

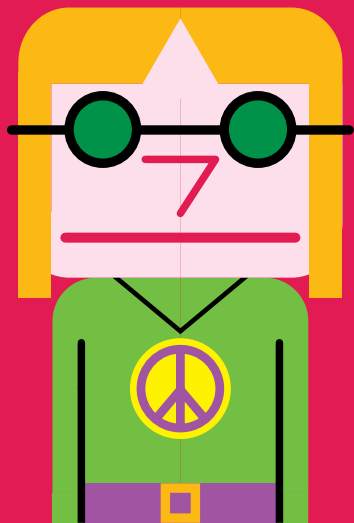
comic book CREATOR

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Recommended for MATURE READERS

*Chronicles of
The King of the
Kitchen Sink Empire*



comic book CREATOR™

Spring 2014 • The **New** Voice of the Comics Medium • Number 5
B O N U S P D F T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

Denis Kitchen—The Rest of the Story: We share the remaining portions of our career-spanning, comprehensive interview with the renowned cartoonist/publisher, covering the realities of the direct market, demise of Kitchen Sink Press, his side careers as art and literary agent, the formation of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, and resurrection with Kitchen Sink Books 3

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COVER: Being neither naked nor a lady, it's Denis Kitchen in 1980, in his Princeton, Wisconsin, office. When featured in his *Oddly Compelling Art* book, Denis wrote of the pic in a caption, "The photographer taking this publicity shot asked me to pose with 'art in progress.' None of my own was handy, so the prestigious 'Worm Castings' box design by Pete Poplaski filled in." At left is Ye Ed's pic of the actual packaging.



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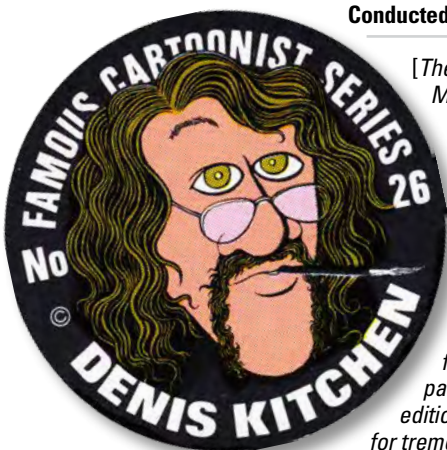
The Chronicles of Krupp



The Rest of the Kitchen Story

Flashing back to Kitchen Sink Press, its demise, and Denis's professional rebirth

Conducted by JON B. COOKE



[The following interview, transcribed by Brian K. Morris, contains the excised portions of the Comic Book Creator #5 print interview — a whopping addition 29,000 words herein! — conducted during a late summer visit to the cartoonist/publisher's Massachusetts home (which, we neglected to mention in the print edition, was copy-edited for clarity and correction by D.K.). Here much more is discussed, including the complex story of Kitchen Sink's acquisition of Tundra and the final collapse of KSP, as well as regrets of the past and hopes for the future. As so with the print edition, great thanks are extended to Stacey Kitchen for tremendous assist with imagery. We begin here with Denis discussing another childhood diversion after being asked when did his interest in cartooning begin. — Ye Ed.]

ABOVE: In 1975, Denis Kitchen began the Famous Cartoonist button, which enlisted over 50 artists to draw self-portraits. Here's the man himself's contribution. **BELOW:** Detail from the cover of Fox River Patriot #53 (1979), this one sporting another Kitchen self-caricature.

Denis Kitchen: I was a voracious reader of comics in both the daily newspaper and in comic books. And from a very early age I drew, but even more in the earliest years I "sculpted." I had a lot of modeling clay. I used to get an allowance of fifty cents a week and in those days, at the dime store — when many things *literally* cost a dime — a

box of modeling clay was 10¢ and a comic book was 10¢. So I would either buy five comics or five boxes of clay or some combination and that was my weekly obsession: those two things...

With the clay I quite literally built a clay world. Before my brother, James, was born, we had a small spare room that my mother allowed me to have as a private playroom and I quickly turned it into a fantasy world. I built castles with parapets and towers and armies of little men two or three inches high: scores, maybe even a couple hundred at one point, with green men fighting brown men and yellow men. Officers had elaborate costumes and weaponry and there were "aircraft" that would take them from one tabletop battlefield to another. Evidently I was this violent little kid, committing daily genocide on other clay populations, then building new generations.

Comic Book Creator: Was this all on the floor or did you have a — ?

Denis: It was mainly on tabletops. The green men were the evil ones. Their leader had an eye patch. The guns were basically toothpicks with a clay arm stock on one end, and little balls of clay would go on the pointed end. I'd propel the bullet off the toothpick and it'd be embedded in the other bodies — *splat!* And that's how the battles would rage, with "bullets" flying. Today's kids do this electronically, but I had actual physical encounters. Soldiers had bandoleers with extra bullets. When they'd run out of ammo the pointed toothpick end became a bayonet. One day the eye-patched green leader was finally captured in his stronghold. He deserved execution, but a firing squad or bayoneting seemed inadequate for this green clay Hitler. A more elaborate and fitting execution was required. I found a stepladder. I was small then but somehow put a stepladder on top of one table and reached a ceiling globe that covered the light bulb. I managed to put the green guy on top of the bulb so he'd bake for eternity. And then I proceeded to forget about it. At some point, my mother went to change the light bulb when it burned out and she said, "What on earth is *this*?" She found a hardened, petrified green man with an eye patch.

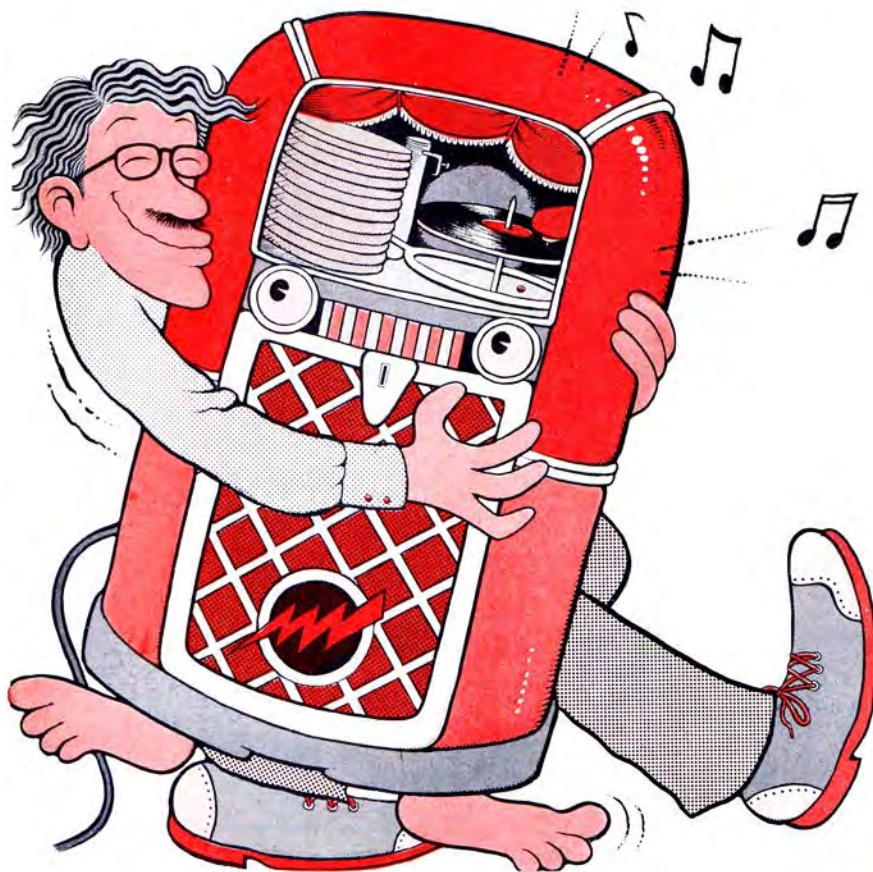
CBC: Baked.

Denis: Yeah, hard as a rock! So, at an early age, I had these odd, elaborate worlds that I created, that I would lose myself in for long spans of time. And when I wasn't doing that, I was reading comic books. We lived in a fairly isolated place so I didn't really have kids in the neighborhood that I could easily play with every day.

[After discovering television] My clay world at that point transformed from ...

CBC: [Chuckles] *Genocide*.

Denis: Yeah, *that* didn't change. But the castles became log forts and pioneers and Indians, and then the Alamo and Texans and Mexicans. At that point, I recruited a couple of boys in the neighborhood and they'd help me build these log fortresses and build the figures and weapons. And then we would have wars with each other. The pioneers, Indians, and Mexicans all had the same toothpick rifles with a little ball of clay at one end for bullets. But the pioneers had a few cannons too, with much bigger cannonballs. I brought Douglas and Richard into my world and they got into it. I



king of the krupp comics empire



ABOVE: D.K., center, at the 1998 Comic-Con International: San Diego with two indisputable comic-book giants who proved enormously helpful to the cartoonist-publisher: at left, Will Eisner and, right, Stan Lee. Courtesy of Denis & Stacey Kitchen. Below inset: Published in 1994, cover of Kitchen Sink Press: *The First 25 Years*, featuring a multitude of KSP characters.

explained, "Here's how you kill them." [imitates gun sound] And so we would have these battles with arcane protocols and I'd be [imitates gun] splatting their characters and they'd go, "No, man, not him. He's my favorite. You killed him," and I'd take back the plot and go, "Okay, we'll give him a flesh wound." [imitates gunshot], *splat*, I hit him in the shoulder. But sometimes, you'd go *shmoosh* right in the face, which was fatal, or a tomahawk in the forehead. The faces were drawn with toothpicks too. You'd basically have two eyes and a nose from quick pokes and make a little smile or a frown, depending on if he was a good guy or a bad guy, and give him a hat or feather headdress, so the personalities were limited to what you could do with a toothpick on a little, circular head. But they got into it too. They enjoyed building the forts with clay logs and paths and trees to hide behind. It could get kind of elaborate. We'd have favorites and it'd be like, "This is Davy Crockett. You can't kill him." We'd have these extended operatic battles that seemed to last forever, and my clay world went from being a solitary experience to being one where the three of us would build together and battle together, then rebuild. It seems like one entire summer vacation consisted of clay war, punctuated by comic book breaks and softball. We were probably eleven, maybe twelve years old and that was an endlessly entertaining thing for us... I was especially entranced by horror comics, mostly the pre-Code titles. So many were genuinely creepy...

CBC: Were you attracted to the horror genre in movies, too?

Denis: Not as a kid, no. I almost never saw movies as a kid. These days I like well-done horror, like *Night of the Living Dead* or *Pan's Labyrinth* or *The Walking Dead*. But I abhor slasher type movies and pointless violence. I prefer the horror to be...

CBC: Clever.

Denis: Yeah, I don't want to see gore for gore's sake. Those have no appeal at all to me. I like artful horror like Guillermo del Toro, somebody who does it with style.

CBC: Were film, television, and radio, did they have any importance to you?

Denis: As a kid, I have to tell you, I was completely deprived when it came to media outside of comics. I very rarely saw movies. I think the number of theatrical movies I saw before the age of 15, I could count on my fingers.

CBC: Wow.

Denis: And usually, it was a special treat. It would be like a birthday or maybe somebody else's parents would invite me along and treat me. I'm not sure why that was the case. It couldn't have been just the money. We weren't *that* desperately poor, but it apparently wasn't something important to my parents. I knew my mother grew up loving the movies, but I don't think my dad did. He grew up really deprived in the south. He probably almost never saw movies, never got caught up loving film the way most Americans did. I don't remember ever going to a movie with my father. When I would see a movie it would be a rare treat, deeply appreciated. But I don't think I ever walked out of a theater feeling as good as I did after I'd read a stack of comics. I was completely hooked on comics. Even TV, which seems to have engulfed America at that time, I was kind of late to it. We couldn't afford a set until the early '50s so I didn't grow up with television when young. I specifically remember by father listening to the 1952 presidential election returns huddled over a radio,

so when we finally got a TV, it was around '53 or '54, probably later than most American households. And when we did get it, it was a really small screen. It must have been, like, an eight-inch screen.

CBC: [Chuckles, points to large flat screen in D.K.'s den] *Not like that!*

Denis: No, not like this one. And I didn't realize when we got it, that I was





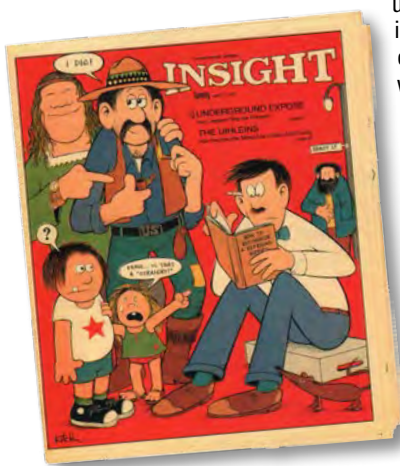
Left: Denis Kitchen's journalism professor in college also happened to be a great newspaper editor, one with an abiding love for comic strips. Editor George Lockwood repeatedly encouraged the young artist to produce a daily comic strip. But Kitchen had ambitions of his own, though he did pitch a weekly contribution to the Milwaukee Journal. Alas, Mr. Lockwood passed on the proposal.

partner Tyler Lantzy and his wife Terre. That was a strength. But you can't sustain a publishing company just on mail order. Also, you can't say that head shops completely disappeared. They gradually went away but it wasn't an overnight, they maybe went from a few thousand to a few dozen. That was a relatively fast and sharp decline. And at the same time, the comic shop phenomenon was fast developing. That network went from literally a handful of retailers to hundreds and then a couple thousand. And we had regional distributors popping up too. Before Diamond came to be the sole survivor, we had a really vital network of maybe a dozen distributors: Capital City, Longhorn, Sunrise, Seagate, Bud Plant, Friendly Frank, Heroes World, Titan, and so on.

CBC: A lot of competition...

Denis: I loved that period because these distributors were mostly guys who started out as fans, and they loved comics. For the first time, we had truly efficient conduits to specialty shops. And I loved the fact that we could solicit ahead of time and get orders. I always tended to over-print anyway because I always wanted a strong backlog and had confidence we'd sell significantly more than first-day

Below: Milwaukee Journal managing editor George Lockwood did succeed in having Denis Kitchen contribute to the newspaper daily's Sunday Insight magazine section, where the cartoonist contributed a four-page strip. Plus D.K. drew the cover of that May 7, 1972 ish.



nearsighted. I hadn't been diagnosed. So when my folks were excited about watching our first set, I remember thinking, "What's the big deal about TV? It's so grainy and blurry, you can't even see what's going on unless you get right up next to it." And they were like, "No, it's fine. There's nothing wrong with it." Well, it was me. I couldn't see. So TV initially held no interest to me. When I finally got glasses in fourth grade it was, "Wow! TV, cool!" I think I had an unusual childhood for my generation in the sense that in my formative early years, I wasn't seeing either TV or movies and comic books and a private clay world were totally dominant. For better or worse.

[We now jump to Denis as publisher of Kitchen Sink Press in the 1970s.]

CBC: With the advent of the direct sales market, what was the — ? How do you recall that and was that a lifeboat for you?

Denis: Yes, the emergence of the direct sales market allowed the transition from head shops to the specialty comic shops. It was a relatively smooth transition.

CBC: You had a mail order gig going for a while.

Denis: Oh yeah, almost from the beginning, we had that. Krupp Mail Order even spun off into a separate business in Colorado, run by my old

orders. But the direct market system allowed you to print conservatively if you chose, and that was a wonderful component. The part that's not wonderful is that eventually distribution consolidated and we lost that crucial competition. I got dramatically caught up in that final shoot-out between Capital City Distribution and Diamond, and picked the losing side.

CBC: Talk about that. What were the dynamics?

Denis: Marvel made a fateful choice in 1994 to acquire Heroes World, the number three distributor, so they would have an exclusive conduit. That move had an explosive effect. DC Comics took advantage of the situation, figuring they could leverage their considerable market share into a better pricing situation. Capital City and Diamond made their best pitches and DC went with Diamond, which surprised a lot of people, because DC and Capital historically had a closer relationship. Heroes World proved totally inept and Marvel eventually signed with Diamond too. That left Capital City pretty screwed-over. Mid-sized and smaller publishers began rushing to Diamond with exclusive deals, but I didn't. I was certain that Capital City was a superior organization. I was close friends with Milton Griepp and John Davis, the owners, and respected them. They personally collected underground comix. They had good taste! [chuckles] But that didn't cloud my objectivity.

Everything in Capital's organization was first class, from the stylish ads they ran to the knowledgeable employees they hired. Many, many retailers felt Capital provided superior, faster service too. And Capital had always been much friendlier to the indies, whereas Diamond had literally refused to carry many underground and indie titles. Diamond even refused to list Kurtzman and Elder's *Goodman Beaver* because "beaver" was in the title. Can you believe that? If the indie publishers united, we'd have enough market share to keep Capital in the game. I thought it was a no-brainer. I was the first to publicly declare for Capital. As critical days and weeks passed I looked around, and to my absolute dismay, I was standing in a very tiny army. Nearly everybody flocked to Diamond. This period was one of my first tensions with Gary Groth, because I presumed Fantagraphics would be an ally. Gary knew Capital was much more supportive of his product line, he knew the censorship history with Diamond, and he always claimed to take principled positions. Yet he didn't go with Capital. I was also disappointed with Dark Horse. I thought Mike Richardson would pick Capital. They came within a hair of a deal, I'm told, but ultimately went with Diamond. One by one, I saw people I thought would be natural allies let Capital City hang slowly in the wind.

Thanks in part to a successful lawsuit against Marvel, Capital continued in business for another year or two after sides were picked. But during that year or so Kitchen Sink *never* had such amazing service. They produced dedicated KSP catalogs, really pushed our line, brought us down for marketing strategies, things like that. Our sales actually increased going with CCD alone. It didn't hurt that we had The Crow graphic novel, which was the industry's number one backlist seller month after month in the mid-'90s. We sold close to 400,000 copies of *The Crow* — the higher price graphic novel, not the comic books — mostly in the direct market. Many industry people thought it was absolutely suicidal to go with Capital City and, once the handwriting was on the wall, it was easy to call it a nuts move. But for me, it was about loyalty and principle. And, honestly, I thought it was also the *smart* choice. But it wasn't the *bandwagon* choice. A heck of a lot of retailers who preferred Capital went out of their way to order as much as they could from the underdog. But at the end of the end of the day, you couldn't have DC, Marvel, Image, Dark Horse, and the vast majority of publishers on one side and just Kitchen Sink, Viz, TSR — the original *D&D* company — and a few others anchoring the other side. So Capital went under.

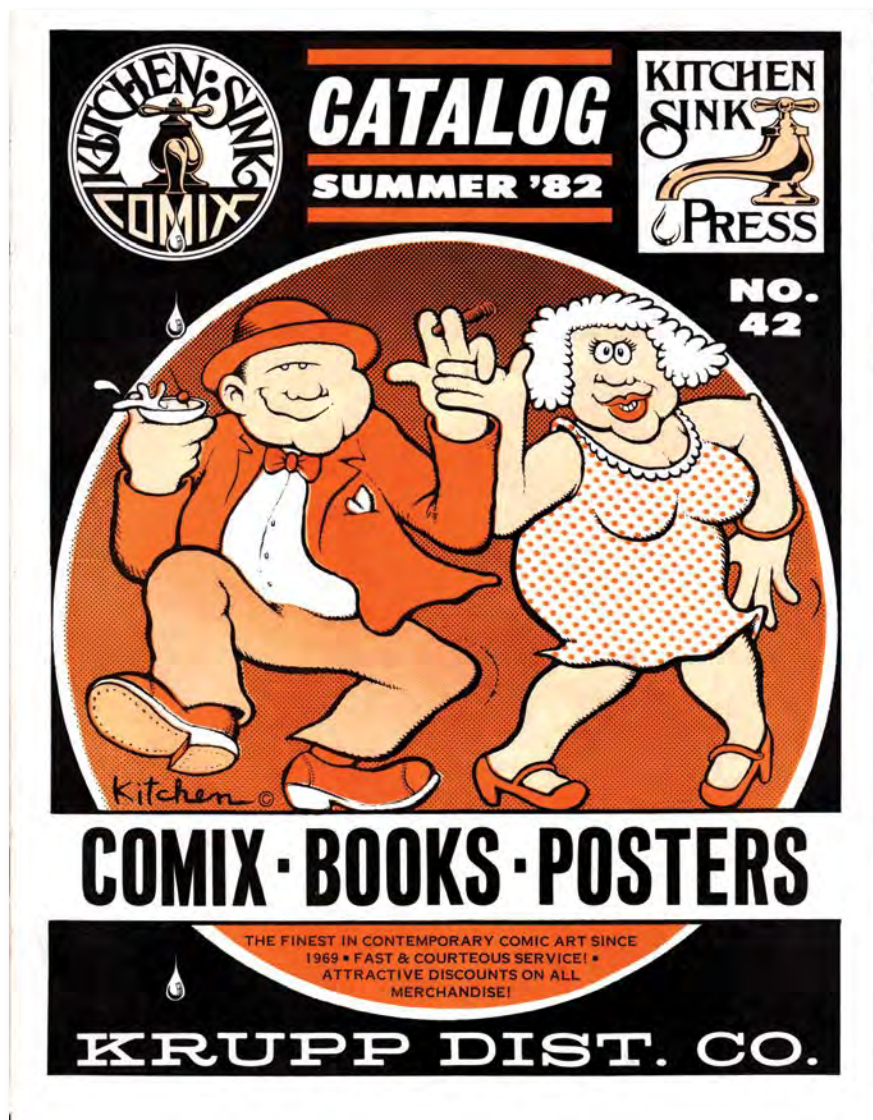
CBC: Yeah, dark days.

Denis: It was. But I will also add this footnote: I saw a dozen or more distributors go under in the years prior to the final Capital-Diamond showdown, and every single time that happened Kitchen Sink and other publishers were stuck with the balances each distributor owed, often a lot of money. One especially ballsy one, Scott Rosenberg, who owned Sunrise Distribution, folded Sunrise, stiffed publishers, and put its assets into starting his own publishing company, Malibu. That frosted a lot of us. He eventually became a Hollywood player with Platinum Studios.

But, in total contrast, when Capital City went under, Milton made sure that every creditor was paid. He could have declared bankruptcy and walked away, but he sold Capital's inventory to Diamond, sold Capital's real estate, and then worked out regular, reliable payments with me and every other creditor. There wasn't one cent of debt remaining when Capital finally shut its doors. I had the utmost respect for the way they closed their business. It was truly classy. To this day my hat is off to them. I also can't tell you how many countless times I've heard publishers and retailers tell me how unhappy they are dealing with a single monopoly distributor. But it could have been different if so many publishers hadn't panicked and rushed to Diamond. The industry got what it deserves in terms of a monopoly.

CBC: You think there's room for anti-trust?

Denis: It's not big enough. Some people talked about that,



but the comics industry is not a big enough for the federal government to intercede.

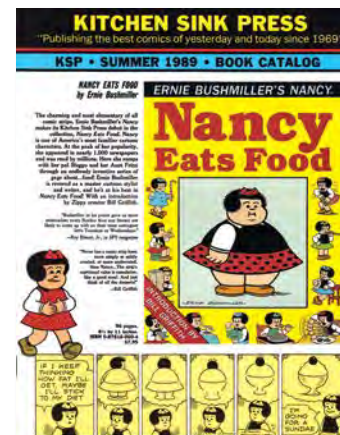
CBC: What is not big enough, that Capital...

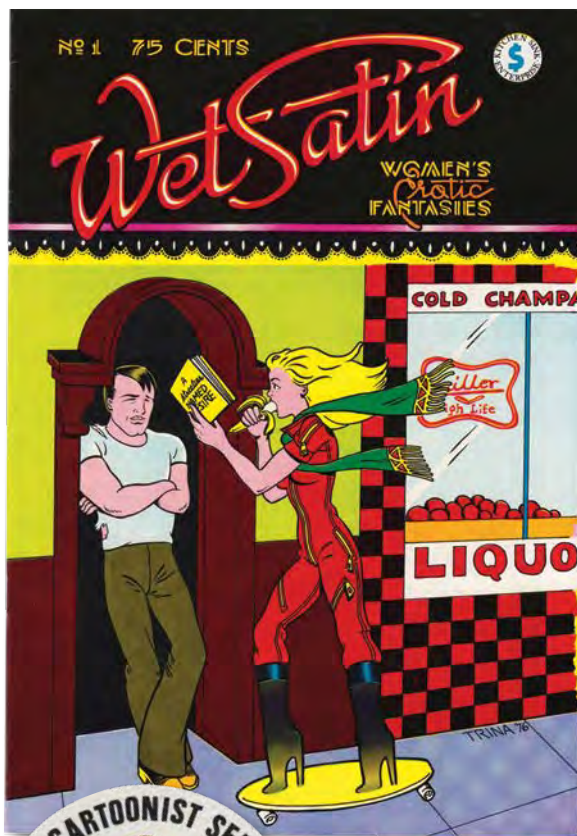
Denis: The dominance of a single company in this small corner of the country's commerce is not considered to be significant enough to be in the public interest, Jon. It's not like breaking up Ma Bell. I should also add that when Capital City folded and I had to crawl back to Diamond Distribution, Steve Geppi, the owner, welcomed me back without any hard feelings. Some of his lieutenants might have been resentful, but Steve has personally always been a good guy to me. In fact, we used to square off against each other on the softball diamond when distributors and publishers would have annual softball games in San Diego. Nowadays its inconceivable that publishers and distributors could actually take most of Friday off in the middle of San Diego Comic-Con and just have fun — a fun but highly competitive game. Anyhow, I was always the pitcher and Steve one of the better players, and we still argue about whether I struck him out more or he hit home runs off me more, but that's ultimately how we worked out any tensions that might have arisen from the comics industry's distribution war.

CBC: How do you see digital? Is that viable in our lifetime? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Denis: I'm certainly not a Luddite who hates it. It's ultimately just another distribution venue. The new generation obviously embraces the Digital Revolution and understandably. With an iPad or iPhone you have a virtually unlimited library of comics and books and graphics and so on. Who wouldn't love that? For me, I still want to be in an easy chair

Above: Denis Kitchen created the fictitious Steve Krupp (named for a notorious munitions company) to serve as Kitchen Sink's publisher. Here's the bowler-topped mogul with (apparently) Mrs. Krupp on the cover of the Krupp Distribution Company's '82 catalog. **Below:** By the end of that decade, KSP was regular publishing books, including their popular Nancy and Sluggo series featuring Ernie Bushmiller comic strips collected by topic.





and read a physical book because I'm comfortable with that tactile sensation. I like turning the pages and having walls of books. But I see my youngest daughter, Alexa, and my wife, Stacey, getting most of their news and information online, playing games and all that, and I get it. I get it.

Were I much younger, I'd probably get some comics via ComiXology. But I don't especially like reading comics digitally. That's just me. My feeling is the more platforms you have, the better. They can coexist the same way movies, radio, TV and print have coexisted for a long time.

Many people thought TV would kill radio. It didn't. It changed radio. Many thought TV would kill movies.

