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## Indicia

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# Literature at the Xerox Machine: The Rise of the Zine

by KAYA OAKES



For many people, *indie* is most recognizable as a genre of music. Before the advent of laptop recording, indie musicians typically recorded on four-track tape decks in their garages, turning out albums stripped down to the bones. This lo-fi auditory marker survived from the punk era into the late 1980s and early '90s, when regional music scenes in places like Berkeley, Chicago, and Minneapolis made a mark that stretched past their city limits. Thanks to the growing number of independent labels, distributors, and bands that viewed touring as an essential part

of their lifestyle, indie musicians were carrying the message of DIY (Do It Yourself) across the country. In some cases, a band's arrival in any town or city where it parked its van was preceded by word of mouth, with rumors about shows in nearby or far-flung cities and stories about life on the road: sleeping on the urine-soaked floor of a squat, playing gigs for unsuspecting rednecks or worshipful fans, and packing themselves into cars permeated with the heady fragrance of unshowered bandmates. In most cases, however, the gossip and news that fueled indie communities arrived first in zines. For the zine maker, who grabbed a pile of zines and toted them around to record stores, bookstores, shows, and cafés, creating and distributing independent literature was the equivalent of an indie band driving their van to each gig: it was a matter of necessity, and a way of building community one person at a time.



Many have debated what a zine is or ought to be since people first began making them. But the typical zine is a self-produced, hand-stapled magazine with content that reflects the writer's idiosyncrasies. Several of the most interesting zines, the ones people eagerly sought whenever an issue was released, were simply diaries of life in the underground. As independent culture evolved in the 1980s and '90s, zines played an increasingly important role in getting the word out, not only about the music people were listening to, but also about politics, local issues, and DIY lifestyle tips. Before technology enabled people to easily forge online connections

based on shared interests, zines were the organ of the indie community. Zines like *Maximumrockandroll*, *Flipside*, and *Factsheet Five* had national distribution, and eventually attracted an international audience. But thousands of smaller titles offered readers an inside perspective on punk and independent life. In a zine, a writer who didn't want to conform to the strict standards of mainstream magazine writing could get away with ranting or quietly meditating on music and community. The unrestricted format also enabled writers to chronicle the minutiae of their day-to-day lives: relationships, travel, dead-end jobs, school, and friends and family. There were no editors, no assignments, no query letters to be rejected, all of which expedited the passage of information from writer to page — even if that page sported numerous typos. Just as DIY made music available to those who'd previously believed that bringing in a band was beyond their capacity, zines made writing as a vehicle for self-expression and communication with like-minded people accessible to anyone. You didn't even need a typewriter (this was the pre-computer era). A zine could be hand-written, illustrated, stapled at the kitchen table, and then walked over to the local record store to sell on consignment. In their homespun, left-of-the-dial takes on American life, zines were the literary version of the musical messages being sent out by indie bands in the '80s and early '90s.



Clowes draws himself with a zine: "Daniel G. Clowes" in *Just Another Day . . .* (1991), 41

While zines had been around in one form or another for as long as mimeograph and copy machines had existed, their impact on independent culture began to be most strongly felt around the time that seminal independent bands like The Minutemen and Minor Threat got together in the early 1980s. Prior to the punk zines that emerged in the '80s, the earliest fanzines were the voice of another marginalized community: science-fiction fans. Because professional critics tended to ignore the genre, those who read science fiction in the 1930s and '40s lacked any critical discourse about it. So "analysis was left to the fan."<sup>1</sup> Sci-fi fanzines became a way for readers to communicate at a time when technology was even more primitive than it would be in the 1960s and '70s. Produced on a minimal budget, these early zines established the format that would be followed for many decades: Xeroxed, folded, and stapled sheaves of paper.

