

# Comics in Halifax: Underground and Underwater

BY NEIL FRASER

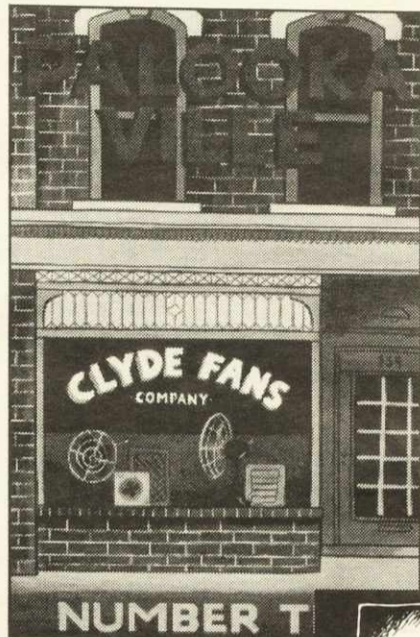
This past weekend, two of Canada's best underground comic artists were in Halifax for an art teacher's conference and a book signing at the Strange Adventures comic shop. They graciously allowed me a couple minutes of their time to discuss their work, the past, and life in the twentieth century. Seth is the creator of *Palooka Ville* and Chester Brown is the man behind the now defunct *Yummy Fur* and the critically acclaimed *Underwater*, published by Drawn and Quarterly.

Both got their start in the mid eighties at a company called Vortex. Seth was drawing a comic called *Mister X*, "...which was sort of a genre related, kind of a mystery, futuristic kind of a comic book. I wasn't writing it, I was just drawing it. I look at that as sort of an apprenticeship period that I went through for a few years before doing my own book."

At about the same time, Chester Brown was "...self-publishing a mini-comic, and it was called *Yummy Fur*. The same publisher that published *Mister X* saw these mini-comics and asked if he could put it out as a real comic book. So the first real full-sized issue of *Yummy Fur* came out in December of '86. I did *Yummy Fur* until '94 and the first issue of *Underwater* came out in August of '94. There were different kinds of things in *Yummy Fur*. In the beginning I kind of had two storylines going; one was this strange, semi-surrealistic black humour storyline featuring a character named Ed the Happy Clown and running at the same time was an adaptation of the gospel of Mark.

"Then I got bored of doing Ed the Happy Clown so I started doing autobiographical comics.

*Ed the Happy Clown* ran up until issue 18 of *Yummy Fur* and then I started doing the autobiographical comics and that lasted until the last issue of *Yummy Fur* which was number



Chester Brown's *Clyde Fans*.

32. I finished the gospel of Mark and then started the gospel of Matthew and that is continued in *Underwater*," said Brown.

*Underwater*, Brown's current work-in-progress, is a surreal look at a pair of twins in another dimension as they grow up and learn about life and language. As they learn, so do the readers. And to help the empathy, Brown has written the comic in a language he created, so the readers learn it at the same pace as the twins. This is a bit of a break from the autobiographical work he was doing just before this in *Yummy Fur*.

"You have more freedom in

fiction to discuss more aspects of your life. It's hard to be totally honest when dealing with friends around you," said Brown. "Friends can be offended if you put them in [the comic] a certain way, so sometimes it is easier to just fictionalize [the books]. Plus you can deal with more things; sometimes you're concerned about things but it is not something that has directly touched your life."

Seth has just started a new storyline in issue ten of *Palooka Ville* after wrapping up his "Kalo" storyline of the first nine issues. This was an autobiographical story that dealt with Seth's search for an obscure *New Yorker* cartoonist from the 40s. This allowed him to explore his passion for the past in story as well as in design.

the old movies and the war, so I felt fairly connected to that generation on some level without giving it any thought. Later on I was just aesthetically attracted to the earlier part of the century, the design, the style of drawing, the style of clothing. It was a superior time period in the way it looked. Things have [become] cheaper and uglier as each decade has passed. And I really liked the music too, that's another big attraction.

"Actually, the older I get, the further I seem to be going back. I'm probably more involved in the twenties and the turn of the century now. As the years have gone by it has developed from an interest and more into a philosophy that things are getting worse. And whereas we may be making social progress, our actual society is crumbling in other manners at the same time," Seth said.

It is not just the subject matter that deals with the past, but his drawing style also gives the feeling of another era.

"It is not really intentional anymore. At one point certainly it would have been a more conscious thing that I was studying: old cartoonists and their stylizations and taking that into my own work. But at this point I am not thinking about it at all

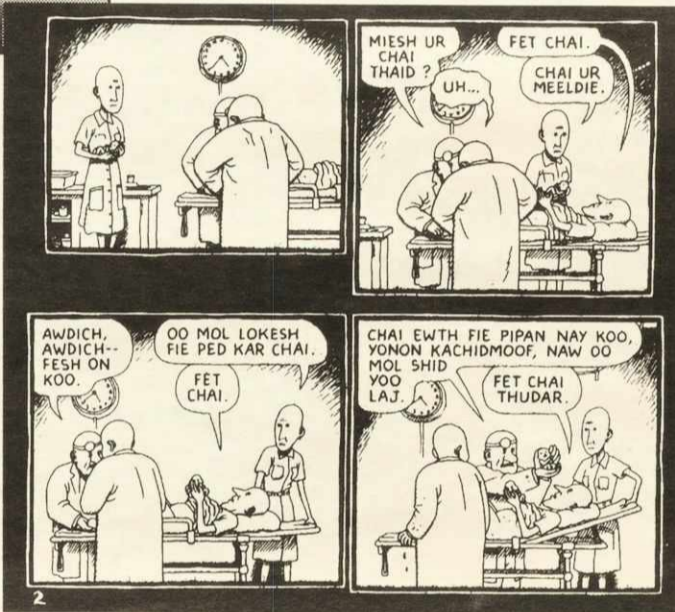
anymore, it is just the way that I draw now. I have totally internalized it and anything I draw is in that style. I think it is suitable for what I'm doing, because a lot of my work has some connection to the past, but it is not really much of a thought process anymore."

