

whatever drug he was taking. I went up to him afterwards like a dutiful fan with my copy of *Howl*.

"Mr. Ginsberg, will you please sign this?" and he started to sign it. He said, "What year is this? Would you put the date on here, what year is this?" When I saw the first underground comics, I said, "Yeah, that's it. That's the language I want to speak."

Literally, the next day I started doing it. Luckily, my work had some vague merit, but not much, and I took it down to the New York underground papers and they took it. It was great. They allowed anything. They'd look at your work and print it without changing a thing.

But that was the best way to improve yourself... When your stuff would come out, you'd look at it and say "Oh my God, is my lettering that bad?" You'd be embarrassed and you'd sweat it out. You'd be noticed right away. "Do my hands have six fingers? Why is this drawing like this? kinda thing, and you really learn. It's better than any cartooning course you could take.

When you were growing up in the '50s, like I did, every kid on the block had taken a cartooning course. You still have matchbooks that say if you can draw Tutti the Turtle you can get a 500 dollar scholarship to cartoonist school.

Now, Zippy is in 65 daily papers, which is 65 more than I thought he'd be in. He's in the *Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *Dallas Times Herald*, *Miami Herald*. Supposedly the *Toronto Sun* is going to do it. But I'll take what can get. I understand it's a bit of a right wing rag, but...

I'm working for the Hearst Corporation. They don't tell me what to do — they came to me. So, I can do my own stuff. Now that's a story in itself — that I could come from such an obscure place to wind up on *The Washington Post*, and Ronald Reagan has to read my strip.

JWC: They came to you and said Mr. Griffith, we want Zippy?

picked up a little pamphlet and had Zippy just sort of read off the ingredients in a McDonald's line.

He thought that you had to read off the pamphlet out loud in order to get the hamburger. That was the deal. And he announced it like poetry, which it reads like... like Dada poetry. So he just read it out. But the McDonald's lawyers called and they wouldn't let this happen. So I replaced it and put it in one of my books. Once the books come out I can do whatever I want.

"... Zippy is high on artificial ingredients — high on cream centres. I'm always looking for cream centre. Is there one in Toronto?"

When you do a daily strip — or a strip as regularly as I do — you tend to incorporate pretty much whatever you are thinking, or doing, or what someone has said to you an hour ago into the strip. At least, I do it that way. It's kind of like writing a diary but when you're writing it, it will hopefully make someone laugh. Everything that happens gets into the strips. You'll be in the next few.

(Much nervous chuckling from the interviewers)

HEATHER SANGSTER: Is there any particular comic character or strip that you follow? What are your particular contemporary interests?

BG: In the daily papers, there is not much to read. I like *The Far Side*. I still read *Doonesbury* occasionally. It's good satire. I'm not thrilled with it, but it's okay.

JWC: It's really slowed down.

BG: Although for about a year, Gary Trudeau started really getting into his drawings which was really nice to see. For years and years, he would just do

kids, or at least silly and not to be taken seriously — limited in what they can do. I mean, *Garfield* is comics to most people. And this movie, I think, will open people's eyes, and hopefully send them off towards a bookstore where the comics are.

There is an excerpt in the film about when comics were being repressed. There's a whole lot of footage from the '50s, where comics were creating juvenile delinquents, and communism, and sexual perversion. And the comic's industry's response was to censor itself.

They created something called the Comics Code. Every comic had to be approved by the code. But since underground comics came along, it's irrelevant. That was their response, so that it wouldn't be a completely put out of business. They decided to police themselves. There were rules. I've seen it. You couldn't use the word "divorce." You can't show sweat glistening on someone's forehead — it implies physical exertions — something not quite Victorian.

The film has some great clips with guys looking into the camera and telling you that if you read comics, you'll turn into a juvenile delinquent — like *Reefer Madness*.

