THE SPAIN INTERVIEW

Gary Groth | **November 28, 2012**

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Manuel "Spain" Rodriguez (nobody calls him Manuel) is unique even among his fellow underground cartoonists, certainly one of the most individualistic and disparate group of artists of any artistic movement of this century. Consider, for example, that he's a working-class Marxist who actually worked in a factory; he was inspired by the work of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko; he belonged to a motorcycle gang and welcomed violent confrontation.

His first strip was published in 1967, an incoherent, psychedelic strip (by his own admission) called Zodiac Mindwarp *that appeared in New York's* East Village Other. *Before moving to San Francisco, he created "Trashman, Agent of the Sixth International," a pulpy parodic Marxist character, equal parts sex and violence. In San Francisco, he hooked up with Robert Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, Robert Williams, Gilbert Shelton and Victor Moscoso to become one of the regulars in* Zap. *In the '70s he started drawing autobiographical and historical strips, which appeared in various underground publications such as* Arcade *and* Anarchy.

He was also a bit of a late bloomer (he was 27 before his first strip was published), which gave him the advantage of having lived a life full of incident and youthful indiscretion, which he would later recount in his comics. His work is usually considerably less internal than that of peers such as Justin Green and Robert Crumb —

another anomaly among underground artists (and even post-underground, or alternative, cartoonists such as Joe Matt or Chester Brown).

His latest major works have been collaborations: Boots *(written by Jim Madow), a paranoid conspiracy/mystical thriller of sorts; and Fantagraphics published* Nightmare Alley*, the 128-page adaptation of the novel by William Lindsay Gresham.*

This interview was conducted over four sessions in the months of January and March, 1998. The interview begins this issue and concludes next issue. All images © copyright Spain unless otherwise noted.

-Gary Groth

THE IMPRESSIONABLE AGE

GARY GROTH: *I think you were born and raised in Buffalo.*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *I understand that you started drawing in the second grade —*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *And that the comics you read when you were a kid included* Captain Marvel *and EC comics.*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *And you stopped reading comics when the Code was instituted around '53 —*

SPAIN: Yeah, '53, '54. You could still get stuff like *Johnny Dynamite* and *One Million BC*; I think those were the last ones to hold out against the Comics Code.

GROTH: *Could you tell me a little bit about what your upbringing was like? Your father was an auto —*

SPAIN: My father did collision work, repaired car bodies.

GROTH: *You were born in '40 —*

SPAIN: I was born in 1940.

GROTH: *So the war was over by the time you were 5. Do you recall the war having an impact on you?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I was at an impressionable age, and I remember all that war stuff that was going on, I remember the various phases of the war. Even though I got it through newsreels and movies, and that sort of thing, it had a big impression on me. I had older cousins who were in various branches of the armed services.

GROTH: *I assume your father wasn't involved.*

SPAIN: No, my father, and me for that matter, we were just born at a time when we missed wars. It seems that wars come with a certain schedule, and both me and my father were just lucky to miss them — my father was too young for World War I and too old for World War II.

GROTH: *Were you too old for Vietnam?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I was too old for Vietnam. I had actually gotten a 4F, you know.

GROTH: *That right?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I worked hard to get it.

GROTH: *When did they start drafting for Vietnam, in '64?*

SPAIN: Yeah, it must have been around '65.

GROTH: *You would have been 25.*

SPAIN: Yeah. They sent me down to get a draft card in the early '60s, but I had just lost my driver's license. I wasn't about to fight for them if I couldn't ride my bike, so …

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Right, right. That's reasonable.*

SPAIN: So I just checked off all the stuff that I knew they couldn't check up on. Except that I was gay. That was the one I couldn't quite check off on.

GROTH: *You wouldn't go that far?*

SPAIN: I wouldn't go that far. But I said I pissed in my bed, and I had the clap, I got depressed and tried to commit suicide, and all that stuff. They sent me to a shrink, and everyone said, "You can't bullshit this guy." The psychiatrist was asking me leading questions. It was really easy to bullshit him. I could tell the guy didn't like me when I walked in, it was that sort of thing, so it was easy to know what to say …

GROTH: *Where was this, Buffalo?*

SPAIN: This was in Buffalo, yeah.

GROTH: *So you stayed out of the war in order to protest it here?*

SPAIN: There was no war going on at that time.

GROTH: *When was that?*

SPAIN: That was in the early '60s, so there was no real war. But at that point, I was already aware of the bullshit nature of the "established order," so I wasn't about to fight to preserve it — even though all that military stuff did, and still does, hold a certain attraction for me. The Army saw that I was the kind of guy that they didn't want in the armed forces.

GROTH: *You have sort of a love-hate interest —*

SPAIN: Yeah, I have a fascination with that sort of thing, war, and all that stuff, which is basically history. I remember the first time I read a book of military history; it was clear to me — this is really what history is.

TAKING HIS LUMPS

GROTH: *So would you characterize your dad as basically working-class?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *What was your upbringing like, what was your childhood like? Was it pleasant?*

SPAIN: I had a lot of good times. I certainly took my lumps. My neighborhood had various ethnicities, it was an Italian neighborhood, a Jewish neighborhood, and a black neighborhood. The block I lived on was mixed, but if you went to the Irish neighborhood you had to worry about getting punched out by the Irish bully, the Jewish neighborhood you had to worry about getting punched out by the Jewish bully, the black bully, or the Polish bully, or —

GROTH: *What were your parents' ethnic backgrounds?*

SPAIN: My mother was born here, but her family is Italian, and she grew up in Italy. My father's Spanish. In Buffalo there's a Spanish community, but it's spread out; there's no real Spanish neighborhood. Where I grew up there were all kinds of different people — Irish, Polish and Greek —

GROTH: *Did they form cliques, like New York City?*

SPAIN: Not so much in my neighborhood. The guys who grew up together were the real formation point. Even though most of us were from Catholic backgrounds, they wouldn't let us into the Catholic Cub Scouts, but they would let us into the Jewish Cub Scouts. Jews were more liberal. For the Catholics, we were just bad kids. But what happened in the Jewish Cub Scouts was that all the bad Jewish kids ended up being in one den with us, and all the good Catholic kids and Protestant kids were in another den with the nice Jewish kids. And then there was this kid … a Jewish kid, who was a Boy Scout. He was in charge of the bad kids' den; he tried to foment a revolution. I don't know, we were probably 11 or 12 or something like that, we were pretty young, and somebody was talking about having a revolution. We were going to split off from the nice kids' den. We were all very earnest about it, we even wrote up Declarations of Independence. But each time we tried to make the edges brown (so it would look more official), we would burn up our document.

GROTH: *You were in the Jewish Cub Scouts?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. Eventually they got tired of us and threw us out. You know, all the bad Jewish kids and all the bad Christian kids, that's what became our gang.

GROTH: *I thought you were a Boy Scout as well.*

SPAIN: No, not really. I got to a few Boy Scout meetings, but at that point I was pretty much getting into being a juvenile delinquent.

GROTH: *Did you like the uniform?*

SPAIN: The uniform was kind of square … the Cub Scout uniform was kind of like the cavalry in the cowboy movies. The bandana, the blue uniform and all that stuff.

GROTH: *Yeah, right. I was always very excited on the day we had Cub Scout meetings because I went to a Catholic school and had to wear a white shirt, tie, the works, and the day of a Cub Scout meeting I could wear my Cub Scout uniform to school.*

SPAIN: I went to religious instruction.

GROTH: *You did?*

SPAIN: Yeah. My family was not that religious. My mother was nominally Catholic … but there was a church on the corner, so I just started going, I just got into it.

GROTH: *On your own?*

SPAIN: On my own, yeah. And my parents just let me go.

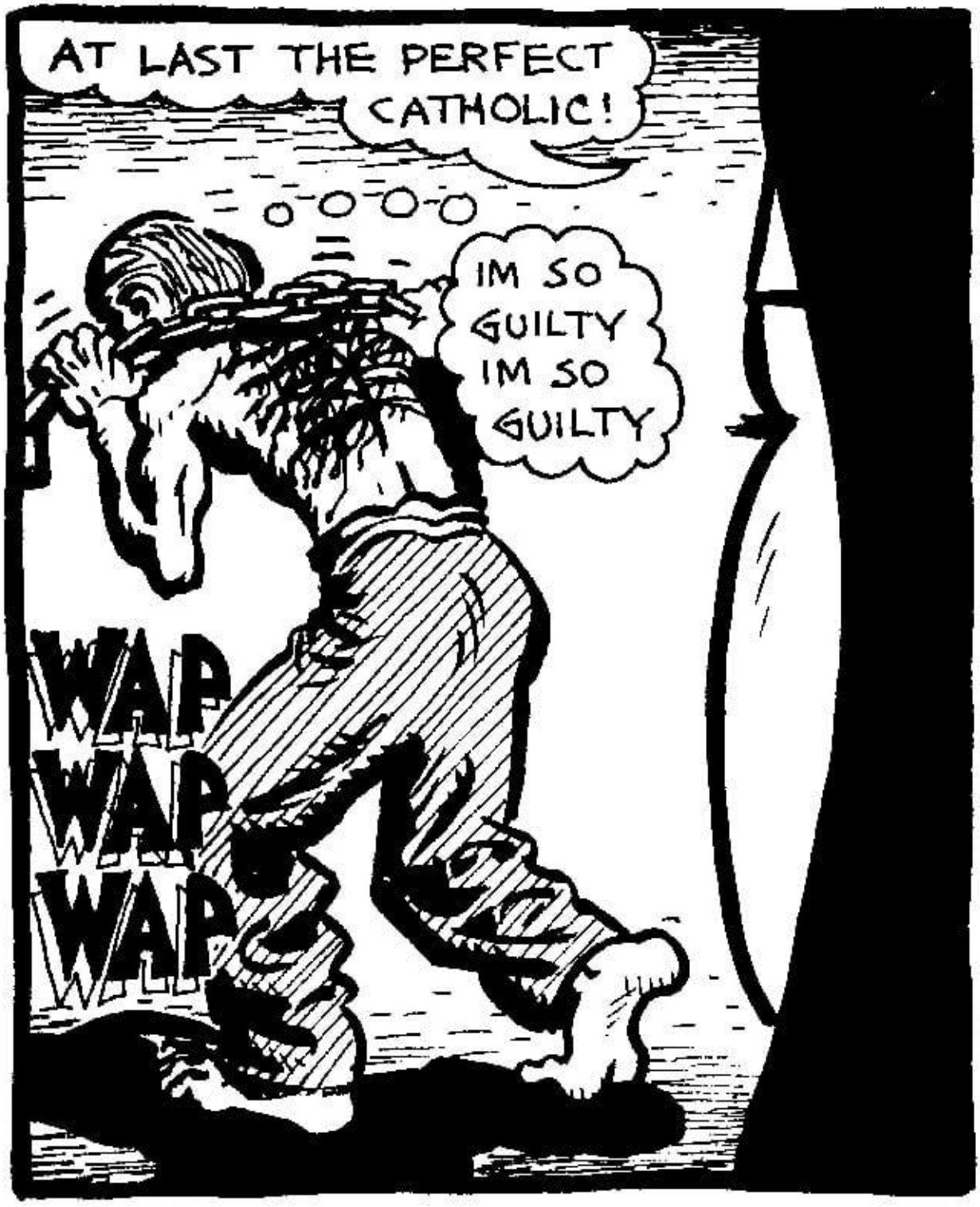
GROTH: *At what age?*

SPAIN: Probably from about 7 or 8 to 11 or 12.

GROTH: *What prompted that?*

SPAIN: I wonder, but it just seemed — it was an impulse to be "good." Religion lays out a framework — if you want to be "good," do this. As a kid, it seemed to make sense.

Obviously, a lot of adults are doing it. You would go to the confessional, and you would have these little sins to confess. You'd have to think them up, because you forgot them: I disobeyed my parents seven times. I swore nine times.



Panel from "The Leather Nun Gets Hers" in *Tales from the Leather Nun* ©1973 Last Gasp

GROTH: *Right, you just have to guess.*

SPAIN: Right. In this half-assed, backward way they prompt you to lie. Who can keep track of all that stuff? And things like … you ate meat on Friday. What are you going to do? This is what your mom cooks. [*Laughs.*] One of the things that turned me around was … I was making my Confirmation, and the nun's instruction was you were supposed to go up to the communion rail and cut a round corner, but the kid in front of me cut a square corner. I thought maybe I heard it wrong. So I cut a square corner, too. I was temporarily confused. The nun snatched me out and sent me down to Father Bent, who was an ex-wrestler and a drunk. I came into raw contact with God's hierarchy, and, I thought, being a good Catholic, he had some special insight from God, and if I sincerely told him the truth, everything would be OK. So I went down there without a sense of trepidation, and I told him what happened, and he just wasn't hearing it. "We know you, you're a wise guy." And as a matter of fact, in religious instruction I was always pretty well behaved. I wasn't going there because I had to, after all. But he just went through this whole Gestapo act and suddenly I realized that this guy didn't have any insight from God. So it was a revelation … the scales being lifted from my eyes, that this guy didn't have any special knowledge, so it just opened the door to questioning … well, if he doesn't have any special knowledge … And, in fact, the guy was a fool. What does this imply about the institution he represents? Even at the time it seemed very comical to me that he was making a big stink over some minor bullshit. I could see that this guy was a whole lot stupider than me, man. This was my first insight into the phoney pretentiousness of official authority. [*Laughs.*]

GROTH: *You were 11 or 12?*

SPAIN: I was 11 or 12, yeah.

GROTH: *Did that pretty much end your interest in religious instruction?*

SPAIN: Well, I still went to religious instruction 'til the next grade. Sister Richard was the teacher … funny these names that they have. I sat down on the first day of instruction and suddenly she comes over and starts to flail away at me with a ruler. And

I said, “What? What did I do?” She says, “That inkwell’s crooked.” When I told her that it was that way when I took my seat, she was not appeased. All she had to do was mention it, and I would gladly put it any fucking way she wanted it. Between this and the crazy “Square Corner Incident,” it was pretty clear that the Catholic Church was run by a bunch of sadistic loonies (and I hadn’t even read any history yet). At that point, I realized, “I’m not going to that crazy place.” [*laughs*.]

GROTH: *You did not go to a parochial school?*

SPAIN: No. My parents, especially my old man, were not especially religious.

GROTH: *Were they agnostic? Or were they just indifferent?*

SPAIN: A little of both — my mother was nominally a Catholic, but in terms of my dad, the Spanish experience with Catholicism is not a happy one, you know, they have an especially nasty history. My father just had no identification with the Catholic Church, but he was sufficiently in awe of authority in general that he didn’t express any overt hostility; on the other hand, he wasn’t about to support it if he didn’t have to. As a kid I remember him making anti-religious statements, but it wasn’t a big thing in my household. But on the other hand, some kids would have to go; I guess you did.

GROTH: *Yeah. Seven years.*

SPAIN: What was your experience like?

GROTH: *I remember it vaguely being oppressive, but I also remember not really knowing any different. So when I would raise my hand and ask to go to the bathroom, and they said no, I eventually accepted these kinds of oppressive tactics as being the norm. I don’t remember any serious religious indoctrination, even though I went to a parochial school for seven years. I think it was possibly because I was just too oblivious to it or bored by it to absorb it, which might have been for the best.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I think that Catholicism is so dogmatic that it just goes over most people’s heads. What’s interesting is that they tried to extend the Spanish Inquisition into the countryside, but they just lacked the manpower. Most people’s lives were just so much

of a hand-to-mouth existence that they just weren't intellectually sophisticated enough to be heretics. Local priests would advise people what to tell the inquisitors so they wouldn't stumble and say something that appeared heretical.

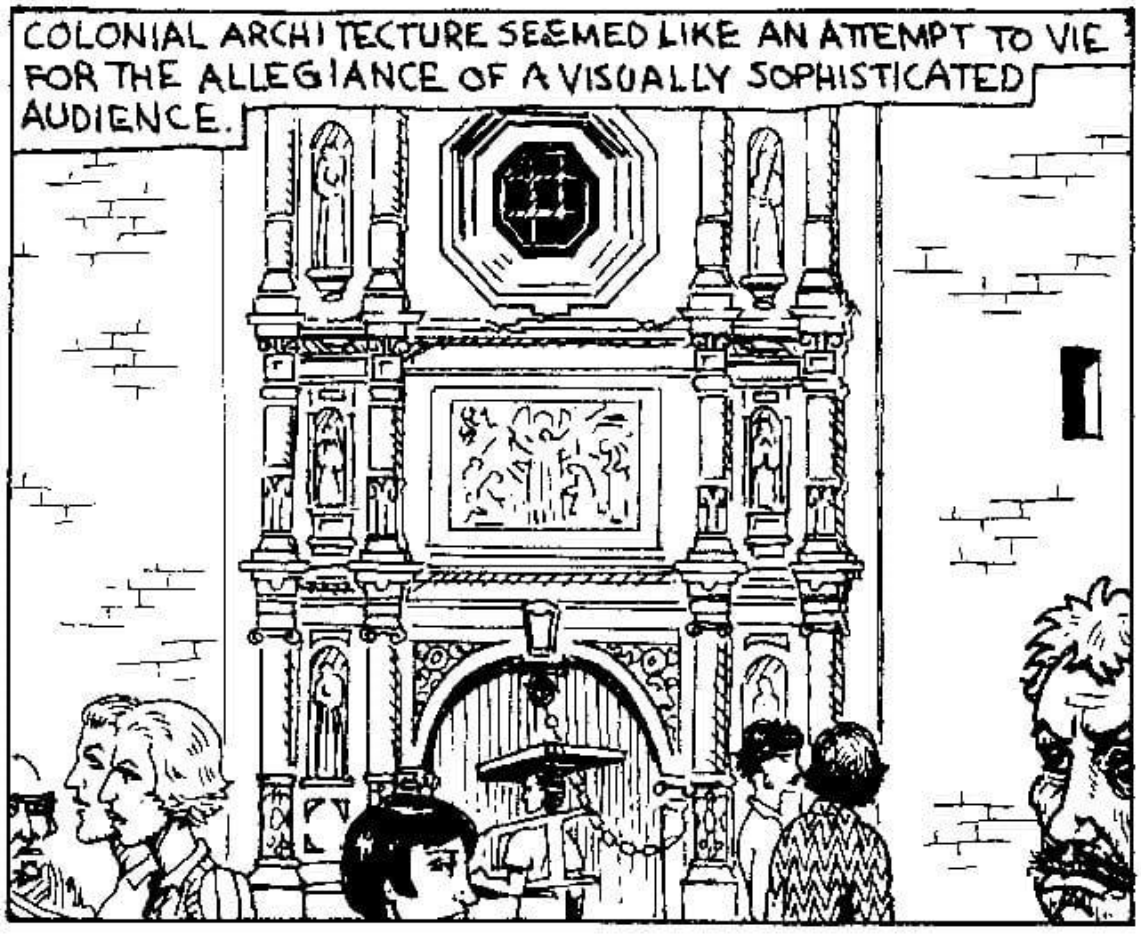
GROTH: *But you went through a few years where you did go to church, and you did —*

SPAIN: Yeah, I would go to church every Sunday.

GROTH: *So what did you get out of that?*

SPAIN: Eventually I went through a period where I tried to go to church, but I would tend to fall back to sleep and end up missing mass entirely. When I did manage to make it, I tended to nod out.

GROTH: *During the church ceremony?*



Panel from "Mexico and Me" (1992) in *My True Story*

SPAIN: Yeah … at some point I had art appreciation class in high school, I must have been maybe 13. So going to church became more interesting, because I could check out the architecture and stuff like that. That lessened some of the boredom. But after I hadn't gone for a long time, or I had gone really sporadically, I went to "confession" and as a matter of fact it was the self-same Father Bent who was in the confessional and I told him I had missed mass about 30 times or something like that and he said, "'Why?'" And I said, "I'd try to wake up for the 9 o'clock mass, and I'd fall asleep, same for the 10:30 mass and so on and I always oversleep." There was a stunned silence. And then he went into some a long rant about how God had done all this stuff for me and I couldn't even give him one lousy hour. He gave me — I forgot all this — 25 Our Fathers and 25 Hail Marys, but by that time the whole framework was just so obviously fallacious that I didn't even finish them. I was told that when you walk out of confession you always feel better than when you go in. I remember even as a kid, coming out of confession and thinking, "Well now, honestly, do I feel any better?" And I would have to answer, "No, not really, if I'm going to be honest with myself," which is what I understood you should be as a religious person.

GROTH: *So it did not give you the guidance you had hoped for? Were you searching for absolutes? Were you searching for some sort of standard to measure yourself against?*

SPAIN: I guess that's what it was. Yeah. My case is a little unique, not having been pushed into it, volunteering for it. But it just seemed to me as a kid, not being very sophisticated, I wanted to be good, and I guess as you say it was some sort of standard by which you could define yourself as good. As you get older, you increasingly see the evil of the world. This seemed to be a way to attempt to counter that with some personal goodness. The first teacher I had in religious instruction was a very nice nun … you know, she was like some nun out of the movies, a very kind old lady who expounded a very benign religious ideology, so it seemed cool.

GROTH: *Now, your dad was working-class. Was he politically aware?*

SPAIN: He was kind of a Cold War democrat. My parents were somewhat paranoically anti-Communist. Most people were at that time. My mom became a Republican at some point.

GROTH: *Your mom?*

SPAIN: Yeah, she's read Ayn Rand, which — you've read Ayn Rand.

GROTH: *Uh-oh.*

SPAIN: She realized it was meant for her, you know.

GROTH: *Is that true?*

SPAIN: Yeah, that's what I think as I look back. On the other hand, she was more open to discussion than my dad. My dad would kind of get pissed off if you offered a rebuttal to what he would say. But he was basically a working-class guy, and the first time I voted, I voted for the Socialist Labor Party. My dad told me it was a vote for Rockefeller, you know. [*Laughs.*]

GROTH: *You're wasting your vote.*

SPAIN: You're wasting your vote, yeah. The counterargument is that it's better to vote for something that you want and not get it than to vote for something you don't want and get it.

COMICS AS A KID

GROTH: *So what was your interest in comics like when you were growing up? Was it intense, or was it —*

Panel from "The Return of Savina" in *Whiz Comics* #3, drawn by C.C. Beck, written by Bill Parker

SPAIN: Yeah, intense. I'd read *Captain Marvel* religiously, and even joined the Captain Marvel Fan Club.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I was always searching for good stuff. I got that photojournalist's review of comics, and I found the cover in there that scared the shit out of me. There was a store on the corner that would have a big stack of comics; I would go through that stack once a week. That's where I saw that cover that just sent chills down my spine. My dad really didn't like comics.

GROTH: *For all the standard reasons?*

SPAIN: For all the standard reasons. So I had a whole struggle just to be able to read comics. It happened at an early age, so by the time I was 10 or 11, I had established my right to read comics. I didn't bring crime comics into the home, and avoided them,

because I knew that my parents would really disapprove. But I liked *Air Boy*; *Air Boy* had a lot of imaginative stuff in there. As did *Captain Marvel*, and it's funny how *Captain Marvel* was more imaginatively written than *Superman*. *Superman* always seemed kind of mismatched. He would punch out guys who were robbing banks, or numbers rackets, all this petty stuff, and he was bullet-proof; it seemed a little unfair.

