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Milwaukee's King of Comix: The Underground Art of Jim Mitchell

Curtis Carter

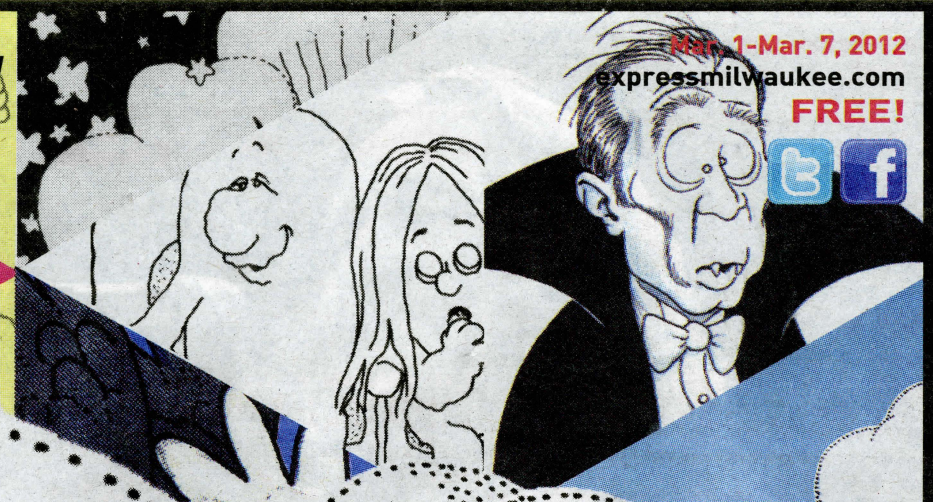
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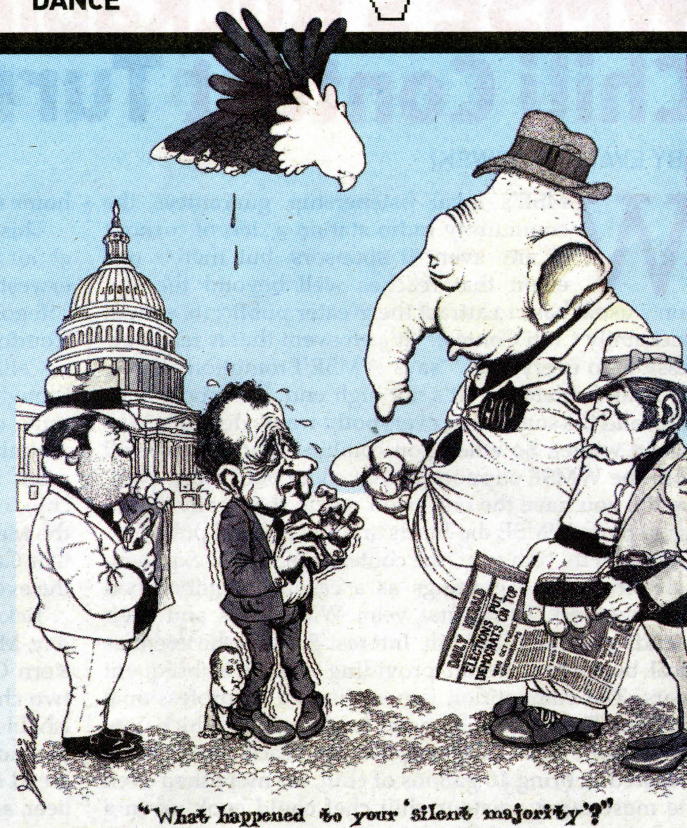
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MILWAUKEE'S KING OF COMIX

THE UNDERGROUND ART OF JIM MITCHELL

BY CURTIS L. CARTER



During the late 1960s and early '70s, young cartoonists working in the spirit of the era's counterculture broke free of the carefully constructed universe of superheroes promoted by mainstream comic-book companies. Addressing such daring themes as sex, drugs and the Vietnam War, the underground comix artists experimented with new styles, self-publishing their work and finding outlets in the era's alternative newspapers.