The new storyline, *Clyde Fans*, will also give Seth opportunity to explore the past.

"For many years I used to walk by this place called Clyde Fans, that is an empty store front with [those words] on the window, and I was always interested in it. For a period of about ten years I slowly started to piece together a fictional account in my head of the people who had run this store and what their lives had been about. I'm covering a period in vignettes, basically, a period from the 1940s right up until today of two brothers and their lives as electric fan salesmen."

Seth and Chester Brown have managed to gain both critical and popular acclaim for their works. Canada is not well known for its comic book market, with most of the business happening in the U.S.A.

"Basically our market is the one in the States, to tell you the truth," said Seth. "We sell comics in Canada, of course, but if we did not have the States we'd be in trouble: that's where we sell the majority of our work. In a way it makes very little difference if we were in America or here in Canada because it's the same market. I prefer to live in Canada, of course, but I don't feel like Canada has gone particularly out of it's way to help us or anything. We're not getting any grants. In fact, I've been turned down for several grants."



*Underwater*: the reader learns a new language along with the characters.

"My parents are much older than me," Seth said of his fascination with the past. "My father is about eighty, so I grew up very involved in things from the earlier part of the century,

although they all, somehow, sound the same.

## Molloy solo project

Shadows on Stone  
Matt Molloy  
Caroline/Virgin

In the contemporary North American scene, Ireland's the Chieftains are celtic music. This statement would make their flautist, Matt Molloy, the pre-eminent celtic flautist in the world today. Sure, Nova Scotians would refute the first sentence of this article, but anyone who has heard Molloy's latest solo record, *Shadows on Stone*, would have a hard time disputing the second claim.

The album contains a few heavy songs, like "Music of the Seals", but is comprised mostly of light-hearted tunes displaying Molloy's flawless playing. Many songs include various tempo changes, and tone changes, which serve to give each track its own character and Molloy's personal stamp.

The disc showcases Molloy's seemingly infinite skill, as well as his respect for both traditional tunes and the more modern advances of the genre, which he effortlessly combines to create this wonderfully melodic record.

"You've got to let [the older, traditional] songs breathe," Molloy said over the phone with a thick Irish accent. "When a song has stayed around unchanged for such a long time, it speaks for itself."

"As far as music [like Ashley MacIsaac makes], bands in Ireland have

been experimenting for years," Molloy said of modern celtic. "To give [MacIsaac] credit, he is firing up his own generation."

His respect for new styles of celtic music has become evident lately, as the Chieftains have toured extensively with MacIsaac in the United States, as well as recording a disc with Nova Scotian celtic artists such as Natalie MacMaster and Mary Jane Lamond. After recording the disc, the Chieftains went on to perform at the recent Celtic Colours Festival in Sydney.

Molloy digs deep into his repertoire on *Shadows and Stone*. "The Wind in the Woods" is a rambling flute tune, while "Music of the Seals" is an eleven minute track that stands out because of the sheer beauty and peace that Molloy's impressive playing lends to it.

A remarkable aspect of the disc is how much of himself Molloy is able to share with the listener without actually ever vocalizing. His main appeal lies in his ability to express emotions and conjure vivid images with intricate and complex notes; on many tracks, he plays the gentle and the harsh within seconds of each other, almost as though he divides into two musicians.

Overall, this disc succeeds because its lilting tunes seem to sweep you away from life's problems for a mere moment.

GREG MCFARLANE

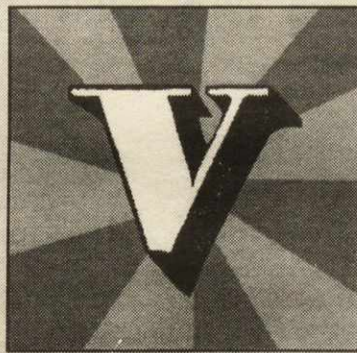


The Vees  
The Vees  
Murderecords

Fear not, Jale fans. Technically, Jale may not be around any more, but their sound still is. The new five-song self-titled release from the Vees features former Jale members Jennifer Pierce and Laura Stein along with Mike Belitsky, who took the place of Alison MacLeod. This album has songs ranging from mellow to upbeat,

although they all, somehow, sound the same.

I wouldn't say this is the worst album I've ever heard, but it's not the best either. It's just another album with that characteristic Halifax pop sound that's getting a bit tiresome and unenergetic. Although the band is moving farther and farther away from Halifax, they're bringing the old scene with them.



Garden/Cheddar/Swiss/Feta/Falafel/Hummus/Tuna  
Bacon/Ham/Assorted/Bologna/Donair/RoastBeef  
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1701 Barrington Street 429-PITA  
(Corner of Prince Str.)

This album is simply mediocre. If you were a Jale fan, you'll probably like it, but if not, don't buy it. It's just that same old slacker pop — definitely nothing new.

STEVE PETRIE

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