

A letter from Hicksville

Why I love New Zealand comics

by Dylan Horrocks

A couple of years ago we had a visiting American cartoonist over for dinner. He was passing through New Zealand halfway through a round the-world wander with bicycle and sketchbook. I asked him what comics he'd been reading lately.

"Oh, not much," he said. "These days I basically just read comics by my friends."

I knew exactly what he meant. A comic takes on whole new levels of richness and meaning when it's by someone you know. And while comics have steadily become less and less a mass medium, they have become more like a community.



In some ways it seems odd today to talk about 'New Zealand comics' or 'American Comics.' You could easily draw a map of style and genre in comics today that would have no relation whatever to national boundaries. 'Alternative comics' from London or Sydney look much the same as 'alternative comics' from Boston or Montreal. Yugoslavia's Sasa Rakevic can sit comfortably on the Fantagraphics catalogue beside Dame Dray and Max Andersson. This year at the International Comics and Animation Festival I've even been invited to be on a panel entitled 'New Voices in American Comics'. That made me chuckle: not only am I a New Zealander but my publisher is Canadian.

Even so clearly a 'national' style as Japan's Manga is becoming internationalized. Not only are young cartoonists from Auckland to Paris drawing manga in the hope of Japanese publication (such as New Zealand's Terri Rota), but the Japanese approach to comics is increasingly influencing the way cartoonists think everywhere.

And vice versa. One of my favorite Asian comics is an X-Men comic which I bought from a Korean bookshop in Auckland. It's a strange hybrid of comics languages: the characters and some of the storytelling elements are familiar from the Marvel idiom, but the layouts, rendering, pacing and those big eyes are all pure manga.

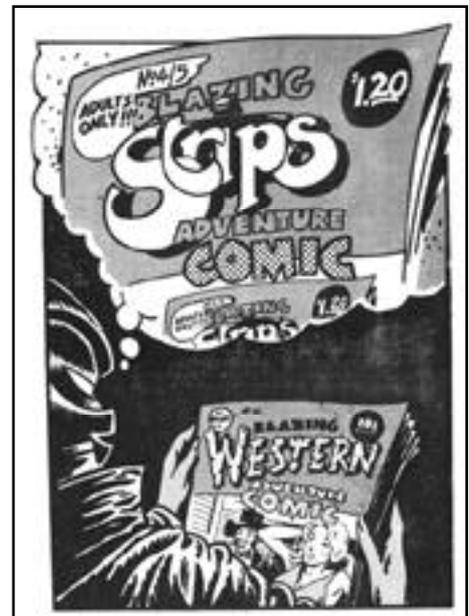
But I don't mean to suggest that comics around the world are becoming the same. The fact that I can read the Korean X-Men comic as a hybrid is only possible because comics are not one universal language; they come in a range of dialects. Some of those dialects are concentrated in a particular place and others are located around a particular sensibility, but it's that diversity which makes comics a constant source of wonder to me.

Nor do I mean to imply that there's some kind of 'New Zealand style' in comics (although if there were, Barry Linton would be its Chaucer). Most New Zealand cartoonists have always looked to overseas traditions for inspiration: American (mainstream and underground), European, Japanese and British.

Although there are a growing number of young cartoonists whose work is clearly influenced by people like Barry Linton, Roger Langridge, Martin Emond, even myself. So who knows - maybe one day people will talk about 'New Zealand comics' the way they talk about 'French comics' or 'Japanese comics.' But even then, there would be plenty of New Zealand cartoonists whose comics were 'Japanese' or 'American' in style and content.

I think what I'm trying to say is that being a cartoonist means belonging to a community or perhaps to several communities. And one of the ones I feel most at home in is New Zealand.