GROTH: *There was a lot more latitude in* Captain Marvel*? A lot more charm and humor? A richer fantasy?*

SPAIN: Right. I remember a story about some guy from another planet who wanted to take the Earth's resources, because they were running out of resources on his home planet. So Captain Marvel went back and checked the guy's planet out, and they had cars that had 56 cylinders. Captain Marvel decides that the alien was not worthy of the Earth's resources. I remember being intrigued by that idea, so I was attracted to stories that made you think about the world in unconventional ways. Then I discovered EC comics.

GROTH: *Did you read* Captain Marvel *prior to EC; did your interest evolve into EC?*

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, I'd seen them around. I mean, it's funny how comics would go through periods where it didn't seem that there were too many good comics around, so you'd be looking around trying to find something that was cool. I got into *Captain Science* for a while. I didn't know who Wallace Wood was, but there was something about his drawing that stood out. My family went to Spain. I must have been about 11 or 12. On the way back, the ship stopped at Halifax, and I went into a used-book store, and they had a *Weird Science* with no cover. I looked at that, man, and I was just knocked on my ass. The story was intriguing, the artwork was better than anything I had seen. After that, I just started buying that stuff, grabbing it up.

From "The Insidious Doctor Khartoum" in *Captain Science* #4 (June 1951) by Joe Orlando and Wally Wood

GROTH: *Before we get into your EC interest, when you were growing up, what were your other interests as a kid? Were you into sports?*

SPAIN: Not so much, but I went through drawing phases of everything. I went through the French Foreign Legion, pirates, spacemen, knights … Teaching a class … I taught for five years at the Mission Cultural Center, and I'd see kids' interests. And they just don't have those things I had when I was young. They just have superheroes. They do all kinds of stuff with superheroes. A lot of the kids are really kind of bloody-minded about it, too. One of my students did a great strip called *Blood Hunter*. The hero, of course, had big blades coming out of his hands. Lots of murder and mayhem.

GROTH: *More so than when you were a kid?*

SPAIN: It seems like it.

GROTH: *Was it fairly innocuous compared to today?*

SPAIN: I guess, but it was more varied, too. I mean, you understood that things were probably a little bloodier than what they were showing in comics. But on the other hand, there was a greater variety of subject matter, it covered a wider historical period, instead of this monoculture.

GROTH: Gunga Din*?*

SPAIN: Yeah, *Gunga Din*. I don't know whether I ever quite got into that until I saw those great John Severin stories in ECs, but that stuff was around.

GROTH: *How do you feel about the sort of narrowing that appears to be going on in kids' culture?*

SPAIN: I think it's too bad. I understand what the problem is. There's always a search to try to find something that'll catch people's attention, and all that superhero stuff has really been going on for a while. I was really disappointed that the new *Two-Fisted Tales* didn't come off.

GROTH: *How do you mean "didn't come off?"*

SPAIN: Well, you know, they only put out two issues. It just seemed that if that was handled better, that it might have stood a chance. There really is a lot of great historical stuff, tons of stories that are as weird and as intriguing as you can get.

GROTH: *Were you into history when you were a kid? I mean, pre-juvenile delinquent?*

SPAIN: No, not so much. It was ECs that developed an interest in history in me.

GROTH: *That would have been Kurtzman's war stuff.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. At the time I got into Hannibal, and Hannibal's father, too.

LIFE OF CRIME

GROTH: *Now, you would have been 10, 11, 12 when the EC stuff?*

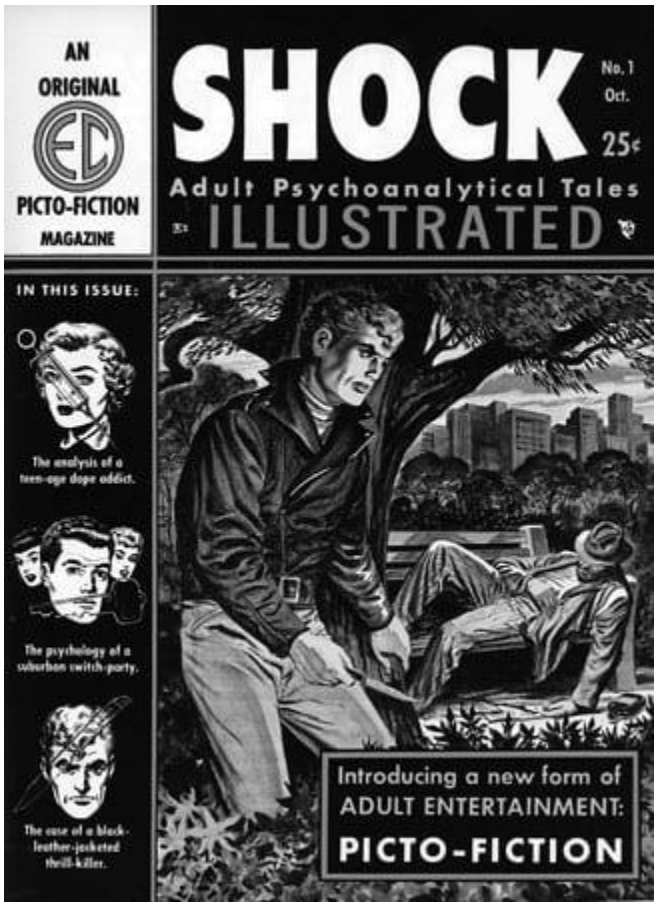
SPAIN: Yeah. Right.

GROTH: *So in fact you would have been starting to be interested in history before your juvenile delinquent phase, which would have been, I guess, post-18?*

SPAIN: No, no, it was kind of from about 13 to —

GROTH: *To approximately now.*

SPAIN: [*Laughs.*] 13 to 16. After they suppressed ECs, they had Picto-Fiction. Around this time I saw a stack of comics behind the counter in a drug store with a Picto-Fiction comic on top. They had that cover by Jack Kamen of the kid in a leather jacket with the switchblade. And I kept waiting for them to put it on the stand; about a week went by and the stack remained unopened behind the counter. I finally asked the clerk when he was going to put that particular book on the rack. And the guy said, "We're not going to put it on the stand because it makes juvenile delinquents. Are you a juvenile delinquent?" And I said, "Fuckin' A." I guess that was a transforming moment.



Cover from *Shock Illustrated* #1 (October 1955) by Jack Kamen ©1955 EC Comics

GROTH: *You liked that because it was a romanticized image of …*

SPAIN: Some sort of recognition of disaffected youth like myself. At that time, my whole neighborhood was getting into that kind of rebellion. The whole neighborhood went on a crime spree that lasted until we were 16, when everybody got busted, and after that … there were guys who became hardcore criminals. One guy, a guy I got busted in a stolen car with, made it to the top of the FBI Wanted list.

GROTH: *Tell me a little bit about your criminal career.*

SPAIN: Well, it was just juvenile delinquency; it was us against the world. We'd just go to other neighborhoods and rob the department stores, and then there was a big car-stealing spree that lasted for almost a year.

GROTH: *Tell me how that worked. You'd break into a car?*

SPAIN: Yeah, you'd get into a car. Well, things were a lot looser. A lot of cars would be open, there were certain cars that you … well, you'd get under the ignition and put some tinfoil or a church key or something, start them up, and this got to be a big thing.

GROTH: *What would you do with them?*

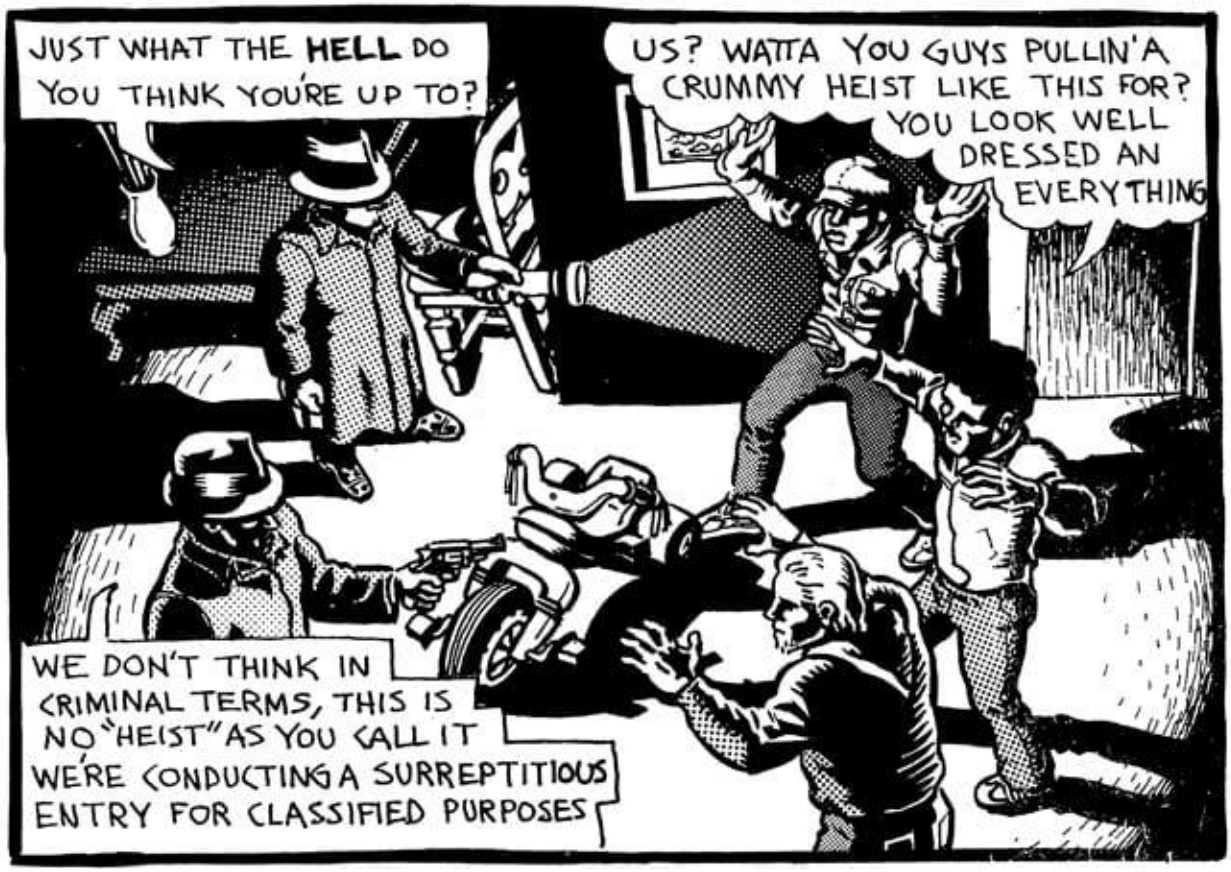
SPAIN: We would joyride, and do damage, run them into walls, run them over cliffs and stuff like that.

GROTH: *And this career lasted between the ages of 13 and 16?*

SPAIN: No, I was 15. It just lasted a few months. It lasted maybe a half a year. But I got busted … this guy had stolen this car for my birthday. We were driving around the zoo and the back wheel came off, and I tried to help the driver, he had fallen out of the car, and I tried to help him across Delaware Park. They nailed us, and they eventually nailed the other guys a few weeks later. I said I didn't know the car was stolen, and I got off.

GROTH: *Were you ever arrested during that time?*

SPAIN: Well, one time the cops took me home for playing chess in this little park area. The cop told me to wipe that look off my face, and I said, “It’s my face, I’ll have any look I want on it.” And the guy dragged me home and told my old man that any time I wanted to step outside with him, he would be glad to oblige me. He was a big guy, and I was about 14 or something. You really saw that things were not at all what was portrayed in the mass media … at least not in our neighborhood. It was just a conclusion that most of the kids of that age came to, that things were extremely corrupt. But of course we didn’t really understand how corrupt they were. When you think about that period that conservatives allude to as some sort of a Golden Age, here you had the head of the FBI who was utterly corrupt, who was in bed with the mafia, just about literally, who was a homosexual denouncing other homosexuals. Hoover wanted a list of every homosexual in America, he was a rabid racist, and the mob, especially in New York, the mob, the mafia had really made inroads into the political machine. And where I grew up there was a general sense of this. We knew about the guy who was about to testify against the mob who had mysteriously fallen out of a 10-story window in a room guarded by police. How did he fall out? They don’t know. I don’t know if you catch any of that history of crime on TV. It’s fascinating, but this sort of thing was folklore where I grew up. Everything seemed to reinforce a deep-seated cynicism. Frank Costello was the guy who had all the political machinery oiled, so that guys like Lucky Luciano could live a luxurious life. So those were the guys who seemed like role models to us, you know. But for me, when I saw the people whose stolen car we were riding in, I felt bad. They were poorer than us. Also, after spending an afternoon in jail, I decided I didn’t want to be a criminal. I had other things to do with myself.



Panel from "The Breaks" in *Zap* #9 (1978 Spain)

GROTH: *So you actually spent an afternoon in jail —*

SPAIN: The other kids were under 16, but because I was 16, I spent an afternoon in jail. And then the other guys in the gang — it was really a despicable thing that they did. They ended up hitting this old guy over the head with a beer bottle, some guy's store that we used to go in and shoplift. And there was no need to do it, because the guy was very old. He probably had Alzheimer's, and one of our guys hit him over the head with a beer bottle; it was really a rotten thing.

GROTH: *What other kinds of things did you do? You stole cars, and actually engaged in robberies?*

SPAIN: No, it was mostly shoplifting, mostly petty, juvenile delinquency, that's all it was. I mean, we would have liked to have been like them guys … I, myself, probably didn't have the balls to engage in major crime. Kids came through the neighborhood, and you would shake them down.

GROTH: *So what prompted you to engage in that kind of activity?*

SPAIN: It was basically hatred for established society. We just saw ourselves in a predatory world and we could trust one another. It was a sense of comradeship among the guys, but anybody else was just a potential victim. That's the way the world was. The world is there to prey on you, and you have an arena where you can prey upon others. I think that that's the way that all criminals see things, and that's the way society is set up, really. It's just that people on the top put a mantle of respectability upon their predation. But, on the other hand, who are you doing harm to? It's really the bottom of the food chain, doing harm to this old guy. Mr. Blimey, we called him. Just some old guy, man, who had a store and probably was on Social Security, and here we were, victimizing this guy, and victimizing other people who were just like us. It was like there wasn't really a class solidarity as such, just more of a solidarity among us guys. Which was a good experience, in itself.

GROTH: *There was no class consciousness involved?*

SPAIN: In a way, but it was more instinctual than conscious. There was antagonism between the squares and the hoods. Squares were mostly middle-class Pat Boone types. A lot of it was played out in the high school I went to, which was mostly middle and upper class ... my mother always tried to put me with a better class of people, which never quite had the intended effect. [*Laughs.*]

GROTH: *You actually gravitated towards the criminal element?* [Laughter.]

SPAIN: Yeah, right. When I was in art school, these were the only people I could really relate to.

GROTH: *Now what was it about the social norms and authority that you so despised?*

SPAIN: Well, one thing, when they suppressed the EC comics, I could see that any idea that there was freedom — it was like Father Bent; it was a farce. Growing up in America, we are told that we have certain freedoms. You heard a lot about this especially growing up during World War II: we had this propaganda about America standing for freedom.

They can never suppress *The Vault Of Horror,* this is America, it stands for freedom. As you become a teenager — hey, wake up kid. The police would tell you outright, "You have no rights." Of course there were some cops who were human beings, but I guess it's the thugs and bullies with a badge that stick in your mind.

GROTH: *Were your parents really disturbed by your getting arrested?*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, they were really, right.

GROTH: *What was your father's —*

SPAIN: Well, there was some point where he couldn't beat my ass any more. I did get a shot on him, and he understood that the time for me to get my ass kicked by him was over.

GROTH: *When you say that, do you mean you actually had a physical confrontation?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *So what was the subsequent relationship like?*

SPAIN: Well ... It was clear that I was no longer a child.

GROTH: *Were you ever close to your father?*

SPAIN: Well ... In a way, yeah, and in a way, no. I finally came to realize that we really were the product of our respective backgrounds. It was something that took me a long time to realize: my dad just came from Europe, which is more authoritarian. In fact, even here that generation was less inclined to listen to what they regarded as back talk. My dad would have been coming from a more libertarian part of that tradition but, you know, basically you're not expected to question. You just do as you're told, otherwise you get your ass kicked. That's just what it is. But my old man was always trying to do right by me, as he understood it. I was a spaced-out kid and now I'm a spaced-out adult, and to my dad it must have seemed as if he just had to knock some sense in to me. How's this kid going to be able to survive? He couldn't articulate that, and it was something that bothered him.

GROTH: *So after he couldn't physically intimidate you, what was your relationship like? How did he deal with these issues?*

SPAIN: We would get into discussions, but at some point he would just get really pissed. We'd be watching television, and I'd say, "I hope that the bad guy shoots the sheriff." Of course he never did, but my dad would get real pissed off at stuff like that. You know, he was a law-and-order, working-class guy, but at that point, I just had a dislike for the established order that I have today. It hasn't changed. And it's funny, my kid goes to school, and I understand that she needs an education, and I try to do my best to foster a respect for learning, and she certainly has a good attitude towards school, but my attitude hasn't changed, man.

GROTH: *Do you feel like the odd man out among other parents because you feel this way? As people get older and they become parents, they become more conservative …*

SPAIN: What I try do is to encourage a good attitude toward learning about the world in all of its diverse aspects. This is what's necessary, not only to survive and prosper, but to have a fulfilling life. My real attitude to official authority is the same as it has always been.

GROTH: *Are you making a distinction between a good attitude and your —*

SPAIN: And my attitude, right. That's exactly the distinction I'm making. As a parent, I have to look out for my kid. I want her to know that learning is really fun. You see kids in this neighborhood, and I see people that I've known as kids and who have become adults, and I understand how they've been cheated because nobody has been able to convey to them the pleasure of learning and knowing things. So I was just lucky, for some reason. I was able to discover that, but not so much in school.

GROTH: *You decided it's a balancing act between instilling a skepticism for authority in your daughter, but dampening that self-destructive impulse which can go hand in hand with that?*

SPAIN: Yeah, it can easily go hand in hand with it. I try to do that. In other words, I can't lie to her … just like any kid, she's a kind of establishmentarian. She believes in all this stuff.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

SPAIN: She tends to. But on the other hand, San Francisco tends to be more progressive than lot of places, so she's exposed to a lot of good progressive ideas: feminism, peace activism, things like that. She has an attitude that girls can do anything, which is a good thing. It's often that I just tease her and say, "No, girls can't do that sort of stuff." And of course she just completely rejects it.

GROTH: *Give her something to rebel against?*

SPAIN: Right, exactly.

CONFORMING

GROTH: *What other media did you experience in the '50s? Did you watch television?*

From *Boots* Vol. 1, story by Harry Kamper, art by Spain ©1997 Harry Kamper

SPAIN: Yeah. I used to listen to the radio constantly, and when TV came in, I'd watch anything in those early days. I'd watch Kate Smith, and all the stupid stuff —

GROTH: *When did you get a TV?*

SPAIN: We must have got a TV around ’52.

GROTH: *You were 12, so that means you experienced TV in its infancy?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. And also what I experienced was the anticipation of TV. They used to have those great programs that came on between 5 and 6, the serials. And so just the idea — think of that, man, you can actually see that stuff on TV, like a little movie in your own house. When it finally came, I’d watch it intensely, but by the time I was 14, I hardly ever watched it. I would watch a few things, but it just wasn’t the completely absorbing thing that it was when it first came. My wife complains about my daughter watching TV all the time, but I think that if you let her watch it all she wants, after a while she’ll just get sick of it like I did.

GROTH: *You said, “The thing about the stuff you read about in EC comics was that it was incredible. And somehow everything else you got in the media, you just knew it was bullshit, you just knew that even these people who were conformists weren’t really that way, they really weren’t these nice people, they were basically as rotten as everybody else. They somehow put on this goody-goody face. That was everything about* MAD *comics,* MAD *comics just got through that shit, and Veronica and Archie and all that stuff, hearing the voice of truth out of all the chaos of smarmy niceness.”*

SPAIN: Did I say that?

GROTH: *Yeah.*

SPAIN: [*Laughs.*] That pretty much sums it up, yeah.

GROTH: *Can you elaborate on what you meant by your reference to the conformist aspect of life in the ’50s?*

SPAIN: Especially in high school. In high school you really got it, and —

GROTH: *That’s where you really learned to conform?*

SPAIN: Well, no. That’s where I learned to rebel. In grammar school, kids are put through that quasi-prison camp routine. And having taught, I can understand why they

do that. But I think it doesn't have to be that way. Teaching kids was some sort of karmic comeuppance. I had all these young boys from 8 to about 12, and they'd just love to bust your chops. I would do my best to answer any question they would throw at me. I would just answer them as straight as I could. Even if they were being a wiseguy. I mean, at some point you might just have to say, "Everybody in this class knows that that's not a serious question, and you know it, too, and so you're just taking up time in the class when we could be doing something that's cool." But that was a rare occasion. I still basically sympathize with those kids. I see them as kids who were just like me. At some point you might have to clamp down. They tend to get a little too bloody-minded. One time I showed them how to draw action in a sequence of panels. A car coming down the street, and they'd say, "Put a cat in it so it can run over it." OK, so I would draw a run-over cat. "Oh, put a baby in there." "Guys, now you're going too far."

GROTH: *You had to draw a line.*

SPAIN: Right, you had to draw a line somewhere.

GROTH: *Did you see movies in the '50s?*

SPAIN: Oh yeah.

GROTH: The Wild One *was my favorite —*

SPAIN: That's right, *The Wild One*. I remember seeing it with my parents.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

SPAIN: Yeah, my parents asked me if I thought what the bikers did was good. My enthusiastic response was that it was. It wasn't the answer they were looking for.