Comics are distinctly American. That's where they started. America gave comics and rock-and-roll to the world. And jazz. But Americans are ashamed of their own popular culture because they don't think that they have a culture. When Americans think of the word 'culture,' they think of Europe. When they think of their own culture — jazz, rock-and-roll, comics, movies, mass media, popular culture — they are ashamed. They don't take pride in what is looked upon as low culture. The only time they'll take pride in it is like with jazz. Jazz has gotten respectable because jazz went to Europe and came back with a stamp that said "OK — certified by the Europeans." French like it, so it's okay.

But comics are still sort of struggling to get up there. And maybe this movie will push it. Zippy comments on that,



GOSH, WOW, NEAT: *Comic Book Confidential*.

Mann explores comics

By HEATHER SANGSTER

"I was a projectionist at York," confesses Toronto filmmaker Ron Mann, "working in a documentary film class."

Although fired from York for stealing a library book, Mann credits his previous job for solidifying his interest in film. "It made it possible for me to see all kinds of films I wouldn't normally see. I was able to learn the history, the theory of film, which is the real value of classes — learning production is useless."

Rather than spend time in a film class, Mann took the hands-on approach to filmmaking. At 12 he made Super-8 films and at 16 advanced, appropriately, to 16mm. The best way to make films, says Mann, is to "go out and do it yourself. If you have passion, courage, and a belief in what you're doing, it'll get done."

Mann's passion at 17 (an age where he described himself as "young, foolish, and horny") was to make films like Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*. He experimented with a trilogy of "art films" with titles like *He Rang, She Came*, which were described as Sumo wrestler porno films.

Mann has, however, propelled himself into the status of a respected filmmaker. His first feature, *Imagine The Sound* (1981) — a documentary on the jazz scene — resulted from his job at Sam The Record Man. Tired of working on the ground floor where Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* played endlessly, Mann moved to the jazz department on the second floor.

Mann recognized jazz as "the American art form" and felt it was necessary to do a film on it so he "wouldn't lose that sense of history." He felt that in "our mainstream culture," certain subcultures weren't represented and it was important to "see what's between the TV dials."

With two credible films to his name, (Mann's second documentary was *Poetry in Motion* in 1982), Mann has produced his third exploration into a well-read but little-known subculture — comics.

After being reintroduced to comics at bp Nichol's house and attending a comic book convention where "8,000 people with coffee and cigarettes" gathered to trade and discuss their comics, Mann was "kicked in the eye" and his perspective on comics changed.

Through research, he uncovered the sordid history and "ramifications" of comics. During the '50s, comics were "an outrage," linked to juvenile delinquency. Mann, however, saw comics "as an artist's medium of independent expression. They are their own culture and they say a lot about history." Mann wanted to make a film that showed how comics "had evolved into a sophisticated, storytelling medium."

The filmmaking process was difficult at first. "The artwork is static and the camera moves — people just don't read bubbles on the screen" says Mann. "We had to make the medium filmic... the idea of performance was necessary." In order to bring the comics 'alive,' Mann had each cartoonist read from and dramatize his/her work because "the personality of the artist is the extension of the comic."

Mann's future involves the promotion of his film because his role "doesn't end after the film's release." He will "make sure everything goes right, check out audience response, and make sure the projection is right."

He believes comics — and his film — will be around for a long time "as a tool for future generations, to know what history was like." He maintains that their popularity will continue. "After the jazz film, my interest in jazz died down. After the poetry film, my interest in poetry died down, but," Mann continues, "I'm still reading comics."

ZIPPY



WHAT? Griffith draws Zippy's humble beginnings.

BG: I was doing Zippy in the *San Francisco Examiner* — which is a Hearst paper — and they asked me if I'd do it. Will Hearst, the great-grandson of the original William Randolph Hearst, was in his mid 30s and he took over the paper — he was given the paper — and he said, "let's see, what will I do? I'll hire Hunter Thompson and Bill Griffith, and others that he liked, and so I started doing a daily for him.

Then, a year later I got a call from New York. They said, can we come out and talk to you and convince you to do Zippy for us, and send it around the country. So I made this list of demands and they agreed to every damn one of them. I just couldn't say no. "I keep my copyright. I have complete control. You can't censor it. It has to be a little bit bigger than the other strips. I draw it out of proportion. I draw it taller."