When I was a kid, the only other cartoonists I knew were the friends I talked into drawing comics. Friends like Chris Barnes, who drew a whole series of stories about a Samurai mouse; he was always better at it than me. These days he's living in England, training as a lawyer. He hasn't drawn any comics for years, but I doubt this causes him any regrets. In my last couple of years at school, two things happened that seemed life changing. I wrote an article on comics for Alternative cinema magazine, which gave me an excuse to find and interview the cartoonists behind Strips. I was in awe of these guys: they were real cartoonists and bloody good ones too. Laurence Clark recommended drawing on ivory board, which I still do today. And Kevin Jenkinson let me trawl through his collection of European BD, some of which I borrowed and pored over for days.



At the time I was oblivious to the uneasiness my enthusiasm provoked in them. By the time I met them, Strips was already starting to peter out; most of the core contributors had reached the stage where they were raising kids and had mortgages to support. The wild 'what the hell' days of the seventies were over and they now had responsibilities to worry about, jobs to hold down and bills to pay. Cartooning was still fun, but any illusions they may have once held that they would be the next Jean Giraud or Serge Clerc had evaporated.



Years later, at an exhibition of New Zealand cartoonists at Bent Gallery in Auckland, Kevin Jenkinson expressed some regret that he had never taken that step into the abyss: following Colin Wilson overseas and trying to break into the comics industry. God knows if they'd been in England or France, most of the Strips gang would have done it - their work was so damn good. But they weren't. And the industry seemed so far away back then.

The second thing that happened was I met Cornelius Stone. For both of us, I think, it was the first time we'd made a friend who was as into comics as we were. We would sit for hours talking over our favourite cartoonists, thrashing out story ideas, inking each other's drawings. We both planned to make it big in comics and we would devise plotlines for 300-issue series with linked mini-series and graphic novels. Cornelius reintroduced me to American

mainstream comics, about which his knowledge was (and still is) encyclopedic. He turned me on to Frank Miller in the middle of his Daredevil run and to people like Bill Sienkiewicz. I'd like to think I expanded his knowledge of and interest in European comics.

We discovered RAW together. When a local book-exchange owner came back from a trip to the States with a suitcase full of Underground comix, which he sold from under the counter by word of mouth. Cornelius told me and we checked it out. As soon as we caught sight of Raw #3 we knew the world had shifted on its axis. In New Zealand you had to work hard to find that kind of treasure.

Mind you, that was also around the time our first comic shop opened: Mark One Comics, run by a 15 year old comics fan and entrepreneur from a cupboard in the basement of the Old Customs House in Auckland. Before long things like Love and Rockets and Cerebus were turning up on our shelves and filling our minds.



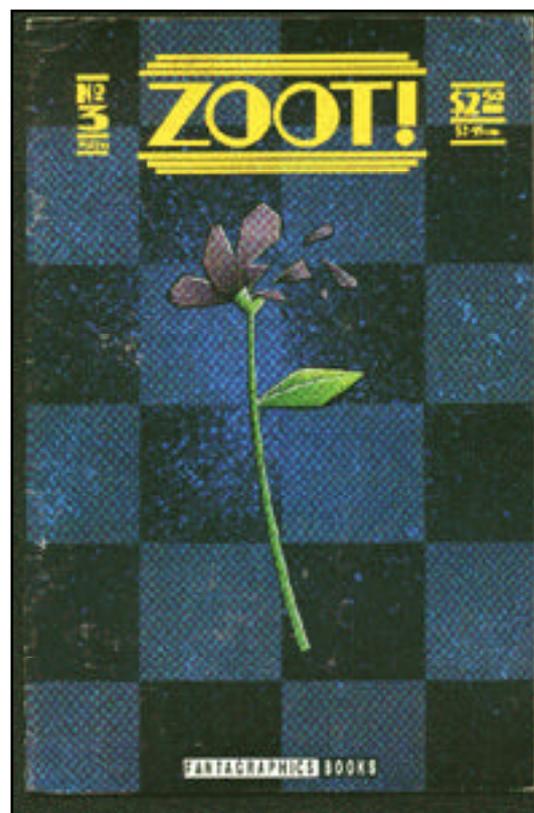
Mark One also gave us a place to meet other cartoonists - something Cornelius has always had some special talent for. By the time we started Razor in 1985 Cornelius had become the centre of a growing network of comics writers and artists