By the '70s, the growing punk community, like the science-fiction community before it, felt ignored. Little attention was being paid to the music it was producing. But, as Stephen Duncombe observes, "As 'fan'. . . dropped off 'zine' and their

1 Bruce Southard. "The Language of Science Fiction Fan Magazines." *American Speech* 57, 1982. p. 19.

number increased exponentially, a culture of zines developed.”<sup>2</sup> The word “culture” is crucial. Just as Mike Watt, Ian MacKaye, and other members of the American punk scene felt a kinship with other punk musicians (even if they had little in common other than being young, independently minded, and broke), zine writers felt a sense of community. It didn’t matter if they were young punks rebelling against mass culture or people radically engaged in the ’60s who needed to vent about the country’s turn back toward conservative values. These people — and the wide range of zinesters in between — were all taken seriously. It didn’t matter if you’d dropped out of high school or attended the famous Iowa Writer’s Workshop.

Among the many zines to emerge in the 1980s, *Factsheet Five* would become one of the most important in uniting the sprawling zine community. Founded by Mike Gunderloy, *Factsheet* began as a literal sheet. Gunderloy perceived a need for a document that would assemble reviews of the different zines he was reading. He had been writing about them to friends when he realized, “I’ve written the same thing five times to five different people, I’ll [just] publish it.”<sup>3</sup> *Factsheet’s* first issue discussed a handful of zines and by 1991 reviewed over a thousand per issue, along with reviews of “books, records, tapes, T-shirts, computer software and other independent media.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite this impressive coverage, *Factsheet* only skimmed the top of the pile. Duncombe estimated that in 1992 (the year before Daniel Clowes began *Ghost World*) somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 zines were being published in America, though exact numbers are impossible to determine. Since most were self-distributed, it was never entirely clear just how many people were cranking them out. But it was clear to anyone paying attention that by the late ’80s, there were more zines than ever before. The variety of topics made for a lively conversation between writers and readers in the underground, but some zines had a longer shelf life and a wider audience than their compatriots. In the ’70s punk rock circles that had first embraced zines, *Maximumrocknroll* played a central role. Not only did *MRR* review hundreds of albums, 7-inches, tapes, and shows in every issue, it also had columns, scene reports, and ads that reflected the multifaceted international punk community. If, to paraphrase Mike Watt, punk is whatever you make it, *MRR* mirrored that diversity and possibility.<sup>5</sup>

But zines of *MRR’s* size and scope were few and far between. The average zine was a small-scale production. Many were “one-offs” and others were published for several issues, though they may not have circulated beyond a group of friends. Rather than limiting their content, however, the small print runs and low budgets actually encouraged zine writers to be more creative. Outside the realms of music and politics, some of the most interesting zines of the era were personal ones, such

2 Stephen Duncombe. *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Verso, 1997). p. 7.

3 Duncombe. p. 158.

4 Mike Gunderloy and Cari Goldberg Janice. *The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution* (New Penguin, 1992). p. 4.

5 *MRR* steadfastly retained its identity as a zine, not a magazine, as its size and circulation grew. It is still printed on newsprint — the cheapest paper stock available — and has a stapled spine, a zine hallmark.

as the Riot Grrrl zines that sprung out of the burgeoning Riot Grrrl movement, spearheaded by bands like Bikini Kill, in the early '90s. Punk, for all of its egalitarian political messages, was not always a comfortable environment for women — and its zines reflected that problem. As *Punk Planet* editor Daniel Sinker observed, “The punk zine editors’ use of ‘bitches,’ ‘cunts,’ ‘man-haters,’ and ‘dykes’ was proof-positive that sexism was still strong in the punk scene.”<sup>6</sup>

Fronted by musician/artist/writer Kathleen Hanna, Bikini Kill was more than a band name; it was also a zine created by Bratmobile’s Molly Newman and Allison Wolfe. *Bikini Kill*’s second issue contained Hanna’s “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” which inspired many young women to start bands and create their own zines. As Hanna put it, “us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US.”<sup>7</sup> Other Riot Grrrl zines like *Girl Germs*, *Chainsaw*, and *I Heart Amy Carter* forged connections between Riot Grrrl and the Queercore movement; but regardless of the writers’ sexual orientation, all of these zines shared a personal feminist message and argued for the need to speak back to the punk scene’s misogyny. Yet, when the mainstream media caught wind of it, the Riot Grrrl movement was misunderstood. When self-defined Riot Grrrls talked to *Time* magazine and appeared on *Oprah*, they were greeted with disapproval. Years after the women’s rights movement began, the mainstream was still uncomfortable when young women spoke up for themselves.

