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Spain Rodriguez, Artist of Underground Comics, Dies at 72

By Bruce Weber
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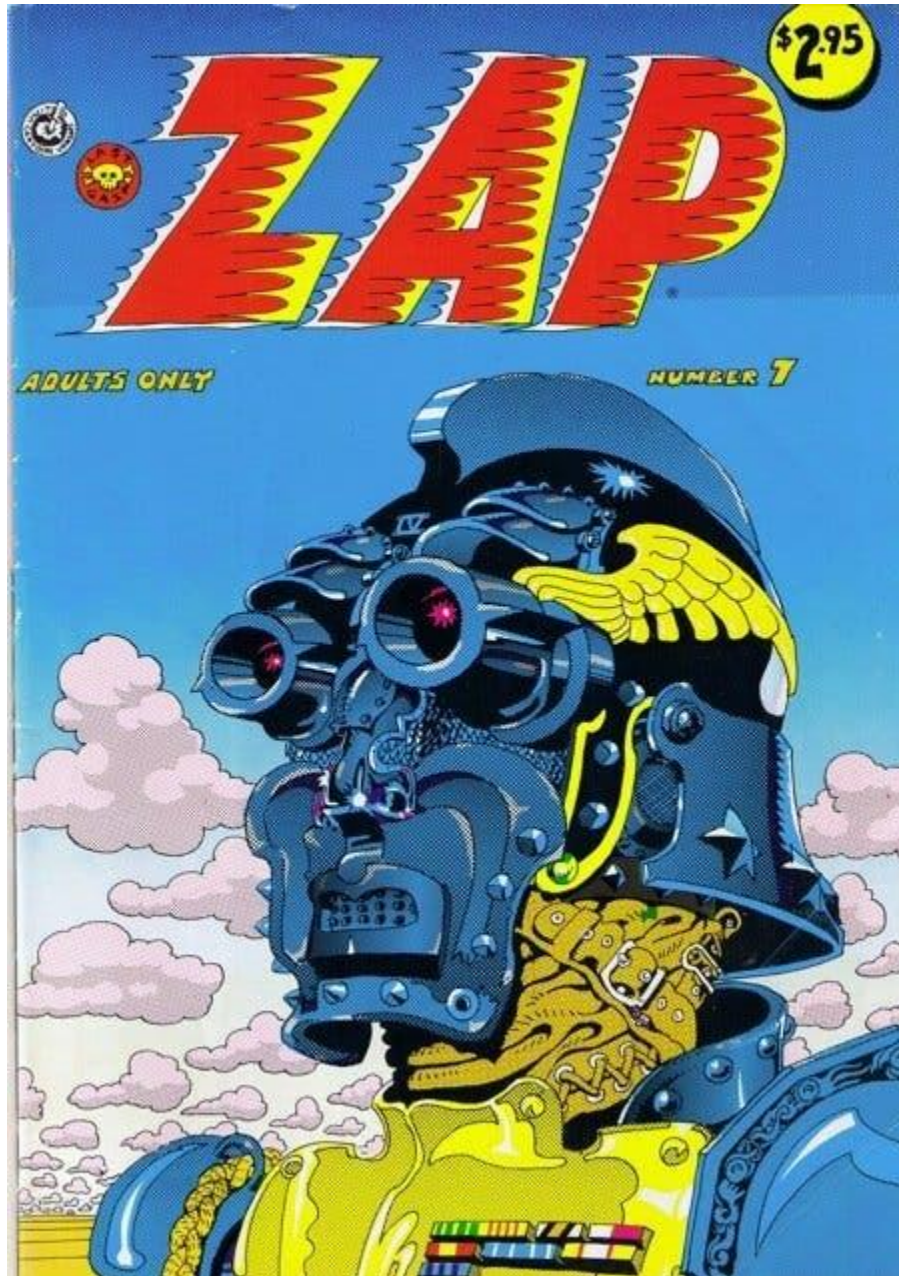
Mr. Rodriguez in 2010. Sean Stewart/Babylon Falling

Spain Rodriguez, a cartoonist whose radical politics and hyperbolic macho imagery, all presented with sly humor, were influential elements in the rise of underground comics, died on Wednesday at his home in San Francisco. He was 72. The cause was cancer, his wife, Susan Stern, said.

