

## FANZINES EXPLAINED

by Jim Romanesko

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**F**or years, when he wasn't pushing paper as a government bureaucrat, John Marr combed San Francisco book stores for volumes on disasters and the B-side of American pop culture. Six years ago he decided he wanted to share his obsession with the outside world, so he launched a photocopied magazine dubbed Murder Can Be Fun, named after a favorite Fredric Brown detective novel.

With it he joined thousands of amateur publishers whose homemade, often irreverent publications have become known as fanzines -- zines ("zeens" for short). In testimony to the medium's growing visibility, Penguin Books recently published a bestselling zine guide, numerous newspapers and magazines have noted the phenomenon, and a zine review that died two years ago has sprung back to life. By one estimate, at least 10,000 zines -- mostly haphazard mail-order products that are done for fun rather than profit -- are now traded or sold throughout the world. Most have circulations of less than 500.

Marr, who sells about 2,000 copies of MCBF when it appears twice a year, is, at age 31, considered a zine veteran. Since its debut, MCBF has examined such unusual trends as killer postal workers (complete with graphs detailing how the deeds were done), chronicled every death at Disneyland since it opened in 1955, and reported on the Boston Molasses Flood of 1919, in which 2.3 million gallons of molasses deluged city streets, knocking over buildings and killing 21 people.

Marr says he spends nearly 100 hours researching, writing and producing each issue. Why? "Putting out the zine is sort of a rationale for doing all of these research projects," he says.

Fueled by the increased accessibility of inexpensive desktop publishing systems and the availability of photocopy machines, zines now fill most every niche, from politics to music to film to travel to offbeat or controversial topics that the mainstream press rarely addresses. One zine called IQ, for example, describes itself as "the sex zine for girls who like girls who wear glasses" Red Heifer Offering targets Christian punk rockers; They Won't Stay Dead! examines what are known as "splatter-films" because of their horrific faux mutilations; and 8-Track Mind is for music lovers who profess devotion to the outdated audio technology.

"There are goofy publications in that subculture, but some zines are very serious, and on serious subjects," says Tom Trusky, an English profes-

sor at Boise State University who organized an exhibit of zines last fall. Indeed, says Mike Gunderloy, co-author of Penguin's "The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution," zines are "so diverse as to be pretty much unclassifiable. The mainstream overemphasizes the wacky aspects, because they make good copy. But a lot of people are doing solid, useful work in niche markets that traditional magazines can never fill."

Zines may be publications, but they can't be classified as periodicals, at least not in the usual sense. Publishing schedules are almost nonexistent, and only the rare effort such as MCBF lasts longer than two years. In fact, many zines vanish after only one issue when the publisher loses interest or runs out of material. Geraldo Must Die!, a screed against daytime talk shows, folded after its debut, as did Hossatopia, a zine that paid homage to Hoss, the "Bonanza" character played by the late Dan Blocker, through poetry, art and reminiscences

Zines that survive and thrive do so through mutual admiration. That's how editors trade or sell their work. Almost every zine includes reviews of others. Pick up one zine and you'll learn about dozens. And those dozens will probably note hundreds more.

Many readers, however, stumble on the "micro-press" by accident. USA Today media reporter Pat Guy discovered zines while interviewing a magazine editor for a story about gay publications. The editor had insisted his magazine was different from the gay zines that are being published.

"What's a zine?" she asked. She got her answer.

Giving the zine scene its widest exposure to date, Guy devoted nearly a page to the publishing underground in an article last August. "Zines are wacky, obscene, gross, tender and funny," explained Guy, who received unsolicited zines for months after her article appeared. "They generally flaunt an in-your-face attitude, plenty of four-letter words and a heavy dose of misspellings, grammatical errors and libelous comments. Some are primitive -- mere sheets of paper, folded and stapled -- others are graphically dazzling."

Guy's report and others like it, along with the release of Gunderloy's book, have introduced the zine scene to many people who never suspected anything without a glossy cover could be entertain-

ing or informative. Recently National Public Radio, Newsweek, "Entertainment Tonight" and major dailies such as the San Francisco Examiner, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times and St. Paul Pioneer Press have discovered and reported on zines.

The medium, however, has been around for at least six decades. Originally called fanzines (from fan club culture), the zines had their roots in science fiction pulp magazines. The earliest ones -- Comet and Time Traveller -- have been traced to about 1930. In 1932 they were joined by Science Fiction, published by Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster, who would later create Superman.

One of the first serious observers of zines was New York psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who discovered the publications in the early 1940s while studying the links between psychology and literature. "Gradually I became interested in them as a phenomenon and started to get some myself," he recalled in his 1978 book, "The World of Fanzines."

Like many others who stumble across the scene, Wertham tried to determine what motivated the publishers and, at the same time, examine why he was so interested in their novice work. The psychiatrist decided that he treasured the "aliveness and naturalness" of zines and "appreciated that they are unmanipulated" by owners, publishers or advertisers.

