure. Smith has rapidly grown into one of the most respected and universally admired cartoonists in the industry. With its beautiful art and engrossing and hilarious story, *Bone* is one of the few comics published today that can appeal equally to both adults and children.

creations. Aside from being a brilliant theorist and inventor, McCloud is the creator behind *Zot!*, one of the best black and white comics of the '80s.

MICHAEL ALLRED **Madman Comics**

In *Madman Comics*, Michael Allred breathes new life into the superhero genre, creating a wacky protagonist in a series that revels in the junk culture of the '60s and '70s. Allred's work is instantly recognizable, with a bouncy writing style and slick, polished art.

HARVEY PEKAR **American Splendor**

Pekar is the master of the autobiographical comic, with his long-running *American Splendor* series. Pekar writes stories of his day-to-day life in Cleveland, Ohio, which are illustrated by such artists as Robert Crumb, Frank Stack, and Jim Woodring. Pekar is also a reluctant ce-

lebrity, mostly due to his controversial and combative appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Along with his wife, Joyce Brabner, Pekar is preparing *Our Cancer Year*, an account of his recent bout with the disease.

STEVE BISSETTE **Tyrant**

After collaborating with Alan Moore and John Tottleben on a celebrated run of *Swamp Thing*, Bissette decided to try his hand at self-publishing. His first attempt was *Taboo*, one of the premiere horror anthologies of the '80s, which featured many challenging and disturbing stories. His work on Image's 1963 has allowed Bissette to finally publish his own work with *Tyrant*, a 60-issue series that follows a T. rex from infancy to death.

JEFF SMITH **Bone**

Following a brief career in animation, Jeff Smith entered the comic field with *Bone*, a delightful series

DAN CLOWES **Eightball**

Eightball, by Dan Clowes, is one of the leading alternative comics being published today. Each new issue shows a creator at the top of his form, telling stories that range from autobiography to off-the-wall rants. One of the highlights of the series is "Like A Velvet Glove Cast in Iron," an experimental, dream-like narrative that was serialized in the first ten issues. Currently, the main story in *Eightball* is "Ghost World," an examination of the day-to-day lives of two teenage girls.

RICK VEITCH **Bratpack, Rare Bit Fiends**

After one of his stories for *Swamp Thing* was denied publication, Rick Veitch decided to self-publish his work. He created the King Hell Heroica, a series of interconnecting graphic novels, including *Bratpack* and *The Maximortal*, that explore the underside of the superhero

myth. After his work on Image's 1963 series, his most recent series is *Rare Bit Fiends*, a collection of stories inspired by the dreams of Veitch and other comic creators.

ALAN MOORE **From Hell**

British writer Alan Moore's work has ranged from superheroes and horror to historical fiction and erotica. After working on *Swamp Thing* and *Watchmen*, he left mainstream comics to concentrate on a body of creator-owned work, the most popular and respected of which is *From Hell*, a story that is both a systematic recounting of the Jack the Ripper murders and a scathing indictment of Victorian culture. Whatever project Moore is working on is packed with a high level of detail and accuracy to enrich the reading experience.

CHESTER BROWN **Yummy Fur, Underwater**

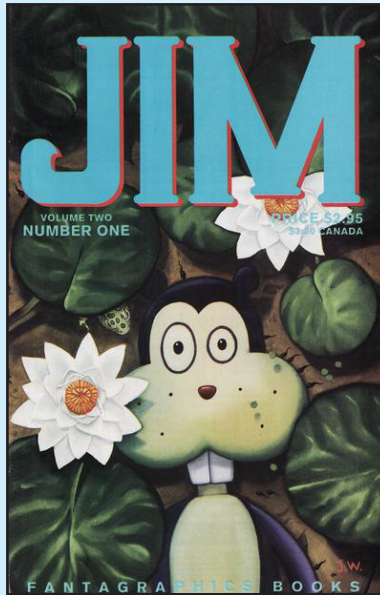
Constantly reinventing himself, Chester Brown has taken his work from stream-of-conscious narratives to brutally honest autobiography, with a few stops in between. His comic *Yummy Fur* has featured stories like the surreal and outrageous "Ed the Happy Clown," the confessional "Playboy," and faithful adaptations of the Bible. Brown has recently canceled *Yummy Fur* to start *Underwater*, a new series of fictional stories.

COLLEEN DORAN **A Distant Soil**

After numerous legal battles to gain control of her creations, Colleen Doran decided to self-publish *A Distant Soil*, a series that deftly balances elements of fantasy, science-fiction and adventure. To support her self-publishing, Doran also does freelance work for mainstream companies on *Sandman*, *Shade the Changing Man*, and *Valor*.

JIM WOODRING **Jim, Frank**

Jim Woodring's simply-titled comic *Jim* presents the outpourings of a truly warped imagination. Most of his stories are autobiographical in the sense that they are drawn from Woodring's dreams and subconscious. His most recognizable creation is Frank, an unidentifiable anthropomorphic animal who wan-



ders around a fertile dreamscape thwarting the bizarre schemes of his nemesis, Manhog in beautifully painted full-color or richly textured black and white adventures.

JULIE DOUCET **Dirty Plotte**

In a distinctive primitive and expressionistic style, Julie Doucet delineates stories that deal frankly with feminine concerns and issues. The action in her comics is governed by the distorted logic of dreams, making for a warped and disturbing experience. Her comic series *Dirty Plotte* has recently changed to an anthology format to accommodate the work of some of her favorite cartoonists.