I like to write. I like to have that extra space — 100-200 words per strip. They only censored me once, if you can call it censoring. I did a strip once on a situation that happened here. The McDonald's Company, responding to pressure from nutrition groups, decided to put out a little pamphlet and you could actually walk into McDonald's two years ago and you could get this pamphlet listing all the ingredients in a Big Mac and how nutritious it was. So I went in and

the same drawing for four panels very much the same. To me, comics are half drawing and half writing. It should be equal. You should be giving people as much to see as to read.

I don't find a lot in the daily strips too exciting. But I do enjoy certain things like RAW magazine, and the weekly strips like Lynda Barry's strip, *Ernie Pook's Comeek*, in *NOW*. And Matt Groening, *Life in Hell*. I like Lynda's drawing. Matt Groening doesn't draw much at all but he's funny.

JWC: Is there a drug influence in your stuff? Like, are you a druggie or what?

BG: No, but Zippy is high on artificial ingredients — high on cream centres. I noticed every building here is called centre, I'm always looking for cream centre. Is there one in Toronto?

HS: What are your impressions of the film?

BG: I think it's terrific for comics, and that's basically the intention of the film — to show people who normally may not know about comics. Obviously it has a core audience of comics fans. As the film goes out into the theatres I think it's going to bring people into reading comics, especially in America — and I'm sure in Canada as well. There's a bias.

People think that comics are still for

too, that's why I do strips with other cartoon characters.

JWC: What about animation? Have you ever thought about animating Zippy?

BG: Not animated. I've had a lot of people approach me to do animation, but what I'm interested in is a live action film which is in the works at the moment, with Randy Quaid. So there is a movie in the works but it's not animated. At the moment, it's being produced by Handmade Films, which is George Harrison of the Beatles. It's been in the works for a number of years but it's about to happen. At least a year from now.

JWC: How do you define underground comics? What exactly is the definition?

BG: Underground comics are comics done by artists, rather than comics done by corporations. An underground cartoonist doesn't have a specific audience defined in his work. It's just a personal expression, like writing poetry, or painting. It's a need to express yourself in a medium that happens to be comics — as opposed to DC, Marvel, and a lot of daily strips, where their reason to exist is to please a certain demographic slice of life, and that's a simple as it is. It's personal comics rather than comics done for someone else.

The right to be strange

By MICHAEL REDHILL

Thrill to William (MAD) Gaines' tale of being caught in the clutches of the Senate Subcommittee's panel of *The Menace Of Comic Books!* Grimace at the vivid black rings under Frank (Daredevil) Miller's eyes! Weep at Stan Lee's moving (but incurable) sibilance problem! *Comic Book Confidential* goes straight to the part of you that was lost when you threw out your Coke-bottle glasses!

Driving home from the King Tut exhibition in 1979, I caught my first glance of a squalid little store called Dragon Lady Comics out the back of our '72 Volvo. In those days I was wearing corduroys and yellow rayon turtle-necks. I wrote short flights of strange fancy, had no friends and loved it.

I was 12 and I was collecting comic books. I, and millions like me, have waited years for a film like Ron Mann's documentary on comic book art.

In *Comic Book Confidential*, Mann interviews upwards of 20 artists and writers and the result is a reaffirmation of the individual's right to be strange. This odd collection of loners and outcasts has carved a lasting niche in North America's more "known" media. *Comic Book Confidential* traces the history of comics from the time of psychotic censor Fredrick Wertham (father of the Comic's Code Authority), to underground comics, to the flowering of comic art of the present day.

Mann's achievement in covering such distances is that he incorporates a great deal of information without losing the audience's attention. Interspersed throughout the interviews is the artwork itself, as well as some animation and not-to-be-missed footage of anti-comic book propaganda from the '50s in which normal children become wild-eyed, brick wielding maniacs — all because of comic books.

The best time you'll ever have learning something.