GROTH: *Did you respond to Brando because he spit in the face of hypocrisy and convention as embodied in those simple townspeople?*

SPAIN: There's something about the assuredness they have, in the way they expect you to accept your place as a cog in a productive system, which is not necessarily acting in your interests, or anybody else's, for that matter. It's really an insult to your intelligence,

that they think you're too dull to realize that what they're claiming to be true is just not true. You can see it all around you. You can see that liberty and justice for all isn't even a pretention with those who represent the law. The Pledge of Allegiance to the flag — I don't have any allegiance to a flag. I have an allegiance to the concepts of the United States Constitution, the ideals of freedom, those ideas that are enunciated in the great documents. Those philosophical concepts are rational, optimistic ideas that I feel a strong allegiance to. But I don't feel any allegiance to a flag, and there's not liberty and justice for all. Under God? Why is it the government's place to promote religion? Look around the world at places where religious fervor is intense, like Algeria or Northern Ireland or the Bible Belt here where they have all those kid-on-kid massacres. That whole thing spits in the face of the separation of church and state. Instead of the good-natured intelligence that has characterized the best in the American spirit, you have the cult of the flag, which has come to symbolize, especially among its adherents, unquestioning obeisance to authority. These guys are continuously exposing themselves for the pompous hypocrites that they are. Just look at the whole thing about Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. I give a shit whether he had an affair. The real political issue is having some moralistic pecksniff recording your conversations and getting into your personal life. That's what you have to look forward to if the Religious Right ever takes over America. It's a preview of things to come. And it's dawning on people. It's semi-heartening. The one thing about America, despite our present-day narrowness of vision, is that we don't see ourselves as serfs.We don't have to bow to anybody. But the opposite attitude is also there. Some people think that our problems stem from a lack of obedience to officially constituted authority. The ones who scream the loudest about "Big Government" are the same ones whose not-so-secret agenda is creeping Fascism. And the corporate elite will be our new lords. It's just part of a struggle that's always going on. Those guys are always going to try and con you. Why wouldn't they? If you're dumb enough to go for it, why wouldn't they? Why wouldn't they have you pledge allegiance to a flag in order to distract you from the fact that the people in the top one percent income bracket have more wealth than the bottom ninety percent and that's somehow a meritocracy? We're suckers enough to let them con us into it. All of their flag-waving is a distraction from this central condition of our existence. While they are

quick to invoke the names of the courageous troops who died in battle as having died for "The Flag," how many of those wars were for propping up corrupt dictatorships who were merely fronts for U.S. corporate interests? As a matter of fact, it was radicals and liberals who fought for free speech against the same right-wing loud mouths that are in the process of gutting the Bill of Rights even as they scream about "Big Government."

GROTH: *Would your conception of liberty and justice for all include economic equality?*

SPAIN: Yeah, definitely, right. I think that most people who have a good balance between productive, fulfilling work and pleasure are basically happy. I think people get loaded all the time as a substitute for therapy. They are people who are trying to work something out. While things can and should be set up so that everyone has the material basis for a decent life, including work at decent wages, access to means of improving their skills, etc., some sort of opportunity has to be made to provide circumstances where even the fucked-up can be useful too … I think everybody, whatever their ideology, wants to see a society of the useful rather than a society of the useless. And I think that there is a strong impulse in people to want to be useful. But the fact of the matter is the capitalist system cannot and does not want to create jobs for everybody. We've strayed off from comics into this politics, but it's a prime motivating factor for my work. I don't want to be a mainstream cartoonist. I don't want to have to be a mouthpiece for what I consider unjust. I'll do commercial work to make bread, but the great thing about doing underground comics is the fact that we can just say it as we see it.

GROTH: *Yeah. Of course, the perverse thing now, though, is that the people who are doing mainstream comics really consider themselves to be almost entirely free to do what they want, because that's what they want to do. So you have that new-found paradox where the kind of crap that people were essentially forced to do for commercial reasons is now being done out of some sort of inner need or inner impulse.* [Laughs.] *You can't win, Spain.*

SPAIN: I guess probably not.

GROTH: *A lot of the corrupt values you're talking about become internalized over the course of time, and a lot of that has happened over the last 50 years.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I'm sure it's true.

GROTH: *You may not follow it as assiduously as I do, but all the people who fled Marvel and started Image did it ostensibly, they say, for creative reasons. And of*

course they're doing exactly the same thing they did at Marvel. It's the same neo-Fascist garbage.

SPAIN: Yeah, right. you've got to wonder. I don't doubt it for a second.

GROTH: *False consciousness is I guess what you call it.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. It's a false consciousness. I have qualms about judging someone's sincere expression. I feel obliged to defend anyone from government censorship, but I have to say, what that guy [Mike] Diana does, you know, showing young girls being tortured … that stuff just repels me. I like good action stuff, the violence is OK with me, but the idea that somebody takes any kind of pleasure out of carving up some helpless girl just strikes me as being really somebody who's fucked up.

GROTH: *Now how would you handle the argument that that's his form of rebellion? I mean, is that valid?*

SPAIN: Well, I'm not quite sure what valid means in this regard. If somebody says, "I would like to carve up so-and-so, and just cram their guts up their ass, and fuck them up imaginatively." Well, short of an overt threat to carry it out, I would have to say they've got a right to express themselves. I've thought of a story where a cartoonist does a story about a gruesome murder, and sometime later he's walking down the street and some guy who has read his story ends up murdering him in the gruesome manner depicted in his story. It's a dilemma. The idea that media creates violence is simply ahistorical. Societies have done unspeakably cruel things with very limited media. Hitler never saw TV. You can just go down the line. The idea that suddenly somebody's going to do something that they're not predisposed to do is not very plausible. Tamerlane used to kill everybody in cities he conquered and build pyramids of their skulls; it's hard to top that. The only thing that media does is to present a concept as opposed to the real act, then you can consider how you feel about what has been presented to you. Certainly no one in the past who had the inclination and opportunity to carry out acts of despicable cruelty was ever deterred by not seeing it in some medium. I guess what media can do is make a case that some particular group, helpless young girls, for example, have it

coming. But I think the real issue is access. It's just harder to sustain an irrational hatred of a particular group when you see people as they really are, even with some of their less attractive features. Maybe that's overly optimistic, but at some point I've hated almost every group I've come into contact with. But I find it impossible to sustain my feelings of disdain, because most people are just trying to get along, don't want to harm anyone and will even help you out if they can. I think that if everyone gets a chance to tell their story we'll just have a harder time holding all these false notions about one another. On the other hand, maybe it will just reinforce them, but I think it's worth a shot. Trina [Robbins] tells me I have to be responsible. I'm not exactly sure just what she means. I'm responsible to my own point of view and my own ethical sensibilities.

GROTH: *I know that on some level you have to believe that in order to do the work you do, and you must feel that you're being responsible to your own needs as an artist.*

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, it's hard to differentiate my aesthetic needs from my philosophical commitments. There is a history of puritanism on the left that I don't feel very comfortable with. I certainly don't want to live in a puritanical society. But the fact of the matter is that sex orgies are not very democratic. Granny does not get invited to the orgy. Neither do the ugly babes. In some sense the Catholic Church, or any church, is egalitarian in that way, in that the beautiful people get to hang out with the not-so-beautiful people. That's reflected in revolutionary ideologies that shun that pleasure principle. There's an element of the pleasure principle that has a consumer's aspect to it. But, just to show how complicated it is, the standards of beauty that come through mass media leave me cold. Like Jaclyn Smith. There are certain movie stars like that ... they're beautiful, but I find them unattractive.

GROTH: *They're sexless?*

SPAIN: Yeah, they're sexless. *Playboy*, it's the ultimate example. I shouldn't say that, because we're trying to get *Playboy* as a sponsor ... but I guess I have to say it. It seems as though women used to be more sexy in *Playboy*. They've become too smooth or something.

GROTH: *I have the same reaction, but I wonder if it's simply because I'm not 18 any more.*

SPAIN: No, I don't think that that's it at all.

GROTH: *You think that the photographic paradigm has objectively changed?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I do, yeah. It's a contemporary standard of beauty that is bland. I remember seeing a Miss Black America [pageant]. They had women who were overweight, women who were imperfect in many ways, but they were far more appealing and far more interesting. Those women were far sexier because of their imperfections. Perhaps it's just because I'm a gnarly dude, but I don't find those flawless women very appealing. I wouldn't be motivated to hit upon them even if I were younger.

GROTH: *It's almost as if a false standard of beauty keeps evolving in our society. They keep perfecting their bodies, and you have to wonder, to what point? A funny thing happened … my girlfriend and I were watching* The Misfits *with Marilyn Monroe, and there was a shot of her running, from behind. And my girlfriend said, "Is my ass that big?" And that was the worst trick question I had ever been asked, because first of all, it's Marilyn Monroe. Like, how do you criticize Marilyn Monroe's ass? But the subtext was that ass was too big. You couldn't win. You know, if I said her ass is not as big as Marilyn Monroe's, that could be bad. If I said it was, that could be bad, too.*

SPAIN: [*Laughs.*] You had to say, "Your ass should be that big."

GROTH: *Right. Right.*

SPAIN: You're right, there's a movie with Marilyn Monroe, where she's an American in some Eastern European country and she's involved with a prince.

GROTH: The Prince and the Showgirl*, with Olivier.*

SPAIN: Right. She looks great, man, you can see her belly sticking out a little bit. She's looking good.

GROTH: *Yeah, yeah, I think so, too.*

SPAIN: I think it's part of the age, where everything has reached its point of refinement where it's devoid of the spice of life. There seems to be big interest in a lot of sleazy '50s skin books. Like *Cad*, did you ever see *Cad*? And you look at those women, and they look like they had a hard life.

GROTH: *Been around the block a few times?*

SPAIN: Right. But they're far more interesting. They don't even show you their whole breast, it will be covered up. But even now it looks sexier, because it's a big thing that she'd be even showing her stuff. But it's something more genuine about that scene. It's hard to idealize it, and you can really get an insight just what the problem of functioning in a hedonistic society is. It's interesting to me, how the older generation dealt with it. They created an illusion that there was an ongoing crusade of rectitude. On the other hand, as we were talking about earlier, the guardians of righteousness were the gate keepers to a world of unbridled hedonism. The summer of love was only novel because the pretensions were dropped. The wall of illusion that our parents' generation created was for us, for the kids. They wanted to protect us from the exploitation that seems to accompany those sybaritic scenes despite, or maybe because of, their almost universal attraction. My old man was a respectable, hard-working guy who came home and read the paper. My mom went to the PTA meetings. All appearances in my family were of conventional, if somewhat oddball, respectability. But the whole of society approved of and promoted a drug that is more dangerous than heroin, tobacco. My old man told me that before Prohibition he would drink every so often. And then when Prohibition came he just stopped drinking. And then after Prohibition he would just have a drink every once in a while. There were a lot of people like that. On the other hand, people were and are doing hard time for marijuana, compared to alcohol and tobacco, a relatively benign drug. Back then the most vociferous upholders of public rectitude were collaborating with the underworld, just as today the C.I.A. works with Central American drug dealers to bring cocaine into Los Angeles. The topper is that the "Drug War" is an excuse for dragooning people of the inner city into neo-slavery in the for-profit prison industry of America. I suspect that the reason that you don't hear much about slave labor in China is that American officials were tired of having Chinese officials laugh in their face. To

point out this obvious stuff will still elicit a response of indignation from people who think they have a stake in the illusion of "respectability."

GROTH: *From your vantage point now, do you consider that to be hypocrisy? Or was it a necessary artificial demarcation between …*

SPAIN: I think that when you have a kid you get an insight into the dilemma that most people face. When I work on certain things, I try to cover them up … not wanting my kid to see them. But my kid has a whole lot of information that she got from preschool. She knows a lot of things that I was unaware of, but in a child-like way. I try to keep the more raunchy stuff out of sight so she can be a kid and deal with the complexities of life when she's better prepared. It certainly seems as if there is a similar effort on the part of many people to keep the general public in a child-like state, but their motive is clearly the bottom line. I know that the counter-culture world is not a world without casualties. My nephew said to me, "I really like your stuff. I can't wait to go out and get into a gang fight and stuff." And I started telling him that he should give some serious thought to the downside of all that.

RESPONSIBILITIES

GROTH: *To bring this back to comics and your growing up in the '50s, all of these conundrums bring to mind Fredric Wertham, who was a paradoxical figure, because he was actually a liberal reformer type …*

SPAIN: They're the worst, in a lot of ways.

GROTH: *Were you aware of him then?*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, right; yeah, sure.

GROTH: *He was fairly prominent during the outcry against comics in the early '50s.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I was aware of what was going down even though I had never really seen the book [*Seduction of the Innocent*] until I was an adult.

GROTH: *Did you watch the subcommittee hearings on TV?*

SPAIN: Some. Yeah, I watched the McCarthy hearings, I watched some of the Kefauver hearings. I never got to see Gaines stand up to them. Now you have William Bennett and C. Delores Tucker. I watched them on TV. It was real interesting. Right after C. Delores Tucker, you had all these guys who had done "studies" that showed when people see media violence, then they go out and murder people. It was all a pitch for reform coupled with an urgent plea to fund these studies and it was obvious that they had had some preconception of what they wanted to prove even before they started these so-called studies. But the underlying assumption was that our most fundamental rights are at the mercy of some asshole's "study." The point is that we're all responsible for our actions. I'm not responsible to anybody for my thoughts. I'm responsible to people for my actions, and everybody's responsible. If I say, "Hey, it would be really cool to do this," to commit some atrocity, that's just not the same thing as doing it. If you carry out a sick fantasy that is tangibly harmful to someone else, we must all see that you receive the appropriate punishment. But if there is no tangible harm, there should be no punishment, period. There was an EC story I read in *Tales from the Crypt*, it was about some father who had killed his daughter. It was a story by Bradbury, and the implication was that the father killed the daughter. When I read it I went — yechh! If you believe in freedom of speech, you have to believe in freedom of speech for the *National Review* and *Human Events*, and all the people you hate.

Panel from "Evening at the Country Club" in *Zap* #6 (January 1973)

GROTH: *That doesn't mean that you might not think that what they're doing is pernicious?*

SPAIN: That's right, I think it sucks, it stinks and I don't want to read that sort of thing myself … yeah, right, there's a lot of stuff like that. It's a funny thing about that gore and violence. Something like *Blood Feast* — did you ever see those movies, *Blood Feast*, and *Palette of Blood* and stuff like that? They become so bloody that it becomes conceptual art or something like that. Usually I really don't like movies like that … I think they're probably made by some pimply-faced weasel who is thinking, "Good, this is my chance to get back at all those babes who wouldn't put out for me, and now I'm going to make a movie where the monster comes over and carves them up." Get out of here, get a fucking life, or learn how to come on to women, or something. I find that sort of gore repulsive. On the other hand, if it's done well, there are certain things there are certain EC things that I just like, stories done with a sense of satire.

GROTH: *When you said earlier, though, that … well, I don't know If you said this exactly, but you seemed to think the media didn't really affect people, you were ridiculing the notion that —*

SPAIN: Yeah. I think that if you look at the historical record, you will see that there were always violent people around.

GROTH: *The media certainly must have some effect on people; EC had an effect on you.*

SPAIN: Yeah, it did have an effect on me, but … well, it's hard to know. It's hard to know. If you had a laboratory experiment and had another me that didn't have EC, how would I have turned out? People are a bit more complicated than laboratory rats. And again, the historical record is there. A historical record of unspeakable cruelty …

GROTH: *It's true that people can be violent without media, and historically have been violent before mass media. But, that doesn't mean the media couldn't either cultivate or enhance that propensity, right?*

SPAIN: But why would you think people are any different now than they were centuries ago? Or what you're saying is that people have that propensity, but maybe it could be stoked, or maybe it could be smoothed over, if everything was at the level of *Archie* comics. I must admit, if I lived in a world where all you could take in was *Archie* or its equivalent, I'd feel the urge to go up in a tower with a gun. I have a clip of all these trailers of teenage movies. And all the American ones, there has to be a fight scene in a teenage movie. In all the English ones, there is never a fight. There is frolicking, and the getting wild, and doing all that sort of thing, but there is never a fight. They're just so civilized, but ultimately is that the kind of world you want to be in? C. Dolores Tucker's idea of the First Amendment is that nothing that offends her is allowed, and she's not quiet about it. This is offensive to me. Offensive? I can't offend anyone? The whole idea of the First Amendment is that you have a right to offend.

GROTH: *Yeah, but I don't see it as an either/or question. I can concede that the media affects people without conceding that it has to be strait-jacketed by government, or … well, I mean, it's already strait-jacketed by everything except government. You know, market mechanisms and special interest groups, and everything else affects the content of media. There are good arguments in favor of an absolutely free media, notwithstanding any pernicious effects it might have on people, because there are also corresponding benefits.*

SPAIN: Well, yeah, but I still think that it seems to make sense that somebody who's inclined to harm somebody is going to harm somebody if they think they can get away with it. I think that it might give them some ideas about how to go about it. Doesn't it seem as though in any group of people, you're going to have x-amount of sadists? We seem to always have had that, you know. So, we hire one group of sadists in hope of controlling the rest. Some of the Soviet movies are really sociological and turgid. On the other hand, so is *Spit On Your Grave*, one of the bloodiest movies ever. And in the U.S.S.R. there were mass murderers running around because of sloppy police work. On the other hand, all that crime stuff is so hyped up. There's the argument that there hasn't been this big crime wave. In the first place, cops can determine what is a murder and what isn't. They certainly have a stake in the public perception of whether the crime

rate is going up or down. And why do we always have to pay for their incompetence with our civil liberties? It just seems that the overwhelming evidence is that there is that bloody-mindedness that exists in people and so it gets to Trina's question: we should be responsible, but I would ask, just what are we responsible to?

GROTH: *That's a good question. For you, as an artist, what are your responsibilities, and to whom or what do you consider yourself responsible?*

SPAIN: I'm responsible to my ideology. To my sense of what betters the condition of working-class people like myself. There are some people I would like to punch in the mouth, but it's so much more civilized to do underground comics.

GROTH: *Well, you're not a pacifist, we all know that.*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *You have to argue that your ideology has to perform some good, some kind of…*

SPAIN: Yeah, right, media.

GROTH: *I find it distasteful when I hear William Bennett lecture on virtue. But I realize that that's because my sense of virtue is completely different from his*. [Laughs.] *But it does seem important to have some conceptual understanding of virtue, even if it's just your own, rather than …*

SPAIN: Right. And it's something … we all kind of believe in some virtue.

GROTH: *Right, right. And it seems like the right wing has actually co-opted terms like virtue and morality, and the left wing is reluctant to use those terms any more, which is unfortunate because it leaves the left in a moral vacuum.*

SPAIN: Yeah. What's especially unfortunate is that there are these values, like solidarity, and compassion, and open-mindedness, and trying to not to be full of shit (something that seems to be completely absent on the right), that seem to be overshadowed in contemporary political dialogue. What they have is a herd of chumps conditioned to

salivate at certain authoritarian symbols, and they just play these, and they know that they're always going to have these fools out there who'll wave the flag. Iraq, for example: there are all these people who are just getting chubbies over the idea that we can bomb people. And that's played upon. But everybody's not like that. There are people who say, 'We don't like Saddam Hussein, but what are we doing? Bombing these helpless civilians that we have been starving to death for years." When what's-her-face, Madeline Albright, gets up and says, "I'll bet you I have more concern for the Iraqi people than Saddam Hussein." How stupid are we? What an insult for that woman to come up with something as stupid as that. So what? Saddam Hussein doesn't give a shit and she can come up with something like a half-inch turd … I don't know, I've been violent in my life … but on the other hand, it was more or less a fair fight, you know? Victimizing the weak, it's not a good thing. That's why there should be a free and open dialogue. People are free to criticize me, but I want a chance to respond.

THE STUDENT

GROTH: *What kind of a student were you in high school? You went to jail when you were 16.*

SPAIN: Well, actually I just spent an afternoon in the can. I don't want to over-dramatize.

Panel from "1871" (1986) in *My True Story*

GROTH: *Did you … live by yourself after that?*

SPAIN: No, I stayed home and graduated high school. There were certain subjects that I was really absorbed with, history and art. I had to do a term paper for American History, and I started reading about Hannibal. I started reading everything I could find about him, about the Punic Wars, about Hannibal's father … to this day I can run down battles, give you historical dates … it was just something that I found utterly fascinating. And I was always good enough so I could pass. I'm sorry I didn't take more math, because a lot of that stuff seems more interesting to me now. But I was able to get along, pass, get a high school diploma. But there were certain things that really intrigued me, and I had some good teachers. I had a teacher in eighth grade, her name was Miss Whetstone, and she was red-haired, and she had eyes that bulged out of her head. And she was known as a no-nonsense teacher … the frightening visage of this woman with these eyes that popped out of her head with this red hair. You knew, when you saw her in action a few times, that when you went to her class, you behaved. But she was also a very compassionate woman who was very serious about her students learning. She would give us mimeographed sheets of sentences to dissect … I can do this …

GROTH: *You mean diagram?*

SPAIN: Diagram the sentences, right, that's what it is, diagram. And to this day, I can do them. If you give me a sentence, I can diagram it. Every day, man, you just had to do it, and she didn't want to hear that you couldn't do it. But she was a woman who would actually talk to you. "How come you guys have that hair style?" But on the other hand, despite her genuine compassion, you just knew that you couldn't cut up in her class —

GROTH: *Right. In one sense, the best of both worlds.*

SPAIN: Yeah, so I was fortunate to have people like that, who brought to your attention the fact that there is an alternative to hanging on the corner, staring dully and drunkenly into the void. These poor kids, you see them, and nobody did that for them. Learning about the world is a pleasure, it's not something that you should have to be whipped into as a kid or as an adult. And so that's the sort of thing I tried to get across to the kids in

my class, and my daughter. .. well, I try to impart that to her, even though I can still feel my resentment of what seemed to me then and now as mindless regimentation … . What can I tell you?

GROTH: *I understand. My kid's only 3, so it's a long way to go.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *With these conflicting impulses.*

SPAIN: That's right. It's just a fact of life, man. If you're not knowledgeable, if you're ignorant, then you're going to be a victim. So there's power that's accessible, and if you don't grab onto it, you'll wish you had.

GROTH: *Better to be a knowledgeable victim than an ignorant one.*

SPAIN: [*Laughs.*] Right. If you're a knowledgeable victim, at least you have a chance of striking back.

GROTH*: Didn't you join the bike gang right after high school*?

SPAIN: No, I went to art school for three years.

GROTH: *Let me just skip back. You attended the Silvermine Guild School of Art of New Canaan, Connecticut?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH*: Now, when you did that, you had not yet joined the bike gang?*

SPAIN: No.

GROTH: *What is the Silvermine Guild School of Art?*

SPAIN: It was an art school in Connecticut that … one of the people who started it was John Vassos, the guy who designed the Lucky Strike logo. At the time I didn't realize that. He was one of the prominent guys in industrial design … so there were a lot of good teachers there. But of course it was the time when Abstract Expressionism was

dominant. The work I did in the commercial art class was appreciated, but the fine arts course was a different story.

GROTH: *Why did you choose that school?*

SPAIN: My mother … she just figured if he stays in the neighborhood, he'll probably end up in jail, so here, he had something going for him …

GROTH: *Send him to Connecticut.* [Laughs.]

SPAIN: So I'll send him to Connecticut. That's where people are nice and nobody gets drunk. So I went to Connecticut. In Buffalo, there were no drugs in my neighborhood at that time. When I was a kid, nobody smoked grass, but in Connecticut, man, there was everything, even heroin. But I didn't touch it. I was serious about getting an education.

GROTH: *You were 18 when you —*

SPAIN: Seventeen, yeah.