It didn't. Instead television became a big revenue source for the film industry. Remember too that printed books are one of the most inefficient businesses around. Books are routinely overprinted, and over-shipped to retailers who have return privileges. Tons and tons of books get pulped all the time because publishers are optimists and you can never come close to matching supply and demand. Forests are decimated in the process, whereas digital media is cheap and clean and efficient and takes up no space. That said, I still prefer to hold a book. [chuckles]

CBC: Do you have a catalog that you own of Kitchen Sink Press stuff that — ?

Denis: No, and that's because I set it up to be a creator-owned business. When KSP went under, everything reverted to the creators, which is the way I thought it should be. That made Fred Seibert, the final big investor in KSP, very angry with me at the end. Maggie Thompson interviewed me for *The Comics Buyer's Guide* when I was fired in December 1998. She said, "So what's going to happen to Kitchen Sink's properties?" And I said, "They're all going to revert to the creators." Fred called me and started yelling because I publicly stated that. I said, "But, Fred, it's the truth." And he said, "Yeah, but most of the artists don't know that."

That comment struck me as the epitome of an arrogant, cynical businessman who

who responded and encouraged him. I hadn't remembered that, of course. We got so many unsolicited submissions. But I knew I tried hard to send personal notes when time permitted. When you're young and sending a submission you're kind of baring your soul. You're vulnerable. And when you get a form rejection letter back, there's nothing more deflating. But if you get a personal rejection letter from an actual human more or less telling you, "I looked at your submission. We can't use it, but thanks for considering us," with maybe a line or two of suggestions, well, that's a little easier to take, and that's what I tried in general to do. So when Kevin told me that anecdote, I thought, "Well, I'm glad I was kind to the kid and I'm glad to see he made it big." I never thought there would be anything beyond that.

But one day in late 1992, I'll never forget, I was watching a Packer game with some buddies at my house. It was a Sunday afternoon. In Wisconsin, when the Green Bay Packers are on TV, *nobody* calls. They know better, or they're watching the game too. The phone rang and I remember saying to my friend Ed, "Who the hell would call in the middle of the game?" It was Kevin. I didn't want to be rude. I mean, I really wanted to say, "Hey, this isn't a good time, I'm watching a game," but since it wasn't a normal business hour, and Kevin wasn't a casual caller, I'm thinking it might be important. So I calmly said, "What's up?" He started talking kind of vaguely at first, beating around the bush. I wasn't sure where he was going. But then he said, "So how's your company doing out there?" I kind of hesitated. I knew the *Turtles* had been tremendously successful and Kevin had started Tundra a couple years earlier, but I didn't know why he would even be asking such a question. And so in kind of a smart-alecky way, I answered, "Well, I'm burning all my awards in the fireplace to keep warm." [laughs] And we both laughed. And after that kind of broke the ice, he said, "I've got a proposition for you. It's either going to be your worst nightmare or your dream come true." And I think all I really heard that day was the "dream come true" part.

Then he dropped the bomb. He said, "Would you consider merging publishing companies?" He went on to explain that he'd sunk a ton of money into Tundra, put relatives in charge, and for various reasons it was not working. And he

thought it was better to dupe creators into thinking they still had obligations to his shell of a company when they didn't. Anybody who understood the underground ethos or read his or her own contract would know. Fred certainly knew because he had done due diligence. But he figured artists *don't* read contracts.

CBC: Can we discuss the demise of Kitchen Sink?

Denis: [Deep sigh] It's still painful to think about, but sure, we can discuss it.

CBC: Now what were things like in the early and mid-'90s?

Denis: So I had known Kevin Eastman a bit. We'd met at conventions a few times after the *Turtles* hit it big and when he was promoting his new publishing company Tundra. He told during one of our first chats that when he was a teenager, he had mailed his pre-*Turtle* cartoons to a bunch of publishers, but I was the only one

said, "I admire what you've done with Kitchen Sink. If we merged our companies, you'd still be in charge, you'd take a headache off my hands, and I'll provide resources you've never had before." My brain began racing at the prospect and I forgot about football. I told Kevin his proposal was intriguing, and definitely food for thought. I agreed to fly out to see him in Northampton, Mass. I should predicate this by saying I already had a sense in the early '90s that I was going to have to do something. The market was changing, big players were throwing their muscle around more than ever, outside investors were funding start-ups, and a company my size was going to have a tougher go of it. It was already getting harder to get shelf space for Kitchen Sink in comic shops. I had relied a lot on personal relationships with retailers, strong reviews, and prestige authors, and all those awards I was burning [chuckles], but most retailers felt compelled to give their limited shelf space to the heavily promoted brand names. Indies were getting squeezed hard. I didn't have significant personal financial resources. I figured I could tough it out indefinitely, especially with my low overhead situation, but it wasn't going to be easy. And so when Kevin implied he was willing to significantly invest in a combined operation, I had to seriously consider it.

When we met, the editorial talks were a lot of fun and I felt he was a kindred spirit, so finally I said, "What exactly do you propose?" He said he wanted me to run the combined entity but he needed to acquire a controlling stake in Kitchen Sink, defined as 51%. My first reaction was, "I can't do that." I said, "I could imagine a 50/50 deal — you know, we're partners — but that extra one percent, that bothers me." He said, "I have a 50/50 deal with Peter Laird on the *Turtles* and we're squabbling all the time. We have these long, drawn-out Mirage meetings and we have our lawyers present and we always have to come up with uncomfortable compromises and one of us is always resenting the other." He said, "I don't want anything like that." He said, "I just want to know if I put resources into our partnership that if there ever is a major disagreement, I have a veto power." But he said, "That's the only time I'd ever use it. I want you to run this thing and I want you to do what you've always done before. I just want to make it easier." He stressed, "That extra percent is just my safeguard." And he said, "I'll make it worth your while. I'll pay higher than market value for that 51% of stock. And beyond that, I'll invest a substantial amount in the company." He said the 51% was non-negotiable. He said if I couldn't agree to that, then to just walk away. I said, "Let me sleep on it." And I went back. I talked to my brother Jim and Dave Schreiner, my attorney, and close friends. I was in a bit of a quandary. I saw an opportunity, one that was very tempting, but at the same time, I hated the idea of giving up control, even if it might be more symbolic than real. And at the same time, I'd never in my life or career seen the chance to receive any serious money from what I had built for twenty-some years. I drew a modest salary. I was content, I was creatively gratified, I was in control of my little empire, but I wasn't really making money. Everything was plowed right back into the company. Then Kevin dangled money for half my stock that was unlike money I ever expected to see.

CBC: How old were you at the time?

Denis: My mid-forties.

CBC: So you're thinking of ...

Denis: I'm thinking it's a chance to cash out some equity and still do what I enjoy. I figured there might never be another opportunity. I liked Kevin, I trusted him, he seemed like a nice guy, and I knew he tried to do good things with Tundra. He attracted some top talent there. And, yeah, it was apparently a bit of a mess by that time, but sure, I could straighten out the mess. I rationalized that it would all work out. I finally decided, yes, I would take him up on his offer. We lost some valuable time when a Hollywood player tried to make our tentative deal a threesome. After we nixed that option, Kevin and I went back to our original deal. Neither of us after that handshake did what I would call proper due

THE Midwest Comix Publisher.

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diligence. I trusted that he had unlimited resources and he trusted that I had unlimited managerial skills [chuckles] and we both overestimated each other.

We signed our deal. I came out east in the spring of 1993. The press release went out on April first, the official date, but a PR blunder in hindsight. After Kevin bought 51% of Kitchen Sink Press, Inc., our corporation acquired Tundra's assets. So the headline read, "Kitchen Sink Acquires Tundra." It was technically correct and Kevin and I giggled over it at the time, but many people thought the whole thing was an April Fool's joke. It took a while for it to sink in to the industry that Tundra was really gone and there was a new, expanded Kitchen Sink, now in Northampton. I brought a half-dozen or so employees with me from Wisconsin, and I had to fire quite a few of Tundra's to reach the optimum number. In retrospect, I fired and kept the wrong ones. It didn't take long for the honeymoon to end and to realize I had walked into a real viper's nest.

Some inherited Tundra staffers were very hostile to the idea of somebody else coming in. They had enjoyed living off

Above: Denis Kitchen's fledgling underground comix imprint, created to help out a couple of Chicago boys tired of publishing their own anthology, became the singular outfit outside of San Francisco filling up head shop spinner racks with hippie yuks and mind-blowing antics. Courtesy of Denis and Stacey Kitchen, here's a KSP statement attesting to the Wisconsin-based company's status. **Previous page:** A good friend and frequent contributor to Kitchen's publishing house is Trina Robbins, pioneer underground cartoonist, comic-book "herstorian," anthologist, and feminist firebrand. Here's a self-portrait, a Famous Cartoonist button, and covers to two of her Kitchen Sink efforts.



Above: Panel of the underground comic publishers at the 1973 Berkeley Con. From left to right: Dan McLeod (Vancouver's *Georgia Straight*), Dave Moriarty (Rip Off Press), Kitchen, Ron Turner (Last Gasp), Don Donahue (Apex Novelties), and Don Schenker (Print Mint). Courtesy of D&SK.

Below: Kitchen participated in a co-op catalog with other of the smaller comic book publishers including Fantagraphics and Rip Off Press. Here's the cover of that one-shot, self-cover catalog, *New Age Comics*, printed at comic-book size.

Bottom: Local membership buttons of the United Cartoon Workers of America, which hoped to unionize comic book artists and writers.

what everyone jokingly called the "Kevin Eastman teat," and they didn't like it that the teat was being pulled away; that somebody was going to run it like a real publishing company. Tundra was set up so that artists controlled all decisions. Tundra didn't even have editors — it had "straw bosses" who let artists make all the decisions, from what kind of paper to use, the format, the marketing plan, embossed foil stamping — you name it — everything that ordinarily an editor, production staff, and publisher oversaw: costs that would be bid-quoted, put on spread sheets and weighed against projected sales as part of a profit and loss projection. You know: how many copies your sales and marketing people think a title will sell based on comparable titles, what it costs to manufacture, with and without certain bells and whistles, what to spend on promotion, what the creator's advance and royalty is, and so forth. There are these tested, long-standing ways normal publishers — even hippie/dippy publishers like me — do to figure out what the investment will be and what realistic returns project to be. Tundra didn't do any of that. They just basically let the artists decide everything and then Kevin would pay the bill. People at all levels took advantage of his misplaced generosity. He later went on record saying he lost several million dollars — I forget the exact amount — over the first three years.

CBC: *The first three years of Tundra?*

Denis: Yeah. In an interview with *The Comics Journal*, he cites the actual amount. Tundra had attracted some outstanding talents. But their massive losses came mainly from the misplaced "let-artists-decide-everything" policy, combined with ineptness. First, he put an uncle in charge, whose only experience was that he had worked at

a print shop. His brother-in-law, a cousin, and various friends were hired because of their relationship to him, not primarily because of skills. There were some good people that, in retrospect, I should have retained, and others I wish now I had fired the first day, but didn't. I got some real crap Machiavellian advice from a couple of well-placed bad apples.

That first year, 1993, was a struggle in many ways, but we made a profit, and a lot of terrific books were coming out. We just about swept the Harvey and Eisner Awards the next summer for the 1993 titles, and I was thinking maybe the worst internal politics might be passing. But there were ominous rumblings in the background, and shortly before Christmas that year, Kevin came into the offices one evening when I was working alone late. He wrote alone for a while in an office next to mine and then handed me a long hand-written letter, summarizing the state of his various business affairs. They weren't good. Several things he had invested in were going south. The *Mutant Turtles*, his golden goose for quite a few years, were beginning a significant decline. A company called *Limelight* was imploding. A promising property called *Underwhere* was going nowhere. Shutting down his separate *Tundra UK* cost a bundle. Plus he'd committed significant funds to building his ill-fated *Words & Pictures Museum*.

Meanwhile, we both had high hopes for *Cadillacs and Dinosaurs*, the licensed property I had developed earlier in Wisconsin, based on Mark Schultz's *Xenozoic Tales*. It was airing that last quarter of 1993 on CBS's animated Saturday morning line-up. But it got slotted against Fox's new *Power Rangers* show and was getting killed in the ratings, something we never saw coming, because CBS had previously dominated Saturday mornings and nobody had ever heard of the *Rangers*. Tyco had invested \$15 million in a *C&D* toy line that was rolling out as the ratings were floundering. So a property we both thought could be a KSP franchise and cash cow was disintegrating in front of us. Still, I assumed Kevin had quite deep pockets and we'd manage our way



through the minefield. But, barely six months into my move east, Kevin said he couldn't meet his financial obligations to me personally — his stock purchase was due in installments — and he couldn't invest all the money he had promised to invest in our company. In fact, the basic accounting was unresolved. I was advised to fire Tundra's financial officer when I arrived, but his junior replacement was over her head. We underestimated how complicated it would be to bring together two very different systems. Kitchen Sink paid royalties to creators and Tundra had a profit share, even though nothing was profitable. Reconciling them was daunting. I had also been assured Kevin was "investing" a million and a half dollars in working capital but suddenly his attorneys were calling what he was putting in "loans."

Our fundamental accounting, our fundamental understanding, wasn't jiving and it was clear Kevin was feeling tremendous financial stress. I was overwhelmed, working 24/7, and feeling like I had inherited a worm's nest, and making solid progress during the first few months. Accounting wasn't my strength and I assumed someone like Kevin had ace people crunching numbers and I'd inherit somebody competent on that side at least. But it wasn't the case. It's tough to condense in a conversation like this, but whatever our misunderstandings, it was all a moot point. Kevin was holding the purse strings and he said, "We've got six months, basically, to find a white knight or we're f*cked." That was my first real clue Kevin had been seriously bleeding cash from various wounds. I was pretty shocked and depressed because I had uprooted myself, put my Wisconsin property up for sale, uprooted the employees who came with me, and I had no idea there would be such a short leash on making our combined operations function smoothly. A hundred things raced through my mind. What projects are immediately affected? What's happening to all the editorial projects we're committed to? What has to be killed or slashed? How many people will we have to let go? All these things are going through my head. But mainly, it was, "If Kevin can't sustain this, then who's the white knight who can?"

CBC: *The plot thickens. So how did that play out?*

Denis: Eastman legally owned 51% of Kitchen Sink, because even though his cash flow was challenged, he hadn't defaulted on the first installment or two to me personally for that 51%. But his local primary attorney, told me frankly that if KSP went under I could kiss that balance goodbye. And so he was in control of the next step. One of Kevin's other attorneys brought Ocean Capital to the table. Ocean was an investment banker group in Los Angeles headed by a guy named Joel Reader. Joel flew out and had some long conversations with me in early 1994. He and a staffer interviewed everyone. They analyzed our sales and receivables and projections — really examined us inside-out over a few weeks. Then, basically, he confronted me with what is known in the corporate world as a cram-down, exercising financial leverage to force a deal on existing shareholders. He said, "We'll rescue Kitchen Sink under certain conditions," and then he laid out the terms.

In raw terms, Ocean would provide working capital and financial expertise in exchange for about 90% of the company. Kevin and I would each be reduced to single-digit equity. It was conditioned on my staying and running the creative side of the company. The specific goal was to build the company and its profile for a couple or three years, then go public with an IPO. When a company goes public, the value of your stock holdings and options can make a huge jump. Joel reasoned that with Kitchen Sink's quarter century in business, with prestigious authors like Eisner, Crumb, and Alan Moore; with *The Crow*; and history of awards; with Kevin's high profile Turtle connection, they could sell a very sexy company profile. And then at some point after the initial public offering everyone could walk away with a nice pocketful of money, especially Ocean Capital.

And the real lure for me was, Joel said, that I'd finally have the capital to develop dream projects and not be

distracted by the corporate side and the bullsh*t stuff — that I could do what I really wanted to focus on. Kevin was already on board because he had a dozen other crises to deal with and thought this was his best exit strategy for KSP. But they couldn't proceed without me. So, after Joel Reader and Kevin's attorney laid out the whole scenario, they said, "So are you on board or not?" Once again, I was facing a conundrum. I didn't really like these new guys. I didn't feel any real comfort level with them. The cram-down was a repulsive strategy to me. I certainly didn't like the prospect of going from owning virtually 100% of the company in a short time to less than half and then only four or five percent. But on the other hand, they struck me as very smart, very competent investment bankers, with a clear business plan that, on paper anyway, could work. My sharp reduction in equity would be offset in part by a guaranteed salary at a big raise for three years, and Ocean agreed to immediately pay the note Kevin owed me. As a practical matter, if I said no, it all collapses. I probably get nothing whatever, unless I want to risk litigating. If I say yes, the company is salvaged (at least short term), planned projects stay on track, employees keep their jobs, and there's a bonus pay-off



Above: Father Denis and daughter Scarlet share a moment in 1977 as they gaze upon the original artwork of Hal Foster's Prince Valiant.

Courtesy of Denis & Stacey Kitchen. Below: Perhaps the most comprehensive collection of the papers of an underground publisher was recently acquired for generations of scholars to come by the Columbia University's Rare Books & Manuscript Library as Denis donated the 1969–99 Kitchen Sink Archives. Here's a mere sampling of D.K.'s exhaustive files.





Above: Courtesy of Denis & Stacey Kitchen, a scan of the original art D.K. drew initially for *Insight* magazine, the Milwaukee Journal's Sunday magazine, to accompany a 1976 feature on the then-novel concept of a comic book convention. The following year, the cartoonist contributed it for use as the souvenir book cover for the Chicago Comicon. In *Oddly Compelling*, Denis writes, "I was able to sneak in plugs for Snarf and my personal favorite characters and artists... But the shopping bag plug for my favorite comics/nostalgia shop in Milwaukee, Dale Manesis's Good Old Days, was considered too-blatant a free advertisement and was censored in the printed [Insight] version."

down the road for all shareholders.

So, after consulting with my own trusted Wisconsin attorney, and my brother (who held a small chunk of stock), and closest friends, I okay'd the arrangement. The papers get signed and I'm still the president and publisher, with a very nice raise, and some stability, but now for the first time in my career I have a boss: Joel Reader, who's now the chairman of the new Kitchen Sink board of directors, which of course is now dominated by Ocean. Joel was a kind of a nervous, fidgety guy. He was a serious suit and tie guy who my marketing director Jamie Riehle called "Fred Astaire on acid," meaning he kind of resembled Fred Astaire, but he had a kind of trippy quality to him.

Anyway, Ocean was not headquartered in L.A. by coincidence. Hollywood was integral to their endgame. The plan was to pitch Kitchen Sink as a repository of intellectual properties that could be adapted for film and merchandise. We had at least some track record there. *The Crow* was huge. We were selling a ton of *Crow* graphic novels, thanks to the movie's success and notoriety. We were selling around 20,000 copies a month of that alone, month after month, con-

stantly reprinting it. I was sending its creator James O'Barr very large royalty checks. And even though *Cadillacs* and *Dinosaurs* had not been renewed by CBS, Ocean saw that as another good example of what we were capable of doing on that front. I stressed to Joel and his team that it's impossible to consistently develop comics that can become big hits like *The Crow*. I told them, "You can't hit a homerun like that very often. This is a company that will hit a lot of singles and occasionally, a double and just every once in a while, a homerun." Joel said, "We expect you to create and acquire properties that are more likely than not to be optioned." They were adamant about that as a key part of the plan. To that end the new Kitchen Sink board of directors had several film producers, including Robert Rehme, who was President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I saw him on TV on center stage opening the Academy Awards ceremony around that time. He and his partner Mace Neufeld had produced A-list pictures, like *Patriot Games*. A producer of the *Hellraiser* series was another board member, so they were pulling in some heavy hitters. But Kevin, Will Eisner, and I were also on the board, so a third of the nine at least were cartoonists [chuckles].

Mace Neufeld's son Brad was brought in to be our V.P. of entertainment with an office in Beverly Hills. And Scott Hyman, the son of the Eastman lawyer who put Ocean and KSP together became our V.P. of business affairs in Northampton. They were intent about building a team with connections to the entertainment business. Joel took out a full-page color ad in *Variety* to announce Ocean's involvement with Kitchen Sink, and he brought me out to his lavish Los Angeles mansion to party with people he thought could be investors or helpful connections. It was a heady time on one level. But at the same time Joel was in my face constantly, and pinching pennies at every turn. Dropping money on a full-page ad in *Variety* made sense to him, but getting him to approve advances to creators, or even paying small bills became pulling teeth. Joel had to approve every single expenditure, no matter how small, from his L.A. office, which was a pain in the ass to the Northampton office. He said to take the company public, we had to show growth, and we so had to watch every dollar, but I was never a spendthrift. His micromanaging was taking up a lot of time and slowing down the creative side that was supposed to be driving everything. The first year with Kevin, KSP showed a profit, and he said, "We've got to build on that. We have to have the lines on the chart moving upward." One reason they decided to invest in KSP was that the comics industry as a whole, which they intensively researched, had been growing at a double-digit rate for several years in a row. The industry chart was steadily going up so the Ocean guys made projections based on continued growth, which is always dangerous. As fate would have it, the first year they were in charge, the comics industry started going the other direction, *shrinking* by double digits because it's...

CBC: *It's the comics industry.*

Denis: Yeah, it's always been a roller-coaster ride. So right away, that bollixed things because Joel assured the Ocean investors, the people *he* had to answer to, that both our sales and profits would steadily and significantly increase. When the industry shrank, everybody's sales shrank, including ours. We weren't alone. It was overall a disappointing year. Joel Reader, as it turned out, had staked his personal reputation on turning Kitchen Sink around. What I hadn't know earlier was he had the same essential group of investors put a lot of money into another company prior to KSP, some kind of interactive 3-D movie experience, and that venture failed. KSP was his chance to prove his true genius, and this was his *last* chance. I didn't know that. So by the second year, the company's still not turning around and we're eating through the seven-figure investment. We're still not showing a profit. We have a couple of shareholder meetings in New York, where I gave a slideshow about upcoming projects and then Joel followed with numbers and projections and he's

exaggerating, and I'm feeling uncomfortable. He's assuring everyone that we're still on track to meet the IPO timeline. I don't want to stand up in the shareholder meeting and yell "Liar!" — but I'm keenly aware he's shading and exaggerating to the gathering where we're going and when. And I also know I'm going to be called on the carpet when we don't meet the expectations, so I'm not thrilled. But I'm trying to be a team player, and I'm hoping that the market will improve, we'll have another break out or two, and by some miracle we can meet Joel's projections.

Point is, by the end of that second year, the numbers are not looking good. We're not going to come anywhere close to meeting what he projected and we're not going to show a profit. And the day after Christmas in 1995, I'm at home and I get a call from somebody at Ocean Capital. They said, "Joel's dead. He hung himself on Christmas Day." [long pause] So...

CBC: So, there's a lot of drama going on behind the scenes while you're trying to make comics?

Denis: It's pretty intense, yes. So next the board of directors appoints an interim chairman, a partner in Ocean and a KSP shareholder who's an older guy, kind of a grandfatherly figure, named Pierre Schoenheimer. I actually liked Pierre. He was the only guy in the Ocean group that I ever warmed to. He always asked the smartest questions and he seemed to take a genuine interest in the core of the business, the comics and books. He'd expressed pride in turning around other companies. In fact, he told me he'd never failed to turn a company around in his entire career. So I'm starting to feel pretty good about our prospects again. Pierre says, "We'll stay the course, fix some things, and just delay the IPO timing," and just as his regime, his new strategy is about to kick in, Pierre gets into a serious car accident on Long Island and nearly dies. He's severely incapacitated. He has to begin a long-term rehabilitation, so he's out of the picture. And then an Ocean lawyer in New York takes over. The lawyer has no interest in turning the company around. He just wants this thing out of his hair, and wants his personal investment back. So he basically says to me, "We're done with this company. We'll sell it or we'll liquidate it. If you want to buy it back, you can find someone to help you buy it back. Here's the price we want. We need it by this date. If you can't do it, we're just going to sell the assets and everybody's gone. That's the end of it." He said, "If you want to save your company, you got basically six months to do it."

CBC: The drama doesn't end anytime soon?

Denis: I'm afraid not. At that point, I'm desperately looking for yet another white knight to help me reacquire the company. Out of my own pocket I hired a local guy named Don Todrin, who ran an outfit called The Work Out Group, to help me navigate the waters. Don was an old hippie who once ran a custom rolling paper company that I had done business with back in the early '70s. He seemed like a jovial guy and a kindred spirit. So he jumped in and we're reaching out to a number of people and entities. One that's very interested is Jim Lee and his company, Wildstorm. Here was one of the founders of Image, someone who had both artistic and business skills, and who had been part of this bold move, Image, where creators took charge. I had to respect that kind of entrepreneur. My team and I had numerous conference calls with Lee's business right-hand, John Nee. The deal with Jim Lee seemed close to happening and then suddenly, [snaps fingers] it just went cold and there was nothing, and no explanation. I didn't find out why until years later, when John Nee, who was then V.P. of business development at DC Comics, told me over a lunch. He said, "You're probably wondering why our deal fell through." I said, "Yeah, I've always been curious." He said, "We didn't want your brother, and we knew he was your right-hand, and that would be a deal-breaker for you. So we just let it go."



And at the time of our negotiations, Nee was probably right. It *would* have been a deal breaker. The real kicker is that my brother James stopped talking to me not long after Kitchen Sink went under. So we couldn't consummate the deal with Wildstorm because I wouldn't abandon Jim, who soon afterward abandoned me. Life's little ironies, huh? Of course, in a strange twist of fate, Lee's Wildstorm was itself acquired by DC. So, in theory, had we made that deal with Lee, Kitchen Sink might have become an imprint of DC. But I think that would have been truly miserable. I couldn't conceive fitting into that corporate structure! But, getting back to the ultimate outcome, simultaneous with Lee and Nee we're having other conversations, and one is with Fred Seibert, who I'd met a couple years earlier when he

Above: Denis, Sheena, and Scarlet Kitchen mess around in D.K.'s arcade game collection housed in his Princeton, Wisconsin barn. From 1978. **Left inset:** Farmer Denis, far left, poses proudly with fellow hayseeds and KSP workers Tom Casey and Mike Newhall in a photo from 1980. Both pix courtesy of D&SK. **Below:** "Self-Portrait as Quarter Moon," D.K., 2007.





Above: Uncut sheet of R. Crumb trading cards published by Kitchen Sink and available today from Denis Kitchen Publishing Co., LLC.

Below: Crumb's beloved bride Aline had her own comix published by KSP, notably *The Bunch's Power Pak Comics* #1 & 2. Here's the cover of #1 (1978). **Inset right:** Crumb and Kominsky-Crumb's self-portraits for the KSP Famous Cartoonist Series of buttons.