Often forgotten is the important role Milwaukee played in the comix movement, with homegrown artists such as Jim Mitchell, Denis Kitchen and others. Mitchell has returned to Milwaukee, where he continues to practice as an artist at Distant Thunder Studios, located in the Brewers Hill neighborhood.

How does one decide to be an artist? "An artist never decides to be an artist. You just are," Mitchell insists. His early discovery of a natural talent for making art overrode his parents' aspirations for him to become a lawyer (his father) or a surgeon (his mother). Needless to say, art won out and has been at the core of his life's work. He is presently at work preparing a book on the history of the underground comix movement and a series of children's books, which he expects to publish in the near future.

Mitchell is essentially self-taught, with no formal training except for a semester at the Layton School of Art. While majoring in journalism at Marquette University in the late '60s, his cartoons and caricatures in *The Marquette Tribune* and the school yearbook drew acclaim—including an invitation to paint a portrait of legendary basketball coach Al McGuire—as well as controversy.

Denis Kitchen saw Mitchell's drawings and invited him to work on an underground comix venture

called *Kumquat*. Their collaboration led to the creation in 1969 of the underground comix project called *Shangrila* featuring artists from Chicago and Milwaukee. These efforts were pioneering, as underground comix barely existed at the time. In 1970 Kitchen and Mitchell joined Don Glassford to form Krupp Comic Works. The artists associated with Krupp generated a successful stream of comic strips for national distribution to some 50 college and alternative newspapers. The venture lasted until 1972.

The popularity of the underground comix from Milwaukee artists spread across the nation and beyond. Mitchell's fans included John Lennon, who once phoned him. According to Mitchell, Lennon especially loved a piece called "Wouldn't It Be Nice If Everyone Were Children Again," a drawing that appeared in Kitchen's comix book *Smile No. 1*, and "Magical Mystical Tour," which appeared on the back cover of *Smile No. 2*. Mitchell's success led to his inclusion in the 1972 edition of *Who's Who in the New Earth*.

An important outlet for the Krupp crew was Milwaukee's alternative weekly, the *Bugle-American*. While working at the *Bugle* between 1970 and 1972, Mitchell introduced a number of successful comic strips and created cover images for the paper such as the memorable "First Earth Day," published March 4, 1971. Collectors prize the images created for the *Bugle-American* by Mitchell and others. Anyone who saved copies of the *Bugle* may well benefit from the increasing market for underground comix.

Mitchell's comix career led to such projects as designing the concert tour poster for British rock band Deep Purple, creating what was perhaps the first rock T-shirt for Peter Frampton's band Humble Pie, and

producing a T-shirt for Yes. He is among the first artists to create and market T-shirts with original air-dry ink silk-screen prints. In all of these ventures, Mitchell prefers to think of his contributions as positive and life-enforcing. Not all underground comix artists were dedicated to provocative sexuality or violence.

The comix underground can be likened to the Dadaists of the early-20th-century art scene in the sense that their art grew out of societal conditions fraught with unrest and anxiety over dark social and political clouds. Like the Dadaists, the comix artists challenged established norms. They invented a controversial art form and called into question conventional norms while expressing dismay over the political hypocrisies and injustices of the Nixon era. These artists sought to advance freedom of expression and freedom of lifestyles and to end the travails of a society divided over seemingly futile wars.

Though the underground comix artists never succeeded in becoming a major art movement, their work is an important barometer of the discontent of their time and is often filled with clever satiric wit. These artists changed the role of the comic book from a form of popular entertainment into an important vehicle for artists to lend their voices to combat social and political malfeasance. For a time, at least, some of the artists believed that they might have a role in changing the world.

Curtis L. Carter is professor of aesthetics at Marquette University's department of philosophy. Formerly the founding director and chief curator of the Haggerty Museum, he is currently the international curator and honorary director of the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art and president of the International Association for Aesthetics.

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