GROTH: *— left home.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Did you revel in your freedom?*

SPAIN: Well, it wasn't much freedom compared to Buffalo, because I was living out in the country, I didn't have any car, and I didn't have any bread, so I just kind of. .. I was just at that age I didn't really know how to hit up on girls …

GROTH: *Did you get a job in high school? Did you work?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I had a paper route, so …

GROTH: *Didn't clerk in the local hardware store?*

SPAIN: No, I was an usher. .. my old man had a gas station, for a while I worked … so I made enough money to have …

GROTH: *Did you date in high school?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right, I did, a little bit of dating. But still … it kind of takes you a while to understand how to hang out with girls, and how to approach them in the right way. I'm kind of a crude dude, so it took me a while to figure it out.

GROTH: *Yes. To learn that ritual.*

SPAIN: Yes.

GROTH: *Was sex a verboten subject in your family? What was your parents' —*

SPAIN: Yeah, I don't think it was generally talked about. When I was 16, my old man told me about the clap, that you could get the clap, and you should wear condoms.

GROTH: *He told you that?*

SPAIN: Yeah. He remembered some guy in the '20s, and he was called the sheik, and he had a lot of women, but he just died in pain in the hospital. Probably before they had penicillin. [*Laughs.*] It was a great story: "The Sheik."

GROTH: *Didn't Rudolph Valentino play the sheik?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right.

GROTH: *Were you an only child?*

SPAIN: No. I have a sister.

GROTH: *Oh, you do? Older or younger?*

SPAIN: Younger.

GROTH: *How did she affect the dynamic of the family?*

SPAIN: She was the good kid and I was the bad kid. [*Laughs.*]

GROTH: *And how did you two get along?*

SPAIN: When I was younger, there was a certain amount of resentment that she was always held up as an example of what I should be.

GROTH: *How much younger?*

SPAIN: About three years.

GROTH*: So you were pretty close in age.*

SPAIN: Yeah, by the time we got to be teenagers, she had … there were a lot of friends that I would try to hit up on.

GROTH: *That could be useful, right … Was there any sort of sibling rivalry?*

SPAIN: Well, me and her have our philosophical differences, but …

GROTH: *She was not rebellious, or …*

SPAIN: No, she was not rebellious. But you can have a good discussion with her … she was real bright in school. I just cut the swath through grammar school and high school, all these teachers hated my guts, and she would come along, they all loved her. These teachers, at the mention of my name, would grit their teeth. But Cynthia … she is real bright. She said that when she finally got her PhD, it was the first time that she had difficulty learning anything. Learning always came easy to her. Finally she had to absorb all this stuff, and it was difficult for the first time in her life. But she plowed through and now she's a PhD. I'm real proud of her.

ART SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

GROTH: *Tell me a little bit more about the Silvermine Guild School. You were there for approximately two —*

SPAIN: Three years. I split a couple weeks before the end of my third year.

GROTH: *What did you learn there? Was it a good experience?*

From "Aunt Mary's Kitchen" in *National Lampoon* Vol. 2 #25 (August 1980) by M.K. Brown ©1980 NL Communications, Inc.

SPAIN: It was a good experience all in all, because I got to do things. I got to do sculpture, I got to do oil painting, I got to do drawing … well, I was always doing a lot of drawing, but it was a depressing experience for me, for various reasons. One of the things was, I was always a hotshot as an artist. I could think of myself as the best artist on the horizon. And even in art school, I thought of myself as the best, except maybe for M.K. Brown, who was in my class. She was the one person whose work I saw as being as good if not better than mine. But draftsmanship was not held in high esteem, so that was difficult for me, and I was the one who made those determinations as to what was good or bad. Drawing was always something that I could retreat to, and I found myself in a situation where people who had a different philosophy were judging my work. If somebody could correct my work, and make it better, in my eyes, fine, but to them, my work was too tight. It is tight, but that's the way I like it.

GROTH: *You once said, "When I was in art school, it was the period of trying to figure out what was going on, also coming into contact with anarchist books. I started picking up books and reading all this different stuff." It sounds like you really started*

broadening your horizons, or at least educating your own intuitive ideas with concrete …

SPAIN: Yeah. The art school was pretty much art. After a while, they had a course survey of Western civilization that was pretty good. But I just got into philosophy by reading.

GROTH: *A little Kierkegaard, a little Gramsci …*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. And Hegel and Kant, pouring through all that stuff.

GROTH: *This was more or less on your own?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I had a lot of time on my hands, although there was never a dull moment. The first year I was there, my landlady tried to shoot me.

GROTH: *Shoot you with a gun?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Now why would she want to do that?*

SPAIN: It's a long, complicated story. Someday I've got to do a strip about it. There were a bunch of interesting characters involved. I don't know how to give a brief synopsis of it. These people were alcoholics. Some years before, the father was delivering a grand piano on a trailer; his son was in the back of the trailer. The father took off quick, the kid fell off, and the grand piano hit him in the head. The doctor said that there was a chance he might live, but he would be a vegetable. He not only lived and wasn't a vegetable, he was a bright guy and got a scholarship to Penn State, which is when I moved into the house. But he had this fist-sized dent in his head. There was this other guy there, Louie Duhane, who was an interesting character. He had a poodle and he would break out into interpretative dancing in the middle of the class. The husband, Skelding … I probably shouldn't have used his real name. I wonder if any of them are still alive.

GROTH: *The worst thing they could probably do is go try to shoot you again.*

SPAIN: Yeah, that's right. I don't know whether Skelding would, but Mrs. Hammond … Everything was always tense at the table, because Mrs. Hammond insisted on all these manners. To this day I can dine in polite company, because I know to spoon my soup away from me, and if you fucked up on that, Mrs. Hammond would —

GROTH: *I always admired that about you.*

SPAIN: [*Laughs*.] That's what they say about me. [*Laughs*.] So anyway, it was always tense at the table. Mrs. Hammond was tyrannical, and both the Hammonds were imbibing huge amounts of booze. At one point Skelding came in, and he forgot to take off his jacket. Mrs. Hammond whipped this plate of relish across the table, they were seated at either end of the table, and it bounced off Skelding's head. The relish was coming down his face, and he looks at Mrs. Hammond and says, "Calla, you are cheap." It was like living in the middle of a Eugene O'Neill play. Eating dinner was kind of a tense experience.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *"You are cheap?"*

SPAIN: "Calla, you are cheap." And then the funny thing is, me and Skelding hated one another. And at some point, the son — I think his name was Frank — dropped out of school and he came back. He was a pretty good guy. But Skelding was a guilty man, this accident that had impoverished them, they were kind of well-off at one time, but the medical bills had impoverished them, so they were forced to take in the likes of myself as a boarder. Mrs. Hammond was always unkind to Skelding, and he was an intimidated guy. The other dynamic was the fact that me, Skelding, and Louie had no love for one another. And this went on all year. At some point, it was near the end of the school year, Mrs. Hammond and Louie got into an argument over the hamburgers which she liked to leave raw in the middle, and Louie did not like this. So he decided to give the raw hamburger to his poodle. Mrs. Hammond insisted that the middle of the hamburger be given to her dog. So an argument began, and at some point, Skelding sided with Louie. Mrs. Hammond said, "OK, Louie, you're just renting your room, you can't use the rest of the house, you can just use your room." At that point, even though I couldn't stand him, I sided with Louie. I said, "Well, Louie, you can come down to my room, too." So it was

me, Skelding and Louie versus Mrs. Hammond and her son. You know he had to side with his mom, of course. So she said, “OK, I’ll show you guys. I’m not going to sit at this table until I get an apology from everyone.” For about a week, we were spooning our soup the wrong way, and eating our bread without breaking it in half, wearing jackets at the table, and just cutting up along these lines. Mrs. Hammond had this boyfriend, this rich Italian kid who went to art school. He was a rich biker. He had a leather jacket and stuff. We used to drink together at various times, and he was seeing Mrs. Hammond on the side. Mrs. Hammond had a few boyfriends.

GROTH: *How old was Mrs. Hammond?*

SPAIN: Mrs. Hammond was about 50, but she was a good-looking woman. She was kind of a beat-out alcoholic. I’m sure in her prime she was quite beautiful. She had seen better days. But this guy … him and her hit it off, and it was just something that everybody accepted. She also had another son. She had a younger son, who was, I don’t know, 4 or 5. Incidentally, I was the only one he’d listen to. I mean, he’d call his mother a son of a bitch, and was basically kind of an unruly kid, except that when I would tell him to do something, he would do it for some reason. And at some point … I was eating some extra crackers or something in the kitchen, and the kid came in and said, “You’d better look out, my mom has got a gun and she’s going to shoot you.” And I said — she was in the other room, and I knew she could hear me — ‘Well, if she ever pulls out a gun, I’m going to stick it up her ass.” With that her first son came in and told me to get in my room. I said, “Hey man, I’ll plant you, too.” And he came over to me and said, “Listen, I have to stick up for my mother.” I said “OK.” After all, I had no beef with him. So I went into my room. Later that night, her boyfriend came in and told me he got Mrs. Hammond the gun. So at that point, despite my big words, I made my flight. I got my blanket and went over to the school, and spent a few nights there. Afterward it was kind of settled. Mrs. Hammond wasn’t really mad at me, but she really hated Louie. Even after a year of this woman’s terrorizing and arrogance, I felt a little sorry for her now that she had been taken down a peg. During the week of Mrs. Hammond’s exile, Mr. Hammond became more sexually aggressive, he would whack her in the ass, and make crude references to her, and come on to her in a crude way, and she seemed to like it. It

changed the dynamic of the household, where Skelding, instead of being a whipped dog, was a sexually aggressive guy.

GROTH: *Like he got testosterone shots or something?*

SPAIN: Something, yeah, right. This whole episode seemed to energize him, and this veil of guilt that was draped over this guy's shoulders had disappeared, and he just became more of a man. I left the house — by that time school was just about over, so … that was it. I don't know whether the real names of these people should be used.

GROTH: *Well, you know, it can't be libelous if it's true.*

SPAIN: It is true. Of course, after all these years, I bear these people no ill-will. The second year I was there, I fell in with these guys who were junkies and burglars. Basically good guys, at least as far as I was concerned.

GROTH: *You were naturally attracted to them?*

SPAIN: Well, it was that I felt comfortable with them. [*Laughs.*] And they treated me good. However, I saw one of the guys, a good buddy of mine, commit suicide, so …

GROTH: *Jesus!*

SPAIN: Yeah, so it was never a dull moment. And in the midst of all this I was doing a lot of artwork. But at some point I just couldn't do any more artwork there. I finally started doing weird comic-book covers, things like … one was a bed with a dish and a rag and a severed hand and a knife. I started doing these things that disturbed them, so they sent me to a shrink. She said, "You really don't like it here. You really miss being home." And I said, "Jeez, that's right." I had never thought of that. So I just split.

GROTH: *You said you left a few weeks before the third year.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Did that jeopardize your academic status? You didn't give a shit?*

SPAIN: I didn't give a shit, and don't, that's right. [*Laughs.*] My academic standing is not really a primary concern.

SEVEN YEARS

GROTH: *When you attended the Silvermine Guild School of Art, you were probably between 18 and 21?*

SPAIN: 18 and 20, yeah.

GROTH: *The first strip that I know you did was* Zodiac Mindwarp *for the* East Village Other. *When you attended the Silvermine Guild School, that must have been between approximately '58 to '60, and I can't imagine you did this strip before about '65.*

SPAIN: *Zodiac Mindwarp*, I did it in ... it came out in '67.

GROTH*: So there's seven years between the time you attended the Guild School of Art and the time you actually had your first strip published. I want to explore what you were doing in those seven years, and how your interest in comics finally culminated in doing that work.*

SPAIN: Well, I always wanted to be a cartoonist. That seemed to be my first love. There was something about art school, they were able to insinuate this disdainful attitude towards things like comics, and towards popular forms of art. Even though I tried to fight it, it seemed to infect me. So I did a lot of painting. By the time I got out of art school, I was fairly depressed, but after getting out of art school, I perked up again and did a whole bunch of painting, and continued to do art work. I've always drawn, as a kid, as a teenager ... I was one of those people who drew in the margins of their notebooks and on their pads and on anything I could get a hold of. I got just as much of an art education working at Western Electric for five years as I got at the Silvermine Guild School of Art. During that period, I worked in a plant for about five years.

Panel from "Mexico and Me" in *My True Story* ©1992 Spain

GROTH: *What kind of plant?*

SPAIN: We made telephone wire. It was a Western Electric plant. And there were a lot of good artists there, some amazing artists.

GROTH: *What was your job?*

SPAIN: I had various jobs. I was a janitor at one point, I worked on these different machines, twisters, stranders ... the plant was an amazing place. Janitor was actually the best job, because you got to see all the surreal machines, and all this different wire being processed through the extruders and the spinners and all sorts of things. There were a lot of interesting people there.

GROTH: *This was in Buffalo?*

SPAIN: This was in Buffalo, yes.

GROTH: *You went back to Buffalo as soon as you got out of school?*

SPAIN: Right, yeah.

GROTH: *And you got a job at the plant pretty quickly?*

SPAIN: I got a job fairly quickly, yeah. After a few months. I worked with my dad a little bit, but ... I got a job at Western Electric, and went through the various departments ...

GROTH: *How did you feel about working there*?

SPAIN: I enjoyed it. A lot of it was tedious, but there were a lot of good artists there. There are a lot of good stories that I could tell about working there.

GROTH: *Were you unionized?*

SPAIN: Yeah. There was a good union there, CWUA, that stuck up for me. You had to fuck up the same way three times to get fired, and I never fucked up the same way more than once.

GROTH: So you could fuck up three different ways and not get fired?

SPAIN: You could fuck up twice the same way, the third time you were out. I was actually rather creative in the ways I fucked up, but I would never do the same thing twice.

GROTH: *So what was your interest in comics at the point you were in art school, and afterwards at the plant? Were you still reading them; were you trying to draw them?*

SPAIN: No, I wished often something good would come out. There was a comic that came out, it must have been at the end of the '50s, called something like *Korak of the Stone Age*. I've looked in the *Photojournal Guide to Comic Books*; I haven't been able to find it. It's not *Turok, Son of Stone*, even though it sounded like that. But it was this stream of consciousness story about a bunch of cavemen who get lost inside some volcano, and off-the-wall things happen to them. It was really strange, and even though it was Comics Code, I got every issue I could get my hands on, because it was just so experimental, and it was just so imaginative. It was an insight into the potential of comics. They had broken out of that frozen superhero monster et cetera et cetera to do something that was crazy, so that was a forerunner, to me, of the potential. And I always wanted to do comics. It seemed to me as though comics afforded anybody the opportunity to put forth any sort of philosophy they wanted. A good example of that is the guy who did *Dr. Strange* —

GROTH: *Steve Ditko*.

SPAIN: Steve Ditko, who did *Mr. A*, a very right-wing, crazy view on things, but still the guy certainly doesn't have the conventional point of view. In the plant, there were guys who were great artists. There was Ron Walazeusky, who did beautiful pornographic drawings that were a combination of S. Clay Wilson and Japanese prints. One was of two sailors, one sailor boffing a chick in the mouth, and the other porking her in the butt. His nemesis was a little old guy named Georgie Etsel, who reputedly was for Hitler during World War II. He was a little old guy with no teeth, and he would keep washing these pictures off the wall, and Walazeusky would keep upping the ante by bringing in markers and various materials that were harder to wash off. And Georgie Etsel would find some new solvent to go wash these real works of art off the bathroom walls. And finally Walazeusky carved these beautiful pornographic pictures with a church key on the bathroom walls. The authorities in the plant flipped out and they had photographers down there taking pictures of it. I wonder if any of those pictures are still around. But Walazeusky was a genius. I don't know what happened to him, but his work was really beautiful. I got just as much of an art education working at Western Electric for five years as I got at the Silvermine Guild School of Art.

THE ROAD VULTURES

GROTH: *Tell me what your life was like during that period, both in terms of how your interest in comics coalesced, as well as what else you were doing*.

SPAIN: Well, at the time I was riding motorcycles. I had different bikes, and I ended up joining the Road Vultures.

GROTH: *Now explain how you joined the Road Vultures; what kind of a bike did you get? How did you gel into that milieu?*

SPAIN: Well, Buffalo is a great party town. Every time I go back there, all the bars are jumping, and there's bands and people dancing, especially at the end of the '50s and in the early '60s, Buffalo really had a great blues scene. There were people from different neighborhoods that were into this scene, and they would get to know each other, sometimes even on good terms. A lot of times you'd get into fights with other

neighborhoods, but you'd usually end up drinking with these guys that you had fights with last week. I was already working at Western Electric, it was the spring, and I saw these motorcycles takin' off and I had some money saved in the bank. I said, "I want one." I had a friend who had a motorcycle. His dad taught him how to ride. His dad stopped riding when he drove a bike in between these two trees and skinned off the side of both of his hands. At that point he figured it was time to stop. So his dad had taught him. He was a big blues buff like me. John Biye, a Cajun guy from Louisiana. He taught me how to ride. Some time later, a guy I knew, a guy who had a motorcycle, got jumped and beat up. A whole bunch of us, at least so I thought, went down to this bar to find the ones who had beat him up. I walked into the bar with two other guys, and we assumed that there were a whole bunch of guys behind us, but there weren't.

GROTH: *You mean you thought friends of yours were backing you up?*

SPAIN: Yes, we thought there was a whole bunch of us behind us, but when we looked around, we were three guys in this hostile bar. I was fighting five guys, and I kept on fighting even when they knocked me down, and some guy kicked me in the head. At that point I just curled up in a little ball, and let them beat on me. There wasn't anything else I could do. It was amazing how little it hurt. I mean, when you're getting kicked in the head, that hurts, but it's amazing how resilient the human body is — and how much a leather jacket protects you, actually.

GROTH*: A padded motorcycle jacket, right.*

SPAIN: But when the Road Vultures heard about it, they thought that that really showed class. They went down to the bar to find those guys, who were long gone by that time. You had to strike for the club, hang around for a certain amount of time, and then they'd vote on you, whether they wanted you in. So I got in in two weeks, and became a Road Vulture.

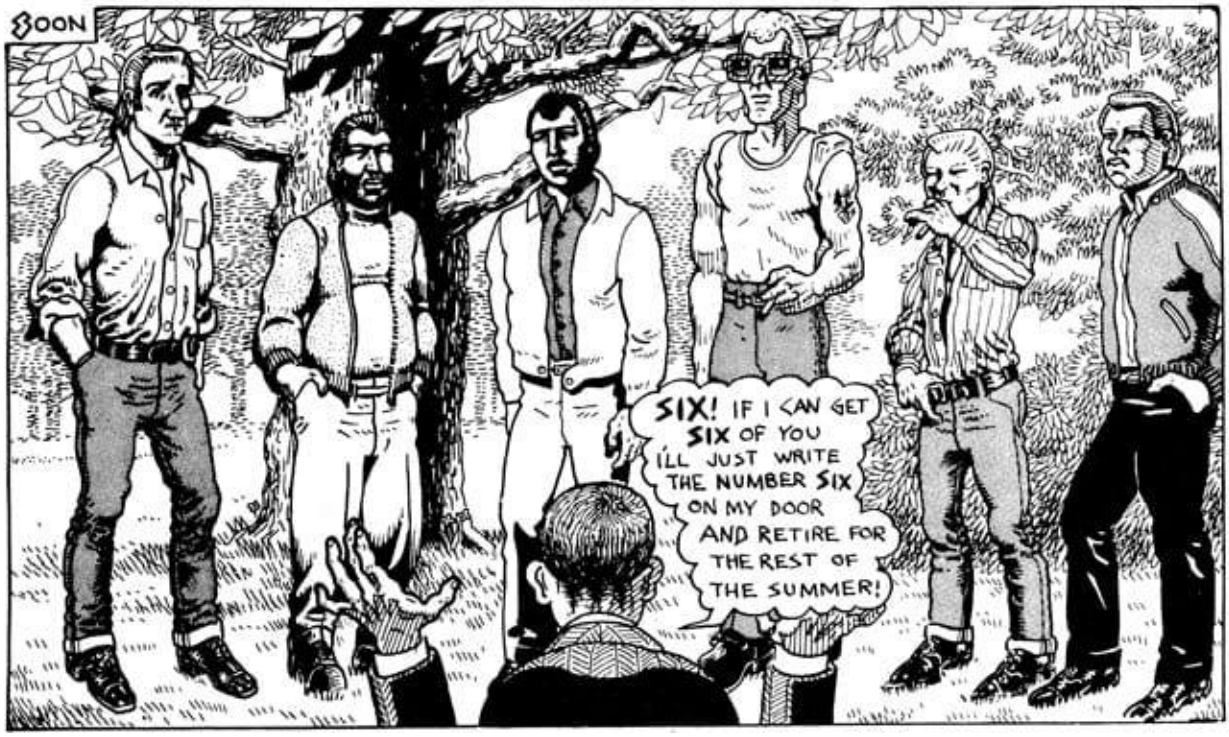
GROTH*: Well, you've got a number of comics stories that harken back to that period, or even before, and I wanted to know how truly autobiographical these stories are. You did the stories in the '70s, so I'm kind of skipping around here a little, but the first*

story that I wanted to ask you about was "Dessert," which I think was supposed to have taken place in 1954, which would have made you 14.

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *In which case it hardly seems likely you were actually involved in that story.*

SPAIN: Yeah, we went through this brief period of rolling fags; our neighborhood went through cycles of crime, and this was one of them.



Panel from "Dessert" (1976) in *My True Story*

GROTH: *Were you involved in this, or did you only hear about this?*

SPAIN: Well, no, I was ... well, I guess the statute of limitations has run out. Yeah, sure.

GROTH: *You were a participant?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *So you were 14 when you were involved in sexually abusing and beating up a gay guy. Were the other kids older? In the story it certainly looks like they're closer to 18.*

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, they were kind of a mature 14. By the time we got to be 18, all that stuff was considered beneath us.

GROTH: *I see. So rolling fags was one of your activities.*

SPAIN: For a short time. But anyone approaching us, even on a non-sexual basis, did so at their peril. In 1954 … the thing that surprised me back then was that a lot of police were sympathetic to gays.

GROTH: *Huh! That strikes me as.. . almost contradictory.*

SPAIN: Uh, yeah.

GROTH: *I would've thought the police would probably have approved of that activity.*

SPAIN:You would think that they would, but no, a lot of police, even in Buffalo, aren't morons.

GROTH: *Another story that I'm curious whether it was autobiographical or not, is titled "How I Almost Got Stomped Through 'The Still of the Night' by the Five Satins," which describes someone attending a concert and sitting in the chair of a black guy's girlfriend, and the black guy comes up and basically says, "That's where my girlfriend sits," and the guy says, "I'll get up when she gets here,"and he says, "No, you're going to get up now," and he says, "Yeah, well, why don't you just go fuck yourself?" And he finds himself facing 30 black guys. Was that you?*

SPAIN: That's completely autobiographical, yeah.

GROTH: *That was you?*

SPAIN: That was me.

GROTH: *That was supposed to be '55, so you were 15 at the time?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *So you were like a real tough guy?*

SPAIN: Well, I certainly fancied myself as that.

