

PUNK'S PREMIER

BY STEVEN HELLER

The twentieth century was littered with small magazines created as soapboxes for misfits and mavericks who foisted radical and looney ideas on fellow travelers. Every generation has its own outlet used to vent or challenge. Some of these magazines reflect the times, some define them. Punk did both.

It is tempting to compare John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil's leap into periodical publishing with the Futurist, Dadaist, and Surrealist art provocateurs who wrote dissonant poetry, composed asymmetric layouts, and pasted together expressive collages, which they published in crudely produced publications. But the first issue of *Punk* was not the 1976 version at all. Where the avant gardists waged a culture war through their publications, *Punk* was a fanzine cum comicbook that initially mirrored the timely passions of its creators, and then leached out into the youth culture as its clarion.

Holmstrom, a comics artist and former student of *Mad* magazine founder Harvey Kurtzman at The School of Visual Arts, was finding his way through the alternative culture just as the 60s underground newspapers were sliding towards irrelevance and cliché. Instead, the music emanating from Hilly Kristal's CBGB/OMFUG, captured his interest and gave him a calling. What *Rolling Stone* in its early years was to hippy culture, *Punk* would be to this new rock and roll movement. But unlike the *Stone*, which covered the bands and scenes, *Punk* was an essential part of it ethos – from the coinage of title “Punk,” which became a vernacular brand name like Kleenex, Xerox or Fridgedare, to its role as a platform and voice of *Punk*.

The first issue with Holmstrom's splash panel logo, overly cross-hatched gothic Frankenstein illo of Lou Reed on the cover, and the entirely handlettered interior texts, established a unique visual character that eshewed the stereotypical anti-design, ransom note typography of the British Punk zines. Although Holmstrom proudly referred the first issue as “crummy-looking,” *Punk* did not sacrifice legibility for style, and used “a lot of straight lines in layouts” to make the lettering “look orderly,” he added. *Punk*'s greatest innovation was combining comicbook aesthetics with journalistic language, which comes brilliantly together in the layout for McNeil's satiric interview with the renown comics heroine Nancy's puggish boy-toy, Sluggo.

Punk took the post-hippy D.I.Y. conceit that ran from the totally artless *Sniffin Glue* (produced with Magic Marker-scrawled lettering, photocopied, and stapled together) to raw but professional-looking tabloids like *Slash* and *The Rocker*. The big lie about D.I.Y. and the zines that fall into the “Anybody can do it!” school of art and design was that they were created by artists and designers with vision. Holmstrom's design may have been as stiff as the brittle white newsprint on which it was printed, yet it was filled with the visual energy of CBGB's sticker, flyer and grafitti-ladden bathroom walls and ceiling – and the history of comics too. Incidentally, that same heavy paper, insures that Issue 1 is preserved for all to see forty years later.