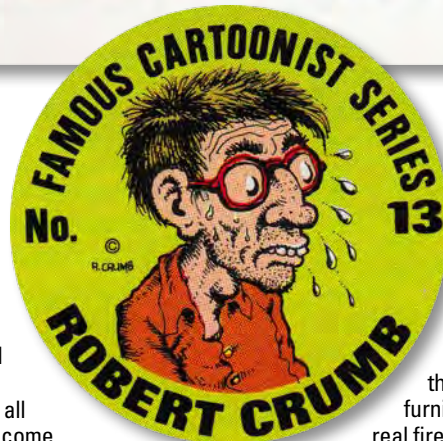


was president of Hanna-Barbera, which was then part of Ted Turner's empire. Fred sought me out when KSP opened its Beverly Hills office, and we had a couple of very friendly meetings, discussing ways we might work together. Fred had struck me as being very bright, and far thinking. He introduced me to his close friends Richard Foos and Harold Bronson, the guys who started Rhino

Records. We thought all kinds of things might come out of those conversations. Anyway, when Turner merged with Time-Warner around 1996, Fred got eased out of Hanna-Barbera. But he was given some kind of a —

CBC: Golden parachute?

Denis: Well, silver, anyway. But yeah, Fred got a pretty sizable severance package. He was a fan of Kitchen Sink and we had talked earlier about doing some business. So when the corporate reverses happened in both of our cases, he said, "Look, I didn't like the Ocean group either. With



them out of the picture I might be very interested in acquiring Kitchen Sink if it's for the right price and you stay on board and if we can together do a plan that makes sense." Bottom line is Don Todrin and I met in New York with the Ocean guys and did a kind of reverse cram-down. We offered a price considerably less than they wanted, but more than they'd get by selling the inventory and furniture and whatever they'd have in a

real fire sale. Don was very good at that sort of thing. He was an attorney and an old hippie and we got a price that Fred said he'd pay. So Fred paid Ocean for the assets and negotiated a deal whereby Jim and I would be significant shareholders, and the next step was raising working capital.

Fred wasn't particularly rich. He basically used his Hanna-Barbera payout to buy KSP. But Fred assured us he'd quickly raise X-amount from some well-heeled friends, and, to some degree, he did. Penn Jillette from Penn & Teller was one notable investor, but it was a slow, grinding process and the company was just chugging along, missing on a cylinder or two, desperately needed the full infusion to get back on track.

During the drawn-out Ocean dealings, I had to lay off the majority of the staff. We vacated the really nice office space in a building Kevin owned and moved into an awful space adjoining our warehouse in an ancient plastics factory. A leaky toilet on a

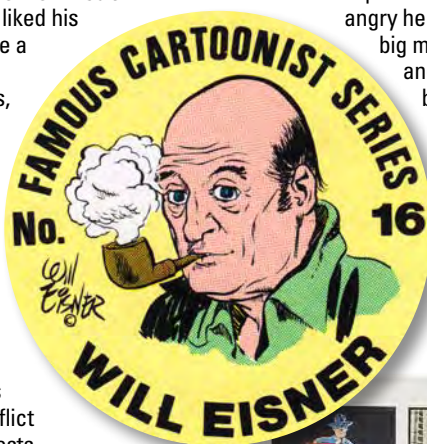
floor above sometimes dripped into my office. We needed, first and foremost, just a suitable workplace, and soon we moved into a building in downtown Northampton, and hired back many of the editors, designers, and others. While we were fund-raising and finalizing our deal with Fred, Don Todrin was getting more and more involved, never as an employee but as a paid "consultant," now on Fred's dime. Fred, who was in L.A., liked Don, liked his brashness and bluntness. And, for quite a while, I thought Don was an ally and a friend. I wasn't tuned in to local politics, so it took me a while to find out Todrin was a convicted felon who'd been involved in local bank fraud. He *had* been a lawyer, but had to resign from the bar when he was convicted. He was wearing one of those ankle bracelets so they could monitor his movements. He was basically under house arrest after hours. I began to realize Todrin was a schemer and wheeler-dealer who was boring from within, and working in conflict with me. He had transparent self-interests.

You may remember Kitchen Sink Press was producing candy. We had Robert Crumb's Devil Girl as both chocolate bars in cigar-type boxes, and hard candy metal tins. And we were doing Freak Brothers Munchie bars, Cadillacs & Dinosaurs, Bone, Betty Boop Bars, a whole line, and they were doing quite well. We were selling them to a lot of non-traditional venues outside the comic market, like Urban Outfitters and some food chains. The candy was profitable, and publishing was marginal at that time. Don told Fred, "Gut the publishing. There's no money in publishing. Make it strictly a candy company." He promised Fred, "Let me run the show and I'll get all of your investment bank and plenty more within a year." I reminded Fred that we had agreed we wanted an intellectual property business, that the core value was in publishing, and that candy was a spin-off from publishing. It was a good profit center, to our credit. I'd produced a lot of merchandise over the years. I said with the right team and his patience, we'd ride the storm and make this work based on what I'd been doing for the previous 30 years, with publishing at the center. So I gave him my counter plan, which couldn't assure him he'd have his investment back in a year. That would have been a false promise and an idiotic thing to say. So, toward the end of 1999, Fred was getting very conflicting information.

Meanwhile, because of Todrin's increasing presence, some people started quitting, including Jamie Riehle, one of my most valued employees. Jamie couldn't tolerate even being in the same room with Todrin. Big promising future projects I wanted to do, like the *Genesis* book by Crumb, for example, were on hold because of the power struggle and restricted cash allocations and people quitting. Fred had to make a big decision. I forced the issue: Was it Don or me? Remember, Fred's in Los Angeles. He's not seeing the day-to-day dramas and personality conflicts; he's busy with his new animation business. He's preoccupied. This is something he invested in, but he's not focused on it. So he took the information and arguments we each gave him and he said to me, "I'm going to a woman I know who I respect greatly, who's a very skillful businesswoman, and objective. I'm going to let her decide because I'm thoroughly conflicted." So he called me around mid-December of 1998 and he said, "I talked to my mentor, I gave her both your sides." He said she looked at everything and her advice was, 'If I were you, Fred, I'd go with the asshole.'

So then Fred said, "Sorry, Denis." And that was it. I was fired. I was in shock. I didn't see it coming. I said, "You know, the guy you just called 'the asshole' is not only an asshole, he's a felon, wearing a bracelet on his ankle, convicted of bank fraud, and you trust him over my track record?" He

just said, "I made my decision, Denis." I did convince Fred to change the name of the company because I was embarrassed at that point to have the name Kitchen associated. So they called the candy company True Confections. Within about a year, it was belly-up and I saw an e-mail a local reporter forwarded me where Fred had said, "I'm on my way to Northampton to kill Don Todrin!" [laughter] That's how angry he was. So, I think he realized he made a big mistake, but it all got very complicated and ugly toward the end. That's about as brief an encapsulation as I can give you. There's no short answer to your original question. Essentially once I made that first fateful decision to give up control, I was no longer in charge of my own destiny and the company was increasingly pulled in commercial directions, which I understand. The ideal situation would have been if Kevin and I had gotten together before



Inset left: Kitchen chum Will Eisner contributed to the KSP Famous Cartoonist button series.

Below: The renowned cartoonist also partnered with KSP to produce a series of Spirit trading cards. Here's a limited edition, uncut and signed sheet.



IT WAS A DAY
PRETTY MUCH LIKE
ANY OTHER. I WAS
TYPING MADLY WITH
BOTH FINGERS ON AN
IMPORTANT OBITUARY
WHEN SUDDENLY A
COPY BOY APPEARED
WITH A WORD FROM
THE EDITOR....

TAP
TAP
TAP

HEY!

GEORGE LOCKWOOD
WANTS TO SEE
YOU... NOW!

GULP!

GEORGE LOCKWOOD
EDITOR
Insight
Magazine

GTT!

AT EASE, KETCHUM.
KITCHEN, SIR.

I WANT YOU TO DO
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS
OF MILWAUKEE'S
UNDERGROUND!

UNDERGROUND,
SIR?

SNAP

YES! AND I DON'T WANT A GLOSS JOB.
I WANT OUR READERS TO UNDERSTAND THE
UNDERGROUND... TO GAIN INSIGHT INTO
THIS CURIOUS SUBCULTURE... I WANT YOU
TO EAT, FEEL, BREATHE, AND SMELL UNDER-
GROUND... AND THEN WRITE A PULITZER
CALIBRE STORY!

BUT WHY
ME, SIR?

BECAUSE YOU HAVE A
MUSTACHE! YOU'LL BE
ABLE TO GAIN THEIR
TRUST AND PENETRATE
THEIR MIDST!

NOW
GET
ON IT!

THIS WAS MY FIRST JOURNALISTIC BREAK. I RUSHED OUT
OF THE BUILDING BRIMMING WITH CONFIDENCE, MY HEAD
GLOWING WITH VISIONS OF BY-LINES AND GLORY.

STOP
THE
PRESSSES!

Sigh...

HONK!

BEEP
HONK
HONK

TAXI

TAXI

BEEP!

18 THE MILWAUKEE JOURNAL

Around the same time I was in touch with Judy Hansen, who had married an old friend of mine from the *Bugle* days. She was an attorney and had been a vice president at Kitchen Sink for a couple years in the early '90s, and, coincidentally, she had been urging me to start an agency with her. And so with both of them counseling that, and feeling kind of aimless, I said, "All right, for the short term anyway, let's do that." So I agreed to form an agency and Will was our first client. Then we started adding other clients and it became a business unto itself.

Denis: Will Eisner called sometime during my self-imposed retreat





Above: Perhaps the most lucrative arrangement in the 30-year history of the publishing house was Kitchen Sink's dealings with Robert Crumb, whose art adorned comic books, trading cards, serigraphs, buttons, album covers, T-shirts, and even candy bar packaging. Here is the outside and inside wrapping of El Crumbo's Devil Girl Choco-Bar. **Below inset:** Courtesy of Heritage, Robert Crumb's original cover art for his XYZ Comics — the "Last Word in Comics!" — published by KSP in 1972.

CRUMBY KITCHEN SINK STUFF...

Devil Girl T-shirt!

Red or Black

DEVIL GIRL T-SHIRTS - 100% cotton, L or XL. Choose Red or Black. \$18.95. **CRUMB FILM POSTER** - Full color 27" x 40" poster. Shipped in tube. \$10.95. **R. CRUMB TRADING CARDS*** - 36 color cards depict Crumb's best-known characters. In cool gift box. \$10.95. **MR. NATURAL SQUEEZE TOY** - Soft vinyl gura squeaks when you squeeze him. In color gift box. \$19.95. **CRUMBWRAP** - Color wrapping paper features four different designs. \$9.95. **COMIC DESTROYING MOTHER T-SHIRT** - Every collector's nightmare. Color on white shirt. 100% cotton. L or XL. \$18.95. **INTRODUCING KAFKA** - Franz Kafka's life and works are illustrated by Crumb. \$11.95. **COMIX*** - Mr. Natural #3*, \$2.95; Home Grown Funnies, \$2.50; XYZ Comics*, \$2.95; Snoid Comics*, \$2.50; People's Comics* (featuring the death of Fritz the Cat), \$2.95; Artistic Comics*, \$4.95. **MR. NATURAL DOES THE DISHES** - Inspirational 12" x 16" metal sign belongs above every sink. \$15.00.

* These comic and trading cards are for adult intellectuals, so you've got to be over 18 to order them. Prices do not include shipping charges.

TO ORDER CALL 1-800-6RCRUMB

CBC: You were able to pull a good income from that?

Denis: Yeah, for a part-time gig. Unless you have lots of bestselling clients, an agency is kind of a feast-or-famine situation. But at one point the Kitchen & Hansen Agency had probably 20 clients. One quarter, somebody's earning well, and another isn't. It's a business where you're earning a small slice of every client's income for the deals you put together. There was one deal early on where I negotiated a \$100,000 advance. For what — when it you boil it down — was one day's work, I got a \$10,000 commission. So I started to think, "Well, this is sweet." But of course, that doesn't happen every day or every year. But it gave me a sense of what was possible.

CBC: You said Kitchen & Hansen was part-time. What else were you doing?

Denis: I'd already had the Denis Kitchen Art Agency, which was a business Stacey and I had selling original art for Harvey Kurtzman, and Will and a few other artists or estates. Then I started what I called a "hobby publishing" entity called Denis Kitchen Publishing. DKP published Harvey's *The Grasshopper and the Ant* and Crumb's *Mr. Natural Postcard Book*. Then I published Crumb's music card sets, the blues, jazz, and country cards and then a set of his comic characters. This was a way to keep my foot in publishing, but it was never a terribly serious or significant-sized company. But add those part-time gigs together, along with freelancing and, yeah, I did all right. But being a literary agent was never something I particularly enjoyed. It was something I *could* do.

CBC: Is that why your agent hat on the cover looks evil? [chuckles]

Denis: The Ku Klux Klan hood? Yeah, that's pretty subtle, right? It was good that Will called me that day. I have no regrets taking that path. But I don't want to agent forever. I've slowly shrunk that aspect of my career over the past few years. Judy is a full-time agent with many, many clients of her own, but my partnership with her is now down to just a handful of valued clients. Kitchen, Lind & Associates, the new partnership I started with John Lind some years back also initially focused on representing cartoonists and estates, and we still retain some that we personally like, but we've greatly

reduced that component. John and I want to make books. That's our passion. For several years we "packaged" books for big houses like Abrams, Chronicle, and Bloomsbury. But we want total creative control, so that's why we're starting the Kitchen Sink Books imprint, bringing back that name as a variant of Kitchen Sink Press. That's an exciting prospect for us. I want to make books. I want to be creative. Agenting and deal-making helps clients but takes a certain toll. It often involves confrontation, arguing and sparring with lawyers and such. It's like going into a shark tank. Why do it if you don't have to?

CBC: But it was a bridge?

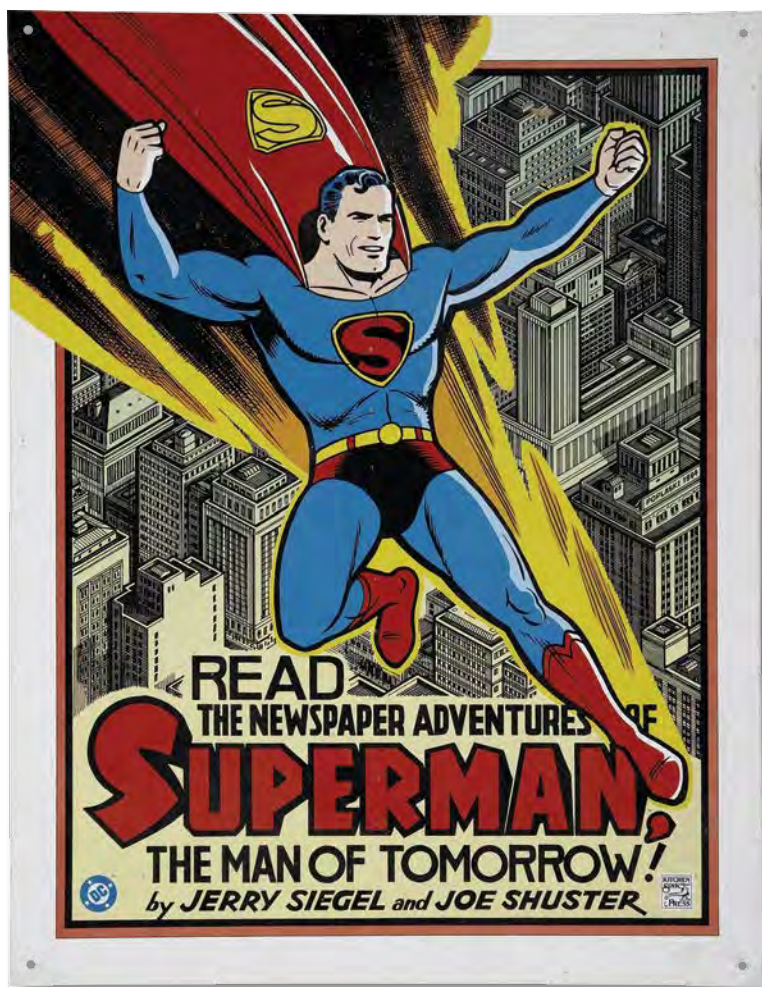
Denis: Yeah, it was a bridge. No regrets. But now, in weird way, Kitchen Sink's come full-circle. Fred's group, that old corporation is long defunct. They let the Kitchen Sink Press trademark lapse, we checked. When they still owned the "Kitchen Sink" trademark I tried to buy it back at one point. But they wouldn't even respond so I just waited and waited until it lapsed. But rather than use the identical "Press" and the same faucet symbol, we made it "Kitchen Sink Books." John made a sink the visual symbol. It's now a fully registered trademark. We're affiliated with Dark Horse. John and I fully assemble and design the books and Dark Horse does the rest: manufacturing, distribution, warehousing, the "fun" part. [chuckles]

CBC: All right, so what was the idea for *The United Cartoonists Workers of America*?

Denis: Our union? [chuckles] That was more symbolic than real. For my generation of underground artists, it was we're in charge of our own destinies, we're not going to take sh*t from publishers, The Man, however you want to define it — breaking the chain of the old way publishing was done. It symbolized the business model we embraced whereby the artist owns

the copyright, the artist owns the art, and the money may come through the publisher but it's allocated in an equitable way. Underground cartoonists received a royalty, not a flat rate. The artists controlled ancillary and international rights, everything. It turned the old model upside down. The United Cartoonists Workers of America with the fist breaking the chains repre-





Above: Peter Poplaski, frequent Denis Kitchen collaborator and longtime associate, is — besides being a terrific artist in his own right — a magnificent mimic of other artists' styles. Witness these joint KSP-DC Comics products, exquisitely rendered by Pete P. **Below:** Longtime fan Ye Editor had hoped to include a Poplaski article to accompany the Denis Kitchen feature but, alas, we could not reach the American expatriate currently residing in the same French village as close friends Robert and Aline Crumb. Neighbor Crumb, in fact, contributed an introduction to the 2012 Denis Kitchen Publishing release, *The Sketchbook Adventures* of Peter Poplaski.

sented those ideals, which were unheard of for cartoonists just before us. The key word was “equitable.” I was in kind of a weird position because publishers, at least traditional publishers, were the enemy, and I’m a publisher and I’m also involved in the union, how weird is that?

I was always feeling a little two-headed. I’m a cartoonist at heart, but I’m a publisher because somebody’s got to take care of business. Gilbert Shelton was an owner of *Rip Off* too, so I wasn’t alone having a foot in both camps. Could the UCWA have been a functional union in terms of paying dues and having union meetings and negotiating as a united body? No, it never came to that. First of all, the underground artists were getting a fair deal. So no one had to picket outside Kitchen Sink or *Last Gasp* or *Rip Off* to demand a royalty or to have art returned. It was simply the symbol of breaking away from the mainstream style of doing business. And the local buttons were just an affirmation of being part of that community. If you had six or more cartoonists, [chuckles] then you could establish a local and get a local button.

with some of us. Spain Rodriguez and I used to joke about it because he, more than any of us, was a real political activist, a serious lefty. He was especially proud of that union symbol. He and Crumb, in particular, put variants of the UCWA symbol on their comic book covers. Spain and Crumb actually attended a meeting early on in San Francisco of what was probably the last vestige of the “Wobblies” — the International Workers of the World. The IWW was at one point the radical spearhead of the union movement, when it was rough and tumble and when companies routinely hired Pinkertons to beat and shoot strikers and agitators. So they attended the meeting thinking that it might be really cool to affiliate the UCWA with the IWW, to give the organization some actual claim to be a bona fide union, especially with the IWW and its proud radical tradition. But the meeting was really boring and they realized anything they attempted there would only be a bureaucratic burden and so they quickly dismissed the notion. Occasionally I will get somebody, usually an academic — or labor historian — who finds our various UCWA union buttons via Google and they’ll contact me. They want to know about the history. And when I tell them what I’m basically summarizing to you here they are invariably disappointed that there wasn’t something more tangible to it...

CBC: How could there be, right? I mean it’s —

Denis: Yeah. [chuckles] I mean it’s cartoonists, not auto workers. Will told me that way back in the ‘30s, during the Great Depression, some artists and cartoonists actually held some meetings in New York, talking about unionizing, at a time when there would have been a legitimate reason to organize, and serious inequities to address. But he said you just can’t organize artists. [chuckles]

CBC: Wrangling cats?

Denis: Exactly.

CBC: You’ve mentioned that at times your collecting has subsidized your business...?

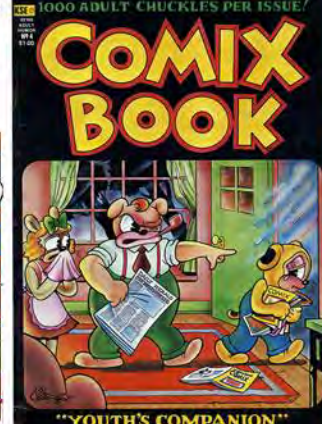


CBC: Now how many did you have?

Denis: I think I made official unions buttons for ten or eleven cities. But I recently received an application from Portland, so the union is still growing. Portland will be Local 11 or 12.

CBC: Are there any meetings?

Denis: Not in any formal sense, no. But there was definitely a sense of comradeship, at least



Denis: Vintage jukeboxes, for example. In the early '70s I got in on jukeboxes when they were \$50 each, sometimes free. People would say, "Get that thing out of my garage. If you haul it, you can have it."

CBC: For real?

Denis: Yeah. Oh, yeah. They were just big, ugly things that often didn't work, and very few people at that point appreciated them. Remember, these played 78s, an obsolete speed. Unless you had our Crumb record of course.

CBC: Did you restore them or did you know what to do?

Denis: I didn't have time to truly restore them. But I had a rule early on that I wouldn't pay more than \$75 for a jukebox. I advertised. I had free ad space in the *Bugle-American* for a long time, then I moved up north to Princeton and with another partner, Mike Jacobi, I started another weekly paper that was kind of a rural alternative and —

CBC: What was it called?

Denis: The *Fox River Patriot*. We haven't even touched on that. That's a whole other thing. And at the same time, Mike and I had another paper, a monthly called *Yesteryear*, which was for antique collectors and dealers. That one was mostly Mike's toy. But I co-owned *Yesteryear* and one of the benefits was free advertising. I'd run quarter-page "I Buy Jukeboxes" ads there, when hardly anyone else was seeking jukes. So I'd get calls from all over the place. I had an old pick-up truck on the farm, so when I had time and somebody called, "I've got an old Wurlitzer, you interested?" I'd pay \$50 or \$75, haul it in my pickup, and stash it in my barn next to the other jukeboxes. I just had an instinct about them, similar to when I was buying five copies each of the early Marvel comics and setting them aside. The craftsmanship on the '30s and '40s jukes was great. They were gorgeous, especially when lit up. Anyhow, I built an inventory of about thirty or forty vintage jukes, which was easy because I had a largely empty barn at the time. Then sometime in 1975, *Oui* magazine came out with a cover story on vintage jukeboxes. It showed these Los Angeles dealers who were restoring and selling machines for at that time, \$1,500 and \$3,000, and up. So the moment I instinctively knew was coming had come and I was suddenly sitting pretty. On the other hand, goddammit, I'll never find another one for \$75 again. The word is out they're very collectible. So I would gradually flip machines from my inventory when needed. So I didn't have to draw a big salary out of the comic company. I was

wheeling-dealing on the side.

CBC: Now you know how comic book dealers can be. They're a certain — they can be a certain type, for lack of a better term, *assh*le now and then*; [Denis laughs] brutal. Buying low, selling high. How are you as a — ?

Denis: As the a-word?

CBC: With dealing in that world. How were you able — ? You obviously have this solid —

Denis: Well, first of all, I don't think it's apples and apples.

CBC: Well, isn't — ?

Denis: Jukebox World isn't overlapping with Comic Book World.

CBC: But the attitude: buying low, selling high, taking advantage, exploitation.

Denis: Well, let's look at that. When I was buying those

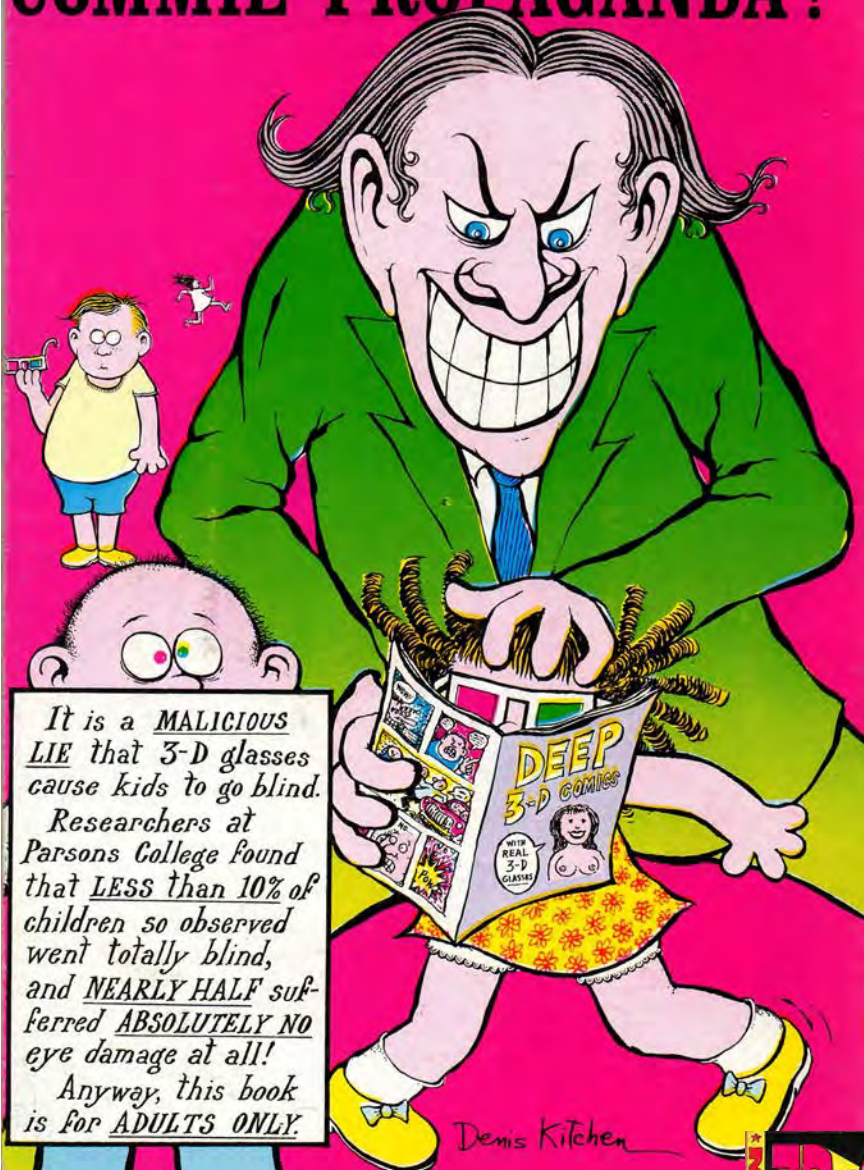
Above: Covers for the entire run of the Denis Kitchen-helmed anthology *Comix Book*. The first three issues [Oct. '74–Mar. '75] were published by Marvel Comics; the final pair [1976] by Kitchen Sink Press. Initially the title was to be *Comix International*, but Warren Publishing beat Marvel to the punch in retaining trademark.

Below: Cover for #1 of the five-issue Warren series ['75–'77].