GROTH: *You got into a lot of fights …*

SPAIN: I got into some, yeah.

GROTH: *You must have been something of an anomaly in the underground scene; I don't imagine most of the underground artists were the kind of guys to get into fights.*

SPAIN: It's ironic that they thought that comic books were causing juvenile delinquency, when most juvenile delinquents didn't read comics, or much of anything. I remember a guy from my neighborhood reading *Studs Lanigan*, but he was unusual. I used to read science fiction. But reading wasn't … or even going to college, I think there was one guy who went to college, but most guys didn't go to college. The black guys in my neighborhood were more into higher education than the white guys.

GROTH: *Were the Road Vultures … I mean, was that a fairly violent way of life? Or is that exaggerated?*

SPAIN: You'd find a bar to hang out, and everything would be cool for a while. But after a while, guys would get bored, and somebody would always eventually come in and get things going. I mean, you didn't have to look for fights, because somebody always wanted to give you a hard time, because you had long hair, or you had an earring, or something like that. They ended up getting their ass kicked. So there were two ways you could be a nonconformist. You could be a nonconformist and just adopt a Buddha-like attitude of accepting all kinds of abuse, or you could be a Road Vulture.

GROTH: *I assume you read Hunter Thompson's* Hell's Angels.

SPAIN: I read parts of it. I never got through the whole book.

GROTH: *Is that right? I was going to ask you if you thought that was a pretty accurate depiction of a biker gang.*

SPAIN: Yeah, the parts I read were pretty plausible. It's interesting that the incident that the movie *The Wild One* was based on was some sort of minor unruliness that took place in Hollister; the Road Vultures had a far bloodier episode in Sherman, New York, where somebody lost an eye … at least one guy did time because of that incident.

GROTH: *Were you there at the time?*

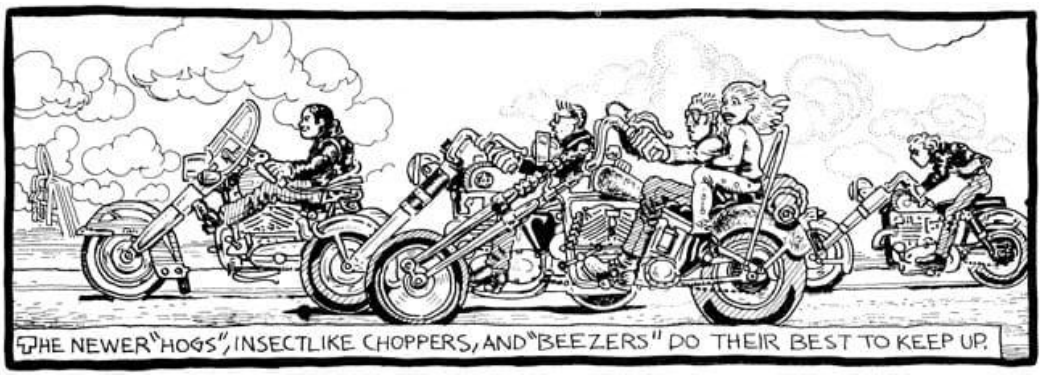
SPAIN: No, I wasn't. This was before my time.

GROTH: *How many Road Vultures were there?*

SPAIN: Oh, somewhere around 20. So we pretty much kept to ourselves, and —

GROTH: *Can you give me an idea of the social routine? Would you all get together Fridays or Saturdays?*

SPAIN: Yeah, we'd have a club meeting once a week, and we'd hang out, depending on what bars would let us in. There was one bar that always let us in, the Silver Sails, that was run by Ma, who would always serve us. It was down by the Niagara River, at the end of the Erie Canal, and we could always count on Ma to let us in. And some weekends would be dead, and sometimes you could go in there on a Tuesday night and the place would be jumping, so that was where we'd hang out in the winter, and then when spring happened, there were all sorts of things you could do — go for rides to different places, and various field meets, and motorcycle events.



From “Field Meet” (1974) in *My True Story*

GROTH: *I don’t want to sound naive, but was there any political dimension to joining the Road Vultures?*

SPAIN: Well —

GROTH: *Or did you just want to kick ass?*

SPAIN: Well, there were two phases of the Road Vultures. I used to read *The Weekly People*, which was the official organ of the Socialist Labor Party. The format *of The Weekly People* was set around 1911. It had very large pages. When I rolled it out, it was hard not to notice, and it had a great logo, the arm and hammer logo, a muscular arm wielding a hammer with block lettering across “The Weekly People.” You could always get into a discussion by just pulling out that paper and sitting there, somebody would always give me an argument about it, and then if you refuted their arguments, they would complain that you’re always coming around here with these socialist arguments, and you could tell them, “Well, I was just sitting here reading my paper and you came in here and started bothering me, so stop whining.” I used to argue a lot, and they would tell me things like, “Them Negroes, they move into your neighborhood and you know how they are, they’re always drinking causing crime and they’re dirty and they’re loud, and we don’t want people like that around.” I always assumed that prejudice was fairly ingrained. Then something happened that shed a different light on things. They used to have a big field meet in Cuba Lake; it was in what they call the southern tier of New York. What happened was there was always this big dance the night before, and there were a lot of college guys who hung out in that town. There might have been a university or some college around there. It was as though there was an invisible line drawn down the middle of the dance floor, and the bikers would be on one side, and the college guys would be on the other side. This one time, there were these black guys there, maybe about five or six guys, and evidently the college guys had been giving these black guys a hard time. When the black guys saw us, they were really glad to see us. It was like these long-lost brothers. The Road Vultures took these guys around, and made sure that they had plenty of drinks and everything like that, and made sure that these college guys

didn't mess with them, took good care of them. And it was the same guys that would make these know-nothing arguments …

GROTH: *Can you elaborate on the social dynamics there? Because I assume the Road Vultures didn't take them in or protect them because they were all a bunch of good liberals.*

SPAIN: We were outcasts. There was a certain solidarity with outcasts. It's funny about people. It's funny about people's prejudices. What I suspect is, when I look back upon it, I just think that a lot of these guys were putting me on. You know, some guys were really rabid racists, other guys were not racists at all, and even sympathetic to black people being people who were at the bottom of society, like we were, so … . That was definitely a cultural affinity at that time. There was this one black bike club who always won the uniform prize. If you're on the road for a few hours, you get pretty dirty, and these guys would roll into town, get some hotel room, and fix themselves up and put on these snazzy uniforms, and just all roll into the field meet, and would inevitably win a prize.

GROTH: *Another thing that occurs to me … I went to school in Rochester, that's not that far from Buffalo, I don't think …*

SPAIN: No, it's 90 miles.

GROTH: *And I rode a bike when I went to college there. But one thing I remember vividly is the goddamned cold in the winter. And riding a bike in the winter was insane. The wind cut through a leather jacket as if it were a cotton sweater.*

SPAIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. There were a few crazy guys who did that. But sometimes there were mild winters that you could get away with it. I think I kept my bike on the road one winter, that was —

GROTH: *It would be really hard to ride year-round.*

SPAIN: Yeah, it usually is. One thing you can do is, you can put newspaper under your jacket. That cuts the wind. But one of the signs of the spring is the smell of motorcycle oil. Right around this time, some hardy soul would get his bike out, and you'd smell it.

GROTH: *Sort of like a groundhog coming out.*

SPAIN: Yeah. A harbinger of spring.

GROTH: *So you were a Road Vulture when you were working at the plant?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

BACK INTO COMICS

GROTH: *So what was your interest in comics and art at that time? I mean, did you have much of one?*

SPAIN: Oh, yeah, I drew continuously. At the plant they ended up putting me behind a machine that was always breaking down. They were putting us on time study to put us on piece work, which is in reality a wage reduction. Whenever they would watch us, we would just work slower, and I worked slower than anybody else. And they ended up putting me on a machine that was always breaking down. So I had plenty of time to do drawings. In fact, there was one boss who would chide me if I didn't draw him a dirty picture every day. He was on the midnight shift, and if I didn't draw him a fuck picture, he would say, "Where are those pictures? I want to see something here."

From "The Peerless Power of the Silver Surfer" in *Fantastic Four* #55 (October 1966), written by Stan Lee, penciled by Jack Kirby and inked by Joe Sinnott ©2012 Marvel Characters Inc.

So I got plenty of practice to improve my chops. So the ’60s were starting to gear up, and in Buffalo the bikers merged in with the beatniks and the college crowd, and it became a big party scene. People started getting into Marvel Comics. There seemed to be some sort of psychedelic subtext; it’s hard to put your finger on it. I’m sure other people have mentioned this; there was something that resonated. I remember reading *The Fantastic Four*, and it was the first time that I picked up a comic book every time it came off the stand since I was a kid. So there was this feeling it was coming back. When they suppressed comics, there were a bunch of us who were EC fans, and there was that cover, the cover of *Mad* where they were leading the underground cartoonists off in chains, and there was something about that that really resonated. There was this girl in our class, kind of a heavyset girl, her name was Tema, and me and a friend did a strip about her. It was called *Tema*, and it was written in letters like *The Heap*. Nasty guys that we were, we put out this strip to terrorize her. We thought of ourselves as underground cartoonists.

Talking to different guys, you’d get a feeling that the idea of underground cartoonists just resonated across the country. Guys I knew would have dreams that they’d walk into some place, and they would see some EC comics that they hadn’t seen before. And I would have those dreams, too. When they suppressed EC comics, I went to every bookstore I knew and bought up every EC that I could find. At some point they actually started charging $3 for them.

It was a funny, mixed feeling about it. It was an indication that we weren’t the only guys who felt these were great, but on the other hand, you had to pay more for them. You used to be able to get them for a nickel. Suddenly they were charging you — even 50 cents was fine. When they wanted $3 for them, we thought they were going overboard.

So anyway, there was this sense out there. This friend of mind, Fred Toote, a guy I did a bunch of strips about in *Blab!*, was one of them. There was this core of EC fanatics in my neighborhood. There was a sense that something would happen, and suddenly there was this feeling around 1965 that comics were going to come back. At some point, in ’65, I dropped out, I quit work, I had some money saved up, and I went down to the Lower East Side [in New York City] and tried to flood places that would accept my work.

GROTH: *You went to New York?*

SPAIN: Right. I was right down the street from where Malcolm X was shot. I happened to go to New York that weekend, hanging out with these people. People would say, "Let's jump in the car and go to New York." In New York there was a great newsstand on St. Marks and 6th Ave that had everything. You could get *The Realist*, all sorts of radical newspapers. So I would always bring a bunch of that stuff back, and give them to guys in the plant.

GROTH: *You would just drive down from Buffalo to New York, or take a train down there?*

SPAIN: I would just drive down, yeah.

GROTH: *What was your purpose in visiting Manhattan?*

SPAIN: The time when Malcom X got shot I was with a bunch of people, and we stayed in some commune. You'd go down there and get stoned, hang out, and it was just … being in the scene, you know. Hanging out, basically.

GROTH: *Now at some point, you moved to New York for six months, I think.*

SPAIN: I moved to New York for a few months in '65.

GROTH: *Does that mean you quit your job?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I quit my job. I had a girlfriend at the University of Buffalo, and so when she went on vacation, when she had the summer break, she lived in Long Island, so I just moved to New York so I could be with her. When she went back to Buffalo, I went back there, too.

GROTH: *Let me skip back for a second. In 1964, you worked with what you said was an old Commie who was expelled from the Communist Party in one of the purges in the late '50s, and you put out a periodical called* The Spirit and the Sword. *This was apparently an underground paper that you'd sell on the University of Buffalo campus.*

SPAIN: Yeah, it was in ’64. In ’64, I went to New Jersey. When I came back, the Road Vultures had seemed to dissolve, but there were a bunch of ex-Road Vultures who didn’t want it to dissolve, so we reformed the club. That was a more political time. We would buy coffee for strikers, and do things like that. We were involved in anti-war stuff that was already starting to happen. I was doing things with Ed Wolkenstien, who put out a publication on a mimeograph machine called *The Spirit and the Sword*, and we would sell it around. The University of Buffalo, they were pretty receptive and I was surprised. I thought, “If you show this to somebody, they’ll probably punch you in the nose.” But people accepted it, and would engage you in intelligent discussions.

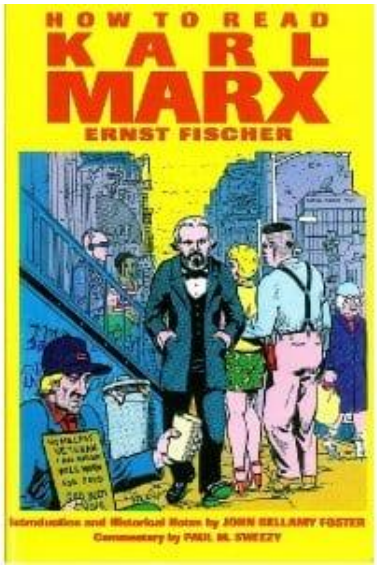
GROTH: *Can you describe* The Spirit and the Sword*?*

SPAIN: It concerned itself with civil rights, anti-war issues, and I did artwork for it. It would have some historical things, things about John Brown. I learned about John Brown, which is a very interesting story. Everybody knows about the stuff at Harpers Ferry, but what went on before Harpers Ferry, when everybody including the United States government, the United States Army, was afraid of him, is less well-known.

GROTH: *Right, right. In fact, the magazine was dedicated to John Brown.*

SPAIN: Was dedicated to John Brown, right.

GROTH: *His spirit and his sword, I guess.*



cover by Spain

SPAIN: “The Spirit and the Sword,” it’s some quote from him. That summer I was in New York, I did work for *The Militant*, which was the newspaper of the Socialist Workers Party. I did some cartoons for them.

GROTH: *Was Norman Thomas a presence in your life at any point, or was he —*

SPAIN: Well, no. The closest relationship that I had to Norman Thomas was through a bunch of really crazy guys called the Resurgence Youth Movement. Jonathan Leek, who started the Resurgence Youth Movement, was in YFS, which was the Youth Group of the Socialist Party. And when Kennedy died, he issued a manifesto calling for all revolutionaries to go forth with pistol and dagger and put to death all public officials. And he was immediately thrown out of YFSL.

The Yippies were a pallid reflection of these guys. These were genuinely crazy guys. You would see them at a demonstration, and there would be Nazis on one side and cops in the middle, and left-wingers on the other side. These demonstrations always took place in Union Square. These guys would attack the cops. The cops would beat their ass. And they put out this great literature. They would say things like, “We dream of the days when the motorcycles will roar down Park Avenue and the fags will prance on your lawns, and the junkies will shoot up in your bathrooms.” And at the time, that stuff seemed pretty incredible. It was strangely prophetic. One of their slogans was “Arm the Vagrants,” which the Road Vultures took up with a vengeance.

During that summer in New York, I met those guys, and we must have smoked about eight joints, just kept passing around joints. I was really loaded. And they set out to try to outdo one another in these outrageous assertions. They were talking about kidnapping Mayor Wagner’s son and holding a People’s Tribunal. And another guy said, “Yeah, we’ll build a big guillotine.” They talked about surrounding some reactionary Southern town and wearing these black uniforms, and going in there with submachine guns. I said, “You guys are crazy, the State Police will come and arrest you all.” One guy jumped up and said, “Oh no, we’ll get these big spears, and we’ll sharpen them up and chop off their heads!” Chopping off heads seemed to be big with them. One guy was loonier than the next, but they were interesting. They put out a magazine called

Resurgence. It had all this crazy stuff like numerology in it. All this was pre-hippie. So the Lower East Side was really jumping during this time. Buffalo was jumping. That pre-hippie period coalesced by the time I got back from New York in ’67. That’s the winter before the summer of love. And the *East Village Other* had already been out for about a year. In ’66 we would get bundles of the *East Village Other*. When I went down there, I made contact with Walter Bowart, he was probably stoned at the time, but he told me to do a 20-page comic, which ended up being *Zodiac Mindwarp*.

GROTH: *He was the editor of the* East Village Other*?*

SPAIN: He was the editor of the *East Village Other*.

GROTH: *How did you get in touch with the* East Village Other *in the first place?*

SPAIN: Copies of the *East Village Other* would drift into Buffalo. So I went down there. I would get down there, because I would go there for a demonstration, or we’d all jump in the car and just go to New York. I gave him some spot illustrations, and he printed them. At some point, he made this fateful proposition of doing a 25-page comic. His idea was to leave the voice balloons empty, and then we would clip stuff out of newspapers and put them in the voice balloons, which is what we did.

GROTH: *A cut-up technique before the cut-up technique.*

SPAIN: Well, the cut-up technique — yeah, it was Burroughs’ cut-up technique. At first it was supposed to be a comic book, but the printer he was in touch with didn’t have the set-up to do a comic book, so we made it a comic tabloid.

GROTH: *I see. So that was your first published strip?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I had done some things for the University of Buffalo newspaper, a strip called *Sunny Days*. The school newspaper had had a left-oriented staff, and they had got a hold of me. He would crank out a story and I would illustrate it, so I had had stuff published here and there, but *Zodiac Mindwarp* was the first really major thing I did —

GROTH: *Had you read The Beats at the time?*

SPAIN: I had read Lawrence Lipton. And I had read a few things. I read a bunch of poetry, and that sort of thing.

NEW YORK

GROTH: *When you moved to New York for a while, you said you moved because of a girlfriend?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Was this the time you lived in New York when you were roommates with Kim Deitch?*

SPAIN: No, this is before that. I just moved there for a few months, three months or something like that, then I moved back to Buffalo. And then I moved back to New York permanently in February of '67.

GROTH: *What were you doing, where you could move to New York for a few months and just move back, and —*

SPAIN: At that point I had some money saved up. You could live cheap on the Lower East Side. I could stay with friends, people put me up. I had a period where I just ran into a bunch of luck. First, I had saved up that money, and then I got a job in a drop forge for about three weeks. I ran into guys I knew in high school who worked there. It was really a brutal job. And I suspect that they had looked up my references, and talked to Western Electric, and Western Electric said, "Get rid of this guy." So they laid me off, and then I had unemployment for about six months.

GROTH: *You said it was a drop forge?*

SPAIN: A drop forge. It's the way they make knives and scissors and kitchen utensils. It's this whole row, they look like guillotines, with this metal block on top. The block must be maybe four by four feet cubed. You have a rod of hot steel. And on the bottom block there are these three molds, where you stick the rod in one mold and press a lever,

and this big block comes down and then the block goes back up, and you just keep moving it on until the implement is made.

GROTH: *I see. So you had money saved up and took the dive to move to Manhattan.*

SPAIN: Yeah. What happened was, I was living on unemployment for about nine months, and some motorcycle accident I had been in a few years before paid off. So I ran into some extraordinary luck, and I was able to brush up my chops and be an artiste, and so by the time *Zodiac Mindwarp* was published, I was down to 200 bucks, and someone who I thought was a friend burned me for a hundred bucks. He was a junkie, he just died recently. He promised to get it back to me in a few hours. I'd never see the money again, but every time I'd see him I'd shake him down for something. I never let him forget it. We knew each other well enough so it was hard for me to punch him out, but — [*laughs*].

GROTH: *He counted on that, right?*

SPAIN: It's funny, I guess, you know how junkies kind of size you up.

GROTH: *I don't have* Zodiac Mindwarp*, so I haven't been able to read it. But when you said you brushed up during that period, I assume you mean you practiced a lot.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I did a lot more drawing.

GROTH: *What was your approach like? What were your influences? What were you inspired by?*

SPAIN: Well, I was reading Marvel Comics, so that stuff had an influence on me. I was influenced by … what was that guy's name? There was a whole bunch of books by him. He was a German artist that was around the turn of the century, that was probably the best draughtsman in world history, who did all these great drawings of giants picking up huge clumps of people, or elephants skating …

GROTH: *Heinrich Klee?*

SPAIN: Heinrich Klee, yeah. And I had always thought of myself as a hotshot. And when I saw what he was doing, the fact that he could sit down and without any pencil, draw a picture, I was trying to do that. And I wasn't too successful at it. Eventually I got to the point where I could do that, but not as well as he could do it. But it was an interesting exercise in trying to conceptualize things. Because one part of drawing is the technical aspect of getting your drawing right. The other aspect is to be able to think up things. So that those attempts, though they were very frustrating and not immediately successful, helped me sharpen sharpen those conceptualization skills so that I I could try to form something in my mind. And even though putting it in pencil is really the easier way to go, it just sharpened my general drawing skills. It was an interesting and frustrating time, art-wise.

GROTH: *Did you learn a lot of draughtsman skills at school?*

SPAIN: I did learn some. I did learn some. The thing about Silvermine was it focused on abstract art, that was eventually helpful. But at the time, it didn't seem to help me in what I wanted to aim for, which was learning those skills of good drawing that are necessary for comics. Ultimately, the way you learn to draw is by drawing a lot. You just can't get around it, but all that other stuff, design and all that, is of course useful in comics, too. In one of our classes, you had a bunch of black rectangles that you had to arrange on a white page. And at the time it seemed pretty dumb. Why put it over here? What's the difference if I put it over there? All that compositional stuff, you find out eventually, is important, too.

GROTH: *So eventually it did help you?*

SPAIN: Yes, it did. I had good teachers. I always had of an attitude, you know. I would go through periods when I thought I was a real hotshot, and other periods when I realized I wasn't as hot as I thought I was. I would go back and forth. Interestingly enough, at the plant there were a lot of good art critics. If you drew a babe that was out of proportion here or there, guys could spot stuff, so …

GROTH: *After many careful years of studying* Playboy …

SPAIN: That's right. The one boss that I was telling you about, who would get annoyed if I didn't have a dirty picture for him, I remember him sitting at a desk, putting on his glasses and looking at some skin magazine and saying, 'When you get to my age, this stuff doesn't bother you at all."

GROTH: *Did you draw a lot from life?*

SPAIN: I did some, but the thing about comics is, you had to be able to draw from your imagination. When I was in art school we did a bunch of life drawing. As a matter of fact, my first drawing class, we had to draw this concrete block on a table. That was pretty easy. I did the concrete block, I drew the details on it, I did the table, I did everybody sitting behind, then I drew the rafters up on top of it, and gave it to the guy and said, "Yeah, what next?" So I had this smart-aleck attitude ...

COMICS ASSIGNMENT

GROTH: *Well now, Walter Bowart basically gave you an assignment to do a 25-page comic?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *And this was apparently the first extensive strip you would have tackled?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *So how did you go about approaching that, and how did you find the subject matter? Come to think of it, what was the subject matter?*

SPAIN: I just started doing things that came to my head, which was ... let me see. I had The Heap in it, I made up a character called Phlegm Master who would shoot phlegm from a gun. I started off with Captain A-Head, which was a fat Captain America menacing a woman sitting in a deck chair on a roof. I just made it the up as I went along.

GROTH: *Was it of a political nature?*

SPAIN: Not really, no. I imagine you could probably get something political out of it, but …

GROTH: *But that's not what you were thinking?*

SPAIN: That's not what I was thinking.

