

Comic & zine reviews

Mark Pawson

Original 1960s underground cartoonist Justin Green makes a living these days plying his craft as a signwriter in California. **Justin Green's Sign Game** is a collection of single-page strips that have appeared in *Signs of the Times*, the professional signwriters' monthly magazine, over the last decade. Green obviously enjoys his work both sign painting and cartooning and it shows, these strips manage to combine the practical—technical hints, tricks of the trade, safety warnings, small business advice and typography lessons—with anecdotes on how to deal with and extract payment from clients, flamboyant self-promotion schemes, and diatribes against the universally hated vinyl lettering. The onslaught of computer generated lazer-cut vinyl lettering in dull typestyles is held responsible for a decline in work for traditional signwriters. The **Sign Game** obviously has a devoted readership in the sign industry—many strips are based on tips and stories sent in by readers.

The "Story of O" strip, about the endless quest for a perfect letter 'O', comes closer to his earlier neurosis-soaked mystical tinged stories in "Sacred and Profane" and "Binky Brown meets the Holy Virgin Mary".

This collection is extremely obscure—I don't think it's had any publicity or distribution outside the signwriting trade, and is incredibly difficult to get hold of. I eventually got one mailorder from the U.S., but it's worth the effort. Ostensibly just a collection of comic strips about signpainting **Justin Green's Sign Game** is an massively enjoyable oddity from a cartoonist who never really fits in anywhere.

Looking back over a pile of previous issues of Chris Ware's **The Acme Novelty Library** I realised that the main reason I'd bought them was because they looked so interesting. I'd cherished them for a couple of weeks before getting round to actually reading the stories, they really are sumptuous visual novelties first and foremost, and should be enjoyed as such!

I like the way **The Acme Novelty Library** seems to change names with each issue, employing a library of subtitles which dominate the front covers of successive issues, "Big Book of Jokes", "Jimmy Corrigan—The Smartest Kid on Earth". For issue #11 we're treated to an alternate spelling, "Novelties" instead of "Novelty", which crawls around the spine so that it can't be properly seen from either side. I like **The Acme Novelty Library's** use of different

types of paper within an issue and its fluctuating page size and cover price. I like the sumptuous pallettes of colour chosen for each story individually. I like the pages of small ads and line upon line of pedantic small print, explanations and exhortations. I like the detailed paper cut-out models of robots and spaceships. I like everything about **The Acme Novelty Library** apart from the stories, they're just a bit too sad and mean spirited, not just occasionally, but persistently, issue after issue, maybe now I've realised why I prefer just looking at it to reading it. Can we expect **The Acme Cruelty Library** next issue?

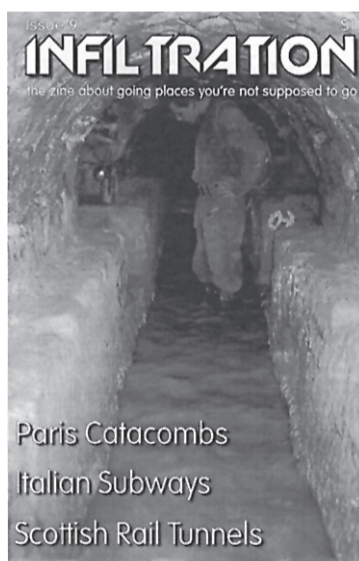
Top Notch Comics #1 has got me puzzled, and I don't like it, this is so similar in every respect to **The Acme Novelty Library**—same publisher, same price, same city of origin, very similar name, similar size and format, mean spirited Father & Son story, mean spirited Robot strip, paper cut-outs, duotone print, spoof adverts and patterned endpapers, that it's impossible to tell if it's an elaborate self-parody of **Acme Novelty Library** by Chris Ware himself, (it's probably the kind of thing he would do, but given the gargantuan amount of work that goes into each issue of **Acme**, it's hard to believe he'd have the time) or a comic so wholly inspired by **Acme** that it comes across as a "School of Acme Novelty" title.

Either way it's an impressive exercise but kinda pointless. Much, much worse than any of the above it looks like it was done on a computer—aaarrggghhh.

Measles, Teddy & Comic Book are "Comics for Kids of All Ages". In the **Measles** anthology, the best strips are the first two, *Venus* by Gilbert "Love & Rockets" Hernandez and Jim "Jim/Frank" Woodring's *Little Frogs*. Both deal with subjects in a light and happy way, everybody, particularly the little frogs, ends up happy in the end, as indeed they should in kids comics.