"Having seen, in my years in psychiatry, so much of the general flaws in our human relations, I was attracted to something that was so positive and was not acknowledged as such," he wrote. "I felt that [the zine culture] was essentially unpolluted by the greed, the arrogance and the hypocrisy that has invaded so much of our intellectual life."

Mike Gunderloy says zine editors are largely motivated by the "passionate, and probably pathological, need to spread one's opinions about the world."

Zines covering a variety of topics have been traded over the decades, but the movement exploded in the early 1980s after Gunderloy launched a magazine that attempted to catalog the thousands of publications circulating through word-of-mouth or notices in other zines. He called his creation Factsheet Five, after a science fiction short story by John Brunner. Each issue described more than a thousand zines and listed their prices and addresses. His effort quickly grew to become what many considered the center of the zine universe.

Gunderloy says he began F5 in 1982 as a two-page, typed letter to friends. In it, he offered reviews of the sci-fi publications he read. Over time, his listings expanded beyond sci-fi and word spread among zine publishers that the way to get noticed (and deluged with inquiries) was to be reviewed in Gunderloy's rag. By the late 1980s, F5 was appearing bimonthly with nearly 140 pages of tightly written reviews. Its circulation had grown to 10,000, but Gunderloy gave away as many as half in trades.

Gunderloy's policy was to review every zine he received (except those that were overtly racist or encouraged violence) and provide free copies of F5 to publishers who shared their zines. Many readers were critical of this method, saying it encouraged shoddy, slapped-together efforts just to get a free copy of Gunderloy's magazine. Critics say the policy flooded the market with lackluster material and lowered standards.

While Gunderloy's decision may have contributed to slipshod efforts, F5 and its large and diverse readership also guaranteed customers for nearly every type of publication. The Satanists had *Brimstone*, drug-testing opponents had the *Urine Nation News*, and those into celibacy had the short-lived *Virgin International Contact Zine*.

Not all zines have a quirky edge, however; those that do just seem to get the most attention. Many zines are published by hobbyists who use their publications to network. Serious birdwatchers, for example, wouldn't miss an issue of *Dick E. Bird News*, which includes a "birdhouse of the month" and pictures of birds and squirrels taken by readers. Another zine, *SOS*, is the organ of the Secular Organization for Sobriety, which offers alternatives to religion-based recovery programs.

Sometimes even editors are surprised by the number of orders they receive for their ultra-specialized and often very personal works. Among them is a man in Austin, Texas, who published *Raised By Wolves*, in which he anonymously told his tale of childhood sexual abuse. He explained that the zine was cathartic for him, and he didn't expect many readers. Those who did order a copy got fair warning: "What I have done here is staple together a bunch of poems, artwork and essays that I have been writing recently, in a marginally successful attempt to cope with some horrible stuff that crawled out of some dark and ugly corner of my memory totally uninvited."

Graphic and frightening, the zine became

more popular with each issue and the editor got dozens of letters from other sexual abuse victims who wanted to share their stories. The Harvard Medical School also wrote, he says, asking to use the zine in psychiatry classes. He agreed.

While F5 connected survivors of abuse and helped zine publishers, it also provided free publicity for kooks. A self-proclaimed Brooklyn psychopath named Frank became semi-legendary in zine publishing when he claimed in his surprisingly popular *Singin' Dose Anti-Psychotic Blues* that he was going to kill at least two dozen people in a massacre.

Frank's thick publication consisted of his essays and copies of newspaper stories about mayhem around the world. He began publishing in 1987 but stopped three years later, after, he claimed, the FBI began investigating him. What sparked the feds' interest, according to Frank, was a lengthy essay he published called "Handy Hits for Messier Massacres: A Guide to Maximizing the Mass Murder Count."

Soon after discontinuing *Singin'*, he returned with a new zine called *Livin' in a Powder Keg and Givin' Off Sparks*. He now required his readers to sign a disclaimer, pledging they weren't law enforcement officers or informers. Further, would-be readers had to explain why they wanted to buy his zine. Frank, it seems, was soliciting psychotic confessions.

Then, in the summer of 1991, Frank disappeared without warning (or providing subscription refunds). He has been heard from only sparingly since.

Like USA Today's Pat Guy, Boise State's Tom Trusky, 48, discovered zines after overhearing the term two years ago. The professor bought an issue of *Factsheet Five* and spent at least \$500 sending off for some 300 titles.

"I was overwhelmed," he says. "The publications were tributes to a belief in freedom of the press, the power of the individual, the value of diversity. They forced me to rethink my diagnosis of the national psyche."

Determined to spread the word, Trusky set up a month-long exhibit of 80 zines this past October at the Boise State student union. Not everybody found charm in the display -- zines with names like *Taste of Latex*, *Queer City*, *Pills-a-go-go* and *Slut Mag* generated controversy. The college admissions director protested that prospective

students and their parents would be frightened away. A religious group that held services in the student union also complained, but the exhibit, Trusky says, drew record crowds.

When the exhibit ended, Trusky says its 50-page guest book was filled with comments. He found them so fascinating that he plans to publish them in September as a zine called *Guest Book*.