GROTH: *And that ran in the* East Village Other*?*

SPAIN: It was a separate publication of the *East Village Other*.

GROTH: *Now, you drew that in Buffalo?*

SPAIN: I did it in Buffalo, and I was down to a hundred bucks, and moved to New York City.

GROTH: *Always good to move to New York with a hundred bucks in your pocket*.

SPAIN: Yeah, right, and it was cold, and I would put cardboard over the holes in my boots. It was good when it was cold, because the ice would freeze over, and when the thaw would set and melt the ice, I'd be in trouble. A friend put me up, and … I was able to get through.

GROTH: *Did you actually move to New York for what you thought was good, or —?*

SPAIN: Yeah, basically.

GROTH: *What prompted you to do that?*

SPAIN: Well, when I was first in New York, I had looked around for ways to make a living doing art, but I wasn't too successful. I had approached Ed Sanders, and he gave me the brush-off, but something strange had happened because somehow in the intervening years, my stature had grown in Ed Sanders' eyes. But when I brought *Zodiac Mindwarp* to New York, Bowart was less than enthusiastic about publishing it. And I had heard that Ed Sanders was thinking about publishing it. So I took it to Sanders, this sparked Walter's enthusiasm and he ended up publishing it.

GROTH: *Who is Ed Sanders?*

SPAIN: Ed Sanders started the Fugs, had the Peace Eye Bookstore, wrote a book called *Helter Skelter* about Charles Manson, and was an important figure on the Lower East Side at that time.

GROTH: *And so you moved to New York with the intent to do what?*

SPAIN: Well … to see what would happen next.

GROTH: *Did you want to make it as an artist, or were you even thinking that far?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I assumed that I'd probably end up in above-ground comics, because underground comics probably would last for a while and then fade out. But I started working for the *East Village Other* and was actually able to live on 15 bucks a week.

GROTH: *Those were the days.*

SPAIN: Those were the days. And at some point, I started getting other jobs, and also I was stoned all the time.

GROTH: *That's a pretty amazing feat on 15 dollars a week.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. So for some reason I pulled it off.

GROTH: *You have to admire that fact.*

SPAIN: Yeah, when I look back upon it, Buffalo's a drowsy, provincial city compared to New York. So in Buffalo, when you walked down the street and somebody else is walking down the street, people give way for one another, and people actually spend all afternoon talking, and it's a very relaxed atmosphere in Buffalo. I'd go to New York … as soon as I would step off the bus, something would happen. And this frantic pace went on and on. One thing would happen after another. Years later I'd be leaving New York and the momentum would return to normal. But there was never a dull moment in New York. GROTH: *Did you like that kind of energy?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I like New York. New York is one of my favorite places.

GROTH: *Did you still own a bike when you went to New York?*

SPAIN: No. No.

GROTH: *Because that would be almost impossible to.*

SPAIN: Yeah, my life had changed even though the Road Vultures were still going, and I was still in contact with them. The Road Vultures came down to one of the anti-Pentagon demonstrations.

GROTH: *At some point, I don't know when it was exactly, you did work for the* Gothic Blimp Works. *Could you describe your social and cultural milieu in New York at that time, around '67, '68?*

SPAIN: Yeah, it was really a great time. I met Kim Deitch … in one of our adventures, we were going to see Art Spiegelman. His Topps Bubblegum Company was on Atlantic Avenue, or something like that, and we found an Atlantic Avenue that was in the Bronx, so we ended up in the Bronx.We were both assuming that we could mooch carfare either off Art or one another to get back. I had been there before and I knew that you just had to walk down the street a few blocks to get there. After the walking about ten blocks we knew we were in the wrong place. Some old guy who we asked told us that the only Topps Bubblegum Company he ever heard of was on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn and so me and Kim were a couple of broke hippies in the Bronx, trying to mooch 40 cents to get back, and people did not want to know nothing. It started to rain, we were quite a forlorn pair. Finally this nice girl gave us the money, but it was one of my few experiences with begging — it's very demeaning to me. People were most unreceptive.

GROTH: *So the indirect reason you had to panhandle was because of Art Spiegelman?*

SPAIN: Indirectly. [*Laughter*.] Well, I knew the Lower East Side, but once you got out of Manhattan, I really had no idea where I was. So we finally got back to the *East Village Other*. It was a memorable time.

GROTH: *So how did you come to meet Kim [Deitch]?*

SPAIN: I met him through the *East Village Other*. And I ended up moving in with him. We had this place on Eighth and B — Eighth and C. The landlord was afraid to come in the building, so we stopped paying rent. So we had this place free for — I forgot what, it was like ... not quite a year, but there was this gang of Puerto Rican kids that kind of ruled the building. Kim had a pistol. But the chamber, the part you put the bullets in the revolver, wobbled around, so fortunately we never shot it. It would have probably exploded.

GROTH: *The cylinder wobbled?*

SPAIN*:* Yeah, the cylinder, yeah.

GROTH: Kim had a gun? [*Surprised.*]

From "The Cop on the Beat" in *Deitch's Pictorama* ©2008 Kim Deitch

SPAIN: Yeah, well, Kim used it to get up and down the stairs.We lived on the sixth floor. The kids in the gang would try to charge a quarter to get out the door. I wasn't paying them nothing. When I was first there in '65, I was friends with a whole bunch of Puerto Rican guys. Being Spanish, they looked out for me, and I got to know them. They didn't like the hippies because they would rob from the bodegas so there was a certain amount of tension. When I got back there in '67, there was even more tension between the Puerto Ricans and the hippies. And in this place where me and Kim were living, the older brother of one of the kids was the leader of the gang. At some point the apartment next to us burned down. And these guys would kick a hole in the wall but we really didn't have anything for them to rob. They would rob my girlfriend's panties. They probably suck-worshipped them or something. Anyway there were many adventures in that apartment.

Later on, a friend of mine from Buffalo came, and for some reason he broke down the door. And at one point we had a pound of grass in there, and we have this door propped up; there was much craziness. At one point I actually had something like $116. It was the first time I'd seen anything over a hundred bucks in years. I'd saved it up. And I was so happy, I was throwing it around. I stashed it somewhere, and later when I was going out the door, a kid tried to hit me up for the quarter toll to get out the door. I told him, "In lieu of a quarter, how about me allowing you to still have your teeth?" Then the kid mentioned something about a $116. I was stoned at the time, and it didn't register until later that evening. I was at the movies with my girlfriend. Suddenly I woke up and I realized the kid said $116. How did he know? That was exactly the amount of money I had, $116. I got out of the theater, went back, and stuck the money in my pocket, and later on when I came back, they had kicked a hole in the wall, and were looking for that $116, which they didn't get. So it was just that kind of a scene. There were no cops. In Buffalo there was this law and order machine, so people would nervously smoke a joint behind locked doors. On the Lower East Side you would walk down the street and smoke a joint, and you didn't have to worry about the police. But you did have to worry about the locals.

GROTH: *This was in Manhattan?*

SPAIN: This was in Manhattan on the Lower East Side, yeah. Alphabet City, they call it.

GROTH: *Did you acclimate yourself to this new —*

SPAIN: Yeah, actually I did pretty well.

GROTH: *You were unfazed by it.*

SPAIN: I was fazed, but at some point I realized that I was like a Puerto Rican, but bigger. I've been friends with Puerto Ricans, and I've been enemies of Puerto Ricans. I'd rather be friends with Puerto Ricans. Most of them are good people, but these kids were nasty. To show how out of it I was: I did a mural, I just did it with my finger on the wall. I had a bunch of paints. At some point I found a little black doll, it was a little black baby doll, and I wanted to put it up somewhere, because it was a neat item. I ended up nailing it to the wall. At one point in doing this mural I had some red paint left over, and I couldn't think of what to do with it, so I finally put it around the nail. So there it was, I had this black baby doll nailed to the door … not giving it much thought, I was stoned, and it was an *objet d'art* … One time I tried to hit up on some Puerto Rican girl, and she just turned from me in disgust. But they didn't mess with me, either. One time me and Crumb and Kim were walking up the stairs, and a guy steps in front of Crumb, a guy in a vermilion suit. Crumb had to walk around him. And I purposefully banged into him. The guy just shrunk back. And I never thought it at the time, but having this doll — they must have seen it when I opened the door, and they, being into all sorts of voodooistic ways of thinking, that must have been seen as an act of insane balls. If I had realized that that was what it was, I would have immediately taken the doll down. Being a stoned-out hippie, I just left it there.

THE NEW YORK SCENE

GROTH: *From what I know of you and Kim, you seem very different, although I assume you have a lot of shared affinities. But Kim seems very reserved and quiet, whereas you seem much more confrontational, bellicose. Were you guys good roommates?*

SPAIN: Yeah, we had a lot of good times, got along real good, and are still good friends. I haven't seen him for a while, but if you run into him, tell him "Hi" for me. I enjoy his stuff in *Zero Zero*. And tell Mack White that I think his stuff is great, too.

GROTH: *What was the social and artistic context like at that time? There were a lot of people who coalesced around* East Village Other *and* Gothic Blimp Works. *Crumb … I think Bill Griffith was there at that time …*

SPAIN: Yeah, Spiegelman. I think Bernie Wrightson did some stuff.

GROTH: *Vaughn Bode.*

SPAIN: Vaughn Bode, yeah.

GROTH: *Who did you hang out with? Did you hang out with all of them?*

SPAIN: We hung out, yeah. I actually had a few buddies there. I had a difficult time being a flower child. That Flower Power thing had a hard time in general on the Lower East Side; it was a grimmer scene. Coming to California, which I did for the first time at the beginning of '69, you could really see how nice it was out here, and how different it was from New York, and how people could feel that way, could feel all the posters, and Flower Power … But the Lower East Side was a little different. You really had to watch your back on the Lower East Side.

GROTH: *It's my impression that Kim was deeply into comics then.*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, we were both doing weekly strips, yeah.

GROTH: *And of course, Kim's dad was a cartoonist.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Did you learn a lot being Kim's roommate? Was it a learning experience as well as —*

SPAIN: Well, I learned a lot working with the *East Village Other*. And I was able to get used to turning out a weekly strip, which is a big task when you first start doing it. It

would probably be a big task now, even though I just finished doing *Nightmare Alley*, but … knocking off a full page the way we did on a weekly basis is still a lot of work. Me and Kim's style is different. What I learned from Kim was plotting out a story, and getting an interesting ending, and developing characters, and that sort of thing. It's interesting working with artists who do one panel, they're basically painters. But the task of doing a narrative story is a whole skill in itself, needless to say. So doing *Zodiac Mindwarp*, every day I would draw whatever came to mind, and at the end of six months I had 25 pages. Later, when I first started doing strips for the *East Village Other*, I used that same formula. Whatever would come to my head I would draw. At some point, I'd coalesced into *Trashman, Agent of the Sixth International*. I forgot just exactly when that happened, but I used to get up at about three o'clock in the afternoon and get to bed about maybe nine o'clock.

GROTH: *In the morning*.

SPAIN: In the morning, so you'd just have a lot of time when you'd be sitting around stoned, trying to think things up. Eventually all this stuff just sort of coalesced. I think that when I came out to San Francisco, and had the problem of doing an eight-page story or a five-page story or something like that, I think that my skills sharpened. I started doing a strip called *Manning*, which I, at that point, felt was better plotted out than the early *Trashman*. The early *Trashman* was basically something I would make up as I went along. I would just draw whatever came to my mind that week. At some point I popped an ending on it. But it's really not a well-plotted-out story. Kind of hippie … spaced-out, non sequitur …

GROTH: *Where did* Manning *appear?*

SPAIN: *Manning* appeared in the *East Village Other*. I did that the year I came back, in '69. That's really when *Gothic Blimp Works* was going full bore, because underground comics really looked like they was gaining in popularity, and so besides doing a weekly strip in the *East Village Other*, part of our job was to put out the newspaper, and so we really worked hard there in that time, doing one thing and another.

GROTH: *Were you able to make a living just doing underground comics?*

SPAIN: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I was. At some point Walter Bowart married a woman who's part of the Mellon fortune, and left the *East Village Other* to whoever was around, which was us. We kept the *East Village Other* going. That's when me and Kim moved — me, Kim, and Trina [Robbins] — moved from that place on Avenue B to the *East Village Other* loft, which is on Second Street. It was upstairs above two Puerto Rican social clubs. Being stoned-out hippies, we just slowly moved our stuff from the place on Avenue C. It was all part of a settlement. At some point Walter Bowart came back, and tried to take over the newspaper. That's a whole story in itself. But the upshot of the settlement was, we were making 50 bucks a week, but we got to live in *the East Village Other* loft, which was huge, and got 40 bucks a week. So it was actually a good deal. But we just kept going back to our old pad and taking things out. At some point, when I came back, the door was boarded up. I asked the lady across the hall, an old Jewish lady who was living there for centuries, "Who did this?" The landlord was afraid to come in the building so we knew it wasn't him. She told us the guy downstairs, the garbageman who's the head of the gang of Puerto Rican kids, he did it. "He's kind of the new overlord around here," she told us.

GROTH: *This was your apartment?*

SPAIN: This was our apartment. You could really see things decaying into feudalism. You could really see this thing that must have happened when the barbarians took over parts of Gaul or something like that. Just new overlords came into being. This guy was able to muster the little gang of kids and that made him the "New Overlord."

GROTH: *So what did you do?*

SPAIN: I just took down the boards and got the rest of our stuff, and —

GROTH: *And moved?*

SPAIN: And moved, yeah. We were pretty much moved out.

GROTH: You said you moved into a loft at the *East Village Other?*

SPAIN: No, it was owned by the *East Village Other*. It was a huge loft down on Second Street. It was big enough for three apartments. Kim and Trina lived in the front part, me and my girlfriend, Dianne, lived in the back part, and the middle part was a big area where Walter Bowart's paintings were stored. It was a huge place. Also, there was an incredible library of records. It had an interesting history, Walter Bowart lived there originally. There was a sleeping loft that was rather big, and a guy who wrote a column called "Cocaine Karma" for the *East Village Other* lived up there for six months, shooting heroin. He had this guy who would bring him food in a plastic bag, he would eat the food and then shit in the bag, and this guy would dispose of it. He lived up there for six months. Then the place was taken over by speed freaks. At one point, it was before I had the place with Kim, I had a place that was basically a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a long hallway. The *East Village Other* sent someone over to stay with me. He was the new art director, but it was already a tiny place. They kept sending him over to that loft, but the speed freaks would keep chasing him out. It was driving me nuts to be cooped up in a small pad with this guy. So finally I just got pissed off, and I went over there and made some threatening noises. After awhile, they all went away, and so Peter Mickelunis and a few other people who worked at the *East Village Other* moved in there. There was an Andy Warhol painting that was of Muhammed Ali hanging on the wall. It was black on black. The thought would periodically cross my mind that it would be a great thing to boost. But I just didn't believe in stealing from the *East Village Other*. Then the painting disappeared at some point years later. I talked to Bowart, he doesn't even remember the painting. It was certainly a nice piece of work.

GROTH: *I've got to ask you, what was it like living with Kim and Trina?*

SPAIN: Uh … well, perhaps I won't go into that. It got kind of hairy, as a matter of fact.

GROTH: *That's the first time you have chosen discretion in this interview …*

SPAIN: Sometimes it's the better part of valor.

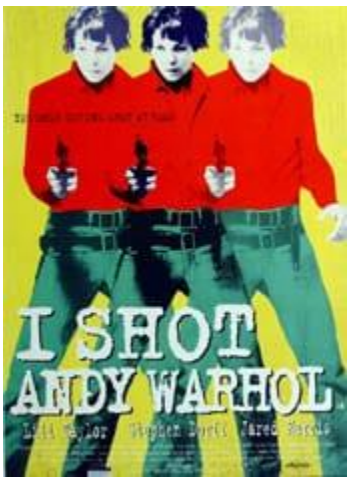
GROTH: *Right. Trina was probably drawing then, too, right?*

SPAIN: Trina had done underground comics before me and Kim. She had done stuff for the *East Village Other*. Trina's one of the first underground cartoonists.

GROTH: *They had not yet had a child. I assume.*

SPAIN: No.

The story of how we ended up on Second Street is interesting.We hadn't heard from Walter for months. And suddenly he wanted to come and throw everybody out. He couldn't do it all at once, but he tried to set up an alternative staff. A lot of the alternative staff were people we all knew. They were scratching their heads about it. They didn't quite understand what was going on, but they were being groomed to replace us. It was hard to confront Walter. It was during the Summer of Love, and Walter always loved you, but at the same time you knew he was socking it to you. At some point I told him, "Walter, every time you say you love me, my asshole starts to twitch." Stock for the *East Village Other*, which people assumed was just worthless, suddenly became a commodity. A bidding war started to happened between Walter and people who were running the *East Village Other* ... At some point, we heard that Walter was afraid to come in the back room where we put out the paper. I don't know if this was true or not but people told us that he was afraid that me and Kim and the art director, Peter Mickelunus, were going to beat him up. Nothing was further from our mind. We were stoned-out hippies, we weren't into violence. But on the other hand, why don't we just tell him, yeah, we are going to beat him up. Another group, the Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers — did you ever see that movie, *I Shot Andy Warhol*? They're mentioned



in that movie. There's a guy in there — Valerie Solanas has a boyfriend — he's one of the guys in the Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers. They came and told me, "Hey, listen, if you want us to take care of him, we'll take care of him for you." So I told them to stand by. Joel Fabercant, who had been running the paper since Walter had left, called everybody together on paste-up night. He told us that there were two ways we can take of this. On one hand, we can see if we can buy a majority of the stock, which will stop him from throwing us out of here.

On the other hand, we could pool all our money and we could get somebody to bump him off. At this point, it was a spontaneous gesture — everybody reached in their pockets, and there were hands out with money, one dollar, 20 dollars, everybody took every last dollar they had and their spontaneous impulse was to bump him off. We were all hippies, but Walter had managed to make himself into a real hated guy and at that point everybody realized that everybody else hated him, too. But it was difficult confronting the guy, because he always loved you and he had a very disarming style.

GROTH: *How much older was he than you guys?*

SPAIN: I don't think he was any older than us. He was the main, though not the only force, in creating the newspaper. He deserves a lot of credit. On the other hand, he should have stayed there, if that's what he wanted to do, and develop the paper. Just coming back after almost a year to boot out everyone who had kept the paper together just wasn't going to happen without a fight. First we got these 10-page memos that would have points on how the women should dress, and this, that, and the other thing. People didn't take that too seriously. At some point he returned to boot us all out. But even during that period, we collaborated on a bunch of work that turned out rather well. If he had worked with us, and treated us right, the animosity wouldn't have been there. Living up to that lovey-dovey hippie stuff, that would have been a good idea. But, the mailed fist beneath the facade of Summer of Love was counter-productive. So the next confrontation was on paste-up night. He comes in, and everybody's kissing his ass … I was a bit annoyed after all that tough talk. So I went into the bathroom, and I drew a cartoon of him. (What better place to conduct these momentous struggles?) I drew him in this John Lennon affectation he had taken on, everybody was salaaming to him as he daintily stepped over them, he was making some pompous statement about the common herd being unable to grasp the rarefied concepts of the esthetic elite. He came in as I was doing all this. So I looked him in the eye and I signed my name to it. He then did a cartoon of me. It was prophetic in a way. He drew me as a fat guy — I wasn't fat at the time — with a big hammer and sickle on my chest, and I was saying "America sucks, Russia is great," which has never been my position. My rap on him was the truth while his rap on me was an just stupid red-baiting. Oh! He also portrayed me with a tiny cock,

which besides being irrelevant to the issues at hand showed he was not the expert on my private parts he imagined himself to be. But with this, everybody in the place started writing this stuff on the wall attacking him. I felt kind of bad about some of it. His reference to my bad thing opened up a torrent of counter-abuse.

GROTH: *That's got to be a libel.*

SPAIN: Yeah! [*Laughs.*] A lot of it was real personal stuff. I felt that what I did was attacking his attitude, which was snotty and arrogant, and we didn't have that coming, especially after keeping the paper alive for almost a year. But we had this duel, and the whole bathroom filled up with this nasty graffiti about him. The next week it was the same thing, and I thought, "Aw shit, I really don't feel like having another confrontation, but I guess it's up to me." Then Kim confronted him. And Kim, in a very gentlemanly way, said, "Walter, I don't think very much of you." And laid it out. I was thankful to Kim for his well-spoken and calm recitation of what was a valid criticism of Walter. So at that point, we made the deal where we'd go down to 40 bucks a week and get the *E.V.O.* loft, so it was a good deal.

GROTH: *How long did you end up living there?*

SPAIN: I must have lived there for about four or five months. At that point I came out to California. Somebody I knew called me up and said, "Hey, if I come out and get you, will you come out to California?" And I said, "Sure thing." Nobody's going to be crazy enough to drive across country and bring me back to California.

GROTH: *This was a friend of yours?*

SPAIN: Yeah. So ...

GROTH: *He did.*

SPAIN: About a month later, there he was. “Hey, hi, let’s go!”

MORE SKETCHES OF SPAIN

An interview with Manuel “Spain” Rodriquez, Part II

The second half of our two-part interview with Spain Rodriguez covers the vast majority of his professional career in comics — from the height of the underground comix era through today. His artistic output is one of comics’ most influential and enduring, stretching across a number of genres and approaches. Spain has made his mark in autobiography, where his straight-ahead action and class consciousness has set him apart from several of those who have worked that same area; history, with dramatically told stories of war drawn from interests and passions the artist has enjoyed since childhood; journalism, practically inventing from whole cloth the first-person journalistic narrative in comics in a way that is as sophisticated and compelling as any of the works Spain’s comics helped make possible; and satirical commentary, through his well-known vehicles Trashman *and* Big Bitch.

In this second half of a several-hour, multiple-session conversation with interviewer Gary Groth, all of Spain’s major works are discussed, as well as the various personalities involved with comics’ first great explosion of risk-taking artists. Included, too, are discussions of modern works like Boots *and his adaptation of* Nightmare Alley*, and even an explanation of his famous pseudonym.*

We begin with Spain in New York City in the late 1960s, where he worked on the East Village Other *and produced his first long comix work,* Manning. *He had just agreed to go to California.*

WHY LEAVE?

GARY GROTH: *Let me ask you a little bit more about New York, specifically, about the other cartoonists who formed the underground hub there. Tell me how you met [Robert] Crumb.*

SPAIN RODRIGUEZ: Crumb … when Crumb did the first *Zap*, it just hit the whole underground comics world like a hurricane — it was really a major thing. It was beautiful, just a beautiful piece of work. He's able to convey a feeling that you've seen it before, it has some sort of old-timey aspect to it. He came out to New York a few times. At one point he stayed with me and Kim [Deitch]. And we had good times together. We had a lot of laughs, and he even stayed up at the *E.V.O.* [*East Village Other*] loft. When I went out to California, I stayed with him.

This sequence is from "Route Zero: The Road That Knows No Law" from Subvert #3 (1976) collected in Trashman Lives!