across the country. Luckily Cornelius' taste was impressively eclectic and Razor ranged from people like Warwick Gray (who taught himself to draw with a copy of How to Draw comics the Marvel Way) to the spaced out visionary artist Aslan. Razor became a testing ground for cartoonists like Roger Langridge and myself. It also became a key voice in the 1980s counterculture, attracting punks, hippies, dropouts and students. Being the 80s, of course, it never quite coalesced into a very big scene but it was a kind of community and Cornelius' flat (Razor House) was its church.

Plastered in photos and drawings, full of comics and books and 23-Skidoo records, Razor House had the wildest parties and the greatest Sunday afternoons. There was always a jam strip on the go and it was impossible to drop in without Cornelius talking you into drawing some new story of his.

Elsewhere in New Zealand stuff was happening too. I used to pick up as many of the student newspapers from around the country as I could find, as there was always something good: a new strip by Tim Bollinger or drawings by a cartoonist I'd never heard of.

In Christchurch and Dunedin little cartoonists' scenes were forming: the crowd who put out Flypaper and Every Secret Thing; and the Christchurch group that included Christian Carruthers, Peter Rees and Lars Cawley.



Everything seemed to come to a head around the end of the eighties. Roger and Andrew Langridge, Peter Rees and Timothy Glass signed up with Fantagraphics and a bunch of us were planning to head overseas on our quests to break into the industry. Graeme Romanes went to Japan. Warwick Gray went to England and was soon followed by Roger Langridge, Peter Rees and myself. Some of us ended up with cartooning careers and some didn't (Warwick now writes for the Doctor Who comic for Marvel UK while Graeme is still trying; although he did produce a series of beautiful comic-strip letters). But it seemed like more New Zealanders than ever before were serious about doing it.

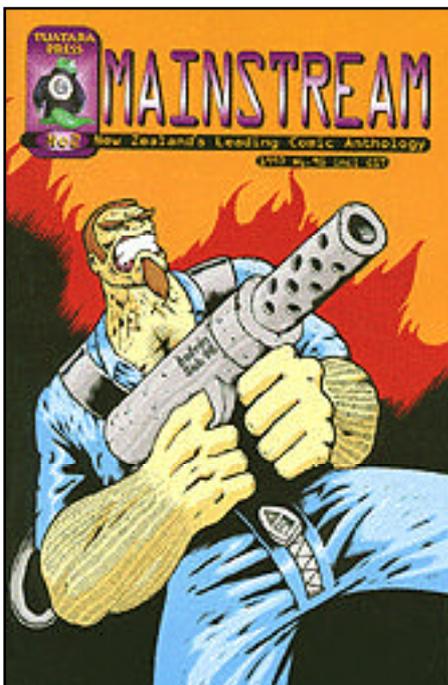
One of the craziest rides in the comics 'industry' was that of Stephen Jewell who I first met at school. Stephen was a big fan of British writers like Alan Moore (actually, back then, there was only Alan Moore: all the clones like Neil Gaiman and Grant Morrison had yet to appear) and had plans to write his own 'great works'. While we were at University, he put out a couple of issues of Shards, a superhero anthology which included his gritty Moore-esque story The Olympians and my own Giant steps (never got beyond episode two, of course). To be honest, The Olympians was a little too clichéd for my taste, although Warwick Gray, Alistair Revfiem and Paul Rogers turned in some great artwork. Soon after, Stephen went off to England and sold The Olympians to Marvel at a convention in London on the strength of a synopsis and a few character sketches. It ended up as a 2 issue Epic mini-series drawn by Australian



Gary Chaloner. Which flopped, by all accounts, and that to date was the end of Stephen's career writing comics. What struck me about the way Marvel handled this was the lack of training Stephen received. In effect he was given two issues to prove himself and when that didn't work he was dropped. There was none of that apprenticeship writing fill-ins for some lesser monthly title, with guidance from the editor, that I would have expected. Now, of course I can look back on it and realise that Marvel was doing its best to churn out titles to maintain its market share etc etc .