In Hernandez's strip, *Venus* introduces herself proclaiming "I love Comic Books! So what?" Later on her way home from the comic shop, in a comics-induced reverie, she takes a forbidden shortcut home, and in what must be a comics-industry first scares off a possible stalker (or is he just looking for a lost dog?) with a super-duper loud fart! I hope that copies of **Measles** will be included in The Sun's "Free Books For Schools" scheme...

In Jim Woodring's *Little Frogs*, Hippy chicklet Aloris subtly persuades two pesky boys against harvesting baby frogs by pelting them



with the decomposing body of a massive dead toad that she finds nearby!

The anthology format is always problematic, there just isn't space in 28 pages to develop a coherent style and identity, and for readers to avoid the "Well I paid £2 for this and half the comics are crap, so I feel cheated out of half my money" feeling. I like Steven "yikes" Weismann and Rick "Doofus" Altergott's work, but they should both get back to their own comics, where they belong.

Teddy faces repeated hassles from the unemployment office for just being a teddy and not having a job. When things get really bad and they're starving, Jean-Pierre, Teddy's cat, decides it's time to utilise his predatory instinct and go find some mice to eat, not expecting his intended victims to be quite so well trained in modern crisis management techniques, the mice decide to help Jean-Pierre by sneaking into a printers and pinching several thousand vouchers for free pots of yogurt! Another delightful story has Jean-Pierre escaping a boring Saturday night at home with his owner by pinching Teddy's cigarettes and slinking off to the cathouse, to guzzle as much milk as he can in the company of dancing felines and accordion-playing tabbies.

After the frustrating but financially rewarding trauma of having his previous characters Ren and Stimp removed from his control John Kricfalusi vowed to go it alone. In Spumco's oversized, high-intensity colour **Comic Book** we're presented with John K's latest deranged characters, Jimmy the Idiot Boy, and George Liquor his all-american huntin'n'fishin uncle. We see Jimmy feeding scabs to the squirrels, and together with George spanking a sassy fish, with other bonkers adventures just too ludicrous to attempt describing in print. With their animated cartoons (you can watch at <www.spumco.com>) and merchandising (dolls, skateboards and animation cel painting kits), George and Jimmy are much more worthy of your attention than those South Park guys—a sad waste of plastic, they should be thankful if every South Park toy in the world was melted down to be made into Jimmy the Idiot Boy's incontinence knickers!

Jack Chick's tracts are palm-of-your-hand sized religious rants in comic book form, I've accumulated a collection of 12 over the years but have no idea where these mysterious publications came from, handed out in the street or picked

up off seats on the bus? Dan Raeburn got to wondering about them and dug a bit deeper, **The Imp?** a 64 page overgrown monster of a tract is the result of his hideous fascination with this series of candy-coloured hate literature/soul savers.

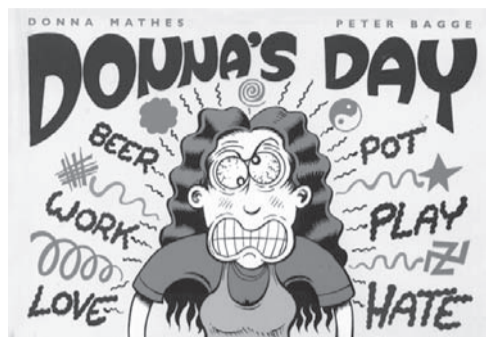
In the 1960's Jack Chick decided that his mission was to spread his rabidly anti Roman Catholic, anti pretty much everything else, religious views and chose the micro-sized comic book format as the most appropriate method to do this, using powerful images, persuasive language and an accessible, cheap format—he's since distributed over 400 million tracts worldwide.

Dan Raeburn's read them all, well over 120 different titles actually, his extended essay examines Chick's perverse take on theology and hateful obsessions. **The Imp?** delights in damning Chick with his own words and pictures and provides a concordance-reference list of themes and characters for those wishing to study the tracts further. If you've ever been puzzled when one of these mysterious tracts has fallen into your hands, you owe it to yourself to get a copy of **The Imp?** and find out more.

Peter Bagge sometimes seems to have more fun doing occasional one-shot mini comics than his regular title, the recently deceased **Hate. Donna's Day** is a great little slice of life 16 pager following the repeated ups and downs of slackerette Donna Day. Publisher Slab-O-Concrete's new "missive device" format, a postcard-comic hybrid, solves the problem of what to do after you've read the comic in a couple of minutes—write your message inside, stick a stamp on the back and send it to a friend. My copy will be staying exactly where it is though, carefully filed next to Bagge's thoroughly reprehensible and totally enjoyable Testosterone City.

