

PUNK #1 ANNIVERSARY

BY JAMES WOLCOTT

Most publications take a while to find their way...taking wobbly baby steps, falling down, getting up again... searching for their editorial voice until finally everything shakes into place. (If not, they're kaput.) But a lucky few light a firecracker with the first strike of a match and declare their identity with issue one. Published in January of 1976, the year of America's bicentennial, *PUNK Magazine* emerged from the cradle fully grown. Or was it a crypt? The cover, a classic, featured a caricature by *PUNK* co-founder John Holmstrom of renegade rocker Lou Reed as Frankenstein's monster, his hair bolted to his scalp, his eyes an enlarged pair of black dots suitable for an emissary of the undead. Inside was an interview with Lou. Not really a pre-arranged interview, more like an impromptu pestering. And not presented in a typical *Rolling Stone*-ish layout as a papal audience with some pop deity (DYLAN SPEAKS), but as a ramshackle pastiche of comic-strip panels, *fumetti* (blurry low-light photographs of Lou sprouting cartoon balloons from his mouth, little toxic clouds of abuse), and blocks of hand-inked dialogue that read like an absurdist play.

It was all a fluke, this non-meeting of the minds. Holmstrom—one of the co-founders of *PUNK*, along with Geddy Dunn, Jr. and Eddie "Legs" McNeil, who graduated from punk mascot to oral historian (with Gillian McCain) of the indispensable *Please Kill Me*—recounts in a hardcover anthology of punk's greatest hits published in 2012 that the *PUNK* squad was on hand to interview the Ramones after their set at CBGB. Hopes high, the *PUNK* crew soon found that the black-leather charm school dropouts were not gushing fountains of opinions and personal info. Joey could be chatty, but you needed a can opener to pry a lot out of Dee Dee and Johnny, depending on their moods, and I say that fondly. The Ramones' manager, the legendary Danny Fields, mentioned that Lou Reed was hanging around at the back of the bar and Holmstrom, like a tabloid scoop reporter of yore, pounced on the opportunity. The interview began rockily, not only because of Lou's customized irascibility, but because of the candles Legs had set on the table to avoid flash photography, their flickering flames irking Lou even more than his nightly norm. When Holmstrom asked Lou which comic books he liked, a question he clearly hadn't been lobbed before, he cited EC Comics and *Mad* magazine, and inspiration sprouted in Holmstrom's imagination like a Christmas tree. "I was already visualizing how I could draw the comic-strip interview with him, aware that I'd landed the story of my life." Holmstrom knew that he had scored a big "get" and the cover he drew became as emblematic of the CBGB era as the Ramones' presidential seal t-shirt. "We could have disappeared after *PUNK* #1 and people would still be talking about it today."

How did *PUNK* stick its landing? The debut issue not only declared its identity, but ed its personality. A smart-alecky, slapstick, bratty younger brother/sassy sister personality that had none of the pontifical airs or the rock critic establishment or the snarling, spitting, scurvy attitudes of the British punk press. The product of talents (including photographer Robert Bayley, who shot the first Ramones album cover, journalist Mary Harron, who went on to become the director of *American Psycho* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*), *PUNK* was a boisterous mongrel, a klutzy collage, inspired by comic-artist greats such as Will Eisner (*The Spirit*) and Harvey Kurtzman (*Mad* magazine, *Humbug*, *Playboy's* "Little Annie Fanny"), whom Holmstrom knew from his student days at the School of Visual Arts, not to mention Wally Wood, Steve Ditko, and Bill Griffith (*Zippy the Pinhead*), Andy Warhol and his anyone-can-be-a-star Factory; Jerry Lewis, Three Stooges, Abbott and Costello comedies; schlock horror movies, detective thrillers, and everything else in the discount bin; and feeding off of Sensurround cruddiness of a city in economic rubble but creative ferment (not just in punk but dance, jazz, underground movies shot mostly on the druggy wastes of the Lower East Side, street fashion, storefront art galleries, the disco world—one big abrasive, barraging, struggling hustle). The full-length *fumetti* features *PUNK* would assemble in later issues—"The Legend of Nick Detroit," "Mutant Monster Beach Party," with an all-star cast of downtown droogies—now look like college yearbooks of a class that was always on its best misbehavior. *PUNK* magazine didn't survive the bitter end of the Seventies (the deaths of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen helped toll the end of punk), but, here we are, forty years later, wishing it a happy birthday. We should all have such afterlives.