Inset bottom: Jim Warren coaxed Will Eisner to take his *Spirit* away from KSP in the early '70s.



Don't fall for the COMMIE PROPAGANDA!



Above: For a novice publisher, Denis Kitchen dove into his role as underground comix vanguard with relish, early on even publishing a 3-D comic book replete with stapled-in glasses! Here's Denis's back cover artwork for Deep 3D Comix [1970]. **Inset right:** Cover of same by Dan Glassford. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

jukeboxes, cheap where I was, those were the going prices. You didn't argue with "free." I had no idea till that *Oui* article broke, that there was a West Coast market starting to develop. Remember, this is pre-Internet. You can't Google "jukebox" or check out eBay results. I don't think I was taking advantage of anyone. The sellers wanted the ugly hulks out of their garages. Had I not been there, many would have gone to dumpsters. These were regarded for the most part as junk. I just knew I loved them and thought they were beautiful and deserved to be saved. I invested in my instincts, as I often did, and gambled I was right.

CBC: Big time.

Denis: Yes, as it turned out. If a little old lady said she had a copy of *Action* #1 and I offered her \$75, that would be gypping, I agree. But there was no *Overstreet Guide* for jukeboxes. If I paid them \$50–75, it was a fair price at the time. It was no different than anything you'd buy at a flea market or yard sale.

CBC: Yeah, yeah.

Denis: The Marvel comic books that we discussed earlier, I bought off the newsstand at cover price. To me, those were investments, like buying penny stocks. That's how I looked at it. I simply had a knack for getting in the ground floor of things, things I personally liked and appreciated and thought would trend upward.

CBC: Before there was blood in the water.

Denis: Are these references to assh*le comic book dealers and blood really necessary, Jon? [laughs] I'm a collector. I like bargains as much as anyone. If you walk around the house, I can point to all kinds of things I was lucky enough to acquire when nobody else seemed interested. That's part of the appeal of collecting, right? I think original comic art's another example. Early on, I was buying comic art or swapping for comic art when there wasn't really a significant market. Swapping was key because I could often trade with fellow cartoonists. You know, with Crumb for example, way before his art skyrocketed. Or Pete Poplaski. Nobody knew who Pete was but I appreciated his art and when he'd do jobs for me I'd often buy the original or swap. He was a collector too, so if he wanted an Al Capp, I might trade him a Capp for a couple Poplaski's, whatever we thought was fair.

CBC: You were dealing within the love of the form.

Denis: Exactly and it was with contemporaries. At the time, nobody else, or very few, were asking much money for their art.

CBC: So you didn't have to deal with the sharks.

Denis: Back to those assh*le dealers again, huh? No. In fact when I started collecting comic at there weren't any dealers, really, at least specializing in art. Way back at the start, maybe 1970 or '71 someone, probably Phil Seuling, referred me to an old-timer in Brooklyn, Abe Paskow. Abe was probably one of the very first guys to collect comic art, and he had lots so he dealt on the side. I wrote and asked him if he had any Burne Hogarth *Tarzans*. I'm a total stranger, a kid in Milwaukee, but Abe mails me two Hogarth Sundays in a big tube. He automatically trusted me. Those were the days. His note said, "Take one for \$50 or both for \$75." Any fool would take the second at half-price, but I could barely scrape up \$50. So I had to return a Sunday *Tarzan* for want of \$25. You know how much that would bring today? Point is, early on, nobody placed high values on these things.

For what seems like a pittance today, you could have bought the crème de la crème. Will Eisner was selling some of his best *Spirit* stories for what might have seemed like a lot at the time for cartoons, but was practically giving it away in retrospect. Fortunately for his widow and his art agent, he

didn't sell them very often. Prime *Spirit* stories that he sold for a few hundred dollars could bring \$40- or \$50,000 and more in today's market. And it wasn't that long ago. The comic art market has come a long way in a relatively short time, and many think it's far from peaked.

CBC: Has something really shifted with the 1%, shall we say? That they have so much money that the value of these things has just gone through the roof, that these things are becoming the purview of the rich? And then it's out of the reach of regular folk.

Denis: The really prime comic art, you mean?

CBC: Yeah, that. The stuff that we love that is now —

Denis: There are definitely some buyers — what you just called one-per-

centers — entering this market and supporting the six-figure sales we're seeing sometimes at Heritage and seven figures in private transactions. My art agency has dealt with a number of very well-heeled collectors. I could see a trend where the very best pieces by certain recognized cartoonists, the masters, could only be afforded by a small echelon of buy-



ers. Most of the buyers who I know in that territory are genuinely passionate about comic art, and are buying primarily for that, not strictly as an investment. But no one, and I'd include myself there, can truly separate buying art, even the art you intensely love, from seeing it simultaneously as an investment. I mean, let's be practical, there's insurance and asset management and you have to attach numbers at some point, and then you normally want to see that number climb, just like your Apple or Hewlett-Packard stock.

Art is a funny area and it can't be compared to other commodities in that there are emotions and tastes. You analyze the stock market, for example, but art doesn't have that kind of detached objectivity to it. Art is the unique product of an individual creator and it will always be treated differently than other investments. We talked about getting in on the ground floor earlier, like I prided myself on jukeboxes and Marvels. High-end art can be the most stable of investments. For example, if a billionaire buys a Van Gogh painting for \$40 million, it's a virtual certainty it will only increase in value, plus you have an object of beauty and prestige that might enhance your reputation in a way that money alone will not, whereas that same investment in the stock market is always something of a crapshoot. Even a once rock-solid corporation like General Motors can go bankrupt. But a Van Gogh or a Rembrandt, they're timeless. But most art collectors, even ones who can buy a Van Gogh, get the most satisfaction, I suspect, from gambling that their eye will spot the contemporary equivalent of Van Gogh.

Think of when Gertrude Stein held salons in her tiny Paris apartment, entertaining Picasso and his contemporaries, and buying as she could from just her writer's income. And she filled her walls when few others were buying what we now regard as modern art masterpieces. All self-confident art collectors want to believe they have the Gertrude Stein gene, that they will be able to buy relatively unknown artists' work and their choices will prove prescient. You can make the same argument for comic art. It's starting to dramatically trend in some areas. At Heritage, Frank Miller art has, a couple or more times now, brought well into six figures, Crumb has hit six figures, some other artists are —

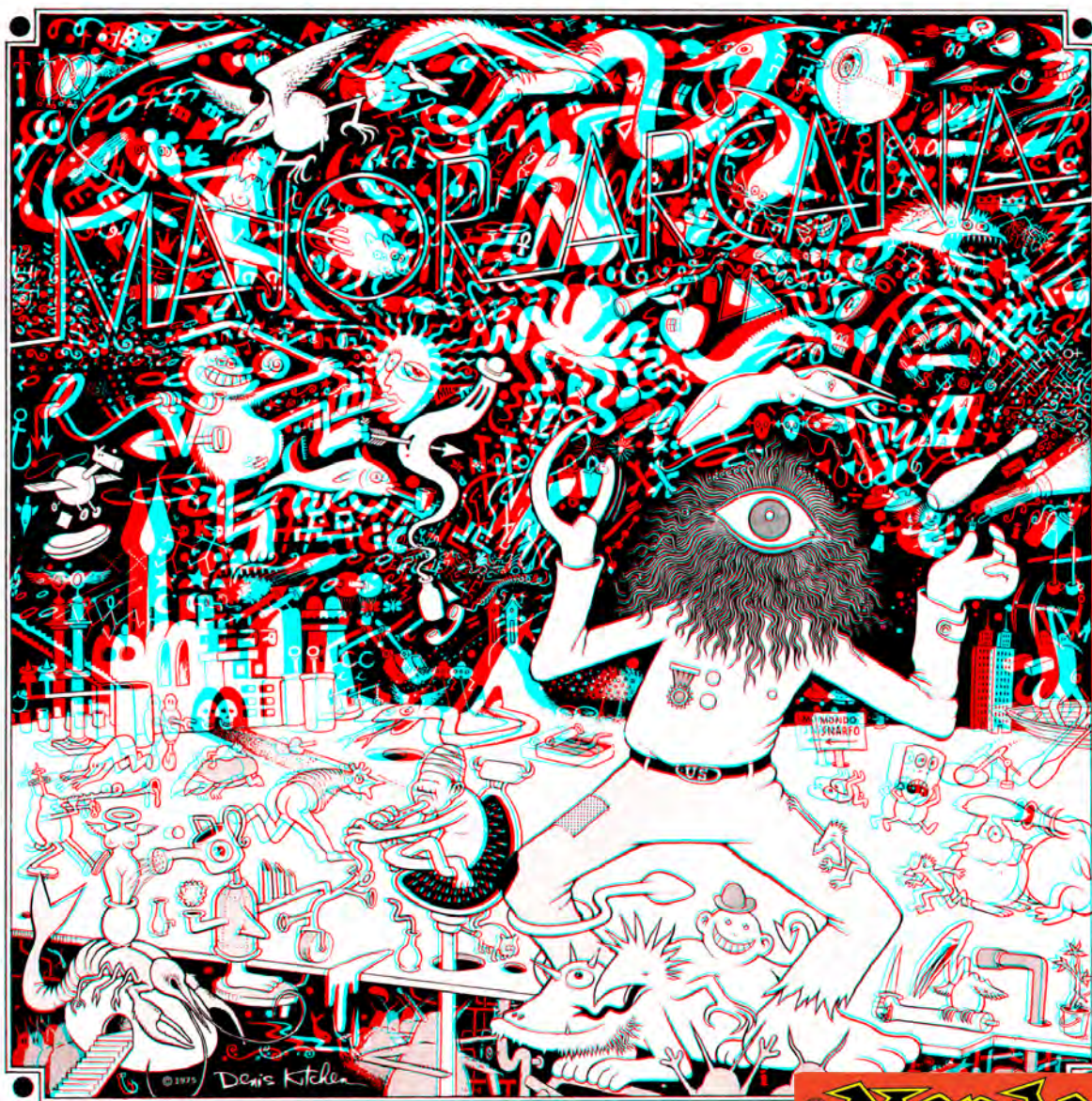
CBC: Kirby's six figures.

Denis: Yeah, and I think we'll see these kinds of figures getting more common for first rank comic artists. I'm aware of private sales that I think would shock some people. But to get back to your observation — the real crème de la crème is only affordable by people of means, so a middle class collector is locked out. On the other hand, a middle-class collector can still have that Gertrude Stein gene, can still identify undervalued art and possibly do very well. How much faith do you have in your own taste? It always comes

down to supply and demand, but I'm very curious how this plays out, comics having always been popular, for well over a century, and widely accepted in the culture, but now the crème de la crème being treated as Fine Art. And we're talking about that top percentage of name artists, the masters, the really proven people. There are obviously plenty of cartoonists, some pretty well known, who can't get more than a trifling for their art. But what we're seeing with the high end comic art is fascinating. Is it a bubble that will burst, or is the very best comic art permanently becoming part of the fine art arena, and will some of the prices we're marveling at now look like a bargain another decade or so?

CBC: It's all relative.

Denis: If you accept that some comic art is Art with a capital "A" and the best belongs in museums, then who knows where it can top off? Who in comic art belongs in the Old Master category? I'm prejudiced, but I would unequivocally put he best of Eisner and Kurtzman there, and Crumb. And Herriman, Sterrett, McCay, Raymond, Foster, I can go on, but we'd probably be in some general agreement about the ones who are valued with hindsight. But when you look at the younger generation, who makes the cut? Who are the younger equivalents? The contenders? Chris Ware? Jim Woodring? Charles Burns? Then look at the still younger generation, the ones still up and coming, the ones that even poorer collectors can afford. If you have a really good eye and you are confident, it's a great time to go shopping for



Top: Originally drawn as album cover art in '75, this surreal piece by Denis Kitchen, entitled *Major Arcana*, was re-used as the splash panel for his story in *Mondo Snarf* #1 (1978) and eventually made into a three-dimensional poster, which we've reproduced here courtesy of Mr. Kitchen. **Above:** The Denis Kitchen cover art for that outstandingly weird and wonderful Snarf one-shot offshoot.



Above: The never-to-be-reprinted (or suffer the full wrath of the Disney legal department) Air Pirates Funnies #1 and 2 (1971), covers by Bobby London and Gary Hallgren respectively. **Below:** To raise money for their ill-fated defense, the underground cartoonists would solicit sketches at cons. Here's a '75 placard, courtesy of Heritage.

comic art. If you can't afford the masters, then by all means, see if you're good enough to pick the masters of the future. Exercise your Stein gene and go, "I like his art or her art. I'm going to buy some. I'm a patron and I don't care if it's ever valuable because I love it." Then, if you're astute or lucky — or both — it may prove a good investment, and maybe a great investment, and you live in your own museum and enjoy it every day. To me, it's got to be about the love of the art first, and the investment second. I can't completely separate the two because there's enough of a capitalist in this old

socialist that when I buy something, I'm hoping it'll appreciate. But I only buy what I truly like. I never buy stock. Wall Street holds no interest whatever for me. I invest in things I understand. I understand comic art, jukeboxes, and so forth. Not everyone feels so confident, but then you don't have to put all your eggs in one basket. Diversifying and dabbling is something everyone understands.

I think anybody with a really good eye today can go to comic art exhibits, even conventions, and meet young talent and start to hone tastes till making those choices feels second nature. Support the handful of comic art gallery owners, like Scott Eder, someone who often offers amazing art by not-yet-recognized geniuses at what I think are bargain prices. You just have to trust your taste.

CBC: So, the future... What else would you like to do?

Denis: I'd also like to do more art books, monographs about particular artists, some of whom are kind of forgotten and deserving of revived attention.

CBC: Such as?

Denis: In particular, Harrison Cady is an illustrator I've long admired. He did wonderful illustrations and centerfolds for the old *Life* magazine and others, starting around the turn of the century. You've maybe seen some. His specialty was anthropomorphic insects and frogs, and tremendously detailed crowd scenes. I've been assembling albums of his work from old magazines, and some originals, for many years, anticipating an eventual collection. Another is Boris Artzybasheff. He had an incredible style. During World War II he did these amazing industrial illustrations, and work for a wire company with incredible caricatures of Hitler, Mussolini, and Tojo made out of this industrial wire and mechanical components. He also did *Time* magazine covers for many years. A very inventive artist.



CBC: What else?

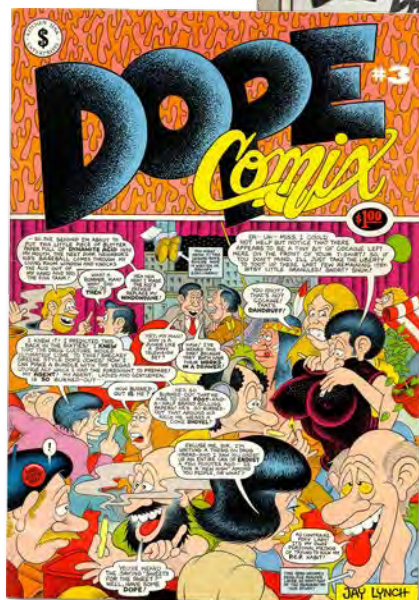
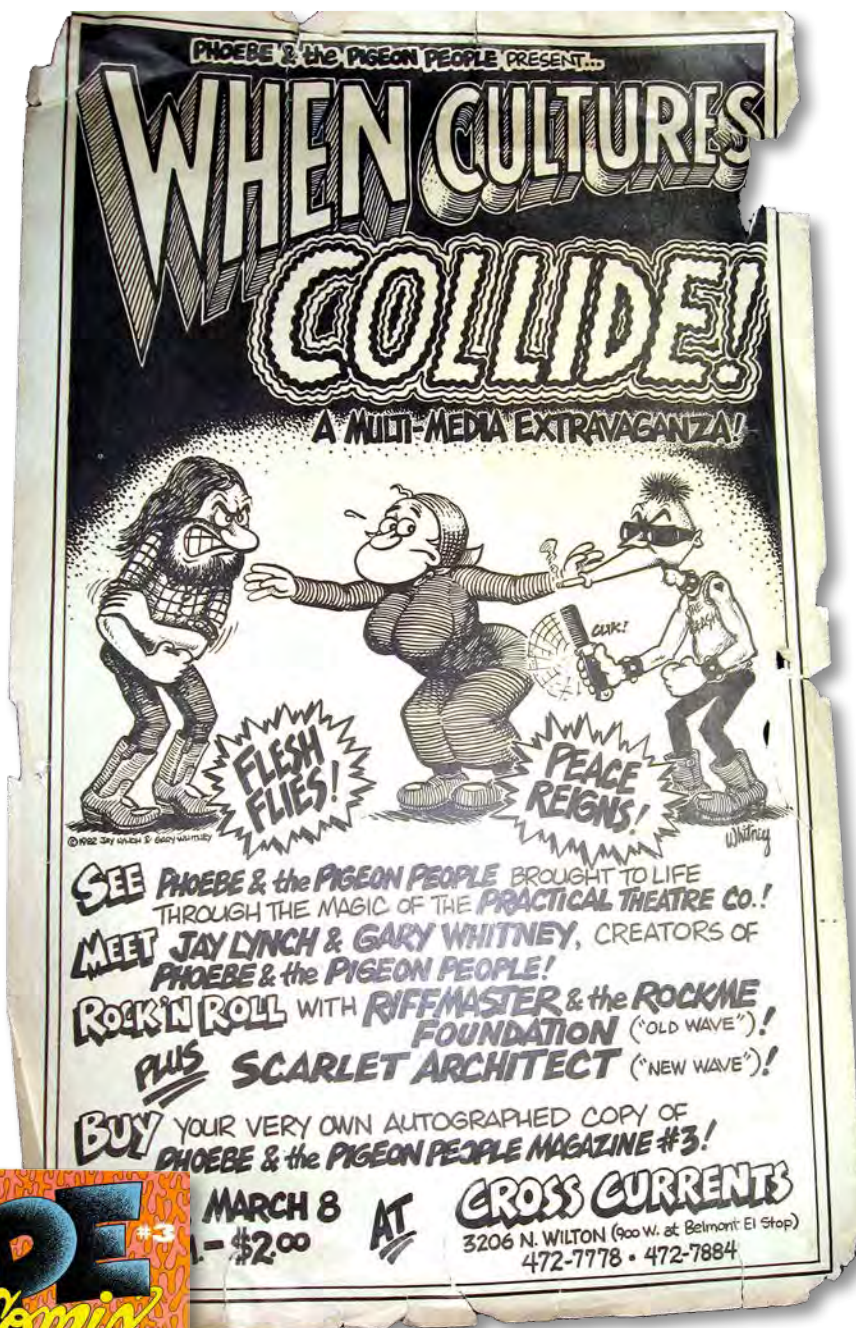
Denis: You know, I'd like to draw more. There are a lot of things I'd like to do while I still have a lot of energy. To sum it all up, it's just an overall passion for the comics and illustration medium at all levels, trying to be a proselytizer for the best the medium has produced, trying to keep geniuses from the past alive, maintain and grow their legacies, try to show younger generations what came before and deserves their attention, while at the same time, to develop new, young talent so that we encourage a tradition, a continuum, but also always welcoming experimentation. I like working with the kids as much as the geezers, you know? I fell in love with comics as a kid and never fell out of love. I consider myself a very lucky man, having always found a way to make a living in all aspects of it. It's always been pleasurable even when there were some tough times. But the business or the market or individuals, taken as a whole, I feel grateful I've been able to work closely with so many brilliant artists and writers and to get to know many of them on a personal level. I still feel relatively young and there's a lot I want to do. I'm not ready to write that epitaph yet.

CBC: And I'm not asking for one, really. [laughs] Just a career assessment to date. You know, I think you told me a story about George —

Denis: Back to George Lockwood?

CBC: Yeah. Did he encourage you to be an artist, a comic strip artist?

Denis: Yeah, he pushed hard for me to go that direction. Like I said, we bonded, starting when I was in college, and he saw the opportunity to get a young promising guy into the syndicated strip business, because of his strong contacts with the syndicates. He — the *Journal* — was a good customer and he had some clout. He was a veteran newspaperman the syndicate guys listened to, because he was a real comics aficionado, with a strong eye. He wasn't just throwing darts at available strips like many papers. If he said to them, "Hey, I've got this young talent. Look at him," I'd have entrée with the top men. There were no guarantees, of course, but George could make that introduction. He kept saying, "You've got to develop some strip ideas. Get me some samples." I was starting Krupp, Kitchen Sink, and the *Bugle*. My hands were full, so I'd tell him I would think about it, but later. Finally I said, "George, 'I don't think I'm cut out to do a daily strip.' And he'd say, 'Are you stupid? Don't you understand? This is the ultimate.' There was a serious generation gap there. He was absolutely clueless what I was doing with undergrounds and why that appealed to me more. One time in his *Journal* office he said, 'Bring in some of these comics that you're doing. Let me see them.' So I brought him a stack of what I thought were relatively tame undergrounds because I knew seeing the really wild ones, he'd faint. So he starts flipping through them, and we're in the middle of a big newsroom at the *Milwaukee Journal*. It's one of these open spaces where there's dozens of desks. Reporters are typing away and stuff, but it's relatively quiet. And he flips to some page and he goes, [shouts] 'Penises! Why do you guys —?' in a really loud voice, 'Why do you guys always have to draw penises?' He says, 'There's nothing pretty about a penis! They're ugly! I know! I've got one!!' And every face is turning toward us. 'Okay, you found a penis in a comic, George, I'm sorry.' He was looking out for my own best interests. He liked me. He wanted to take me under his wing and he wanted me to see me become



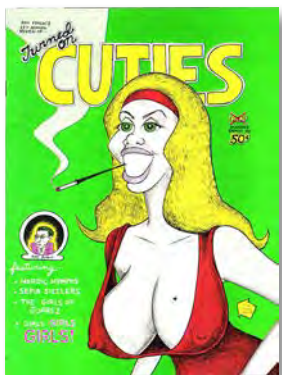
the next Walt Kelly. I said, "First of all, I doubt I'm fast enough." He said, "Walt has an assistant. He can't do it all himself either. But you don't want to start as someone's assistant. You'll be trapped assisting forever. You've got to start out doing your own invention." I said, "But, George, I'd have to come up with eight weeks of sample strips. That's a lot of work. That's all on spec. I won't get paid while doing that." I gave him all my reasons and he said, "You just don't understand. You could make it big. That would be the greatest thing. Why wouldn't you want to do that? I'd die to be in your

shoes. Take advantage of my contacts." So I said, "Look, I'll tell you what. I'll compromise." George was giving me assignments, which was critical income in those lean early Kitchen Sink days. I would do stuff for the *Journal's* Sunday *Insight* magazine. It paid pretty well and I was appreciative and there was a big audience. The *Milwaukee Journal* then,

Above: Interesting Chicago artifact from 1982 — a poster by Jay Lynch and Gary Whitney featuring their strip *Phoebe and the Pigeon People*, the comics collections which were published by Kitchen Sink. **Inset left:** Jay Lynch contributed this ever-so busy cover to *Dope Comix* #3 [June '81].



Above: What? Me commercial? Robert Crumb, infuriated at the cinematic depiction of his first successful comic book character by director Ralph Bakshi in 1972's *Fritz the Cat*, the cartoonist had his fornicatin' feline murdered Mafia-style in the Kitchen Sink-reprinted *The People's Comics* ['72]. **Inset right:** Cover of same, which was initially published by The Golden Gate Publishing Company, which, according to the *Grand Comic Database*, had only one other release, the '72 cartoon pin-up book, *Turned-On Cuties*, featuring contributions from Crumb, Jay Lynch, Bill Griffith, the Mad Peck, Spain Rodriguez, and Art Spiegelman, among others. **Below:** For giggles, here's Jay Lynch's cover.



on Sundays, had a circulation around four or 500,000. This was a big paper. And so I said, "Look, what I'd like to try is a full page for *Insight*." That was about an 11" x 14" size, a good size, and I said, "I'll do a full-page where I go to someplace in Milwaukee, or nearby, and do like a Shel Silverstein thing, with my impressions, funny situations, based on actual places and things, but with my jaundiced take or whatever."

For perspective I was proposing more of a Billy Ireland scenario. Ireland was the Columbus, Ohio, cartoonist who inspired Milton Caniff to take the syndication route. But Ireland just wanted to do a regional strip, and for many years that was in Columbus. That's what I felt comfortable doing, at least at that stage. I didn't feel prepared to do a national thing. I felt too young, too raw. And I figured with a weekly gig I could still hedge my bets with the fledgling Kitchen Sink. George said, "I don't like that idea at all." But nonetheless I went back and roughed up a couple to show him. One is reproduced in my *Oddly Compelling* book, called, I think, "Cream City Comics," based on an old nickname for Milwaukee. I actually felt good about the concepts, and ideas were coming to me, and for the first time the general idea of a mainstream continuity started to excite me. And whatever the budget would have been back then, I would have been happy with it. I showed George the roughs and

he wasn't supportive at all. He said, "You just don't get it." [growls with frustration] He threw a little temper tantrum and kept telling me how shortsighted I was and how I should go after the national audience and I could make *really big money*. Basically, "Are you out of your mind, kid?"

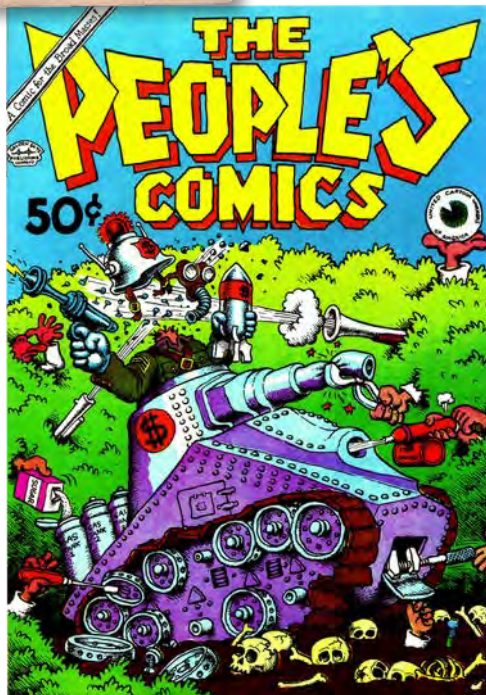
After that, I lost any enthusiasm and went back to the path that we've been talking here about. It was the path not taken, for better or for worse. I kind of wish he'd have given me that little rope, and maybe he could have pulled me in, inch by inch, into his grand plan. We stayed in touch periodically, after he moved to another newspaper, and after he retired. And every time, he'd be like, "You blew it. You *blew* it! You could've done a strip." I'd say, "George, I'm doing alright. I'm having fun, I don't have any regrets." When I talked to him I always kind of felt like Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*, where he's all bloodied and he says, "I coulda been a contender." [laughs] I have no idea if I'd have had a chance for success in the syndicate world. George would have enjoyed making it happen, because that was the big time for him: a "normal" cartoonist's dream. It was more important for him than me. So we stayed in touch for years. He died a few months ago, just before, unfortunately, his book on comics went to press. He never saw it in print.

CBC: Did you ever think of ideas — I mean obviously, the key for having a regular daily strip is to have continuing characters, right?

