



# A History of Underground Comics: 20th Anniversary Edition

*Mark James Estren Ph.D.*

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In the land that time forgot, 1960s and 1970s America (Amerika to some), there once were some bold, forthright, thoroughly unashamed social commentators who said things that “couldn’t be said” and showed things that “couldn’t be shown.” They were outrageous — hunted, pursued, hounded, arrested, busted, and looked down on by just about everyone in the mass media who deigned to notice them at all.

They were cartoonists — underground cartoonists. And they were some of the cleverest, most interesting social commentators of their time, as well as some of the very best artists, whose work has influenced the visual arts right up until today.

*A History of Underground Comics* is their story — told in their own art, in their own words, with connecting commentary and analysis by one of the very few media people who took them seriously from the start and detailed their worries, concerns and attitudes in broadcast media and, in this book, in print.

Author, Mark James Estren knew the artists, lived with and among them, analyzed their work, talked extensively with them, received numerous letters and original drawings from them — and it’s all in *A History of Underground Comics*. What Robert Crumb really thinks of himself and his neuroses...how Gilbert Shelton feels about *Wonder Wart-Hog* and the *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers*...how Bill Griffith handled the early development of *Zippy the Pinhead*...where Art Spiegelman’s ideas for his Pulitzer-prize-winning *Maus* had their origins...and much, much more.

Who influenced these hold-nothing-sacred cartoonists? Those earlier artists are here, too. Harvey Kurtzman — famed *Mad* editor and an extensive contributor to *A History of Underground Comics*. Will Eisner of *The Spirit* — in his own words and drawings. From the bizarre productions of long-ago, nearly forgotten comic-strip artists, such as Gustave Verbeek (who created 12-panel strips in six panels: you read them one way, then turned them upside down and read them that way), to modern but conventional masters of cartooning, they’re all here — all talking to the author and the reader — and all drawing, drawing, drawing.

The underground cartoonists drew everything, from over-the-top sex (a whole chapter here) to political commentary far beyond anything in *Doonesbury* (that is here, too) to analyses of women’s issues and a host of societal concerns. From the gorgeously detailed to the primitive and childlike, these artists redefined comics and cartooning, not only for their generation but also for later cartoonists. *In A History of Underground Comics*, you read and see it all just as it happened, through the words and drawings of the people who made it happen.

And what “it” did they make happen? They raised consciousness, sure, but they also reflected a raised consciousness — and got slapped down more than once as a result. The notorious obscenity trial of *Zap #4* is told here in words, testimony and illustrations, including the exact drawings judged obscene by the court. Community standards may have been offended then — quite intentionally. Readers can judge whether they would be offended now.

And with all their serious concerns, their pointed social comment, the undergrounds were fun, in a way that hidebound conventional comics had not been for decades. Demons and bikers, funny “animals” and Walt

Disney parodies, characters whose anatomy could never be and ones who are utterly recognizable, all come together in strange, peculiar, bizarre, and sometimes unexpectedly affecting and even beautiful art that has never since been duplicated — despite its tremendous influence on later cartoonists. It's all here in *A History of Underground Comics*, told by an expert observer who weaves together the art and words of the cartoonists themselves into a portrait of a time that seems to belong to the past but that is really as up-to-date as today's headlines.

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