Some zines dealt with topics that made even punks uncomfortable. Published by shock writer Jim Goad in the early '90s, the aggressively titled *Answer Me!* confronted readers with violent themes, even featuring a so-called “Rape Issue” that Goad claimed was his attempt to “present rape in all its ugliness.”<sup>8</sup> In *Ghost World*,

Enid’s friend/enemy John Ellis, who works at Zine-O-Phobia, self-publishes *Mayhem*, a zine that strongly resembles Goad’s — both writers focus on topics like serial killers, Nazis, and the Ku Klux Klan. Enid reads “Fifty Reasons Why I Want to Kill You” from *Diel!*, another fictional *Answer Me!*-type zine. Perhaps the title was inspired by Goad’s infamous editorial “Why are You so Fucking Stupid?”



Enid reads *Diel!*: *Ghost World* (1997), 59.1

6 Daniel Sinker. *We Owe You Nothing*. *Punk Planet: The Collected Interviews* (Akashic, 2001), p. 62.

7 Kathleen Hanna. “Riot Grrrl Manifesto.” [http://onewarart.org/riot\\_grrrl\\_manifesto.htm](http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm)

8 “Question Put Before Court: Is Magazine Smut or Satire?” *The New York Times*, 11/26/1995.

9 *Answer Me!* became the subject of a highly publicized obscenity trial in 1995. Goad defended the zine by saying it blended a “*National Lampoon*-style sensibility with a snuff film aesthetic,” and the state was unable to prove that the newsstand selling the magazine knew it was obscene. In a sadly ironic twist, Goad was later imprisoned for abusing a girlfriend. (“Question Put Before Court: Is Magazine Smut or Satire?” *The New York Times*, 11/26/1995.)

At the opposite end of the zine spectrum, *Cometbus*, one of the better known personal zines, chronicles the life of Aaron Cometbus (aka Aaron Elliot) as a drummer and a punk scraping to get by. It features tales of dumpster diving, messy relationships, and traveling on little-to-no money. The zine's visual aesthetic — black-and-white copier-distorted images with unique, all-caps handwriting — became a blueprint for numerous zines that followed. *Cometbus* encapsulates many of the best things about zine and indie culture: freedom of expression, low-budget creativity, and the zine's role as a networking device for people scattered across the country. Some zines later evolved into record labels and full-blown magazines with national distribution and (to many readers' dismay) advertising. But most, like *Cometbus*, remained just as they had begun: Xeroxed documents of people making their way along the fringes of American culture.



Many zines included text and images, with an emphasis on illustrations more raw than attractive. In this way, they resembled the independently produced comic book, whose values and history parallel those of the zine. Like zinesters, alternative cartoonists in the '80s and '90s realized their vision, unfettered by editorial interference. Daniel Clowes and the artists who produced groundbreaking series such as *Hate*, *Dirty Plotte*, and *Love and Rockets* demanded the freedom to draw and write whatever they wanted, a freedom available only outside of mainstream publishing.<sup>10</sup> The grubby hippies who stood at mimeo machines in the '60s, cranking a handle and inhaling the sweet fumes of their own ideas materialized in print, would totally dig that notion.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Bagge's *Hate* began in 1990, Julie Doucet's *Dirty Plotte* in 1991, and the Hernandez Brothers' *Love and Rockets* in 1981.

<sup>11</sup> Before zine culture established a foothold in the landscape of American literature, earlier forms of independent publishing (including literary magazines, small presses, and the distributors who enabled these micro-produced books and journals to make inroads into bookstores and libraries) paved the way for the DIY publishing revolution of the 1980s and '90s. In the late 1960s and early '70s, writers in the California Bay Area and New York began experimenting with an even more visionary, experimental sort of writing than any generation before it. The underground literary scene was home to many writers who would not only go on to create groundbreaking work, but would also found small presses and literary journals, all of which were run by the writers themselves, and, like zines and small presses that followed them, often run collectively.