Denis: Right. That's the usual formula, and it was something that bothered me about coming up with a syndicated concept. What I considered doing, the rough stuff I showed him, was semi-autobiographical, me going to places, impressions, reality-based gags. And I did do one with them. I never really liked the idea of being wedded to the same cast of characters, like doing *Blondie*, forever and ever, even though I knew that where a cartoonist can reel in the audience and the licensing revenue. Crumb told me once that his biggest

nightmare would be if he had to fill in boxes — strip panels — every day, day after day, with the same characters, over and over, and I had to agree. What would have appealed to me was something more non-traditional, like Gary Larson later did so well with *The Far Side*, where you could be all over the map with gags and irony. That's what I did with my weekly *Bugle* strips. I briefly had a regular character, a janitor named Ferd Pile, but after just a couple of months I had another character assassinate him. [laughs] I instinctively knew I wasn't cut out to do regularly recurring characters. This was before George was pushing me to develop a syndicated idea. There's another thing reprinted in the *Oddly Compelling* book, I think it's called "Denis Kitchen, Star Reporter, Visits the Underground," where I did a several page story for his *Insight* magazine, with a tongue-in-

cheek response to his honest curiosity about the whole hippie scene. He'd said things like, "I don't know what the hell your generation is up to with the long hair and all this stuff. Explain it to me." And I finally said, "Well, have me do a comic strip about it. I bet a lot of readers your age feel the same way. Send me to the East Side," — that was the hippie district — "and I'll do a funny explanation." He bought the concept, and so I got to have fun putting him into the story. I showed myself working in the *Journal* newsroom, typing with one finger. George calls me into his office and he's this



gruff, Napoleonic character. He says, "Kitchen, I have an assignment for you. I'm sending you to do an exposé on hippies." And I'm like, "Why me?" And he says, "You've got a mustache. You can infiltrate." So basically I'm the bumbling reporter, trying to figure out what the hippie scene is about. I end up literally underground where there's Mr. Natural and the Freak Brothers, and that's the real underground, not on the street level where all the touristy head shops are. I drew it in black-&-white and wash, the first time I worked that way, because *Insight* was printed on a rotogravure press and could reproduce grays really well. George must have thought it would be a popular feature because he made it the cover story. The pay for that gig probably fed me and paid the rent for quite a while as I worked for nothing on actual undergrounds. [chuckles] And so that, I thought, was an example for George, of something I could do as a single page, once a week, maybe even once a month, just to give me a little foot in the door. I think it could have developed a good audience and built my confidence for maybe the big time shot and feel like I can do something regular while I still had my day job. But for him, there was no compromise. He was like, "Quit that idiotic day job and get me eight weeks of samples and I'll make you a star."

CBC: And it was all just on your talent and it was — you didn't even have to pitch him a character or pitch a concept?

Denis: Well, I never got serious enough to come up with any characters and samples. I'm sure if I had I would have first shown him the character sketches and premise and said, "All right, I've got a couple ideas here. What do you think?" He would have given me good feedback, especially since his own reputation with the syndicates would have been tarnished if I submitted crap stuff. I think George may be fancied himself as a homegrown Colonel Patterson who, you know, would say to Harold Gray, "Make the boy a girl and call her Orphan Annie." There's always some tinkering at the beginning. But I never got to that point. I kept remembering Crumb saying, "If I did a daily I'd kill myself." And I just concluded, "I don't want to do that either." [laughter]

CBC: He's f*cking right. [laughter] Some people did it very well, though.

Denis: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Some are multi-millionaires. But it's a daunting prospect.

CBC: I mean that was the Holy Grail of the comic book artist: to get a newspaper comic strip.

Denis: Absolutely! Will Eisner tried with a thing called *Fireball Bambino* in the late '40s. It went nowhere. A daily strip was Harvey Kurtzman's dream. He tried many times to sell ideas to syndicates and was constantly rejected. Of course if he had sold one of the strip ideas early on there's be no *MAD*. The world as we know it would be a different place!

CBC: And then some guys get a strip, a daily grind, and they find out they're in living hell, right?

Denis: Yeah, I guess so. But I'm just speculating. I don't really know.

CBC: Because if you weren't making enough money to hire assistants, you had to have an assistant to be able to pump that stuff out, never mind a Sunday. [laughs]

Denis: Yeah. Yeah, you don't have to convince me. I think it's a ...

CBC: Murder! So, you were just off-handedly talking to Crumb about it? About doing a daily?

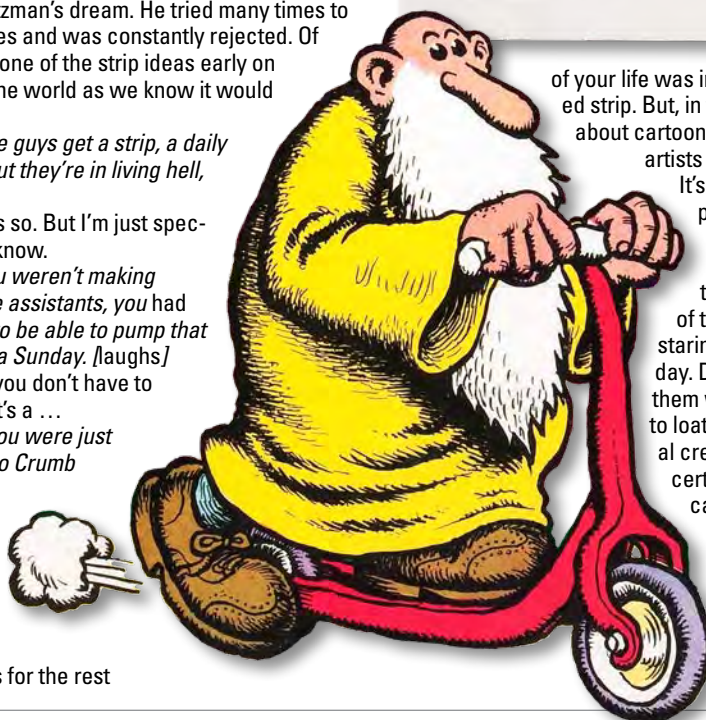
Denis: Yeah, I don't remember the exact context. I'll just never forget what he said. The notion of filling in panels for the rest



FRITZ
the CAT[®]

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He's X rated and animated!



of your life was in the context of a syndicated strip. But, in truth, you could say that about cartooning in general. Comic book artists fill in endless panels, too.

It's just the relentless deadline pressure, the stress, the inevitable writer's block, that's I think what we're talking about. And on top of that the same characters staring back at you day after day. Do you become fonder of them with time, or do you come to loathe those two-dimensional creations? Sure, there's a certain glamour in being a cartoonist, and the potentially big pay-off, but there are easier jobs, right?

CBC: [Chuckles] And boy, then you did some dream projects of like doing *The Complete Li'l*

Above: The notorious X-rated animated feature based by Robert Crumb's comic strip, *Fritz the Cat* ['72] proved successful enough at the box office to spawn a sequel, *The Nine Lives of Fritz the Cat* ['74]. Famously, the cartoonist was so incensed with the feature, he killed the cartoon character for good with an ice-pick to the head. **Inset left:** Detail from the cover of *Mr. Natural* #2 ['71]. Kitchen Sink Press published *Mr. Natural* #3 ['77], which collected the short-lived strip published in *The Village Voice*.



Above: Professional cartoonist, author, historian, publisher, agent... call him what you will. But, at heart, Denis Lee Kitchen is an inveterate collector! Here's the man at a '70s con seeking an elusive issue of some obscure title.

Below: For Ye Ed's massive tribute issue devoted in memory of the comic book master Will Eisner, Denis contributed an anecdote about his early 1970s first meeting with *The Spirit* creator, for which the cartoonist-publisher also contributed this illustration of hippie Kitchen and square Eisner to accompany in *Comic Book Artist* Vol. 2 #6 [Nov. 2005].

Abner.

Denis: That was definitely a dream project because, like we discussed earlier, that was my favorite strip growing up. It took me a long time to get the rights. While Al Capp was alive, I didn't approach him. I didn't have the means then, plus I don't think I was confident there was a market for the reprints then. But after he died, I approached the attorneys who represented his estate. I think I started modestly, offering to publish a "best of" volume. They said, "Make us an offer." So I did. The attorney called me and he said, "We got your offer. We appreciate your interest, but call us back when you're talking real money." Now a few thousand dollars, that was real money to me, but that was beneath their level of interest. Keep in mind how big Capp was at his height, licensing a theme park, and with huge advertising deals with big brand cereals and so on. They were accustomed to Proctor & Gamble money. So I conferred with Dave and Pete and Jim and said, "Jeez, what if we do them all?" We added up the total royalties they might earn and, taking the long view, it was "real money" by anyone's standards.

So I formally proposed publishing entire years of dailies, four times a year — or maybe it was twice a year. I

said, "If we do all the strips, including the Sundays, it'll be 54 volumes and something around a quarter million dollars in royalties." That got their attention and we proceeded to a deal. Keep in mind that 54 volumes is staggering. Nothing in comics, hardly any book project *anywhere* comprised 54 volumes. It would be much bigger in pages and volumes than the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. But I felt confident. The one mistake I made at the beginning was — being too excited — I announced the project prematurely. I was amazed how much publicity we got. The Associated Press picked it up and it was all over the country, which made me feel people still cared about the strip, but it was all out there six months before we got the first book out. We had this tremendous buzz and then, when the first volume actually came out, it was old news. As was often the case, getting the publicity was easy for me but of course — *duh!* — timing is everything. Our mass market book distributor, Berkeley, gave me sh*t about that timing, believe me. So *Li'l Abner* launched kind of ass-backwards. But still, it did very well and the first volume actually had to be reprinted. We sold, I'm pretty sure, 15,000 copies of volume one. But then the sales just slowly, gradually diminished, and by the end, it was around 3,000. But I still would have continued them. I would have done them all if Kitchen Sink Press hadn't gone under. We reached the 27 volume mark, exactly half the projected 54. We were just approaching the point where the dailies, in my view, were showing signs of deteriorating. It was still pretty good into the mid-'60s and getting uneven into the late '60s, but when you hit Capp's 1970s *Abners*, it was awful, just god-awful. Capp himself admitted when he retired that the strip hadn't been funny for years. On the art side, Frank Frazetta stopped doing the Sunday pencils around 1961 and not too long afterward he lost his longtime assistants Andy Amato and Walter Johnston to retirement and illness. He replaced them mostly with Bob Lubbers who was doing it, I think, in a pretty half-hearted manner...

CBC: Not an easy man to work with, right?

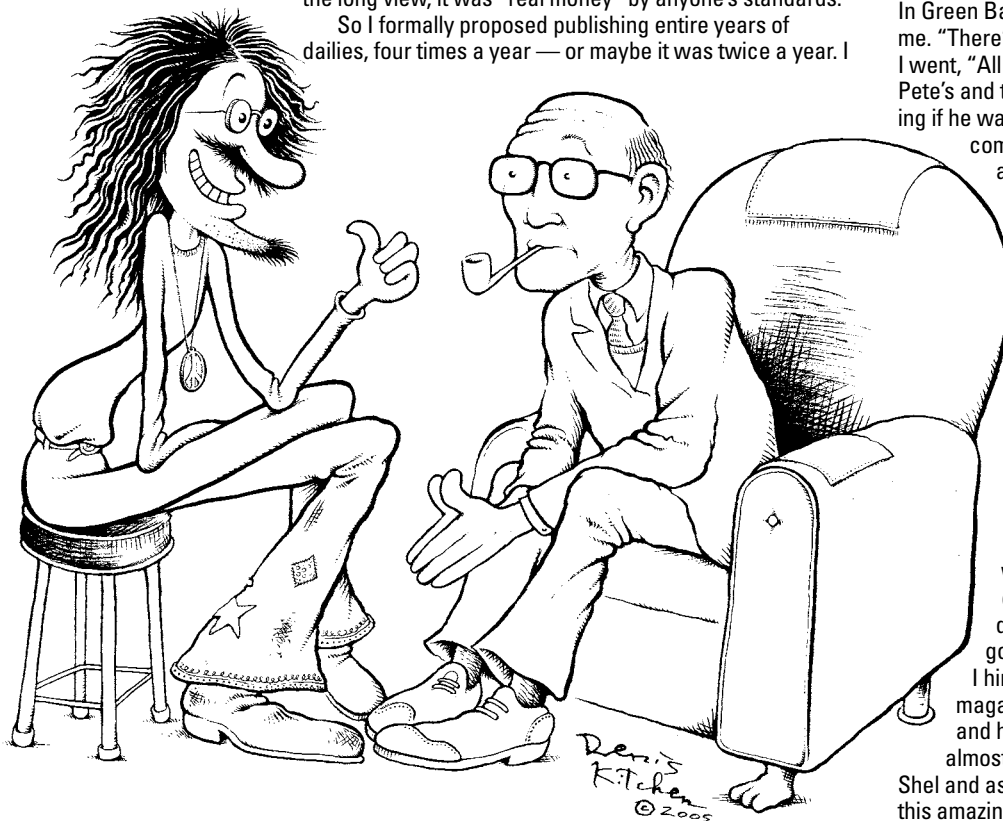
Denis: I know. No, not easy at all. Not easy at all. Read our biography. [chuckles]

CBC: How did you meet Pete Poplaski?

Denis: Right after I started the original Kitchen Sink, one of my roommates, Bill Kauth, was a traveling book salesman. In Green Bay he picked up the campus paper and called me. "There's a kid in here you ought to take a look at." And I went, "All right, mail it to me." There were illustrations of Pete's and they were really good, so I sent him a letter, asking if he was interested in doing work for a new comic book company. Pete turned out to be a comics fanatic and immediately wanted to drive to Milwaukee to meet me. Pete was straight as an arrow and when he arrived at my East Side flat he walked up the stairwell, with the walls covered with psychedelic and surreal images, and then into this den of iniquity. [chuckles] My place was filled with freaks and marijuana smoke. He coughed quite a bit, and he was a little nonplussed by the scene. We still laugh about it, but he and I hit it off right away.

Pete dropped out of school, which didn't make his parents too happy, and started working with me. We remained inseparable for many years. He was the staff artist, my art director, and a lot of the commercial jobs we got, Pete would do them. He was so versatile, and such a chameleon with styles and mediums, he could draw anything, and it'd be great. Gradually, he got more confident in his writing and editing skills.

I hired Shel Dorf to edit our new *Steve Canyon* magazine, because Shel was Milt Caniff's letterer, and he assured me he was capable. But I found out almost instantly that Shel was totally inept. So I fired Shel and asked Pete if he could take it over. He turned out this amazing magazine. It really blossomed under him and



had much more than reprint material. He got to know Milt Caniff personally and talked to him regularly and pulled great stories out of Caniff, who was getting quite up in years and loving the attention from younger fans. Every cover was amazing design and color done in complex multiple overlays, requiring deep abstract thinking, long before digital color. Milt had a complete archive of every single *Canyon* strip, so we were getting perfect proofs to shoot from. But one time there was one Sunday inexplicably missing from his archives. Milt said, "My assistant Willie and I turned the place upside down and we couldn't find that one page." He was in a bit of a panic. But Pete said, "Don't worry, Milt." Then Pete took a color Sunday tear sheet of the missing proof, put vellum over it, traced it in line in Milton's style. We Photostatted it and inserted it in that issue.

When the magazine was printed, Milt had forgotten, at that point, exactly which one had been missing. When he got his copy in the mail I called and said, "Pick out the page that Pete drew." He said, "Okay." Then he looked at every page intently — and who knows Milton Caniff's style better than Milton Caniff himself? — and then he re-looked again, and finally he said, "I can't spot it. I have no idea which one was missing earlier!"

CBC: *What a mimic. Holy sh*t.*

Denis: Pete's drawn covers for our *Li'l Abner* series in Al Capp's style that the family couldn't detect. The Brooklyn Museum years ago assembled an exhibit of post-atomic images that included a Shmoo drawing by Al Capp. But it wasn't a Capp original, [chuckles] it was a Poplaski. He's done *Flash Gordon* covers in Alex Raymond style. When Educomics was doing Keiji Nakazawa's *Gen of Hiroshima* comic books, they hired Pete to do Nakazawa and nobody ever knew.

CBC: *He's about the best mimic there is, huh?*

Denis: I think so. When Alan Moore was doing the Tom Strong series there was a sequence where Alan wanted a several-page script done in C.C. Beck's Captain Marvel style. So who'd he ask for? And you saw the wraparound Spirit "jam" cover hanging in the other room? That's all Pete's pencils underneath, and largely Pete's inking, but Will Eisner, Milton Caniff, John Pound, Leslie Cabarga, me, and Richard Corben inked portions of it. When the magazine was published [*Spirit* magazine #30], I included a key, an outline of the crowd scene, indicating which artist inked which portion. After it ran, quite a few people called or wrote to tell us the key was wrong, that we had omitted credits for Harvey Kurtzman and Moebius. Well, yes, it *looked* like Moebius and Harvey drew certain characters, but they were totally by Pete. He also often draws *larger* than any other cartoonist I've ever seen. The covers he did for the *Superman* books DC and Kitchen Sink co-published in the late '90s, those originals are literally four feet wide!

CBC: [Laughs] *Did he ever have a desire to do a regular book?*

Denis: I don't think so. First, he's not very prolific and also, he's primarily a painter. Oil paintings. Comics is one passion, but painting is his real passion. He's kind of a Renaissance man who —

CBC: *Does he make money at the painting?*

Denis: Pete sells paintings to collectors and tourists in France, where he now lives most of the time. Pete is kind of obsessed with Zorro. One of his endearing idiosyncrasies is that he often publicly dresses in a Zorro costume, complete with mask and sword. You can see him in action, even fencing, in various YouTube videos — check 'em out. That's how he attracts tourists. People will be walking down the cobble-stoned streets of this idyllic medieval French village and they suddenly go, "Is that Zorro painting at the easel?" And so, of course, they're curious, they walk over, and most tourists speak English. Pete strikes up a conversation with them — he's a charming character — and see he's doing brilliant work on the canvas. And often enough, they'll follow him to his studio, and buy a finished landscape or still life

or nude right off the wall. Then he goes back to paint. He only has to sell a couple of paintings or so a month and he does all right. Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky are his biggest patrons, and they don't typically buy art.

CBC: *And so the work that you do with him, you give him a lot of lead time to do?*

Denis: Yeah, if at all possible. Or if he's really enthused, he'll do it ahead of schedule, if the assignment excites him.

CBC: *Does he ever have any projects that he brings to you?*

Denis: Yeah, sometimes, but typically they don't get finished. He's been working on the definitive Zorro book for years. He's the world's foremost expert on Zorro, bar none, but he keeps refining and refining his book, because there's always one more thing, one more detail, one more bit of research he has to do on location. I was supposed to agent that book 20 years ago and I'm still waiting. I have no doubt it'll be definitive, if I live to see it.

CBC: *Is this the whole cultural history of Zorro?*

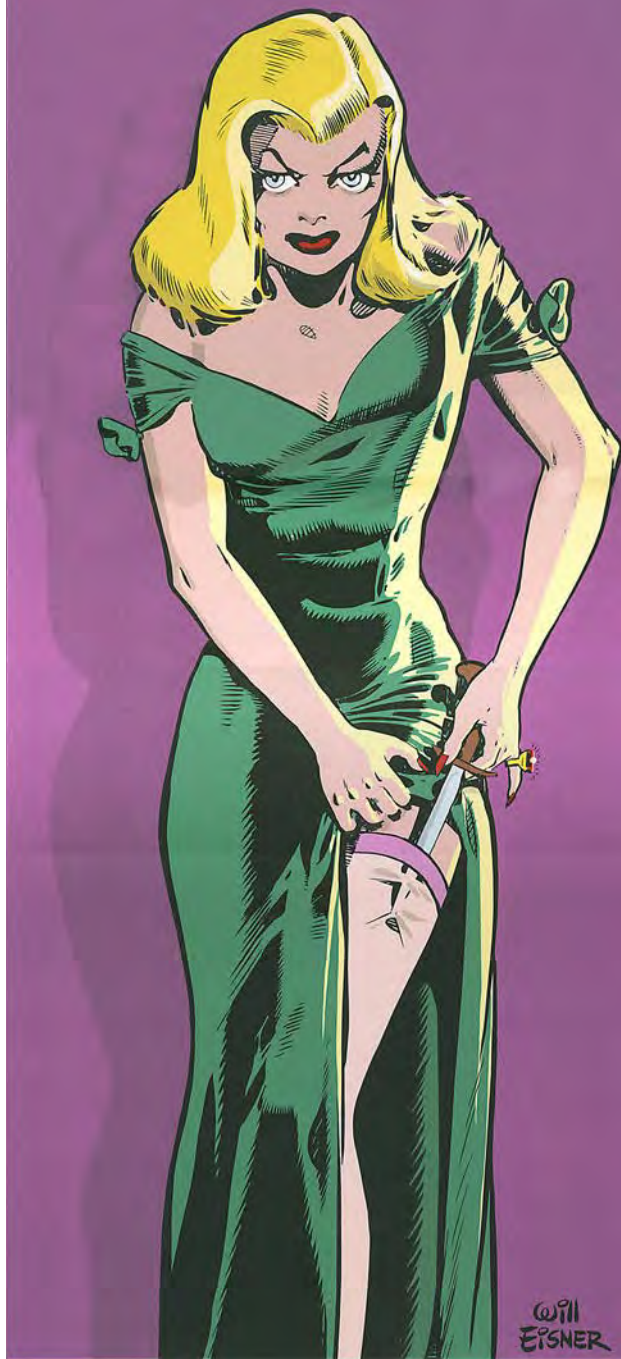
Denis: It's kind of beyond Zorro himself. The larger theme is the myth of the hero. Pete gets deep into it. He writes about what preceded Zorro in literature, the earliest manifestations of the costumed hero, and about Johnston McCulley, the pulp writer who created Zorro and other characters, and the countless Zorro film spin-offs. And I think he has virtually every Zorro movie poster in every language, and....

CBC: *I want the book.*

Denis: McCulley is from Chillicothe, Illinois, and so Pete's been going there, working with the Chamber of Commerce, trying to set up a museum for their now-obscure native son. And I'm like, "Pete, finish your book instead of —" He's a one-man, zealous champion for Zorro and the writer's legacy. And he's read and re-read every pulp that Zorro has ever been in. Everything Johnston McCulley ever wrote. And then he ties in other things. Part of his hypothesis is that Zorro was the direct progenitor of Superman and, I think, the first masked hero. Of course Zorro was popularized by the Douglas Fairbanks silent films, and that led to Errol Flynn and that led to this and to that and, basically the whole myth of the superhero, he believes, evolved from Johnston McCulley's writings. Every spare dollar — or Euro — he makes, he invests in rare Zorro posters and artifacts. You just missed him. Pete was here for about three weeks.

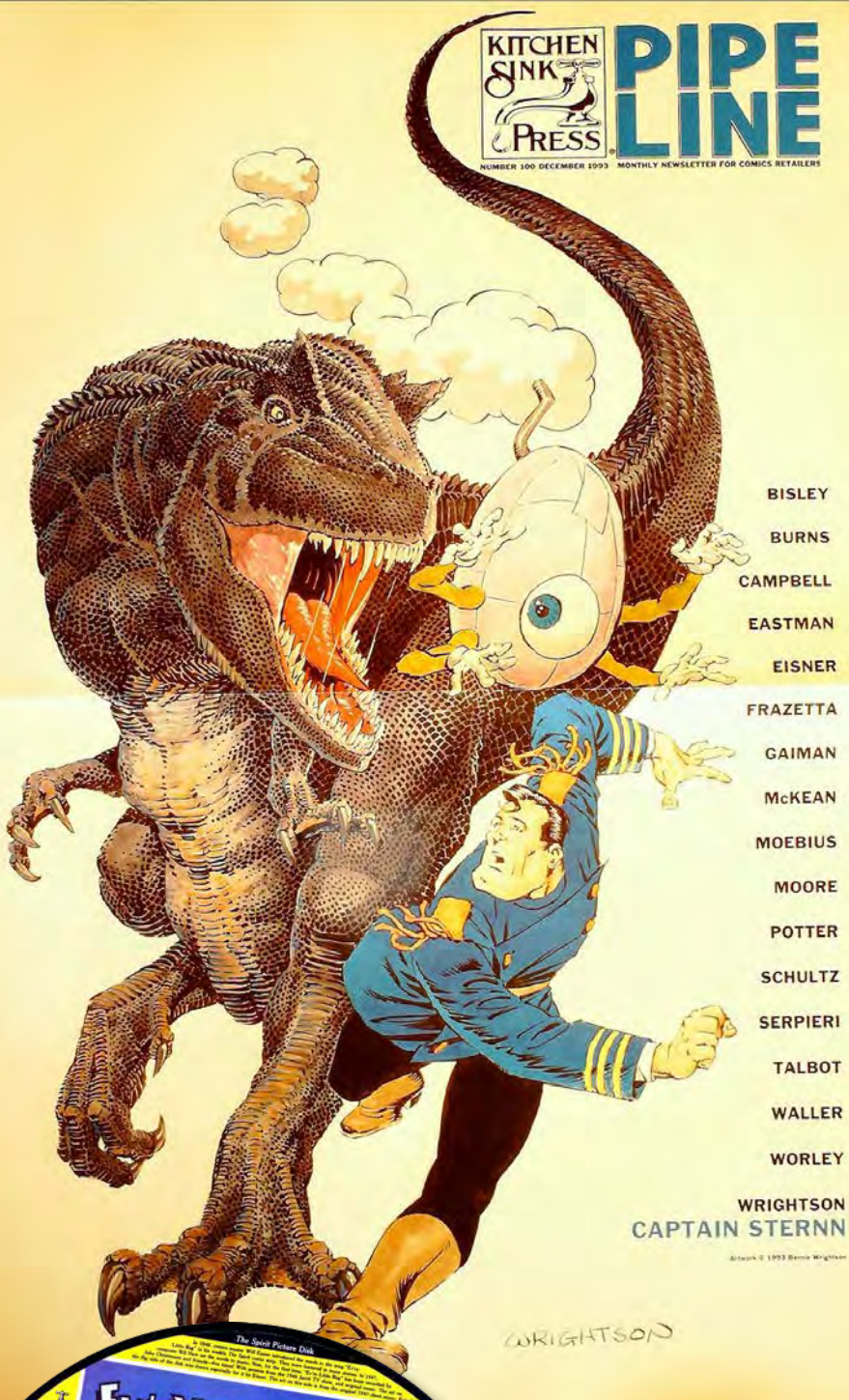
CBC: *Does he have a style of his own?*

Denis: Oh, sure, certainly his paintings. A lot of stuff. Did I show you the great caricatures he did of me and John Lind we'll be using in some promotion? That's pure Pete, too. But, for example, he's doing *Superman* and *Batman* covers for



Above: Serigraph by Will Eisner of *Spirit* femme fatale Skinny Bones, published by Kitchen Sink. **Below:** Dave Gibbons cover for KSP's The Spirit: The New Adventures #1.