Mr. Rodriguez was part of a wave of artists — including R. Crumb, S. Clay Wilson and Bill Griffith, who created the character Zippy the Pinhead — who established the irreverent, profane, highly sexed, antiwar, anti-capitalist spirit of underground comics (often, in this context, spelled comix).

A voracious reader of comic books as a boy in Buffalo, he was highly offended by the Senate hearings that resulted in the censorship of comics in the 1950s, and his anger at the establishment never wavered.

In illustrating his tales of revolutionaries taking back the streets, often violently, from plutocratic forces of repression and corruption, Mr. Rodriguez drew motorcycles and other machinery, detailed cityscapes, futuristic and historical military scenes and hyper-sexed human figures.



A Rodriguez cover for Zap magazine, 1974. Zap/Last Gasp

His characters, who originally appeared in leading underground publications like The East Village Other and Zap, included the counterculture superhero known as Trashman, an urban guerrilla with a ruthless disregard for the lives of the rich and powerful; Manning, a corrupt cop

(whose strips bore the slogan “Some call it police brutality; he calls it Justice”); and an adventuress, known as Big Bitch, who was a sexed-up counterpart to Trashman, a pornographic cross between a Charlie’s Angel and Rambo.

“Spain was one of the seminal, in probably all meanings of that word, figures of the underground comics planet,” Art Spiegelman, author of the graphic novel “Maus,” said in [an interview](#) with The Buffalo News after Mr. Rodriguez’s death. He added: I don’t know that there’d be such a things as these nice gentrified graphic novels that I’m associated with as well if it weren’t for the energy unleashed with such vehemence by Spain, Crumb and others.”

Manuel Rodriguez — he became Spain as a boy defending his heritage in fights with schoolmates — was born in Buffalo on March 2, 1940. His father, a Spanish immigrant, was an auto body repairman. His mother, an artist of Italian descent, painted under a male pseudonym: Steve Nomi.

Young Spain was a delinquent — he fought, he stole cars — but he also had a curious mind, and he drew from a young age; on the sides of trash bags, he created comic strips that entertained the garbagemen who picked them up, his wife said. After high school, he attended the Silvermine Guild School of Art in New Canaan, Conn., where Abstract Expressionism was in vogue and his extra-realistic drawings went unappreciated. He never graduated.

“I never got over the thrill of being able to create a three-dimensional image out of a flat surface,” he said.

When he left school, he returned to Buffalo, and for five years worked in a Western Electric plant that manufactured telephone wire, an experience that he said was his real art education when he began drawing the machines and his fellow workers. He also joined a biker gang, the Road Vultures Motorcycle Club, and drew the bikes and the bikers, illustrating their conflicts and reproducing their earthy language.

“I was cool before it was cool to be cool,” he liked to say.

In the mid-1960s, he moved to New York City and found himself on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the heart of the city’s counterculture life. At the request of Walter Bowart, a founder and the first publisher of The East Village Other, a brash, often outlandish newspaper, Mr. Rodriguez created a comic book with a frankly sexual cover called Zodiac Mindwarp. He went on to do comic strips for The Other.

Mr. Rodriguez’s first marriage ended in divorce. In addition to his wife, who was his partner beginning in 1979 and whom he married in 1989, he is survived by a daughter, Nora Rodriguez, and a sister, Cynthia Rodriguez-Badendyck.



A drawing of Mr. Rodriguez's character Trashman from 1970. Spain Rodriguez.

His books include “Che: A Graphic Biography” (2008), about the revolutionary leader Che Guevara; and “Cruisin’ With the Hound: The Life and Times of Fred Tooté,” a look back at his early life in Buffalo. A retrospective of his work is now at the Burchfield Penny Art Center in Buffalo.

Part of that exhibition is a short film about him made by his wife, much of it touching on his life after he left New York in 1969 and moved to San Francisco, where Zap was being published and where the center of the underground comix movement had settled. The renegade counterculture scene hasn’t lasted with quite the same fury, and in recent years Mr. Rodriguez taught art at the Mission Cultural Center and was a driving force in the creation of the many murals that adorn the walls of the city’s Mission District.

“He struck me as an archetypal character,” Mr. Crumb says about Mr. Rodriguez in an interview in Ms. Stern’s film. “Crazy artist, crossed with left-wing radical, crossed with working class Latino hood. He had a big influence on me through his artwork. He was top of the line in that generation of underground breakaway cartoonists.”