One of the things that this guy Joel Fabricant arranged was that we could party on down at a nightclub called The Scene. Steve Paul's The Scene. We could go down there and get free drinks and they had great acts: Jerry Lee Lewis, Sha Na Na … you know, everybody who was playing in town played at The Scene. So we basically had it knocked. We were getting free entertainment, free luxurious pad, and it was really a good time. In a lot of ways, I wonder why I came out to California.

GROTH: *I was going to ask you that.*

SPAIN: I ask myself. I've asked myself that plenty of times.

GROTH: *You eventually must have made it over to [Art] Spiegelman's.*

SPAIN: Yeah. I was over there a bunch of times.

GROTH: *What were your impressions of Spiegelman when you met him?*

SPAIN: Well, Spiegelman was really the first guy I met. He had ideas that were radical to me, such as experimental page layouts. I never thought of things like that. I explored a lot of that when I did *Manning*. I did one strip at an angle. It was really an inspiration to run into somebody who had given though to things like that, and then, just the influence of seeing all the work of different people. It really was a time – more than I could have ever imagined as a kid when I fantasized about underground comics, and artists being led away from the subway to jail.

GROTH: *Bill Griffith was there at the time. Did you get together with him?*

SPAIN: Sure. We all used to hang out together. We would put out a newspaper.

GROTH: *Justin Green? He was there?*

SPAIN: Justin Green, yeah, right.

GROTH: *You met Vaughn Bodé?*

SPAIN: Oh yeah. It was funny. When I first met him, he was this real conservative-looking guy. But the stuff he had done was really wild. Conceptually interesting. He ran down all the worlds he had thought up. All that German equipment that was truncated, and I had never really thought about plotting things out like that before him. My inclination is to start off, and see where it takes me, but he'd really worked everything out before hand. Years later when I saw him, he sure looked different: he had very long hair and one long green fingernail, he was rouged up and had eye liner on, and 17 earrings, and stuff like that. A big change from when he first came around. I think we first turned him on to grass.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. *[Laughs.]*

GROTH: *Jesus!*

SPAIN: Very conservative.

GROTH: *Did you like his work?*

SPAIN: I liked the concept of it, and I really admired the fact that he could do all this stuff in Magic Marker. Funny animal comics aren't really my favorite kind of comics, but I could really appreciate and admire the sweep of his thought.

GROTH: *You mentioned Bernie Wrightson earlier. Did you know him?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I'm sure I met him a bunch of times. Artistically, I felt closer to him than to Crumb or to Kim —

GROTH: *That's interesting. Why was that?*

SPAIN: Oh, because I do more of an adventure-type comic. Kim and Crumb and Vaughn Bodé, their stuff is more — it's more kind of a funny comic. It's a different thing.

GROTH: *Of course, Wrightson had to be very influenced by the EC horror stuff.*

SPAIN: Right. I think we were all influenced by EC's. Every so often I hear a complaint from Crumb that he didn't go to art school. I laugh at him — you mean you spent all this time with Harvey Kurtzman and you're envious of me because I went to art school?

GROTH: *You said you knew Bill Griffith and Justin Green in New York, and that you would occasionally hang out with them; do you have any recollections of what they were like? Was there an affinity between you and them?*

SPAIN: Well, we just knew each other from the *East Village Other*. We got to know each other a whole lot better here in San Francisco, you know, in the early days of underground comic books. We had been putting out *Gothic Blimp Works*, which was an underground comics tabloid. I was turning out either a strip or a cover for the *East Village Other* once a week, so turning out something for *Gothic Blimp Works* was a whole lot less disciplined work than what I was doing for the *East Village Other*. But it was also more experimental. I was working on a strip called *Manning* at the time.

GROTH: *Tell me about* Gothic Blimp Works.

SPAIN: Well, at the time, in the late '60s, underground papers seemed to take off, too, and the whole underground publishing thing as well. Crumb was turning out *Zap* here in California, and I don't know why the printers couldn't put together a comic book [sized periodical], which would have been the natural thing to do, but for some reason or other they said they weren't set up to do it … When I did *Zodiac Mindwarp*, it was supposed to be a comic book, but the publishers said they just couldn't do that format, and so the tabloid format was what was done. And the *East Village Other* put out *Kiss*, which was an answer to *Screw*; also *Gay Power*. Because at that time Stonewall had happened, so all these things were going on in the office. All these publications were being put out, and every so often I would turn something out for *Kiss*, then *Gothic Blimp Works* would come out every few months, which was actually amazing for any kind of underground publication. But we already had some discipline of turning things out with the *East Village Other*.

GROTH: Gothic Blimp Works *was a tabloid?*

SPAIN: *Gothic Blimp Works* was a tabloid. I'd done a cover for it, Robert Williams had done a cover for it. It was the first time I had ever seen any of his work, and Bernie Wrightson, and [Mike] Kaluta.

GROTH: *You knew Kaluta then, apparently*.

SPAIN: Yeah, I had met Wrightson, and — yeah, I had met them — I mean, you know, the things in the *East Village Other* office were always chaotic, so I didn't really get to know them that well, but …

GROTH: *Who published* Gothic Blimp Works*?*

SPAIN: The *East Village Other*.

GROTH: *And it was distinguished from the* East Village Other *how?*

SPAIN: In that it was all comics.

GROTH: *And what exactly was the rationale behind that?*

SPAIN: It was to cash in on the underground comics thing, which had seemed like, actually *was*, a going proposition. It was a nice enhancement of our paychecks, and more work, and so it was good all the way around. It was also a chance for new guys to get things in. By that time, me and Kim Deitch, who had been doing a runaway strip for the *East Village Other*, were almost established guys.

GROTH: *So what artists were in* Gothic Blimp Works*? You, Kim —*

SPAIN: Yeah, me, Kim, Bill Griffith, and Art Spiegelman, and Yossarian, and … just a lot of the guys who were around at that time. Vaughn Bodé, he was also in there —

From Manning

GROTH: *Was that the publication you did* Manning *for?*

SPAIN: I did the longest *Manning* strip for *Gothic Blimp Works* — I think it was three pages.

GROTH: *Now, Manning was a bloodthirsty cop.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. It was a satire of all the cop propaganda that still infests TV. Also, the idea of a plot was starting to sink in. When I did the first *Trashman*, I just would make it up every week as it went along. Whatever popped into my head at the time, I'd just try to arrange it in a way that seemed to make sense, and a friend of mine had given me that ending of the scene where Trashman mows down the high society swells. It was from the guy who had stiffed me for a hundred bucks when I first came to New York, so I figured he owed me something. But living with Kim, who would meticulously plot things out, made me more aware that I could do all these things with plots. I tried a lot of experimental things with *Manning*, using collages, and at one point I just tilted the whole strip at a 45˚ angle.

GROTH: *Well, that's interesting, because formally you're a conservative artist.*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *I mean, you don't go in for a lot of Spiegelmanesque experimentation.*

SPAIN: I feel that experimentation really has to serve the storyline. [Jim] Steranko, who I really love as an artists, and who would really come up with all these inventive things that I found all kinds of inspiration from, seemed to take a little past the storytelling point, where a lot of the effects seem to be more for the effect's sake rather than to move the storyline ahead. I think everything should really serve the storyline. So I still try to use experimental things, but I just try not to make them draw attention from the point you're trying to get across.

GROTH: *Were you a big fan of Steranko's in the '60s?*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, I still am. I really like his stuff.

GROTH: *You still are?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I still am. I just got some comic that has a lot of reprints of his stuff, but I haven't seen too much new work of his.

Spain experimented with a 3D word balloon in this panel from "Untitled" in *Subvert* #2 (1972): collected in *Trashman Lives!*

GROTH: *It's interesting that you would like his work so much, because so much of his work is pyrotechnics.*

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, yeah, right. I —

GROTH: *As opposed to content. There's not much content there.*

SPAIN: Yeah. And I think that's a valid criticism, but the pyrotechnics are great. Perhaps he needs somebody to write him a good plot that can have a lot of pyrotechnics.

GROTH: *When you say you eventually discovered the concept of a plot, what was your fiction reading like at this point?*

SPAIN: I had read a lot of science fiction, and I was continuously reading things. I think at that point I was reading a lot of H.P. Lovecraft … a lot of that old pulp stuff that was really before my time, so it was fun to become acquainted with.

GROTH: *Speaking of pulp stuff, you started* Trashman *in New York, right?*

SPAIN: In New York, yeah.

GROTH: *That was for the* East Village Other?

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Can you tell me how that came about?*

SPAIN: Well, I don't know exactly how it came about, but it was one of those nights that I would stay up all night being stoned and listening to the radio and drawing. Some of it I could patch up to be a comic strip. At some point those strips became *Trashman*. Maybe I got the idea from Jonathan Leek, who started the Resurgence Youth Movement. By this time, he had become a stern Maoist. But on the other hand, he still had preserved his wacky tendencies. He was talking to toasters, and stuff like that. So the idea began to take root.

GROTH: *Now, of course,* Trashman *was an overtly political strip. How much Marx had you read? How much had you actually studied of revolutionary politics?*

SPAIN: I went through a period where I read a lot of philosophy. Something about Marx really rang true. When I first started bringing Socialist stuff around the factory, I thought, "Ah, I'd better be real careful about this stuff." What I found out was that guys in the plant were real receptive and there's a real sense of class war on the plant floor, because they're really trying to squeeze as much work as they can out of you. We were all young guys, and we also wanted to fuck off as much as we could. So that struggle was definitely there. The whole piecework thing, which they cram down your throat, is in reality a wage cut. They see how much you're producing. In order to get the wage that you're getting, you have to produce more, and then if you produce anything over that, they give you a bonus along with a lot of hype about productivity and competitiveness.

But it's a transparent shell game. And everybody understands this. Yeah, there are certain aspects of Marxism that … it seems to be the idealization of the working class. It seems like wishful thinking. Workers are just as capable of reactionary attitudes as anybody. There are certainly a lot of wealthy progressive and humanistic people.

But on the shop floor, it's very clear that you're getting screwed and they'll screw you as much as they can, and you've got to fight back. And if you've got a good union, you're in a lot better shape than if you don't, so … so much of that stuff rang true. Marx is a little dense. German philosophy talk is a little hard to understand, but the *Weekly People* would explain things in an understandable way. I've read more Marx as time goes by. I just did a cover for a book called *How to Read Marx*.

GROTH: *Right. I have that.*

SPAIN: That's pretty good at clarifying some of that dense text. But you really see the class struggle going on all the time. For example, the MAI (Multi-Lateral Agreement on Investment). I don't know whether you know about that. It's a super-NAFTA that would basically have an unelected council of businessmen that could override environmental laws, workers' safety laws. It really is this capitalist world government that would make democracy obsolete. Obviously every rich person is not a bad person, but the basic tendency of that conservative outlook is authoritarian and antidemocratic, and something that anybody but the most servile person has to be against.

GROTH: *Well, I guess this isn't the time to get into that.*

SPAIN: Right. I have to sort of hold myself back from another political tirade.

GROTH: *You did a fairly small number of* Trashman *strips for the* East Village Other *before you moved to San Francisco.*

SPAIN: I actually did a chunk of them.

GROTH: *About 20 pages, I think.*

SPAIN: Yeah. I did a few — there are a few that I know I did that aren't in the collected *Trashman* that I —

GROTH: *Oh, is that right?*

SPAIN: Yeah, as I read through it, I thought, "Well, where's this strip, where's that strip?" So there's a few that aren't there. But I don't know exactly where they are. But there's somebody somewhere around that's got a big collection of these.

GROTH: Trashman *is a fascinating mélange of revolutionary politics, sci-fi, and pulpy plots*.

SPAIN: Yeah, well, I like those pulpy plots. There's something about the serials, those Saturday-matinee serials. They have this minimal plot line and maximum action. So when I did the last *Subvert* comic, I tried to set up something like that where I had a minimal plot so I could just do a lot of action. Which is the trend of a lot of movies, too. It's funny, because action is really a space-filler. You can make it as long or as short as you want, and it's beside the point of the basic plot. The basic plot, you have a basic problem, and usually a McGuffin, some sort of object that everybody's after, and then the action's something that's many times not really essential but can also be interesting in and of itself.

SAN FRANCISCO-BOUND

GROTH: *You just mentioned* Subvert *comics. You published that in San Francisco, didn't you?*

SPAIN: Oh, yeah.

GROTH: *Now, can you tell me at what point you moved from New York to San Francisco?*

SPAIN: Well, I came out here at the beginning of '69, and went back to New York, and stayed there until December of '69, and then got a good ride out here.

GROTH: *What was the lure of San Francisco?*

SPAIN: Well … a lot of it was that I had a good ride out here.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Those were the days.*

SPAIN: Yes, right.

GROTH: *It's practically the same thing Crumb said, I think. He just lucked into a ride out there, and landed there, and that was that.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I had a ride — with Crumb's date, actually.

GROTH: *What?*

SPAIN: Her name was, the name she went by was Lark Clark.

GROTH: *Lark Clark?*

SPAIN: Yeah. Crumb said he once pushed her face into a bunch of spaghetti or something like that.

GROTH: À la *Cagney*.

SPAIN: *À la* Cagney, right, yeah. That tough guy.

GROTH: *I always think of Crumb and Cagney together.*

SPAIN: Yeah. *[Laughs.]*

GROTH: *Explain how you got this ride with Lark Clark?*

SPAIN: I had known her, and at some point she had gotten a new Volkswagen, and needed somebody to drive with her across country, and I was just in the state of mind where I could have stayed in New York or I could have come out to California. There was all this stuff happening in California. Of course, there was a lot of stuff happening in New York, too. But she tilted the balance.

It took us about two weeks to get out here. The ride across country was interesting. At some point, the car broke down in a small western town, and I've never had this kind of

attention before or, thankfully, after. It started off with us opening up the *I Ching*, and the *I Ching* saying something to the effect that strangers in a hostile place should give nobody a hard time. OK. With that I could hear the car starting to cut out. We got to some garage, and I assumed that everybody worked on Volkswagens. But we went to this garage and the guy said, "Volkswagen? What the hell's that?" He told us that there's one guy in town who might work on it, we might try this garage down at the end of the street. We had to get someone to push the car to get it started at that point. We got to the garage and the garage said, no, they didn't work on Volkswagens, but there was another guy down at the end of this other street who might just help us out. So what I did was, I would stop the car in the middle of the street so somebody would have to give me a push. Lark Clark had her son, who was a baby at the time. At some point she became indignant because I was doing this unethical thing to the other drivers by stopping the car in the middle of the street and she walked out in a huff. So I was left with this car in this hostile town with this baby. Somebody finally gave me a push —

GROTH: *She left the car without her baby?*

SPAIN: Yeah, she just strode off without her baby. So once I got the car going, I saw her walking down the street and I slowed it down enough to say, "Meet me at that garage at the other end of the street, and just do it." So we got down there, and at that point the people in the garage were not glad to see me. So I told her, "Listen, we're really in a bad situation. Nobody knows what a Volkswagen is here. There's one guy who might work on it. But I got to go find him, and I can't get this car started, so I want you to wait here with the baby. You've really got to do this, because we can't leave the baby, blah blah blah." So I walked through this town, and everywhere I went, like I say, I've never had this kind of attention before. People were coming out of doors and yelling at me. Cowboys were trying to pick fights with me. Everywhere I went, people were locking their doors, and it was just a wall of hostility. People were swearing at me, people were driving by cursing me out.

This 1970 cover is collected in *Trashman Lives!*

GROTH: [Laughing.] *You weren't used to this?*

SPAIN: Well, not in New York. In New York, I was a normal guy.

GROTH: *To what did you attribute this?*

SPAIN: Well, I had long hair, I had this jacket that was from Afghanistan that a good friend had gotten me—

GROTH: *Foreign, yes.*

SPAIN: And I think I looked like a hippie, you know. So I finally got to this old guy, and he said, "Sure. If you'll bring it down here, I'll see what I can do for you." And when I went back to the place, I decided to take what I figured was a shortcut. I figured if I could cut through these streets, I could get there quicker, time being of the essence. The guy told me, "I'll be closing in 15 minutes," so I had to get it there. I finally got to the gas

station, and I said to the people there, “Listen, if you guys give me a push, I’ll be out of here, you’ll never see me again.” Three or four guys jumped up and gave me a push. And I took it to this guy, this nice old guy welded this part in the distributor, and it was this real meticulous job, holding this tiny part, trying to weld it. But he did it, and the car started. I assumed the guy would charge me 40 or 50 bucks. The guy charged me six bucks. And I just got out of there, and I was just so happy to get the fuck out of that town.

GROTH: *What state was this?*

SPAIN: This was in Wyoming. Something like Greenbanks, Wyoming. You know, that’s one place that I will avoid. So … we’d been dawdling on the road, just taking it easy. At some point, my money was running out, and I had to get to San Francisco. Lark Clark, she would get into these free-love communes and try to get everybody to fuck everybody. That was her thing.

GROTH: *That was her thing?*

SPAIN: Yes, this was her thing, yes, right. She was a true sexual iconoclast.

GROTH: *I bet she was successful at it.*

SPAIN: Yeah, you go to these places, and guys would be porking each other, and everything. Yeah, she was really a classic Love Child. It was good times crossing the country with her.

GROTH: *Fun while it lasted, huh?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *I guess you never kept in touch with Lark Clark.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I eventually lost touch with her. Every so often she would come to town and I’d see her. But I did lose touch with her. Crumb mentioned her in a strip. I think he wrote her original name in some sort of advertisement on the back of one of his comics.

GROTH: *Fondly, I hope.*

SPAIN: Oh yes. Right. She was … yeah. Dana Crumb hated her guts.

GROTH: *I would expect no less.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *So you arrived in San Francisco. Can you tell me a little about how you started to meet people, or how you started to move in your new social circles?*

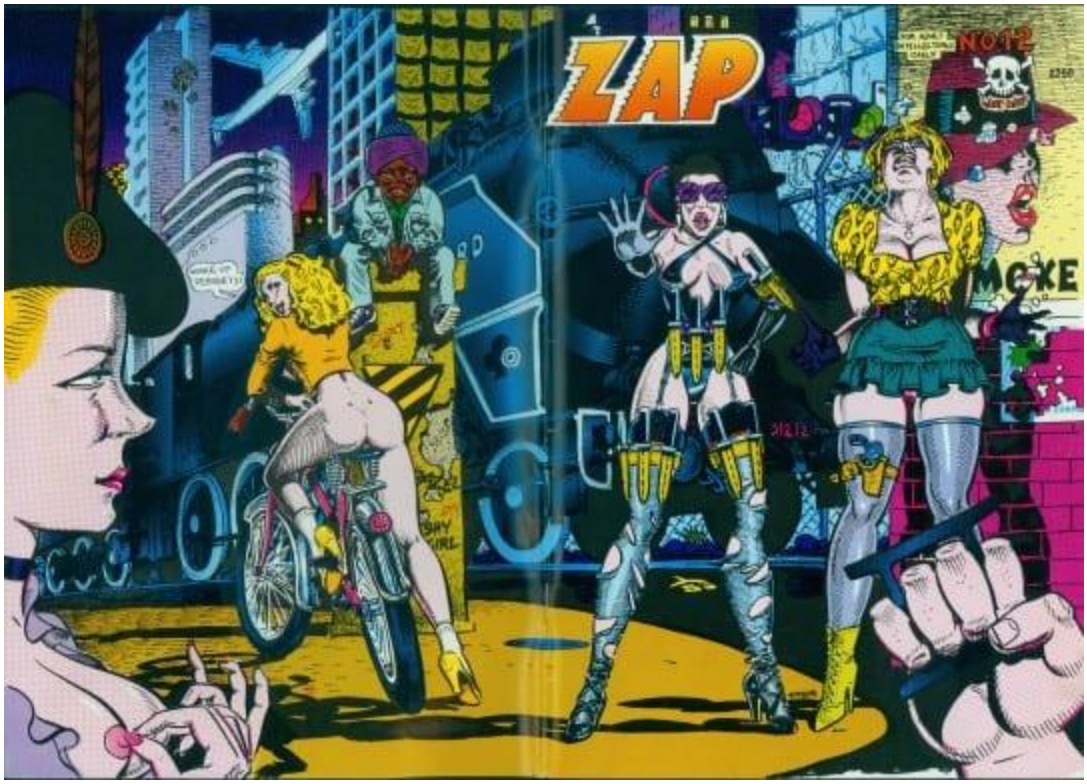
SPAIN: Well, the last time I was here, I had already met [S. Clay] Wilson, and I knew Crumb — at one point I stayed in his place.

GROTH: How did you meet Wilson?

SPAIN: I did something for *Zap*. That was *Zap* #4, I believe. I did something while I was staying at Crumb's, so … you know, I'd met everybody already. [Victor] Moscoso, I knew Gilbert [Shelton] from New York.

GROTH: *You actually did something for* Zap *when you were out there on a temporary trip?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I wasn't sure whether I was going to stay in California. The *East Village Other* gave me a ticket to come back, and I'd never flown across country. I was easily swayed, as you can see. They gave me a ticket, so I flew back to New York and worked for the *East Village Other* again.



Spain drew this 1989 cover

GROTH: Zap *was a pretty closed community. How did you get invited to appear in* Zap*?*

SPAIN: I think it was a little more open at that point, because after me and Robert Williams, Moscoso and Wilson decided they didn't want anybody else in, and so then it became a closed thing. Well, Crumb gave *Zap* to the artists. It's something he didn't have to do. It was really an act of generosity on his part. *Zap* is a collective, made up of the most uncollective guys there are. So in setting it up the way he did, everybody had veto power on anybody new coming in. This is something that rankled Robert because he wanted to see a lot more open attitude in *Zap*, and he just didn't have the power to impose his will. One thing he could have done was set things up so that if an artist didn't have anything in a particular issue, then he would lose his vote in the next issue. That would have been one way to offer an incentive to have something in every issue and give himself more influence. But nobody had done this before. I trace the present unhappy state of Crumb with *Zap* to that, to our general inexperience, and Crumb's generosity. Even though, when you look at the *Zaps*, we turned out 13 good issues, so there are

arguments both ways. The limited group of artists became something of a format that kept *Zap* from being some sort of a generic underground comic which many underground comics tend to be. But there were a lot of good guys who should have been in *Zap*. A lot of guys who are good artists and who crank it out regularly.

GROTH: *You think Crumb's a little disillusioned with* Zap *now?*

SPAIN: Well, yeah. Yes. That's what he says. In the next *Zap*, we're featuring the great artist's punch-out between Crumb and Moscoso. He did his version, and me and Moscoso did a reply to him.

GROTH: *So you went back to New York, and then you finally hitched a ride with Lark Clark, and moved to San Francisco more or less permanently, I guess.*

SPAIN: Yeah. Permanently.

GROTH: *How long after you got there did you publish* Subvert?

SPAIN: Um, let me see. I did *Subvert*, I did *Mean Bitch Thrills*, which actually sold about 40,000 copies or more. At that point, it looked like underground comics were going to be a going concern. They even had a few underground comic conventions.