BISLEY
BURNS
CAMPBELL
EASTMAN
EISNER
FRAZETTA
GAIMAN
McKEAN
MOEBIUS
MOORE
POTTER
SCHULTZ
SERPIERI
TALBOT
WALLER
WORLEY
WRIGHTSON
CAPTAIN STERN



IDW's reprint series. So, when Dean Mullaney says, "I want you to do these eight covers," Pete just right away goes, "Okay, that's the Curt Swan era. I'm going to do that cover like Curt Swan, and that one as Wayne Boring," or, "This is the early Wonder Woman so I'm doing to do it like H.G. Peters." And that authentic look, that's part of the fun for him.

CBC: Yeah, what an interesting character.

Denis: He sure is. And ethical as they come. If he was dishonest, he'd be selling Frank Frazettas for a fortune, because he could fool you. Actually, here's another story for you. Some years back, just before the dot com bust, when everybody on Wall Street was gambling on these upstart Internet

companies that were unproven, there was an outfit called *red.com*. I have no idea what they even sold. They came to Crumb and offered him, I think, \$80 grand to do some illustrations for their Website, with half upfront. Aline, Robert's very pragmatic wife, said, "Take it. Do it." Robert was like, "Nah, I don't want to do it," because they wanted people working at computers and stuff like that, which, to Robert, was boring. But Aline said, "Take the money." So they take the advance, they cash it, and then he's got to do these things and he's half-hearted. He sends it to them, and they go, "That's not what we want." So Pete happened to be at dinner when the *red.com* people said they wanted a do-over.

CBC: [Chuckles] *Dr. Poplaski*.

Denis: And they said, "Either give us what we want or we want our money back." And Aline's like, "I spent that money." So Pete says, "Well, can I just try?" They go, "Please." So Pete does these drawings in the Crumb style, people at computers and whatnot. They send them in and they go, [excited] "That's it! That's the Crumb we want."

CBC: And they went bust anyways.

Denis: Yeah, they went bust before the second payment was made.

CBC: Was it good?

Denis: I never saw the art, just heard Pete summarize the situation.

CBC: [Laughs] *Somebody's passing those off as Crumb. Those originals are somewhere.*

Denis: Hah! Probably. By the way, I published *The Sketchbook Adventures of Peter Poplaski*, so there's another place you can see his real style, at least his sketching style. It's mostly from his travels.

CBC: I have seen that, right.

Denis: Wherever he is, if he's at a train station, a bus stop, anywhere, he pulls out the sketchbook and he'll start sketching strangers. And he has these little exercises he calls like "Three-Minute Portraits" so he's got to do your portrait in three minutes, then stop, do the next person, three minutes, stop.

CBC: He's just one of those guys, like you're one of those guys, that really like production. We really like the "all-ness" of print, of having to put it together. And, look, he does it without seams. He doesn't even do paste-ups and white-outs and stuff like that.

Denis: Right, right. Very seldom.

CBC: And that's why I find Poplaski so appealing because he seems like a — he immediately seems like a kindred spirit with an enormous talent. I just would love to see him do stories, you know?

Denis: Well, you'd definitely love Pete in person. And he has done three- and four-page stories, maybe five-, six-, but nothing of significant length story-wise.

CBC: Because I would argue he's better than what he's mimicking.

Denis: I completely agree. But he's not well-known, largely because he's not prolific, and he doesn't do long stories.

Even for people who've seen his beautiful covers, his signature's often small or kind of hidden. And they're not —

CBC: Hmm, but I also like wanting that and it's okay that I don't get it. It's just that every time I see his name, it's just one of those things that like, "Oh, yeah." You know, like I'm in *The Club*, like oh, yeah." That's why I wanted to specifically talk about him because he's just always been around, he's always been mimicking other people's styles, but he does it with such verve and it's such a perfect thing, it's almost better — again, better than the original. There's just something of — he even gets it better than the original artist.

Denis: Absolutely, yeah. And he's really, really knowledgeable about both art history and pop culture. He reads big, heavy tomes on art history. He'll read the letters of Van Gogh, the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini, the kind of art books very few other cartoonists — or anybody — picks up. When Justin Green lived in Wisconsin and spent time with us, he watched Pete over some period read the Time-Life Library

KITCHEN SINK PIPELINE

of Art, a bunch of volumes I had in my office library but had never more than skimmed. Justin said, "No one else but the editor and Pete has read those books cover to cover!"

CBC: *What was up with ProJunior? Who was Don Dohler?*

Denis: Don Dohler created the character in an obscure mimeo zine. I published the first and only *ProJunior* collection. That character became the cartoonists' communal property.

CBC: *It looked like this thing has a long history, yet totally unknown to any number of readers. And it was treated with reverence and it was all you guys were coming together to*

Denis: Well, Dohler was a friend of Jay Lynch's and maybe somebody else. Artie? Skip? Don was an early fanzine artist when comics zines were extremely rare, and you'd have to say, objectively, he had limited talent. He created *ProJunior*, a character whose only distinctive characteristic was reversed eyeballs. Jay was the impetus of the anthology. He said Don doesn't care about owning the character, so it's communal property. So we pulled it together and did it. A lot of good contributors were in it: Crumb, Wilson, Justin, Spiegelman, Trina, Joel Beck, a bunch of people. I did a two-pager. Jay did the cover. Somehow the contributor count was off and the diagonal stripe on the cover of the first printings said "23 Underground Cartoonists!" But there were actually only 22, and we corrected the stripe text on later printings. But the "23" cover is one of those scarce variants underground collectors seek. Later Crumb, in particular, did additional *ProJunior* stories. And I remember Justin Green including *ProJunior* on a Krupp catalog we jammed on. I can't tell you much more than that. I had a little correspondence with Don Dohler, who ended up making low-budget horror films. In retrospect, it was definitely an odd comix project, but the point was probably that we could all draw the same character, something novel at the moment.

CBC: *Merchandising: In the early days were you involved in creating various kinds of merchandise. You said that you designed a bong, for instance. Did you have an interest in other paraphernalia?*

Denis: I did do the design for a bong way back in 1970 or '71, yeah. I still have one. I always liked cool merchandise. I never felt I was restricted to just doing comics and books. I think the first thing I diversified into was greeting cards because, early on, we were mainly in the head shop market, and I developed a line of mostly drug-related greeting cards for Christmas. They were quite popular. We sold a ton of greeting cards. We had a point of purchase display for counters with groups of eight different designs. We re-released them several seasons in a row, updating with new artists and new designs. Artists included Jay Lynch, Trina Robbins, Justin Green, Pete Poplaski, Pete Loft, Steve Stiles, me. Later, we did "All-Season" cards, not restricted to Christmas. Howard Cruse did an early gay-themed card and one for parents who used to use LSD. We thought Hallmark can do it, [chuckles] we can do it for our audience, too.

Even later, after I moved east, we did two different sets of Christmas cards. This time, we used artists like Charles

Burns, Art Spiegelman, Jim Woodring, and Drew Friedman, and many others. But they weren't as successful because comic shops seemed far less interested in having targeted Christmas-themed greeting cards, certainly not the way head shops embraced them. And, maybe too, the distinct hippie sub-culture embraced whatever helped identify that movement. It was — you know — the establishment, your parent's generation, sends sappy or religious Christmas cards to everybody so we're going to send outrageous Christmas cards where trees are made out of marijuana leaves or Santa Claus is stoned or whatever. Jay Lynch did the manger scene where the Wise Men come in and Mary's holding the baby and one of the Wise Men says, "What do you mean it's a *girl*?" Justin Green did a manger variant where Joseph is handing out cigars. I loved that stuff. If I'm going to send out a Christmas card, I want it to have some personality. So that was the first experiment in creating merchandise and it was very encouraging.

I think next was the 78 rpm record by Crumb. I mentioned earlier that me and Crumb had 78s in common — him, collecting the records; me, more the jukeboxes that played them — and he loved making music too, so I proposed to him, "Let's make a record." We perversely decided to make it a 78. Again, this is flying in the face of all marketing logic, right? Already at that time, in the early '70s, 78s were thoroughly obsolete. If you had a record player that played 78s, it's because it was your parents'. No hippie had a 78 rpm turntable. But nonetheless, we wanted to be 10" in diameter and we wanted the crazy 78 rpm speed. So the first thing we did was record the music. Robert Crumb, Bob Armstrong, who's also a cartoonist, and Al Dodge, came to Milwaukee. We created a new arm for the Octopus: the Ordinary Record Company. I rented a studio and a sound engineer. I produced a session where we recorded four tunes, all of which I thought were great. The next step was to manufacture it and that ended up taking months because —

Above: *Ever the savvy businessman, Denis Kitchen maintained communication with retailers through his regularly published newsletters hawking the coming KSP line-up and available inventory. Here's the header art, doubtless drawn by the ubiquitous Peter Poplaski, for The Kitchen Sink Pipeline. Courtesy of Denis Kitchen.*

Previous page: *Above is a promotional poster trumpeting the Kitchen Sink line-up back in the day and featuring art by Bernie Wrightson, the subject of the issue after next of Comic Book Creator. Below is the Spirit "Ev'ry Little Bug" picture disk (that boasted Billy "Will Robinson" Mummy on guitar!). Another "Ordinary Record" pressed by Kitchen Sink.*

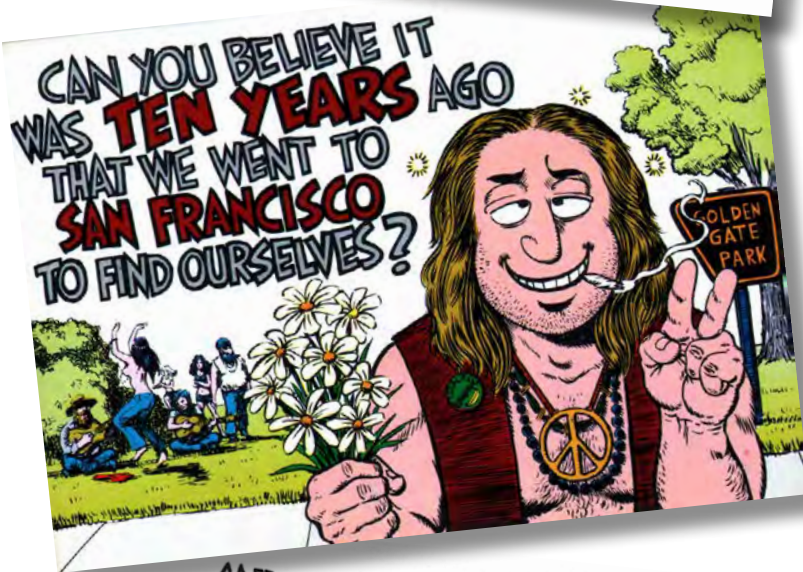
Below: *Denis Kitchen has expressed an interest in pursuing a book on American illustrator-cartoonist Harrison Cady, whose whimsical style graced the Peter Rabbit comic strip between 1920–48. Here's a superb example of the artist's work.*



The Battle of Hunker's Hill

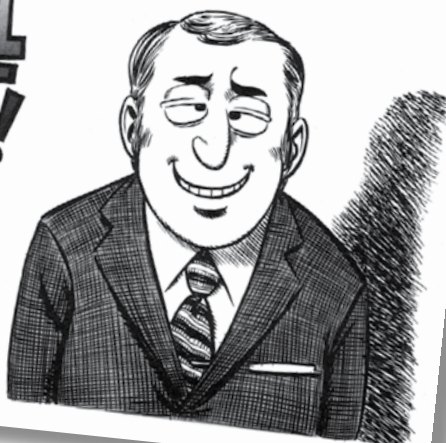


...I just wish you wouldn't flaunt it!



AND WE'RE STILL LOST!

Above: Kitchen Sink even produced counter-culture greeting cards with its Krupp-cards line. Here are a pair of cards by Howard Cruse and Steve Stiles respectively.



CBC: Yeah, where are you going to find — ? [laughs]

Denis: Exactly. Gosh, there's nobody in the Yellow Pages that does this sort of thing. I got shunted around and around. And finally, somebody said, "Try so-and-so in Nashville," and I got this old record manufacturer on the phone. And I told him what I wanted and he said, "You want a *what?*" I told him again and he said, "Well ..." He had a heavy southern accent and he spoke kind of slow, and he said, "Well, I got a machine off in the corner. It's got a tarp on it and I haven't looked at it in years. I don't know if it'll still run. I can dust it off and see. Let me get back to you." So he did and he got it operating again and he gave me a quote. It's not like I could compare quotes with a competitor, but it seemed reasonable. And my partner Tyler Lantzy kept saying to me, "You really want to do this? You really — ? You think we're going to sell it — ?" And I said, "Come on, it's fun, it's Crumb, he designed a special label and a jacket for it." I said, "People will buy it, even if they don't play it." And he said, "How can you be sure?"

CBC: Most of the people will play it. [chuckles]

Denis: Yeah, most people won't ever play it. Tyler at that time didn't quite get that collector mentality. But I knew. I just knew instinctively people will buy this thing as an artifact. So the Nashville manufacturer pressed them. I think the minimum was 5,000 — because, you know, a ten-inch vinyl disk itself was obsolete. So to make 5,000 blanks and to press them and all that, Tyler was like, "You really think we can sell 5,000?"

CBC: Five thousand? Wow.

Denis: It seemed a reach for sure, but it was too late to turn back. I said, "Aw, trust me." Soon we had publicity in *Creem* and *Rolling Stone* and all kinds of regional and alternative press, because it was such an anachronistic oddity — who's crazy enough to do this? And also it's Crumb, with his cult following. We blew out of the 5,000, then we reprinted, and sold a second 5,000, so there's two printings out there. And at that point, sales were starting to wane. We had recorded four tunes, so we could have done a second record. Crumb had designed a second Ordinary label and jacket for it and Tyler said, "I think we sated the novelty market. That's it." I couldn't really argue with him so for better or worse, we never did the second. But the success of selling 10,000 completely obsolete objects gave me confidence that we could sell the most unlikely things if they were cool enough. You can't define that, but I just instinctively knew this was cool.

CBC: [Pointing out the artwork for CBC #5 cover] What is this postcard reference?

Denis: Good eye, Jon. That's an in-joke. I collect a lot of things, as you may have noticed, but postcards have turned into a favorite avocation. That whole wall behind you here, that's covered with albums — those are filled with topical postcards. If anyone reading this interview has old postcards in their attic, or knows an Aunt Alice who has shoeboxes of postcards, they should contact me. I even like the free cards given away by publishers and many artists at bigger conventions and trade shows. If a fan attending shows regularly grabs extras of freebie postcards at shows and then mails a pile to me [P.O. Box 2250, Amherst MA 01002-2250 — **Ye Ed.**], I exchange credit in our online Steve Krupp's Curio Shoppe. For really good stashes of old ones, I'll even swap old comics, books, or original art.

CBC: What kind do you like?

Denis: All kinds, especially pre-linen early ones, but even new advertising and promo cards, as noted, hold appeal. I like any visually interesting postcards. These days I'm especially into postcards from the very early 1900s into the '30s or so, ones that depict drunks in a humorous manner. Plus the cheesy romantic cards of that era, or leap-year postcards giving women license to be aggressive, vintage automobile postcards, humor in general, and of course any comics-related cards. In the modern area I especially love tacky ones, whether intentional or not. There's something about postcards that appeal to me. They were hugely popular back in the day. Gazillions were sold for a penny each with another penny for postage. They were the email of the day. Countless publishers cranked these out and so there are almost endless varieties and themes. And they go back to the late 1890s, so they appeal to my interest in history. You get to see a visual parade of each passing decade, with evolving design styles, changing social norms, fashion of course, the way gender rela-

Cherry

America's favorite
adult comix star!



Cherry TM & ©2014 Larry Welz.

tionships are portrayed and change, and so on. They're a slide show of the culture. I enjoy sorting them thematically. For example, one of my favorite categories is drunks. I have two or three albums of just men drinking, and staggering, and sneaking home — from the early 1900s into roughly the Prohibition era. What intrigues me, given our current condemnation of drinking and driving especially, is that drunks are portrayed then as just amusing. They're funny. In virtually every one, it's not —

CBC: Judging?

Denis: — Right, not judging in a negative in any way. In fact, it's the wives who are portrayed as villains as they wait up for their drunken husbands with rolling pins ready to crack heads. There are seemingly endless variants on themes. Take one example, I find my first postcard of a drunken guy leaning against a light pole. All right, that's kind of a cliché. Then I find a variant of that, and then another one, and another one. Now I have several pages of nothing but drunks leaning on light poles! Some are cartoons, some are staged photographs, and now I'm curious just how many I'll find of that single theme. Ditto for drunks trying to find their way home, stumbling and falling, and cops lifting them up, or they're with buddies holding each other up. There are scores on each of those. Then they get home and they can't fit their key in the keyhole. This must have been absolutely hilarious in 1912 because I have bunches of those, all centering on the same visual joke. For each of these themes, I've got lots of examples, and it becomes a certain collecting challenge: how many different postcards were there with guys fumbling to put a key in the keyhole? Well, many more than you'd think. After I sort by themes, then in a case like this, I'll sort further in a presumed chronological order. First, they get drunk, then they lean on poles, then they fall down, a cop picks them up, then they find their home, then they stumble with the key, then the wife threatens to kill them, then they pass out...

CBC: Of course. And you have time to do this when?

Denis: I work long enough hours. What I'm describing might be work or tedious to some, but it's one way I relax when indoors. I'll sort cards in my man cave with TV or NPR or music in the background. I never cease to be amazed at the number of variants on any given theme from roughly a

century ago, when, to cite the one example, most of society looked at drinking in a generally tolerant and funny way. This is no longer a funny subject.

CBC: That's true.

Denis: The same cultural evolution can be seen on any topic — sexism, politics, driving cars, raising children, whatever — all societal trends are dramatically visible through postcards, because this was such an enormously popular medium, a big part of people's daily lives way before radio, TV, and mass media. It's also another medium that made frequent use of cartoons.

CBC: So you're looking at ones that are somewhat narrative in nature, that their imagery — you're not looking for a Coney Island or —

Denis: I make a narrative out of them.

CBC: So you're making sequential storytelling out of these clichés.

Denis: Yeah, it's easier to just show you some examples in the albums.

CBC: Does any series incrementally tell a story?

Denis: Well, understand that there were postcard publishers who *did* create specific sequential postcards so you'd have like a set of four, or a set of six, sometimes ten or more that tell a story. Those are typically romantic in nature.

CBC: Were they perforated?

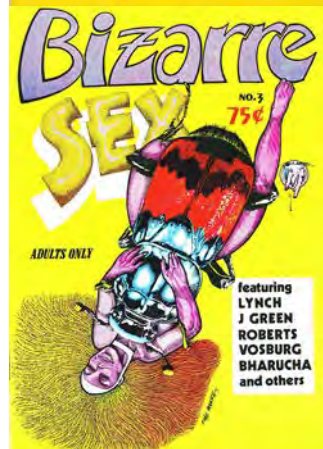
Denis: No. No, you bought them as a set, presumably, but you'd mail them to friends or a romantic partner one day at a time, as an unfolding story.

CBC: Oh, so all at the same time, they'd make sense as a set.

Denis: Right. Those kinds are usually boy-meets-girl themes where the punch line is a kiss or an embrace. Heady stuff when a mere glance at an ankle turned men on. Occasionally I'm lucky enough to find in estate sales where some guy in, say, 1906 sent such a set to a girlfriend, one day at a time, postmarked in sequence, each with the same Spencerian handwriting, and that girlfriend, maybe eventually his wife, saved them all the intervening years until maybe an unsentimental grandchild put them in a yard sale or on eBay.

CBC: That's what I was going to ask.

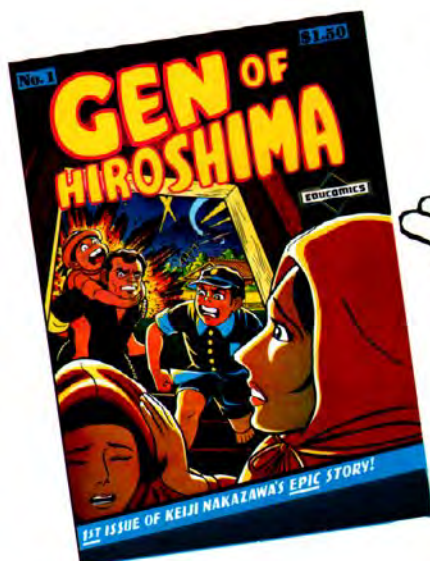
Denis: The intention was to see a visual story unfold. Does that remind you of comic strips? Anyhow the drunkard ones,



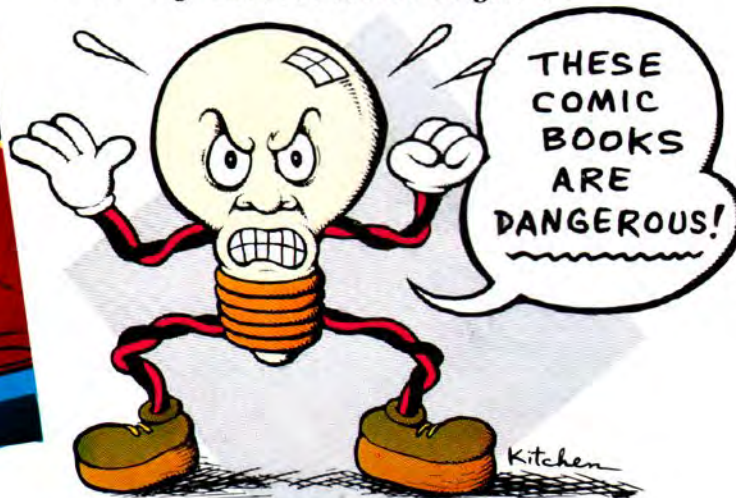
**BIZARRE
SEX
No. 4**

Retailer: Remove this
outer cover at
your own risk!

75c



Greedy Killerwatt says...



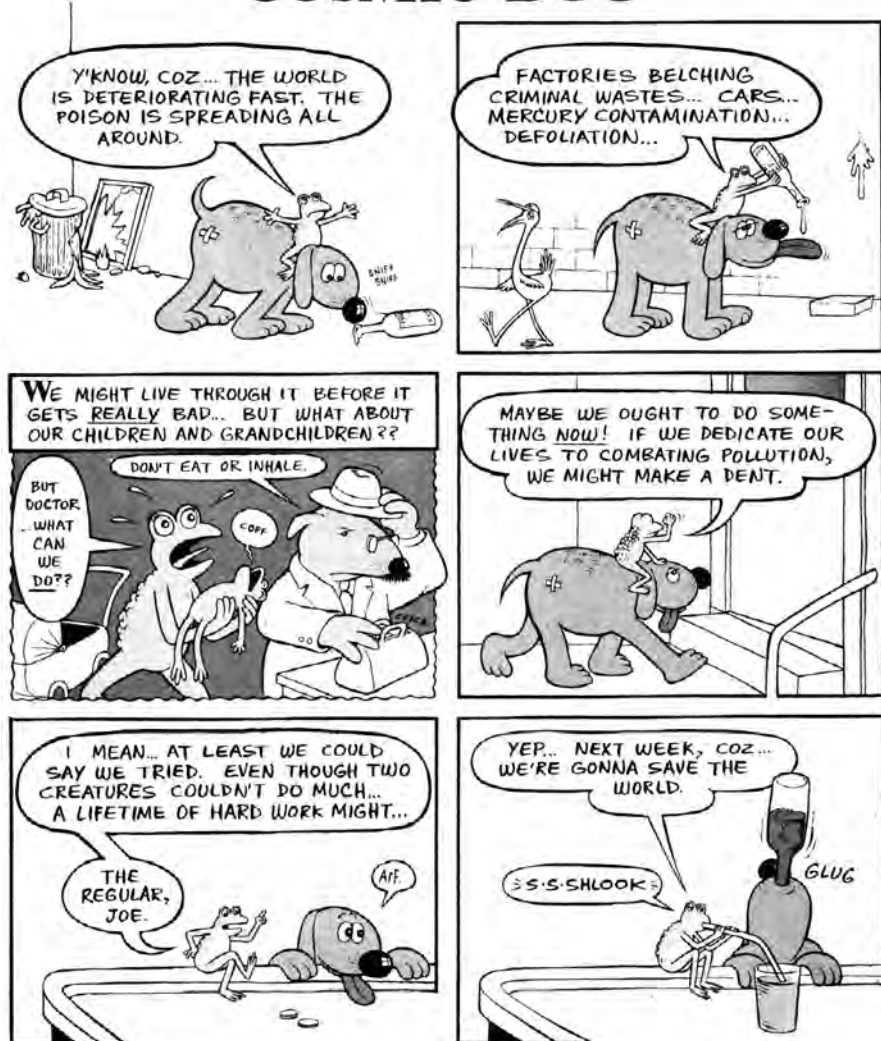
Gen of Hiroshima, Bizarre Sex ©2014 the respective copyright holders.

Denis Kitchen presents:
THOSE INTERNATIONAL SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE...

TERRY THE TURGID TOAD

and his Sidekick

COSMIC DOG



Above: Editor Denis Kitchen contribution to his anthology *Snarf*, #2 [Aug. '72]. **Previous page:** Top is Cherry Poptart, the hardcore — and exceptionally profitable — KSP-published comic by Larry Welz.

Taken from a promotional flyer courtesy of Denis Kitchen. On right are four covers of KSP's *Bizarre Sex*, the title published between 1972–84. At bottom is Denis's illustration to the back cover of Leonard Rifas's *Energy Comics* #1 [Jan. '80], a play on the innocuous electric company character *Reddy Kilowatt*. Also featured is the cover of *Gen of Hiroshima* #1 [Jan. '80], also published by the *Edu-Comics* imprint. **Next page:** Top is a certain Oddly Compelling intro writer, Neil Gaiman, checking out *The Best of Comic Book*. Below is Denis's strip, "And She Gives Good Head, Fred," from *Snarf* #9 [Feb. '81]'s back cover.

mostly, those were never intended as a set. I'm assembling them as some form of expression without a name. But I do this, also, with the eyeball cards. [chuckles] I do it with tawdry stripper cards, with hobo cards, with most of...

CBC: Ah, you got a book in mind?

Denis: Yeah, definitely, at some point, I think there could be several thematic books.

CBC: Do you never not have a book in mind? [laughter]

Denis: That's the bonus of being both a publisher and a collector — the two can easily overlap. It can also allow elements of a hobby to be tax deductible. [laughs] Maybe you saw my *Reading Comics* postcard book? That's a book that came out of another whole set of albums. I think you saw the source for that: I collect vintage photographs of people who are reading comic books and strips. The old photos of cartoonists, and newsstands might also become books. It's just a question of how you assemble or present the content for a particular audience. There's a definite story to tell with postcards, primarily as visual books, but with context that might have cross category appeal, like, anthropology, sociology, social history and so on. So yes, it's become my favorite hobby of late, even though —

CBC: You've got to show people to have them understand it? You get a lot of quizzical looks? "Really, Denis?"

Denis: To some degree, yes, I get some quizzical looks.

Also I think some people hear "postcard collecting" and they think it's a little old lady hobby, like quilting or something. But I'm always happy to pull representative samples so people who don't have a clue what we're talking about might go, "Oh, I get it now."

CBC: [Laughs] Because I know people who collect H.P. Lovecraft postcards.