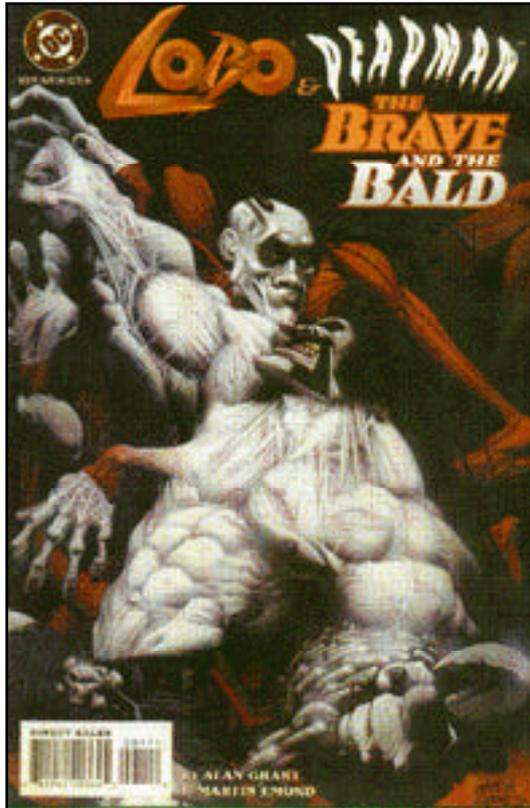
But Stephen had every right to feel a little jaded by his experience. These days Stephen is doing quite well as a journalist, writing about the rave music scene and, occasionally, about comics. He may turn his hand to comics again one day, but for now writing about them seems to have been more rewarding.

When I returned to New Zealand in the early nineties, the scene was entering a whole new phase. Roger Langridge was doing well, with stories in *Deadline*, *A1* and the *Judge Dredd Magazine* (by now he'd realised that a regular comic with Fantagraphics might bring you some kudos, but it probably won't pay the bills). Cornelius Stone was branching out into photography, writing and producing plays and generally being a counterculture celebrity; he actually had groupies now. Paul Rogers - another old acquaintance from school and Razor - was now tutoring at the local polytech, where he was getting some of his students to do comics under the banner of *Mainstream*. Given that comics in New Zealand had generally been non commercial in the past, Rogers was deliberately going against the norm which had usually been self consciously alternative or underground. Many of the young cartoonists involved in mainstream seemed determined to carve out a career drawing comics in the British or American industries. And some had the talent to do it.



And there was a spectacular precedent close to hand. Martin Emond had recently signed up, in quick succession, to do a series for *Tundra* (White Trash written by Gordon Rennie), work for the *Judge Dredd Magazine* and an issue of *Lobo* for DC Comics. In three years he'd gone from being on the dole to having his own accountant and an income to match. Suddenly dozens of young local cartoonists were looking to be the next Martin Emond, complete with baseball cap and wild death-metal styling.

I think of this as the era of ambition in New Zealand comics. Career ambition and also creative ambition. Young cartoonists these days don't simply want to get their strips into a local anthology and meet other cartoonists. Now they talk about submission guidelines, try outs with Marvel, how to pitch to Kodansha or the next trip to the San Diego Convention. Or else they're embarking on graphic novels and huge epic sagas, determined to out-Pope Paul or catch up with Chris Ware or Chester Brown.



It seems fitting that the last few years hasn't been dominated by an anthology (the way Strips and Razor dominated their decades), but by a whole bunch of solo minicomics: Andy Conlan's Strumming Teeth, Timothy Kid's Half a World Away, Karl Wills' Jackass Comics, Ant Sang's Filth and Adam Jamieson's Cataract and Blink to name but a few. Almost nobody starts out with a few pages in somebody else's magazine any more - now everyone wants their own comic.