Tiki News excavates the legacy of the 1950's vogue for Hawaiian/Polynesian culture, looking at artifacts of the craze that originated in California and spread worldwide. Editor Otto von Stroheim has assembled a globetrotting team of lounge-bar archaeologists, these committed cocktail tasters travel to the world's major cities revisiting ancient tribal sites—Tiki bars deep in the bowels of hotels, or currently languishing as strip joints, it seems that most major cities in Europe and the US have surviving Tiki-themed bars.

Issue #14 is the *Exotica Erotica* issue and has serious fun examining the many and varied representations of exotic dusky maidens



presented for consumption in the West, Illustrated with collections of Velvet Paintings, Hawaiian shirts, Record Sleeve Artwork, Restaurant decor Menus, match-books, tacky tourist souvenirs, carvings and waitresses themselves! **Tiki News** shows the artifacts that were created to satisfy consumer demand for exotic fantasies and forbidden desires.

Infiltration—“the zine about going places you’re not supposed to go”, is the underground journal of alternative urban exploration, all about exploring hidden, forbidden parts of our urban environment—subways, rail tunnels, storm drains, catacombs and other supposedly off-limits structures. Editor Ninja, and the enthusiasts who contribute to the zine, seem to locate and access these places pretty easily.

With minimal design and plenty of atmospheric murky photographs, each issue is a collection of factual accounts. It’s particularly impressive that Ninja is so committed to his hobby (sport?) that he plans his holidays around illicit tunnel tourism, meeting up with catacombs explorers in Paris, but feeling slightly less adventurous in Milan after seeing submachine gun toting police and security guards everywhere.

I like the subversive, yet responsible tone of **Infiltration**, it’s clear that careful planning and precautions are necessary in potentially dangerous spaces, one issue is full of tales of getting caught, and offers practical advice on what to do if security guards find you—play dumb and say sorry seems to be the best strategy!

At first glance both **Infiltration** and **Tiki News** seem incredibly narrowly focussed, you can’t help wondering if there’s enough material to fill 30 A5 pages of a zine, let alone a dozen or more issues about Tiki Bars or Old tunnels, yet for me this is where the success and strengths of both these zines lies, in focussing on a highly specific, obscure yet accessible area of contemporary culture and covering it well, with the editors enthusiasm showing through and thus attracting good contributors.

CONTACTS

JUSTIN GREEN’S SIGN GAME, 80pgs, ST publications, USA, available in UK from Disinfotainment £10.95 inc p/p

ACME NOVELTIES LIBRARY #11 \$4.50, TOP NOTCH COMICS#1 \$4.50 and MEASLES#1 \$2.95, Fantagraphics, USA, both \$4.50, should all be available from any decent comic shop

THE IMP? 64pgs, \$6.00 inc p/p, Chaplain Dan Raeburn, 1454 W Summerdale 2C, Chicago IL 60640 USA. Available in UK for £4.00 inc p/p from Disinfotainment

JACK CHICK Tracts may or may not be available in your local Christian bookshop
Jack Chick Website: <www.chick.com.>

DONNA’S DAY, 20pgs, £1.50 inc p/p, Slab-O-Concrete, PO Box 148, Hove, BN3 3DQ-ask for their catalogue of other fine comics

TEDDY by Virginie, 48pgs, Bill, Luc vandewalle bruggestraat 11, 8755 Ruiselde, Belgium in UK £3.50 inc p/p from Slab-O-Concrete

SPUMCO COMIC BOOK, Dark Horse Comics, \$5.95, might still be available...

INFILTRATION, 24pgs, \$2.00 inc p/p, Infiltration, PO Box 66069, Town Centre PO, Pickering, ON, L1V 6P7 Canada
Website: <www.infiltration.org.>

Available in UK for £1.50 inc p/p from Disinfotainment

TIKI NEWS, 40pgs, \$3.00 inc p/p Schwarz Grafiken
2215-R Market Street #177, SF, CA-94114, USA
in UK £2 inc p/p from Disinfotainment

DISINFOTAINMENT
— mailorder catalogue P.O.Box 664, London, E3 4QF

WEBSITE: <www.mpawson.demon.co.uk>