Denis: Why not? I have some of those. Name almost any topic. That wall there filled with binders? All those binders are full of postcards. There are probably well over 50,000. Lovecraft is too easy. Sometime in the '90s a couple of my employees had breakfast in a café in San Diego specializing in pancakes. The owner, a woman, had giveaway postcards on the counter showing her face with a pancake on her head. Of course, I had trained them well, so they grabbed a couple, and later in the office announced they found a brand new category for me. I thanked them, but the next day I brought in several other examples of other postcards of women with food on their head, including a different woman with a pancake on her head. They were floored. I love moments like that.

CBC: You're very ill. [laughs]

Denis: Very possibly. My wife and youngest daughter tell me that quite often.

CBC: Well, we are collectors.

Denis: Yes, so you understand. Everyone needs to unwind in some way after a stressful day. In the book business there are constant deadlines and plenty of stress.

CBC: Not every day's perfect, right?

Denis: Hardly. So down time is critical for mental health. Take yesterday evening. I went downstairs and started sorting stork postcards.

CBC: Storks?

Denis: Like when storks were a universal symbol for newborn babies. It's astonishing how many stork postcards there were — and how they weren't always the obvious "stork carrying a baby." There are a ton of those. But I like the darker themed ones, long before we had birth control. Like one card where a stork with a baby is approaching an open window and the couple are chasing the stork away with a broom because they don't want a baby.

CBC: [Laughs] That's a good one. "Not here, pal."

Denis: Or I just got one where a stork is carrying twins, but one baby is black and the other is white, and the stork says, "I don't know how that happened." These cheap communication devices tell you things about the culture you might not think of. During an era a hundred years ago when you'd think a child's birth was a welcome thing, a lot of humorists at the time were using stork jokes to show, "No, we got enough kids already."

CBC: And that's the growth of immigration, too, and the Catholics in the middle of that. [laughs]

Denis: Yep, all of that. There would be like a woman with six kids who sees a stork approaching and she's shrieking, "Not me! Please!" Or another shows a stork stalking a single woman who's running away.

CBC: [Laughs] Do they — are there racial ones?

Denis: There are, sure. I don't specifically go after racial cards, which I generally find offensive, but sometimes they're part of larger card lots, and I see them. They are reflective of the culture during their time too, though usually in a disturbing way. One obvious example is the very common old Florida tourist cards where alligators are about to devour little black kids. That was considered mainstream humor well into the '40s and even beyond.

CBC: And there's a special subculture of collectors seeking...

Denis: There are, definitely. I'm a generalist, but within being a generalist, I have certain themes that particularly appeal to me like, say, eyeballs. You saw on the wall too, that I collect actual eyeballs. Well, not real human eyeballs but plastic, and glass and rubber ones. There are a couple of eyeball display cases right where you were sitting earlier — maybe you didn't even look at those.

CBC: [Laughs] No.

Denis: They were staring at you. How could you miss them? But that's another example of my urge to organize things. For years when I come across eyeballs — like everyone does, right? — I'd gradually put them in the "eyeball" drawer until there were enough to organize. Then I find the right display case, like a small printer type drawer, and arrange them till they fit perfectly right. And at that end point, I'm really glad I saved all those eyeballs for 20 years. You just have to plan ahead and be patient. I did the same thing with aliens when alien toys were especially prolific, right after the Roswell craze.

CBC: And I still have those.

Denis: I have no doubt. The nice thing about aliens is it's not like Disney or Warner owns the trademark and controls the licenses. Anybody, any company, can produce their own alien variant. And a lot of them were chintzy, cheap, plastic, crappy-looking. I'd buy them all and then arrange them in displays.

CBC: Isn't there something weird with that? Aren't there a lot of people with a particular mental illness and that's the vision that they have seen? Isn't that where they — that image comes from?

Denis: I'm not sure it's exactly a mental illness for most accounts. I think one scientific explanation for claims of nighttime abductions is called sleep paralysis. I'm intrigued by the whole flying saucer and alien sub-culture, but I don't buy into the various claims for a second.

CBC: It's like disparate. You can have somebody in Borneo having the same kind of vision of an alien, describing an alien in exactly the same way someone in Brooklyn does.

Denis: No, they typically don't, Jon. The actual truth is that the prototype we've come to know as the classic alien — you know, the so-called "gray" with the big elliptical eyes — it comes from TV shows and movies.

CBC: From Close Encounters, basically?

Denis: Before that, even. There was the story of Betty and Barney Hill, the alleged abductees who'd described being kidnapped by saucer beings in the '60s. There was a TV movie [The UFO Incident, 1975] based on their claims that early on established the prototype that other people would later claim to see. Millions who saw that show had that particular image placed in their minds. That UFO culture fascinates. I've gotten a lot of books on it over the years, many by true believers, starting with flagrant hoaxers like George Adamski, right through that Heaven's Gate suicide cult. I'm just morbidly attracted to it because —

CBC: Yeah, because it's weird. [chuckles]

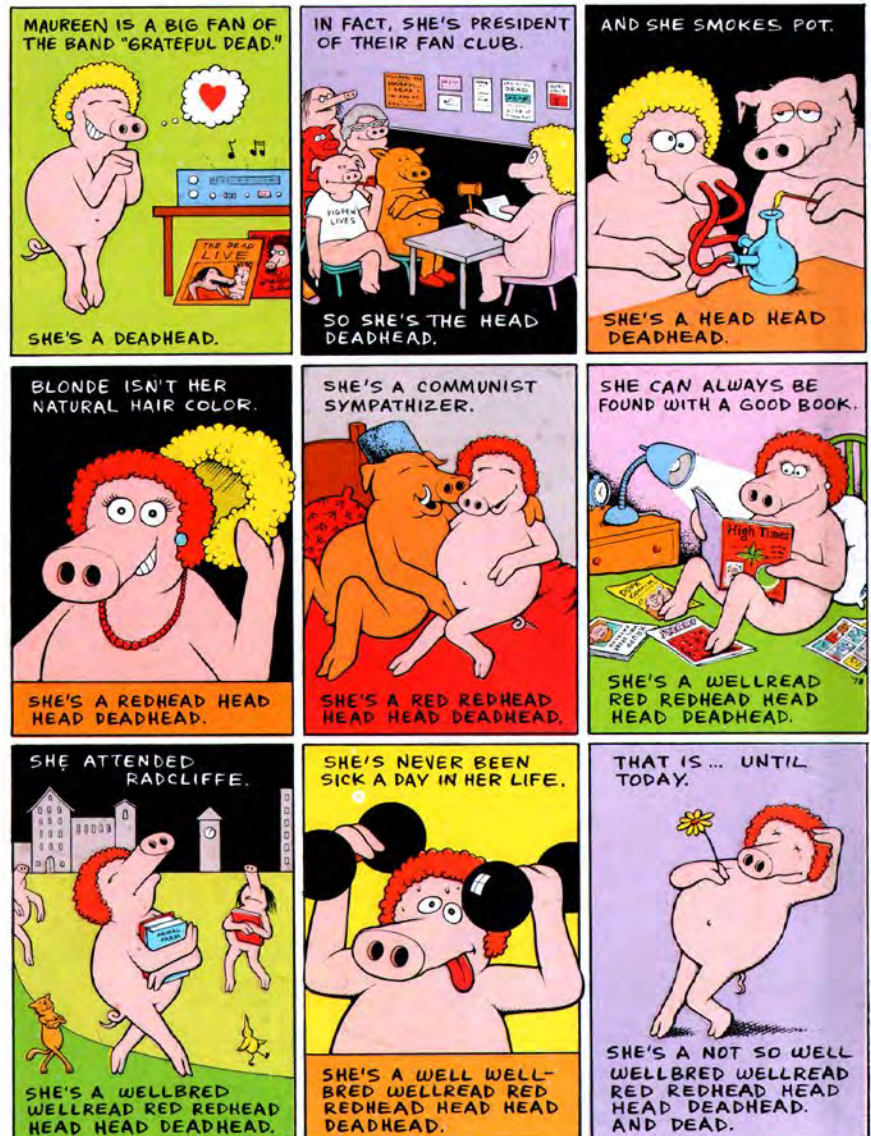
Denis: Because it's so freaking weird, right, and because so many people seem to truly believe we're visited by aliens. A shocking number if you believe the Gallup polls.

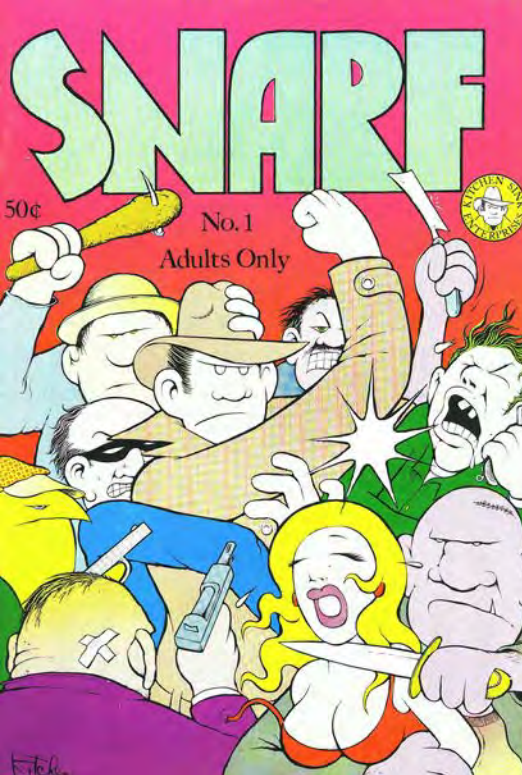
CBC: What's up with Kitchen Sink Books?

Denis: Ah... so we are going to talk about comics again? Well, the first book the new Kitchen Sink Books imprint is doing is *The Best of Comix Book*, about the experimental magazine I assembled for Stan Lee back in 1974. It's being collected for the first time in 40 years. I wrote a forward for it, James Vance wrote a longer essay, and Stan provided a really nice introduction. In fact Stan also signed a very limited edition of the book. How often does Stan do that? He was really quite proud of *Comix Book*. It's unlike anything else he ever did in his career — no capes and no alter-egos. And it's creator-owned. That was a first for the big companies back then. It's what Jim and I largely write about in our text. There's some real interesting material. Many will be surprised, for example, that *Comix Book* was the first real national exposure for Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. Or how many people realize that Stan Lee used to send checks to S. Clay Wilson? Trina Robbins did a story about Wonder Woman getting knocked up. And artists like Basil Wolverton and Alex Toth are in the collection too, so it wasn't just underground cartoonists. John Lind designed the book, so it looks great.

Our goal is to do four, five, maybe six projects a year. There won't be something every month, but there'll be quite a variety. Some will be in a coffee table book format, on particular artists or subjects, ones that should appeal to a broad set of collectors and be commercially popular. Then there'll be other books, not likely best sellers, but ones we have a passion for, ones that John and I think deserve to be done. Mike Richardson has guaranteed us editorial autonomy, and as long as the line as a whole makes some money and both sides are happy, we'll continue the relationship. At this point in my career, I just want to make good books, ones I'm proud of, ones that have some significance, and are fun to assemble. John Lind wants exactly the same thing.

But, to be clear, I don't want to start a Kitchen Sink Press all over with a few dozen employees and to have to deal with printers and distributors and warehousing and collecting money and all that. I don't want those hassles and headaches again. By having a joint venture with Dark Horse, John and I get to do the editorial and design part, they do the rest and it's a perfect kind of partnership. We just get the editorial and design headaches and hassles. [laughs] We've been packaging books for top trade publishers for several years now and we've done books we're very proud of, but it's often really frustrating. The large publishers always have the last word. You can turn in a book you think looks perfect and they'll inevitably want to change the cover, or change this, change that. You have to inhale deeply, count to ten, and go, "Okay," because they're in charge. They're the ones paying you to package the book. It's not even to say, "We're





This and the next three pages:

Covers for the Denis Kitchen-edited humor anthology *Snarf*. After Denis snagged Will Eisner to draw #3's cover, the editor hoped to persuade top-echelon cartoonists to draw covers and he met great success, with contributions from Harvey Kurtzman, Robert Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Will Elder, among other comic luminaries.

Below and next page bottom

right: Two, though, who got away as *Snarf* cover artists despite heavy Kitchen lobbying, were Ernie Bushmiller, creator of *Nancy*, and Li'l Abner's Al Capp. With Bushmiller, Denis never got past the syndicated cartoonist's wife and with regards to Capp, the money KSP could offer just didn't make the bon vivant's pay grade.

always right, or we're always the smartest ones in the room," but it's a respect thing. We no longer want to argue over which font to use or what the cover approach is, or the logo, or whatever the issues might be. At this stage, John and I feel we've got the track record, with longevity and numerous awards for design and overall content, enough that we've earned that creative autonomy. We don't expect Dark Horse to underwrite Kitchen Sink Books if they lose money. It's a business proposition. But we do expect the final say, or in film terms, the final cut. That's why we're with Dark Horse. Mike gives us that respect, and we, in turn, respect his organization.

CBC: *What's after your Comix Book collection?*

Denis: Well, I can reveal a bit. A new edition of Kurtzman's *Jungle Book* is in production. That 1959 solo work is an absolute classic, but it's been out-of-print since the previous Kitchen Sink collection 25 years ago. This one will feature new design, a new essay by me, new design, and Crumb has promised a new intro. Plus we'll recycle Art Spiegelman's earlier intro. We're excited about that one. Hopefully a new generation of comic

fans can appreciate Kurtzman's genius.

We're also working with Monte Beauchamp on a terrific book called *Popular Skullture*, which showcases a couple hundred skull-related covers from old comic books and paperbacks. Steve Heller's doing the intro for that. I will probably get in trouble if I tell you anything after those.

CBC: *Are most comics related or are they all mixed up?*

Denis: Predominantly comics related, but we've got at least a couple of things on the list that have nothing to do with comics, or peripheral, like *Popular Skullture*. Some fall into more of a pop culture realm and others are more in the illustration vein than comics. We can't be typecast. Just like comics.

CBC: *Mm-hmm. And what else are you doing? Is that your predominant focus right now, what you're doing?*

Denis: Well, I think your cover says it all. There are a few hats. But that's my predominant focus, yeah. I did recently draw a five-page color comic story, a mini-biography of Dr. Seuss.

CBC: *Where will that appear?*

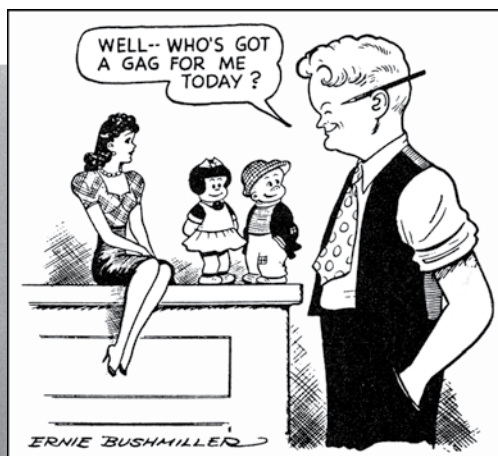
Denis: It'll be in *Masterful Marks: Cartoonists Who Changed the World*. It'll be out this coming fall from Simon & Schuster. Monte edited that one.

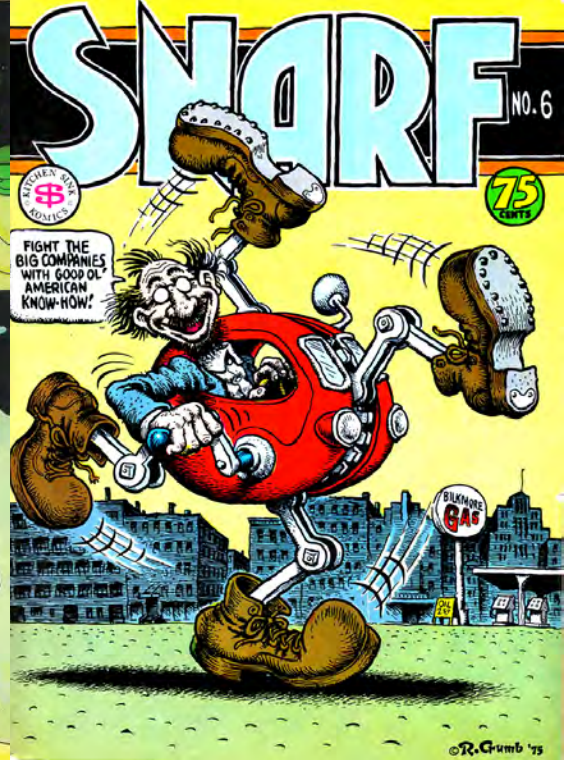
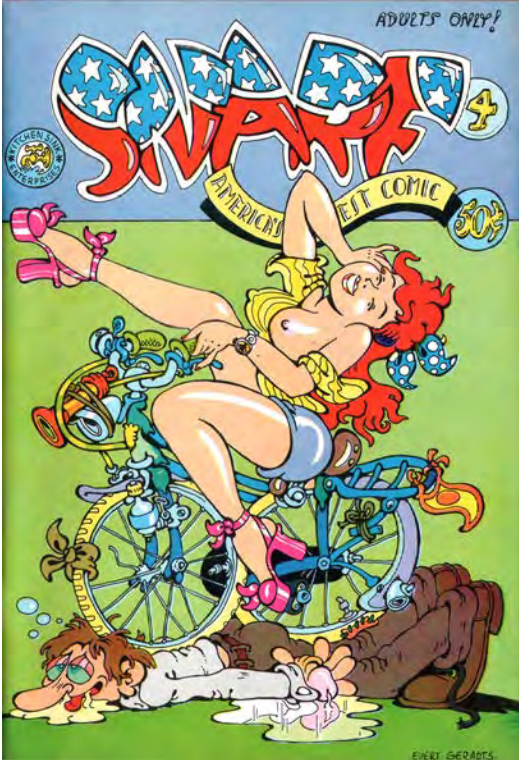
CBC: *Do you have any dream projects?*

Denis: [Long pause] I'm not sure I can answer that. That's a —

CBC: *You do have one?*

Denis: Well, there are a lot of things, a lot of projects I'd like to do. Some are getting periodically fulfilled. The Al Capp biography that I did recently with Schumacher, that was a dream project that finally materialized. I've been doing these "chipboard" drawings for years and throwing them in drawers. A selection finally got published a couple years ago. That collection and the feedback from it inspired me to do more. So, on many evenings, if I'm not reading or filing postcards, I'll be drawing on chipboard. I've been surprisingly prolific, and the new ones are much better, I think. There are probably enough for another book now. Maybe it'll be a Kitchen Sink book, or I'll self publish it, I don't know. Some people seem to dig them. They're surreal, and spontaneous, and have a pretty unique look. And I've got a couple of exhibits coming up, one is in Holyoke in October and a solo exhibit in Brooklyn in, I think, late 2014 or early 2015 at the Scott Eder Gallery in Brooklyn. And so we'll see if —





CBC: You got something in October, you say?

Denis: Yeah, in Holyoke, Massachusetts. There's a group show I'll be in. I'm not very plugged in locally. I live here, and love where I live, but I don't know much about local politics or the regional art scene. I'm not plugged into the community, really. I'm pretty disconnected because I'm immersed in so many projects. I don't come up to breathe that often.

CBC: Right.

Denis: So I seldom mingle in town. But Gary Hallgren, the cartoonist, he's plugged in and he lives nearby.

CBC: Oh, does he?

Denis: He's about 15 minutes away, and we're old pals. Gary participates in a lot of group shows. He talked me into joining this one and that's new for me. I don't usually get involved with galleries. But I've agreed to do some new paintings for that show, experiment with some ideas I have. So we'll see how that goes.

CBC: What's the genesis of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund?

Denis: In late 1986, I got a call from Frank Mangiaracina. He was a regional distributor in Gary who also owned a small chain of stores in Indiana and the Chicago area. He said Michael Correa, his store manager in Lansing, a suburb of Chicago, was busted and the cops confiscated a number of titles. *Omaha the Cat Dancer*, one of Kitchen Sink's long-running series, was one of them. But the bust included some relatively innocuous things like *Heavy Metal* and even *Ms. Tree* and *ElfQuest*. And so he sent me —

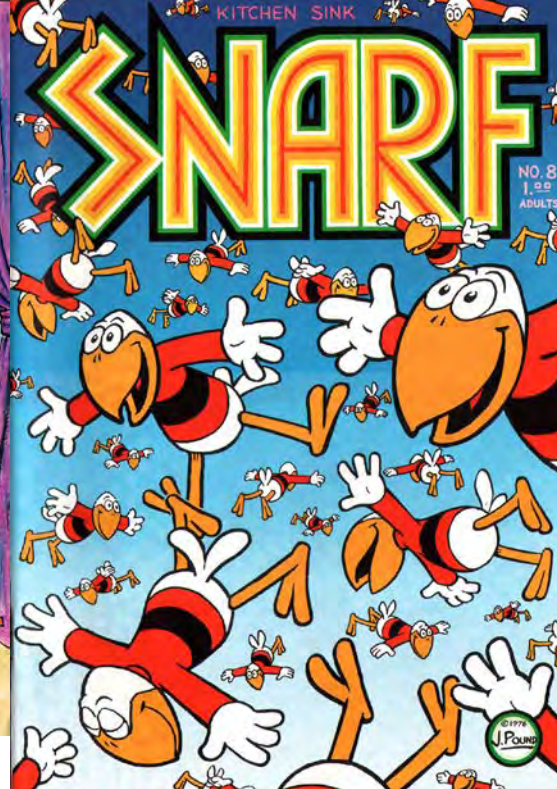
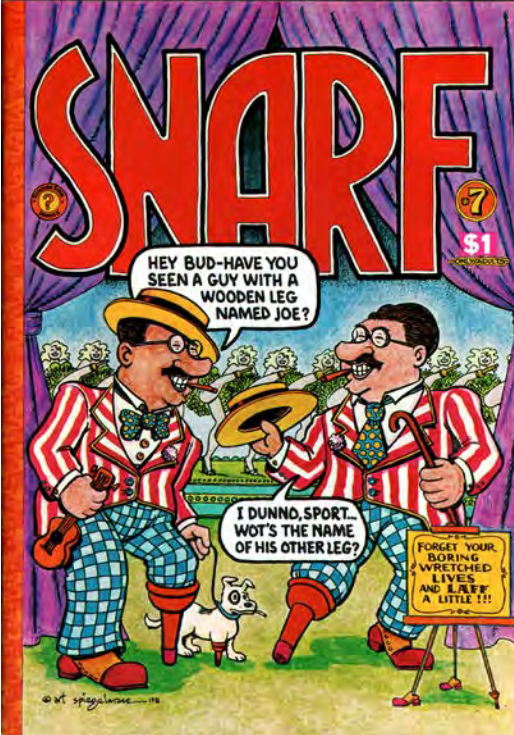
CBC: And *Weirdo*.

Denis: I think so, yeah, *Weirdo* was nabbed too. Frank sent me a clipping that appeared in the local paper and I was just dumbfounded, because the cop was self-deluded and stupid enough to talk candidly to the reporter. He told the reporter that the shop was selling vile stuff with an "otherworldly influence" and things that were *Satanic*. He said, "If you know what you're looking for you can see the satanic influence everywhere." So I realized right away the cop making the bust is a religious nut. This is beyond obscenity — he's seeing the Devil at work. So I said, "What are you going to do?" And he said, "I hired a lawyer and we'll contest it." But he hired a local lawyer who had no experience in First Amendment law and one of their mistakes was bringing in Cat Yronwode as an expert witness. The jury had seen the busted publications, some of which were quite sexually graphic, but clearly intended for adult readers. With Cat on the stand, the prosecuting attorney said, "Would you let

your children read these comics?" And Cat was like, "Yeah, sure, I'd have no problem with that." And so even though the case had nothing to do with children reading the busted comics, she apparently lost all credibility with the jury with that comment. They found Correa guilty. He faced a significant fine and some jail time.

At that point, I felt, "Oh, man, I've got to do something here." So I told Frank, "I'm going to raise some money so you and Michael can get a really top-notch attorney to appeal this. It can't come down this way." The very next convention I was at was in the Twin Cities and Sergio Aragonés was there. I think he was the first I asked. I said, "If I put together a fund-raising portfolio for Frank's manager, would you contribute?" And Sergio said, "Absolutely!" Reed Waller, *Omaha's* artist, lived in Minneapolis and, of course, he agreed to do a piece. Then I contacted Will Eisner and Crumb and Rich Corben, Frank Miller, Steve Bissette, Howard Cruse, and — I have to look — ten or 12 artists to each do a piece for the portfolio. I did a plate, too. And then I talked to my printer and said, "This is for a good cause, will you just do it at cost?" He agreed. I talked to the distributors and I said, "Will you pass this along without taking a cut?" I think they all agreed. I tried everything to minimize cost and maximize the revenue. I set up an account under the name Comic Book Legal Defense Fund. Then I found a highly respected First Amendment attorney in Chicago named Burt Joseph. He had put together the Playboy Foundation and had worked with Hefner on a number of key court tests. I met him in person, was impressed, and said, "You're the man." He took the case to the Appellate Court and overturned the conviction. After paying him, there was still some significant money in the special account I had created, I think in the neighborhood of \$20,000.





This page and next: More imaginative Snarf covers, including the unpublished #16.



Below: Our esteemed resident photographer Seth Kushner (that's he above in a pic taken by Ye Ed) is currently ailing with a serious malady and all of us at Casa CBC offer our deepest wishes to our chum. Here's Seth pic of Denis Kitchen taken at Baltimore Con last year.



So, at that point, I asked myself, "Should I just give this money to a deserving charity or should the CBLDF maybe be a permanent organization? Are there going to be more busts?" And I thought, "Maybe we just don't hear about other busts. There could easily be more incident like Friendly Frank's." So I decided to keep it going and to build a formal organization. I filed for 501(c) 3 status, the IRS category for non-profit organizations, and built a board. I invited a couple of guys who had been particularly helpful with fundraising and volunteering. One was Minneapolis book dealer Greg Ketter, then we asked IADD, the association of direct distributors, to nominate someone, knowing they would select Frank Mangiaracina, the distributor/retailer who first called me about the bust. Early on, we wanted to make sure the board represented all facets of the industry: distribution retail, publishing and creators. We kept Burt Joseph on retainer to review any proposed case, to make sure any applicant's claim for assistance was within the parameters of the First Amendment. We also had charitable and educational guidelines as part of our 501(c) 3 charter.