And they deserve it. There's so much commitment to becoming really good among these cartoonists. Karl Wills poring over his copy of the Smithsonian Book of Newspaper comics and trying to reconstruct the craft and comic timing of masters like E.C. Segar. Timothy Kidd trying out every bloody drawing medium he can think of in Half a World Away - from brush and dip pen to ballpoint pen. And redrawing issue 5 three times before he's prepared to publish it. Kelvin Soh immersing himself in Scott McCloud and E H. Gombrich on a mission to crack the secrets of visual narrative.

I guess the Strips guys went through all that too, back in the seventies Colin Wilson, Joe Wylie, Kevin Jenkinson - they all drew like established professionals. I remember being amazed when I discovered that they didn't make their living from comics.

There's always been something heroic to me about people who strive to really master a craft even when there's no hope of making it their profession.

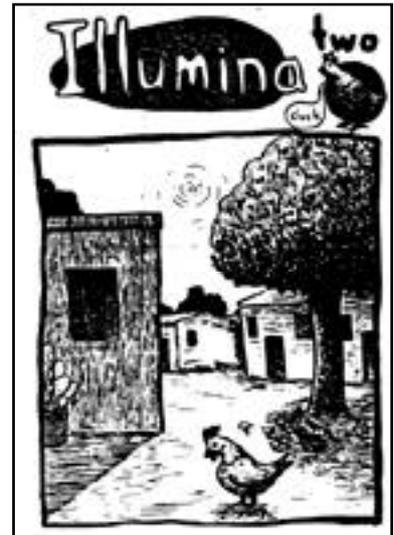
Once when I was teaching a night class on the history of comics at Auckland University, one of the students - a late middle aged man - asked if I wouldn't mind looking at some of his work. He then pulled out a hundred pages or so of a very competently drawn spicy adventure story. Full of topless women and ancient mysteries, it had a slightly old fashioned feel (try and imagine a Heavy Metal story drawn by Edgar P. Jacobs).

I was amazed. This guy had quietly worked on this thing for years, for his own Amusement. There wasn't a hope in hell it would ever be published. It was too rude for half the publishers and not rude enough for the rest; anyway, it was too old-fashioned for any of them. But I loved it. I wish I had made a copy of it but instead it went back to whatever private cubbyhole in which my student had created it.



Ultimately, that's the kind of comics I love the best. It's like the old fandom - before it became a business and an extension of the industry. Back when it consisted of nerdy enthusiasts who liked nothing better than to enter little imagined worlds that were built with love and attention to detail. Who were dedicated to a craft which no one else acknowledged, let alone respected And who found in it the community they were unable to find in mainstream society.

I guess New Zealand still has something like that, too, in the enthusiastic comics communities grouped around FunTime Comics in Christchurch and Tony Renouf's Treacle and Umph! in Dunedin, and the incredibly energetic and unpretentious zinesters at Oats Comics, all of who seem to truly believe that anyone can be a cartoonist and that everyone should.



When I think about 'New Zealand comics'. I think of them as a microcosm of the greater world of comics. We have our Daniel Clowes wannabes, our respected alternative artists, our Image clones our manga creators and our cocky young ink studs. We even have our very own Robert Crumb in Barry Linton - the one New Zealand cartoonist whose work is utterly grounded in the South Pacific in Aotearoa.

We have the people who try cartooning for a while and then give it up because it doesn't pay, it earns them no respect, they've been burned by the industry or it's just too much hard work. Some of whom are painfully talented.

And we have people who spend years working on comics that no one will ever hear About. I love New Zealand comics because I get such a kick out of seeing the places and people that I live with every day explored in that other world I love living in - the world of comics.

I love New Zealand comics because it's a community I like being part of. It's surprisingly free of the cliques and backbiting I encountered overseas: and on those rare occasions when we all get together, the superhero dudes and the Chris Ware fans soon end up enthusiastically chatting together about what they all love: comics. Because here. cartoonists really do love comics.

But most of all, I love New Zealand comics because they are made by my friends.

Dylan Horrocks, Omana Beach, Aotearoa.