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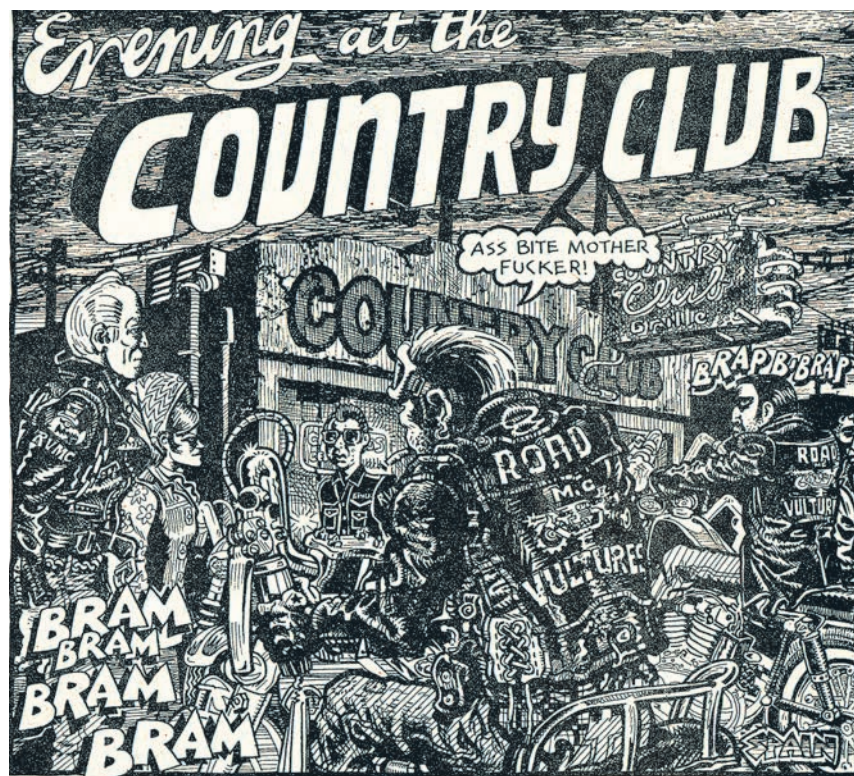
Zap Atcha

How underground comix spelunked America's id **BY R.C. BAKER**

Howdy Doody and the Lone Ranger. That was the stuff that was deeply imprinted on me," the prolific cartoonist Robert Crumb told the art critic Robert Hughes in 2005. "Little Lulu and Donald Duck and Felix the Cat — real basic popular culture that was fed to kids. My parents had no culture."

So Crumb (born 1943) created his own, drawing funny-animal and humor comics throughout his childhood — ideal training for a job he landed in his early twenties crafting goofy characters and jokes for the American Greetings Corporation of Cleveland. In the mid-1960s he dropped acid and eventually touched down in the midst of San Francisco's flowering hippie scene; by 1968 he'd combined the liberating excesses of the counterculture with the Americana of his youth to conjure up Zap Comix #1 — 28 pages of big-fendered cars, big-footed men, and big-breasted women. Crumb and his wife sold Zap #1 for 25 cents a copy from a baby carriage on the streets of Haight Ashbury, and while no one knows how many copies of that first edition were printed, this new form of comic art became a hit. For this exhibition, curators Monte Beauchamp and Eric Sack have gathered more than a hundred original comic boards, along with finished comics, ephemera, and printing plates, surveying five decades of Zap artwork.

Initially Crumb wrote and drew everything himself, including "Freak Out Funnies," which augured the broken taboos and groundbreaking offenses to come. A skinny, bespectacled Crumb stand-in bemoans city living and complains of paranoia as he runs away from "sewer snoids," a troupe of pint-size subterranean wisewasses; meanwhile, a buxom black woman with legs like a linebacker and wearing only a leopard-print skirt is hoovered into a flying saucer, where she is gang-raped by aliens before dropping into Crumb's lap under a heart-shaped balloon reading, "It's love at first sight!" In later strips she acquired the name Angelfood McSpade, a "simple, primitive creature"



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Spain's righteous bikers, above; Crumb's paranoia, bottom left; Griffin's op-art eyes, right

whose open sexuality threatens upright, uptight white civilization. As Crumb told Hughes, such characters "were just stereotypical 1920s images of big-lipped black people which actually had very little to do with real African Americans.... All that stuff I did in the late 1960s was cartoon stereotypes. I was playing around with them in a psychedelized way. I dunno. It's hard to explain. It's not my job to explain it."

Despite such disclaimers, Crumb has, over the years, been called out on his racist caricatures and misogynist sex fantasies. He shrugs it off, telling the *Comics Journal* in 2014, "I'm abnormal, but I've been copping to it for so long that it no longer has any liar quotient for me at all," adding, "Then again, I can turn around and blame it all on Wilson."