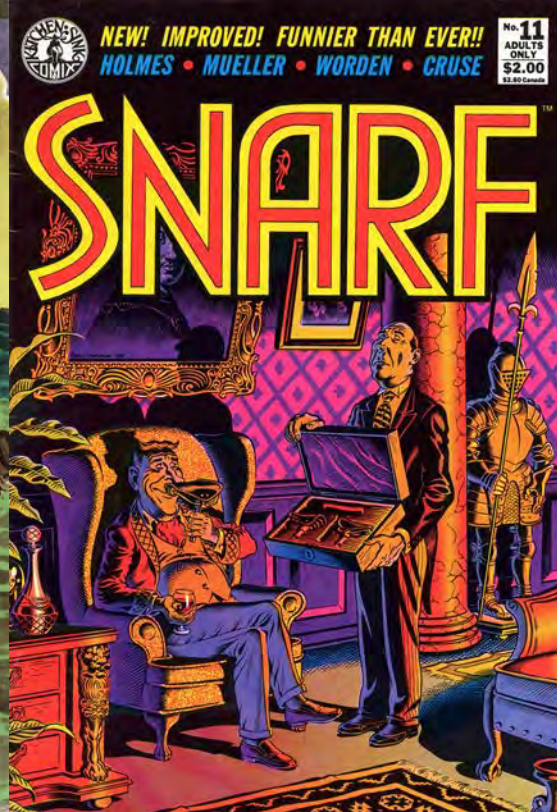
So gradually the CBLDF grew, raised more funds, took on other cases, hired specialty attorneys, employed full-time staff and became an umbrella organization for the whole industry. For the first time a retailer, for example, in a situation comparable to Michael Correa, could call an 800-number and know they'd immediately have someone pay attention and offer fast, professional legal assistance, whereas in the past, similar situations would pass unknown. If you weren't in the town where an incident happened, more often than not, it didn't even make the news. We heard many stories of cops coming into shops, telling a retailer, "I don't like those comics. You better get them off your shelf," and they'd usually comply to avoid trouble. It was that kind of quiet intimidation. So over the years, we had a good number of cases where an overzealous prosecutor or police officers, most typically in the Bible Belt, but not always, would do their best to censor the content of comics shops. We also had cases that didn't involve alleged obscenity, like cartoonist Paul Mavrides in San Francisco, who balked when the State of California's Board of Equalization tried to charge him a sales tax for simply mailing his orig-

inal comic art to his publisher, also in California. That ended up being a very expensive case that we finally overturned, and it had nothing to do with sex.

We had the notorious Michael Diana case where Michael initially was a suspect in a Florida serial killing that he had nothing to do with, but in the course of discovery, the police found these cartoon booklets he was self-publishing and selling or trading to like-minded people and they busted him for obscenity. The books were pretty graphic and blasphemous: Jesus mutilating and having sex with children, strong stuff, but done for his personal amusement and a tiny number of adults. The jury found him guilty and the judge went way beyond any case we'd ever heard of. As part of Diana's sentencing, the judge, said Diana was no longer allowed to draw, even in the privacy of his own home, and law enforcement would spot-check him. We were like, "You can't do that! You just can't do that. That's beyond the pale." But that was the sentence. We tried to appeal it all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but the Supreme Court declined to hear the case. We were appalled. You can't win them all and that case is now a standing precedent.

But, most of the time, we successfully intervene and stare down a prosecutor, or if we go to court we prevail. After founding the CBLDF and chairing it for, I think, 18 years, I resigned a few years ago, and urged the board to have term limits, which they've since implemented, because I think organizations need fresh blood periodically. And then a year or so back, the board decided to create an advisory board so now, Neil Gaiman and I co-chair the CBLDF Advisory Board. The other advisors include people like Mike Richardson and Matt Groening and others, assisting in fundraising kind of industry elders in certain situations. So I'm still peripherally involved, but not day-to-day. At the very beginning I just felt very strongly about abuse of power and I felt protective about *Omaha*. I loved that series and thought it was obscene to be called "obscene." Anybody who's ever read it knows it's a very literate, humanistic story that, yes, has some sex in it. But so do a lot of great literary novels. To single it out, along with others in that bust that was just idiotic. We have to prevent ignorant or close-minded cops and prosecutors from pulling worthy things out of stores. Most retailers don't have the means to properly defend themselves. These are often very expensive cases. So there has to be an organization that can help.

CBC: Is there a team of lawyers that — ?

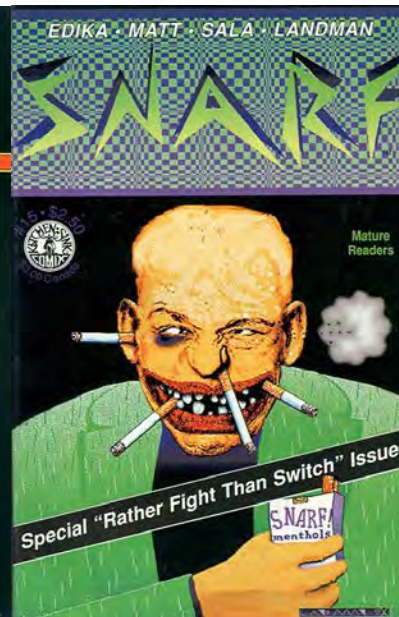
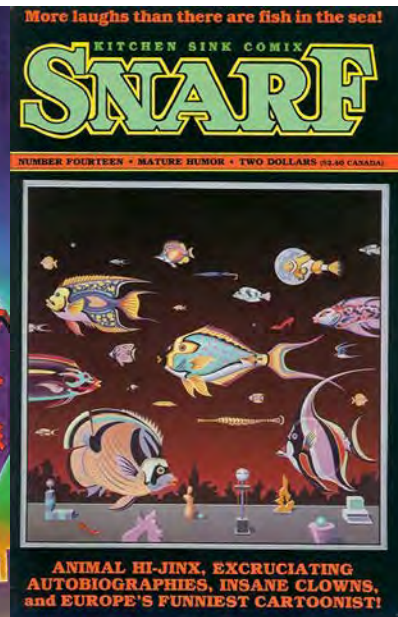


Denis: Burt Joseph has since died so there's a new expert attorney on retainer. Often the CBLDF will work with the ACLU in certain areas because they have many affiliated attorneys who are serious First Amendment specialists. Occasionally we will find regional attorneys who will do the legal work pro bono. More often than not, we help applicants find a qualified regional attorney and, where possible, negotiate a reduced rate. Cases can easily cost several tens of thousands of dollars. Sometimes, just by coming in to a fresh situation with an organization like the CBLDF with a long track record and a reputation for tenacity, and one that's media-savvy, some local officials will just back down, because when they busted a guy, they didn't realize some national organization was willing to come in and make a big case out of it. And the truth is, in many cases, they fully understand the local ordinance they use to bust the guy isn't going to stand up to scrutiny because it will be proven unconstitutional up the legal chain. So if a CBLDF attorney points that out to them, they will sometimes back down and drop the charges because they don't want a bad headline that makes it look like they're wasting taxpayer money on a case they're going to eventually lose. A lot of times, it is just local politics. It's real easy, if — let's say — you're a district attorney running for re-election, to bust somebody for obscenity. You look like a local hero, right? It's just too easy. And in some cases, like the police officer in Lansing, Illinois that cracked down on Friendly Frank's shop,

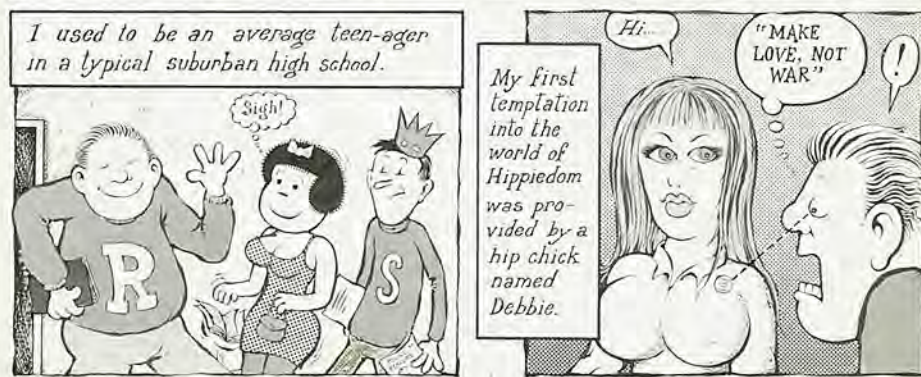
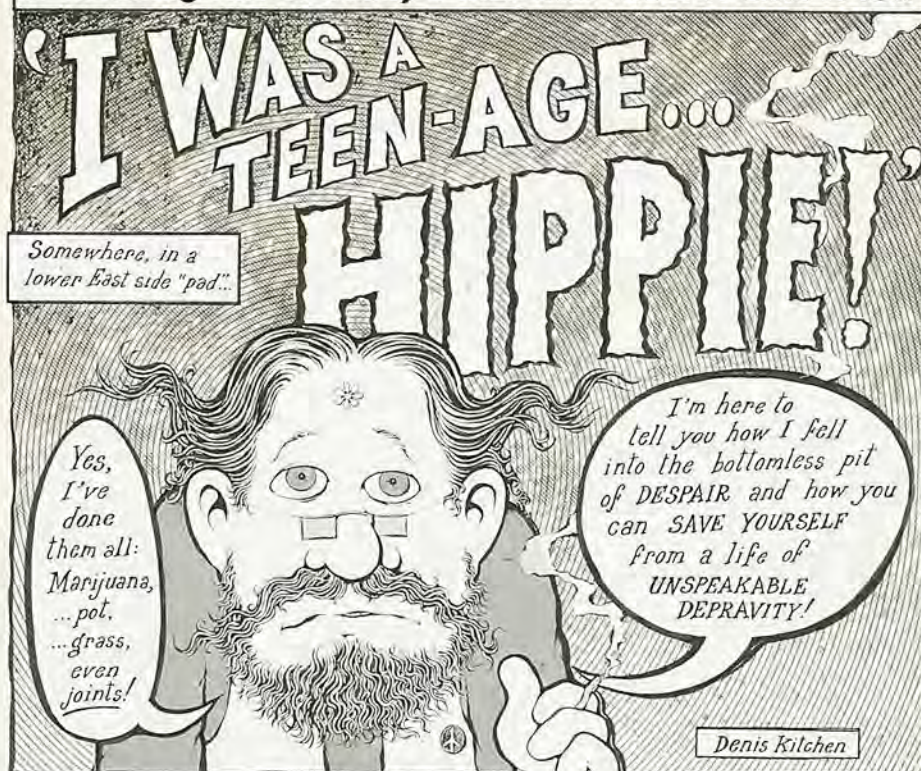
it was a religious cop who was personally offended. It had nothing to do with the law. How can a comic be satanic?

CBC: How about Hot Stuff? [chuckles] Is there any sense that, obviously initial, is that children are being exposed to this? Is there any kind of shift that's taking place that where comics aren't kid stuff anymore?

Denis: Typically there are local ordinances that set reasonable standards for display of adult material. If you're selling skin magazines, for example, or X-rated videos, anything like that, there are local laws that say sales have to be to customers 18 or over. And if you have mixed product in your store, you have to have a segregated area. Typically, an ordinance will say such material has to be out of sight or out of the reach of a child. In some locales, such material must literally be in a separate room behind a curtain. Towns and cities regulate these things and its usually just common sense. If you're a retailer, don't be stupid, right? We had at least a couple of cases where comic store clerks were set up, where the police sent someone in who was 17 years and 11 months old to buy an X-rated comic, and if the guy behind the counter routinely took the money without asking for an ID, suddenly, he's in handcuffs. Some retailers are too lazy to routinely check or, frankly, they don't want to lose the sale. Who thinks they're under surveillance and going to be set up? So part of the CBLDF's ongoing educational program is teaching retailers to be smart, to be aware of local restrictions, things like that.



A shocking tale of today's kids that TELLS IT LIKE IT IS!!



Above: Splash to Denis Kitchen's Teen-age Horizons of... Shangrila #1 [Summer '70] contribution. Courtesy of Heritage Auctions.

CBC: You do outreach?

Denis: The Fund is doing that now, yes. Charles Brownstein, the executive director, recently showed me booklets now being disseminated, to help educate retailers and the public. Neil Gaiman funded the creation of these materials. For a long time, we didn't have the spare resources to do such things. It's step-by-step as staff and budget permit.

CBC: That would actually — a good, effective outreach would benefit the organization, right? Because there would be less chance of these mishaps occurring.

Denis: Yes. And they need every aid that can be made available. You know, it's not always easy to be a retailer. You're ordering hundred and hundreds of new products every month. You can't possibly read or view everything in your store. And you might have somebody inexperienced or lazy helping you, maybe you're on vacation, and somebody's filling in who isn't as savvy as you, or not taking precautions as you would. It's easy for a retailer sometimes to accidentally get in trouble, especially where a borderline age is involved or an ordinance says this material has to be four feet off the ground and yours was three and a half feet or whatever. If authorities, for whatever reason, want to get you, they can probably find a reason.

It's like "Stop and Frisk." If the police stop and frisk enough people who look suspicious or are of a certain color,

you know, some percent of the time, they're going to find a drug or a weapon. But should they be able to just stop anyone they don't like the looks of? Those of us who live in Rhode Island or Massachusetts, like you and I, there's less concern about basic rights being violated. But if you've got a comic shop in, say, Alabama, I think you have to be extra judicious. There will be many people in the community who'd rather you weren't selling *Dungeons and Dragons* "devil worship" games or "weird" comic books, and you will be continually under scrutiny and vulnerable. We had a case in Texas where a shop was busted and the case was very weak. The two owners were exonerated, but the bust alone made the local newspaper headline, to the effect of "Local Comic Shop Busted for Obscenity." The bad press caused one partner to lose his girlfriend, and for the shop to go out of business. It pretty much ruined these guy's lives and livelihood. The CBLDF can win cases, but we can't turn restore lives. You usually can't restore a reputation once it's sullied, especially in smaller towns.

CBC: Right. So has outreach been discussed for a while?

Denis: Remember, I resigned close to a decade ago, so I'm no longer privy to internal detail, how long certain things have been discussed before being implemented.

CBC: Was that a thought back in the day?

Denis: Yeah, oh yeah. The concept was certainly on the fund's agenda for a while. It's always a question of human and financial resources, and how you allocate them. We had to grow from just me volunteering time and me volunteering my secretary Paula's time, back in the late '80s, to finally getting a part-time executive director, Thom Powers in the early '90s. When I came to Northampton, I hired Susan Alston as the first full time executive director. She had been with Tundra, one of the people I mistakenly fired a short time earlier. Now, today, the CBLDF has a full-time executive director, Charles, and Alex Cox, the deputy director, who focuses on administration and conventions, and another full-time staffer focusing on fund raising. There are also merchandise donations from publishers and artists, often sold at cons or as incentives where if you donate money, you get a free book, or free T-shirt

or whatnot. It's like your local public radio station soliciting donations and...

CBC: Kickstarter.

Denis: Yeah, any device that make it easier to donate to a cause. When you go to a convention now, chances are you're going to see a CBLDF booth with staffers or volunteers who can tell you about the Fund and you can buy merchandise that's been donated by publishers. It's just constant fundraising to maintain the organization and to pay for the periodic legal battles.

CBC: Hmm, and has it been a steady history that's taken place? It's been up and down, it's probably been difficult, has it always been a struggle?

Denis: You mean in terms of victories versus defeats or...?

CBC: The survival as an organization.

Denis: I don't think I ever felt it wouldn't survive, but there were times when it was lean and when the amount in the war chest made us nervous. There were times when if we had a really big case, we would have had to really scramble, but there are times when some months might go by without a major case and so you'd build up the chest. And then, when there is a big case, then that's helpful in a way because people see the news stories and a person on the line and they realize the threat to free speech is real.

CBC: Right, one of ours.

Denis: Exactly.

CBC: I remember a situation with Marvel and Megaton Man.

Denis: [Chuckles] Well, that one wasn't handled by the CBLDF. It was more of a tempest in a teapot. Don created a set of *Megaton Man* buttons that we were promoting through his comic books, and one of the buttons had Megaton Man saying, "I eat X-Men for breakfast!" The Marvel attorneys contacted us. They said, "You can't use that name. That's our trademark." I said, "It's a joke! This is parody. It's Megaton Man, an over-muscled character with the brain of a nematode saying he can eat your guys for breakfast. That's fair use." And they were like, "We're sending you a cease-and-desist." I basically said, "We made a thousand buttons. You want to make a federal case or sue over a lousy thousand buttons? Go ahead. It's going to make you look stupid, make Kitchen Sink and Don Simpson look sympathetic to fans and I'm going to sell a lot more *Megaton Man*. Is that your game plan?" Basically, it went away quietly, but it was something of public tiff because somebody leaked their threat to *The Comic Buyer's Guide* and *Comics Journal*, places like that, probably to make it look like a David and Goliath thing. Actually, now that I think back, it was *me* who leaked it. [Laughs] Anyway, the powers at Marvel at the time backed off. It wasn't worth it.

CBC: With your peers though, there was the *Air Pirates* case.

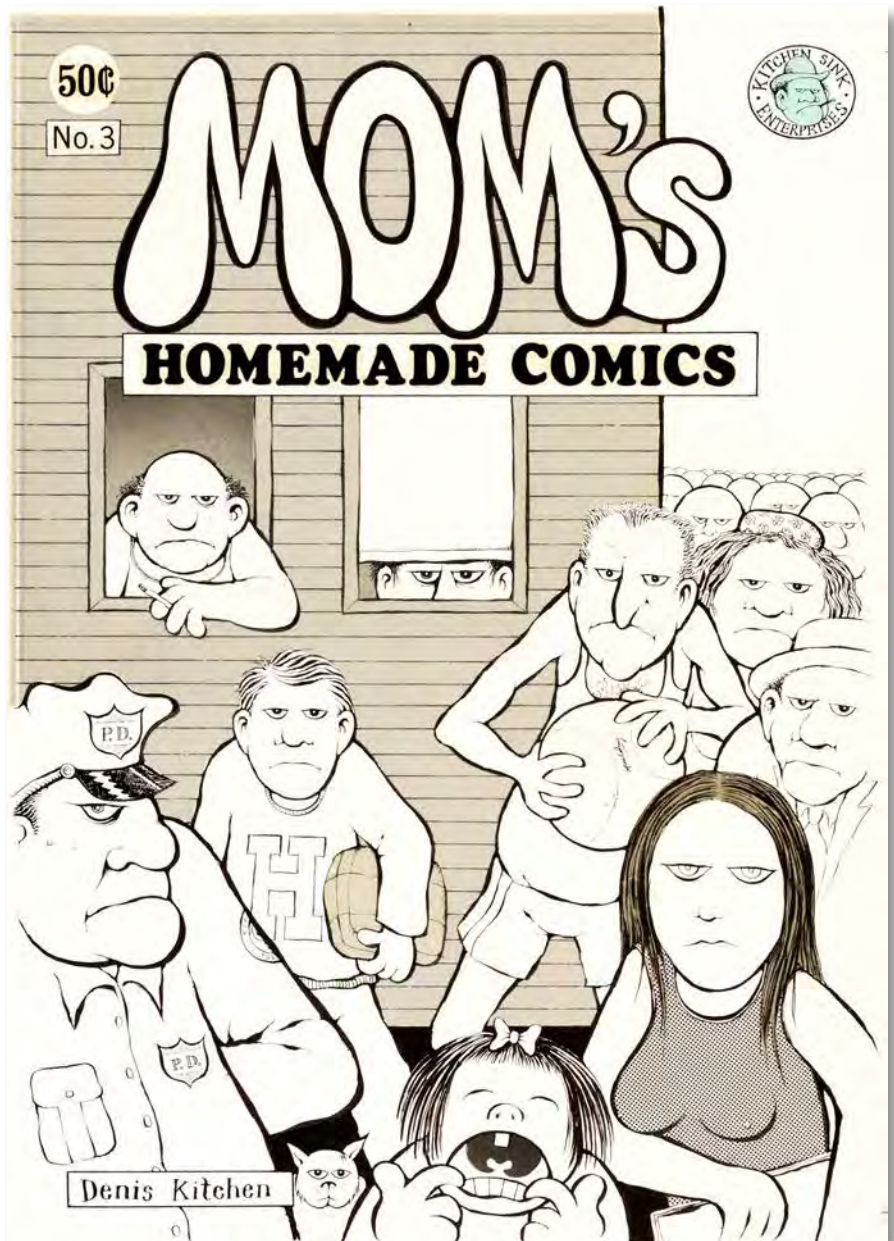
Denis: Well, yes, and Disney hammered them into submission. But you know what? I disagreed with Dan O'Neill on that quixotic effort. His position was essentially that Mickey Mouse had become such an American icon, that he effectively belonged to the public, that the *Pirates* could do whatever they wanted with Mickey. Parody is one thing, and very important, but they took it well beyond a single story to make a point. They created two entire comic books with explicit X-rated versions of Mickey and Minnie, and other characters long associated with children's comics and cartoons. I personally thought they were overreaching. Believe me, I have no fondness for the corporate Disney empire, but if somebody had done what the *Pirates* did to a character or property I owned, and it went beyond a one-shot, I would probably be pretty pissed and take action too. You have a right to take satiric pot shots at anything, but the *Pirates* just went too far, persisted after they made an initial point. The Supreme Court shut the *Air Pirates* down in a nine-to-nothing vote, so even the most liberal justices had no sympathy for their legal arguments. I just picked up the book about that legal battle, the one by Bob Levin, so I'm curious to see his breakdown of that whole showdown.

CBC: Did you have debates at the time, discussions at the time? Did people, any of the — ?

Denis: Sure. Remember, most of the *Pirates* were friends of mine. Gary Halgren's still a close pal like a mentioned earlier. I liked Ted Richards. I liked Sherri Flennikin — in fact Sherri and I came close to being a couple at one point — Bobby, and Dan, the ringleader, I liked all of them. I just thought taking on Disney was a futile task that would eat up their time and limited resources and all for the wrong reason. My feeling was, "You guys are all really talented, develop your own characters. Don't try to take over Disney's characters." I think most of them regret the battle in retrospect because of the time and energy drain and the constant angst. They might have had their earnings garnished for life. I mean, these were real fears. [chuckles] If you mess with the big boys, they're going to come down real hard on you. Is it worth it? I know some agree it was just a crazy, quixotic thing to do...

CBC: Do you remember any comic book projects that you regret passing up?

Denis: Oh, sure. Yeah, there were quite a few over the years. At one point, Crumb offered me *Weirdo* magazine. I loved the stuff he was personally doing for it, but he was



using some material — what I thought was god-awful stuff — by street people and rank amateurs who I thought didn't have a scintilla of talent. But he liked giving a platform to a certain kind of cartoon folk art, stuff I had no aesthetic regard for. So while I had the utmost respect for Crumb the cartoonist, I didn't like Crumb as an editor, so I turned him down.

CBC: Do you have regrets?

Denis: I think that decision was too hasty and short-sighted in retrospect, yeah. When Crumb stopped editing it and he let Pete Bagge edit *Weirdo*, Pete Bagge also offered it to me. And again, I'm not sure quite why that time, but I turned it down again. So that's one example. Also, fairly early on, I'd get submissions from some cartoonists who I didn't think were quite ready and thought they needed a little more time to develop, and then sometimes I missed out on them entirely. Chris Ware was a prime example. He was corresponding with me while he was still in college in Austin, Texas. I remember Dave Schreiner and I were looking at Chris's submissions a couple times, thinking he might be close for *Snarf*, but saying, "He's close, but he needs a little more time." The next thing we know — *poof!* — he's somewhere else. Timing is so much a part of publishing, which is why I always liked to use anthologies to give young artists a toe in the door, to build a relationship and let them feel their oats. Why didn't we give Chris Ware that toe in the

Above: Also courtesy of Heritage, D.K.'s paranoid cover art for *Mom's Homemade Comics* #3 [Feb. '71].



Above: A couple of catalog covers from Kitchen Sink Press and its sister organization, Krupp. Both courtesy of Denis Kitchen.

Right inset: The dual conflicting nature of one Denis Lee Kitchen: Businessman and creator is emphasized in this D.K. caricature.

Below: The new chapter in Denis Kitchen's life is the Dark Horse imprint Kitchen Sink Books, which Denis runs with partner John Lind.

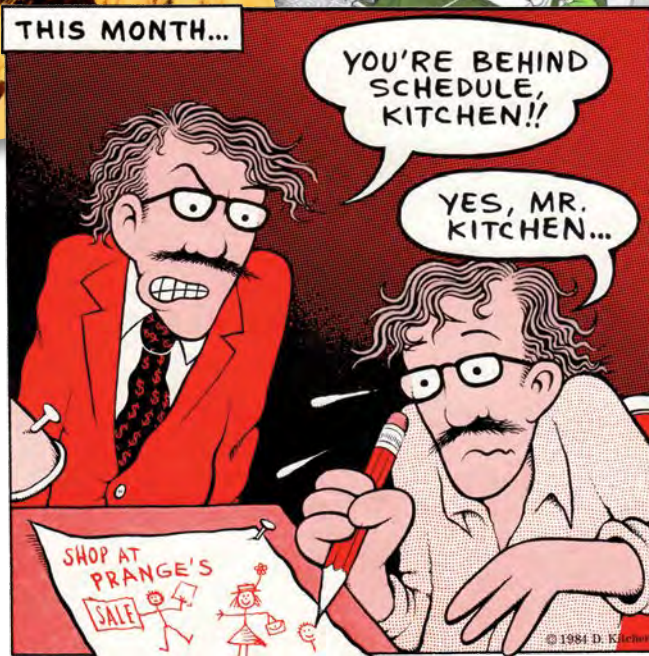


door a little earlier? You can't win them all. I'm sure if I went through the files, there would be a number of talents where today I'd go, "I turned him down? What was I thinking?"

CBC: Who are your favorite discoveries?

Denis: My favorite discoveries? Joe Matt was certainly one. I gave him his first toe-hold in *Snarf*, then his *Peepshow* collection. Howard Cruse was

another. Reed Waller and Kate Worley with *Omaha*. Mark Schultz, for sure — I'm certain there are others. Charles Burns may have had his first comic story in *Death Rattle*. I'd have to go over the backlist and see what others I might be forgetting offhand. I wasn't necessarily keeping track of, you know, who I published first or who "discovered" someone, but I think Kitchen Sink had a pretty good batting average. I remember when the Hernandez Brothers burst on to the scene, and I read that they had self-published *Love & Rockets* as a zine and sent a copy to *The Comics Journal* to be reviewed. When Gary Groth saw it, he did more than review it, he immediately offered to publish their stuff. So in a case like that I never even had an opportunity. Part of me thought, "Jeez, if we had our own magazine of criticism like *The Comics Journal*, then we'd get more first looks like that." But



those thin threads. I also remember when Terry Moore was just starting to...

CBC: Oh, right, the girls. *Strangers in Paradise*?

Denis: Right. He was looking for a publisher and I was very interested. I loved what he was doing and we started talking business. Then he was like, "I'm thinking I might self-publish." He thought he'd follow the Dave Sim model. I remember saying to him, "If you go that route, Terry, it's not going to be easy. There's a whole lot on the production side and distribution side that will drag you down. I know firsthand how hard it is to make comics when you're also publishing comics." But he was lucky because his wife Robyn was very astute on the business side and it *did* work. He's one of the few who successfully followed the Dave Sim model, like Jeff Smith, who also had a really capable spouse.

I also thought it was a conflict of interest. How can you be a publisher of comics and publish a magazine of criticism at the same place without being at cross-purposes?

CBC: I guess it's okay with some other publishers.

Denis: Right. I would have loved if the Hernandez Brothers had sent *Love & Rockets* to me, but they didn't. Fate often hangs on

Profuse thanks to Stacey Kitchen for her much-appreciated assistance!