JASON STEPHENS **Atomic City Tales**

Perfectly capturing the fun spirit of old-time superhero comic books and combining it with a '90s bite, Jason Stephens' *Atomic City Tales* is one of the most bizarre comics on the stands. Stephens has dropped the series of comics within comics that was a trademark of his earlier *Sin Comics* in favor of a loose superhero comic that showcases Stephens' off-beat humor.

JOE SACCO **Palestine**

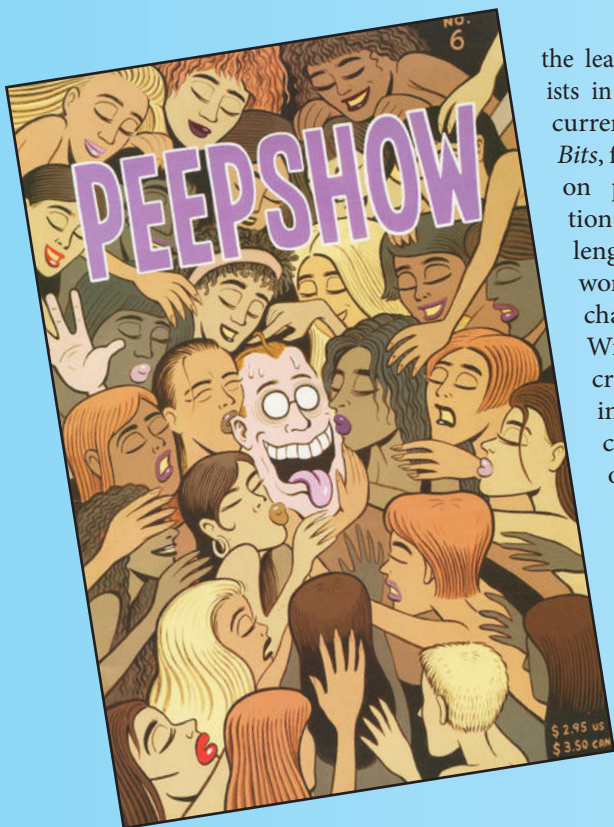
After completing six issues of *Yahoo*, cartoonist Joe Sacco launched *Palestine*, an intriguing investigation of the forces at work in the Occupied Territories. Sacco has created a unique form of comics journalism with his precise, masterful drawings and accurate, insightful text. *Palestine* is one of the very few comics that broadens the medium as both an artform and as a means of communication.

MARTIN WAGNER **Hepcats**

Hepcats, the comic featuring Martin Wagner's anthropomorphic characters, originally began as a cartoon in the University of Texas' *Daily Texan*. After ending the college strip, Wagner self-published *Hepcats* and began writing more true-to-life stories. His current serialized novel, *Snowblind*, is a gripping tale of the horrors of dysfunctional families and child abuse.

EDDIE CAMPBELL **Deadface, Alec**

While he is best known for his work illustrating Alan Moore's *From Hell*, Eddie Campbell is also an accomplished writer, as evident in his *Deadface* and *Alec* comics. With *Deadface*, Campbell tells modern-day stories of Bacchus, the Greek



god of wine, and in *Alec*, he tries his hand at autobiography. Campbell brings both of these stories to different companies, ranging from Dark Horse to Fantagraphics.

JOE MATT *Peep Show*

In the autobiographical *Peep Show*, Joe Matt presents himself as neurotic, cheap, and self-absorbed. Somehow he makes the whole thing fascinating and hilarious. His autobiographical comics originally appeared in various anthologies as one page strips packed with numerous miniscule panels. With the regular *Peep Show* comic book series, Matt has expanded his artwork to larger panels with fluid and expressive characters.

ROBERTA GREGORY *Naughty Bits*

After getting her start in the undergrounds during the '70s, Roberta Gregory has become one of

the leading female cartoonists in the field today. Her current comic, *Naughty Bits*, features her opinions on pornography, abortion rights, and the challenges of women in the workplace through her character Bitchy Bitch. With a knack for sharp criticism and shocking honesty, Gregory's comics will definitely open your mind.

JAMES OWEN *Starchild*

When a car accident almost ruined his career as an artist, James Owen vowed to recover and continue his *Starchild* comic. He has surprised the industry by coming back with one of the surprise hits of the past few years. Owen's beautiful pen and ink drawings mesh perfectly with his gothic fantasy story of the Higgins' family.

LOS BROS HERNANDEZ *Love and Rockets*

Gilbert and Jaime Hernandez continually produce some of the finest narratives in comics today. In *Love and Rockets*, the comic the brothers share, Gilbert tells stories of the inhabitants of a fictional South American town called Palomar, while Jaime chronicles the lifestyles of the post-punk generation. Both have a natural ability to create believable characters and tell enthralling stories.

TERRY LABAN *Cud*

Terry LaBan made his mark with his first series, *Unsupervised Existence*,

but has won a reputation as one of the most daring of the new cartoonists with his new series, *Cud*. He has developed a looser cartooning style and a sharp sense of satire to create hilariously brutal stories that feature Bob the performance artist, parodies of cultural icons, and LaBan himself.

MARK MARTIN *Hyena*

Along with Jim Woodring, Mark Martin is the creator of *Tantalizing Stories*, a short-lived, but highly acclaimed series that featured Woodring's Frank and Martin's hilarious Montgomery Wart. As the editor of the humor anthology *Hyena*, he has assembled a diverse sampling of some of the most warped artists in the field. Martin is also an expert cartoonist, infusing his characters with a whimsical sense of fun and humor.

Tom Palmer Jr. is a freelance writer and full-time college student who frequently travels between New Jersey and Virginia.