Willem de Kooning once said it was Jackson Pollock who

"broke the ice" for abstract artists. Similarly, while Crumb certainly pounded on the doors of propriety, it was S. Clay Wilson — a Zap contributor from Issue #2 onward — who

ripped them off their hinges, set them afire, and pissed on the ashes. The two artists met at the printer's loft as Zap #1 was rolling off the presses, Wilson having just arrived from Kansas looking to peddle his horror-vacui drawings of pirates, bikers, cops, and all manner of lurid ruffians engaged in mortal combat. Born in 1941, Wilson came by his fascination with violence honestly: While at the University of Nebraska he had been obligated to partake in mandatory ROTC training. After asking himself, "What am I doing with this fucking rifle? I don't need ordnance to learn the humanities, do I?," he switched to medic training, where movies documenting sucking chest wounds and shrapnel lacerations lent a grotesque verisimilitude to his later artwork. In this exhibition, the final panels of "Wanda and Tillie" — a rollickingly compressed tale of "two AC/DC nympho tramps" on a violent rampage, from Zap #6 (1973) — confirm Wilson's place as a front-rank spelunker of the id: A haloed Jesus delivers oral pleasure to Satan's flaming penis, mirrored by a woman forced to finish fellating her just-murdered lover, a masterfully cross-hatched diptych pairing orgasm with balls-out blasphemy.

Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez's working-class antiheroes were more earthbound. Spain (1940–2012) was invited into Zap beginning with Issue #4. Crumb once told an interviewer that the former motorcycle-

gang member's politics "were driven by genuine, authentic class anger, class hatred. I liked that about him." In "Evening at the Country Club," Spain weaves vignettes of a drunken poet, a nervous guitar player, and a warily canoodling couple into a rhythmically choreographed biker brawl.

Eventually there would be eight artists in the Zap collective, and all of them can be seen here in "jam" pages, trading ink riffs on the same boards. Wilson's gnarly demons mixed it up with the flaming hot rods of Robert Williams (born 1943), while Rick Griffin (1944–'91) and Victor Moscoso (born 1936), who made psychedelic posters for the vibrant Bay Area rock scene, contributed op-art verve.

Crumb had lettered "Fair Warning — For Adult Intellectuals Only!" across the cover of Zap #1, and a quarter-century later that tradition was still strong when Gilbert Shelton (born 1940) used elegantly shaded panels in Zap #13 to depict the ghostly relief sculptures on one wall of Paris's Père Lachaise Cemetery, which commemorate Communards executed there in 1871. This being Zap, however, Shelton's elegiac travelogue concludes with Doors fans storming Jim Morrison's grave on the twentieth anniversary of the singer's death. Always a sharp satirist, Shelton's "Wonder Wart-Hog" skewered mainstream superheroes as macho psychopaths long before the *Dark Knight* franchise proved his point.

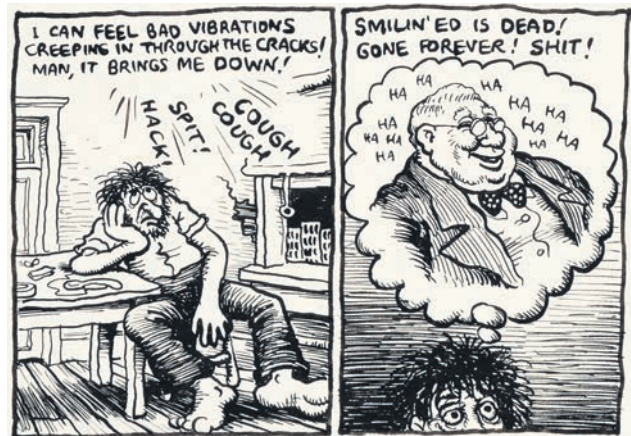
The last man added to the Zap roster (after Griffin died) was Paul Mavrides (born 1952), who described the gig as "being invited to the party twenty years after the beer's gone." Crumb's interest in the Zap



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enterprise had long since waned, and in Zap #14 (1998) Mavrides portrayed the grand old man of the undergrounds as reluctant to participate in a new "jam" page and sneering at the other, lesser-known artists: "The kids don't give a damn about Zap — let it go!" On the final page of the story, Moscoso stabs Crumb to death with a Rapidograph pen.

"Make it jump! Make it crackle! Blister their irises! Fuck their minds up!" S. Clay Wilson once proclaimed, and he and Crumb and their co-conspirators have delivered flamboyant flesh, viscous fluids, and gleeful bedlam for decades. It's all here on the walls in pencil, Wite-Out, Zip-a-Tone, and ink — ebullient offense transmuted into art.



©1968 R. Crumb

FLAMBOYANT FLESH AND GLEEFUL BEDLAM