GROTH: *They had one in Berkeley, right?*

SPAIN: Right. So things seemed to be going along OK until about '73, which interestingly enough is the time when American wages peaked. American wages have been downhill since '73.

GROTH: *Do you think there's a cause and effect there?*

SPAIN: I wonder. You know, that whole afterglow of the Summer of Love seemed to last well into the '70s, when there seemed to be a decision at some level to reduce the standard of living of the average American. I've always looked upon Richard Nixon as the powers-that-be saying to the public, "I want you to go into the woods and pick the switch that I'm going to whip your ass with." Nixon was the switch with which to whip our collective fannies. Things were never quite that good after Nixon. You could feel the

happy smile among the Reagan Democrats. Their little asses were red in contrition for the "excesses" of the early '70s, late '60s. Things were great while they lasted. But you can still see the hand-wringing among conservatives about the '60s.

GROTH: *Well now, when you say things were "great," what do you mean?*

SPAIN: There was a lot of good times, underground comics were doing great, San Francisco was rocking out …

GROTH: *Yeah. Of course, there was enormous social turmoil, and Vietnam was reaching its peak, students were getting shot …*

SPAIN: Right. That's right. Yeah, and all that sort of thing was going on. I ended up living with a bunch of people who were really involved in political protests. I got to know people from the San Francisco Mime Troupe. So yeah, that kind of political ferment was really building up. The whole thing about the anti-war movement, it had stops and starts and periods of discouragement, then it would pull itself up by the bootstraps. Because the war was so horrible that even if you got discouraged, you knew that they're still sending off people like yourself that get killed, really for nothing. The documents that have come out show they even knew that the war couldn't be won, but kept sending American youth into this meat grinder.

GROTH: *Did the social-political activism over that period dovetail with your own conception of revolutionary politics?*

SPAIN: Yeah, it did more or less. A lot of the political activism was more student-based than working-class based, because the students were the ones who were getting drafted.

GROTH: *Yeah, and you were in the blue collar camp, more or less.*

SPAIN: I was more like an old Leftist in some ways. Today, a lot of the Green Movement is too anti-tech for me. After Critical Mass, which is this thing once a month where the cyclists stop traffic, trying to get everybody to get out of their cars, I would have a whole lot of misgivings about voting for a Green candidate. It's come down to the anti-tech versus the pro-tech people like myself.

GROTH: *You're pro-tech?*

SPAIN: Yeah. The two cultural trends at the end of the 20th century are the Futurists versus the Functionalists. If we drop to the technological level of, let's say, the Mennonites, the Pennsylvania Dutch, we could definitely have a sustainable future. Whereas if we keep building nuclear plants and gas guzzlers, we'll probably end the species. And so, you see, some people are Functionalists, and they want to see the human species go on, and other people just want to see this gleaming-chrome future. I'm really one of the people who wants to see the gleaming-chrome future, but I think we'd have to make certain adjustments. For example, if ten percent of our power can come from photovoltaics, why not build ten times as many photovoltaic plants and run everything off solar energy? Including cars. I don't want to live like a primitive person. At least in that sense. Right now I'm starting to work on something called *Alien Apocalypse 2000*. The person I'm working with is an Earth First person, so we have interesting philosophical discussions.

GROTH: *Philosophical collisions, I would think.*

SPAIN: We're able to carry out things on an amicable basis. We have personal respect for one another. I'm not out to trash them, because it's all compared to what? Charles Hurwitz should be in jail. People like Charles Hurwitz are vandalizing our national patrimony by destroying some of the last of our redwoods to fund their little junk bond schemes. But, on the other hand, I'm not giving up my car so some Chinese bigwig can drive his. There's got to be another solution. Plus, I just don't believe in animal rights. I wish it was cold enough in San Francisco so I could wear a fur. As it is, I wear as much leather as possible. I think that animal rights are a symptom of degeneracy. So we have that philosophical difference, also.

GROTH: *Do you have any animal companions?*

SPAIN: Well … my wife and my daughter have badgered me into having a rabbit.

GROTH: *No pun intended.*

SPAIN: *[Laughs.]* Right, no pun intended. But it doesn't make any noise, and I refuse to deal with its feces or take care of it. I'm higher on the evolutionary chain, and it should be taking out my shit.

GROTH: *And you have the additional option of being able to eat it if it gets uppity.*

SPAIN: That's right. That was certainly a selling point. But I hate dogs and I'm allergic to cats.

GROTH: *Well let me get back to* Subvert. *Rip Off published that.*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, except the last issue was published by Justin Green's brother who died recently, Keith.

GROTH: *Rip Off was Gilbert and Jack Jackson and Fred Todd, I think.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *How did you connect with them?*

SPAIN: I had known Gilbert from New York, and they were one of the people who published things, so I did some work for them.

GROTH: *Did you meet Jack out there?*

SPAIN: I met him here.

GROTH: It seems like you two would have a lot in common, a fascination with history …

SPAIN: Yeah, I love his stuff. His stuff is great, he did *Commanche Moon*, and the book about Juan Seguin in Texas. Great stuff. It's a great way to teach history. Have you ever seen that Texas history book, done in comic book form? Incredibly racist. Mexicans are referred to as greaseballs, and things like that. It's a great way to teach history if you just take that racist bullshit out.

GROTH: *Whatever didacticism there is in* Trashman *is leavened by the pulpy quality of the plots, the sci-fi elements, and frivolous sex. To what extent were you trying to put forth an agenda in* Trashman, *and to what extent were you just trying to put together a good adventure story?*

SPAIN: Well, both were concerns. All art has some sort of political context. Some more than others. Some things are fairly didactic. Things like *The Fountainhead* are basically propaganda pieces.

From *Zap* #11 (1984) collected in Trashman Lives!

GROTH: *A 1,000-page tract.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right, really. And [Steve] Ditko's stuff is interesting, but that stuff becomes so preachy, and you have to have some affinity for that point of view if you're going to put yourself through reading all that. My model is television and mass media in general, which also carries with it certain assumptions. It is in its own way no less didactic than *The Fountainhead* or Steve Ditko, it's no less didactic than *Trashman* or anything else. I just happen to have a minority point of view.

GROTH: *Well, no, if anything, I'd say it was less didactic, and—*

SPAIN: Well, good, because I mean it to be less didactic.

GROTH: *Yeah. Fewer speeches than in* Mr. A.

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Or* The Fountainhead.

SPAIN: Yeah. I think that it goes over better that way. So my model in a lot of ways is more mainstream. Television has more of a subtext of propaganda; I think police programs are classic propaganda. Lying propaganda at that. In no cop program do you see anything about cops shoving billyclubs up some guy's ass, or even when they touch upon cops' planting evidence on people, it's all done in some way that justifies it. I was watching something on *Law and Order* where the cops are agonizing about lying in court. This is a joke. The Philadelphia police department has been caught planting evidence on people, and the New Orleans police department was actually running a murder-for-hire racket, etcetera, etcetera. The great thing about underground comics is that there's an opportunity, however limited, to come out with something that is more realistic.

CHRONOLOGY

GROTH: *When you were doing the* Subverts *in San Francisco, you must have been in the process of learning the form.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *I don't have a really tight chronology of your work, so I don't know how your work played out, but I have a feeling that you did* Trashman *first, and then moved into doing historical and autobiographical stuff. Is that about right?*

SPAIN: Yeah. The first thing I did that was really autobiographical was in *Young Lust*. Which I started to dip my toes in talking about my own experiences, and —

GROTH: *What story would that have been?*

SPAIN: There was a story called "Raw Meat." It was about a gang bang some time in the '50s in an optometrist's office.

GROTH: *That wasn't the story about rolling the gay guy?*

SPAIN: No. I think rolling the gay guy might have been before "Raw Meat." Yeah, that was "Dessert."

GROTH: *"Dessert," right. Which was '76.*

SPAIN: Yeah. OK, so it was already that late. Right after that, we did a color version of *Young Lust*, and that's when I did "Raw Meat."

GROTH: *Wasn't* Young Lust *edited by Bill Griffith?*

SPAIN: Yeah, that was Bill's … Bill and Art [Spiegelman].

GROTH: *How did you get involved in that? Did they just invite you in?*

SPAIN: Yeah, another thing I put out was *Insect Fear*. Let me think … *Insect Fear* might have had something that was about people I knew. "Plate Job," that was the name of it. In *Insect Fear* #3. We put out three issues of *Insect Fear*.

GROTH: *What other artists were in* Insect Fear?

SPAIN: *Insect Fear*—Wilson, Justin [Green], there was a woman, her last name was Melendas, she did the back cover … I forgot whether Trina had anything in any of the *Insect Fears* … Jim Osborne … Kim did some stuff for *Insect Fear*. I don't know whether Rory Hayes ever did anything for *Insect Fear*. We always used to hang out together, so that if somebody had a comic going, whoever wanted to be in on it usually would just jump in —

GROTH: *Was there one person more or less in charge of* Insect Fear?

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, I was in charge of *Insect Fear*. I thought up the tide, and did the first issue.

GROTH: *And who published that?*

SPAIN: Print Mint.

GROTH: *Was it a pretty fairly free period at that point, where you could get almost anything published that you wanted?*

SPAIN: Yeah. It was not only real easy to get published, but it was sold through headshops so we had a great distribution set up. At some point they cracked down on headshops, though. Having underground comics would identify them as being dope-oriented establishments, so they would drop underground comics.

GROTH: *Why would you publish at one underground publisher over another?*

SPAIN: I don't remember there being any special reason. When I came to town, I already had an *Insect Fear* started, so … I had a cover and a story, I got other people to do stories, it was real easy because everybody was really up for it. *Zap* was done by Print Mint, so I brought it over there, and they were happy to do it, and the same with *Mean*

Bitch Thrills. At some point I did *Subvert* with Rip Off, because I knew those guys. There wasn't any really special reason why I would go to one person rather than another. Last Gasp came a little later, and I think they were the ones who started putting out *Skull* comics. And so, I began to work with them, but it was a period of prosperity.

GROTH: *Relatively speaking*.

SPAIN: Well, yeah, given what we were used to. At the *East Village Other*, for a while I was making 15 bucks a week, and you could kind of live on that through one thing and another. One thing that helped a lot in those days was being on food stamps. That certainly helped us to survive, and helped me to —

GROTH: *I was going to ask you how you actually earned a living through this*.

SPAIN: Yeah, when I had to look for a job, I would write down I was an underground cartoonist.

GROTH: *There weren't too many openings*.

SPAIN: Right. There weren't too many openings, right.

GROTH: *You were doing work for* Zap*, and you were doing a handful of your own comics, like* Insect Fear *and* Subvert. *You also got involved in* Arcade*, which was edited by Art and Bill. Can you tell me what it was like working with Art and Bill?*

SPAIN: Bill and Art. You know, things were starting to slip already at that point, and we were trying to turn out a slick, professional publication, and having a Crumb cover was always a big seller. For Crumb, it was something closer to his vision in that it opened a venue for new artists, and it wasn't the closed thing that *Zap* was. And so it was a hopeful thing, and …

GROTH: *What were Bill and Art like as editors?*

SPAIN: They were just fine. I mean, there wasn't too much editorial control … Nobody bugged you. You were given so many pages, you did the pages, and that was it. The closest thing to any kind of editorial direction was when I did *Insect Fear*. The stories

were about psychological terror, so one of my requirements was you had to have insects crawling up the walls. I think that was the closest to any kind of editorial imposition that I'd ever heard of. I thought that would give the book some sort of editorial cohesion.

GROTH: *Did you ever do any work for* Raw?

SPAIN: No, I never did. I helped them staple some copies together one time I was in New York, but I never did anything for *Raw*.

GROTH: *Well, then you* did *work on* Raw …

SPAIN: *[Laughs.]* Well, yeah. I guess you could say that. I forget what issue it was. I just happened to be in New York, and so I helped put them together.

GROTH: *What prompted you to do autobiographical work? The earliest autobiographical work you did was maybe '76.*

SPAIN: Well, there's all these great stories from my old neighborhood. There were many stories I wanted to do, but I never thought I was skilled enough to do them up to that point. There are many great stories that come out of the Road Vultures, but they require a certain level of facility and a certain ability at plotting that I just didn't feel I had before that time. I had all these guys' faces in my head. At one time or another I drew everybody's picture. I could draw everybody from memory. As a matter of fact, when I was in the Road Vultures, we would have these pads. I would do murals of motorcycles roaring over cops' bodies. I would draw all the guys on bikes. It really outraged the Buffalo Subversive Squad. After we moved out of the apartment, they would send cops down to take photos of my work. The best one of those murals I did was inspired by a movie with Virginia Ding-Dong Bell. I don't know if you know who she is.

GROTH: *No.*

SPAIN: She was this semi-porn star from the '50s, a big-breasted woman. She was beautiful in a strong Slavic way. I saw her in a movie, and I was really taken by her. So I drew her on the wall of an apartment of a woman I was staying with. I drew her with pasties and a G-string on, just like in the movie. The only problem was that it didn't look

like Virginia Ding-Dong Bell. It looked exactly like Lady Bird Johnson. I really didn't mean to do it that way — it was really just bad portraiture. I really didn't have anything against Lady Bird Johnson, and even drawing her in this situation was not in my eyes demeaning in anyway. But, once I had drawn Lady Bird Johnson, I did know how to draw Johnson. So I drew Johnson and the Yellow Peril behind him, and I just filled up the wall. After we left there, boy, the Buffalo Subversive Squad was very interested in that. You know, this is real evidence of the sort of goings-on that they didn't approve of. Especially having seen the stuff that I had done previously of motorcycles roaring over prostrate bodies of cops. I don't know whether they still have it, but there was probably a file of my artwork with the Buffalo Subversive Squad for a long time.

HIS TRUE STORY

GROTH: *You said that you always had an interest in telling autobiographical stories. Was Justin [Green] an influence, because his was one of the earliest autobiographical comics told in comics?*

SPAIN: Yeah, definitely, that thing was great. At one point, I had about six copies of *Binky Brown Meets the Holy Virgin Mary*. I let people borrow them. Each comic was given with solemn vows that they would return it, and I ended up having no copies at all. It was one of the masterpieces of Western civilization.

GROTH: *Right, right. Well, you know, your autobiographical stories are usually less … well, I'm trying to figure out how to put it, but —*

SPAIN: They're less tormented than Justin's.

GROTH: *Yeah, exactly.*

SPAIN: Justin is a far more tormented person than I am.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Is that true?*

SPAIN: Some people think that I'm not tormented enough, but you know … that's just the way I am.

GROTH: *I'm sure they're working on it.*

SPAIN: Yes. *[Laughs.]*

GROTH: *Do you think that's true?*

SPAIN: Yes. Justin's far more tormented than I am. I tend to be somewhat jive.

GROTH: *To what do you attribute your lack of being tormented, or to put it in a more positive way, your sense of –*

SPAIN: My upbeat sense of the world?

GROTH: *Yeah, right.* [Laughs.]

SPAIN: Well, I don't know. I think I've seen the best of America. You know, for all my complaints, I have seen the best of it. When I see kids today, I understand that it's a whole lot worse now. So —

GROTH: *Worse now than it was when you were a kid?*

SPAIN: Worse now than it was when I was growing up. So …

GROTH: *How do you think it's worse?*

SPAIN: Well, what you pay for rent now is ridiculous.

GROTH: *Yeah. Harder to exist.*

SPAIN: It's much harder to exist, and so I was able to have good times. I mean, today you're living in this incredibly punitive society. There is a kind of war on youth. I think it was John Mitchell who said this country will turn so much to the right that you won't recognize it.

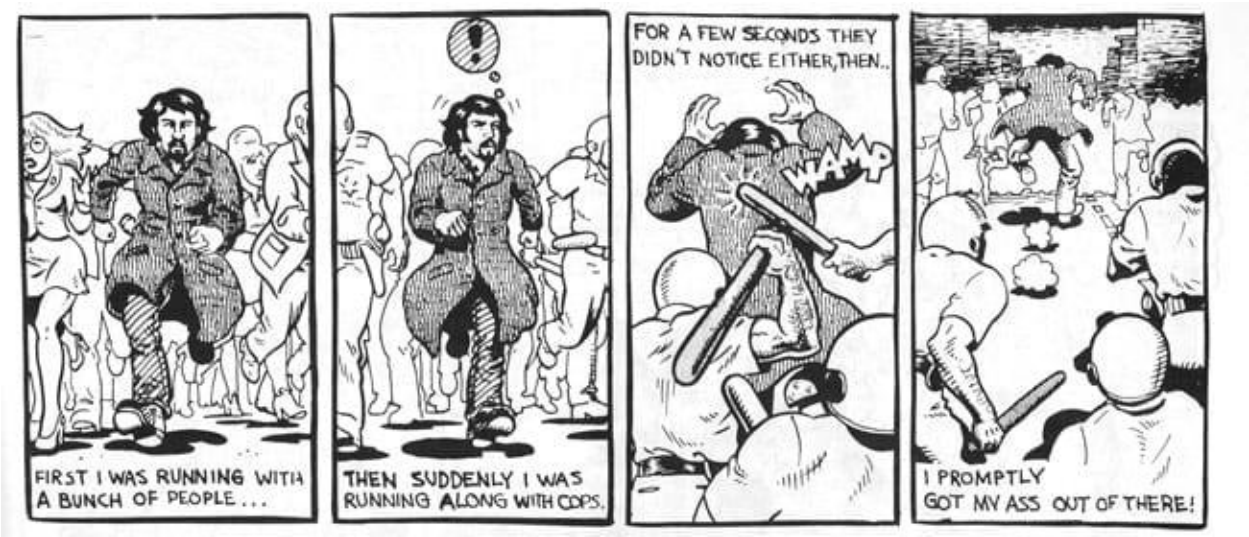
GROTH: [Laughs.] *The prophet John Mitchell.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. You know, that's what it is. It's interesting that the generation of hippies became sour conservatives, to the point where the people have become so

vindictive that they even ignore their interests just for the thrill of punishing somebody. That's what it is, you know, the punitive society. The United Prison Camp of America.

GROTH: *Do you attribute that to both the right and the left?*

SPAIN: Well, there are certain elements of that on the left, you know. You have anti-sex feminists. All feminists aren't anti-sex, but there certainly is the "no more fun and games."



GROTH: *Why do you think the social convention moved in the direction to be, as you call it, so punitive?*

SPAIN: Well, I think part of it is a decision by corporate America. The people had it too good. The Reagan Democrats are really interesting. They're people who hate hippies, people who are really culturally conservative. They're people who see all that kind of partying as being not a good thing.

GROTH: *And yet, of course, corporate America has to push that kind of hedonistic lifestyle in order to sell more products that cater to that.*

SPAIN: Yeah, that's a factor. Well, the system has to be creating more leisure time for somebody. You've had a century of all this technological progress, and it's got to be creating more leisure time. There's only two things that production can do, which is to create leisure time, or find ways of spending it. Leisure time has to be going somewhere,

and part of the whole drug thing is, half of the crack smokers are white people, but probably 90% of the people who get busted are black people. So black people become part of this economy of supplying drugs to wealthy kids who are bored, and this is something for them to do, so this a contradiction in society. The whole workfare thing, which is a way to get cheap labor. These conservatives will just lie to your face, because they think you're so stupid. But when people on workfare say, "We're doing the same job as this guy who's working next to us, why don't you pay us the same?" But then they say, "This is not really a job, this is a work experience." Jeez, what a lovely term. And they'll look you straight in the face and say it. But it's just another way of extracting wealth from the mass of people and giving it to rich people, a lot of whom don't know what to do with it, you know.

I think that it's a problem that any society at our technological level has to deal with, which is how to use your leisure time. Do you sit around getting stoned all day? Today, you can cocoon. If you have enough money, you could just send out for drugs, for food, watch a hundred channels of TV, probably order some machine to suck you off. You would just sit in a chair.

There was a guy who worked for the *East Village Other*, he stayed up in the sleeping loft that I later lived in. He stayed up there for six months shooting heroin, and he had this guy who would bring him food and a plastic bag, and he would shit in the bag and the guy would take out his shit. He just stayed up there for six months. Bring him drugs and food. Of course, that was an exceptional thing, but I'm sure a lot of people are in that situation. A lot of people could do that today. And it's more technologically feasible to do, but I'd like to think that there's a better way to spend your time.

GROTH: *So given the kind of* laissez-faire *attitude that capitalism imposes upon people, where do you think the punitive aspect that you refer to comes from?*

SPAIN: I think part of it is people are genuinely frightened.

GROTH: *So it's a reaction against that?*

SPAIN: Yeah, part of it's genuine. I really wonder about the crime statistics, which are easy to manipulate, but you suspect that something's really going on. San Francisco, which never seemed to have a big gang scene, a few years ago there seemed to be shootings every few months, just senseless and tragic shootings. So you can understand people saying, "We just want those guys to be out of our lives." But I just think that it's cynically manipulated, where most of the people in jail are in jail for drugs. The drug war's basically a culture war. The people who are supposedly anti-drugs just have their own particular drugs that they're for. They're not really anti-drug, they just don't like certain kinds of drugs. It's just that the culture that came out of the earlier part of the century approved of certain drugs and not others, and they're fighting people who don't take the right drugs. Police programs are basically the alcoholics versus the junkies.

GROTH: *Two generational factions?*

SPAIN: In the graffiti wars as well, there are two schools of abstract art fighting against one another. The kids go and put up colorful graffiti, and then it's covered with drab graffiti. The graffiti is still there, but it's more "tasteful." Slightly off-colored squares, you know, like tasteful Hans Hoffman vs. Jackson Pollock. It's probably a reflection of basic technological upheaval.

GROTH: *And you're still pro-tech, though?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. The free market is a rationing system in and of itself. It determines what's produced, and obviously the people with more money have more votes, if you want to compare it to a political system. But in a real democracy, we all have the same vote. The trick is, is being able to use that commodity for your own interests. There's a general rip-off going on, and it's usually under the guise of free market rhetoric. In California, they are deregulating power companies now. What that means is the average consumer is footing the bill for these bad decisions that are made by various power capitalists. They're giving us an 11% discount, and then there's an $18 surcharge to pay off the bad nuclear power decisions of the power companies, so … socialism for the rich. The rich are far too intelligent to reject socialism. The rich embrace socialism while they wag their finger at us about the free market.

GROTH: *Well now, to get back to your autobiographical stories. There was one autobiographical story in which you depicted yourself as a fairly tortured individual. That was "My True Story."*

SPAIN: That's because I was a tortured individual. No, actually, when I did that, I was coming out of a bad marriage, and so I was in a tortured situation. But actually I overstated the case. Actually during that period of time I was a whole lot less tortured than I portrayed myself.

GROTH: *Is that right?*

SPAIN: Yeah. I was having a great time.

GROTH: *It looked like you were having a great time, but you also depicted yourself as an insensitive, womanizing clod.*

SPAIN: Yes, but that's what I was.

GROTH: *Can you reconcile that with progressive politics?*

SPAIN: Well, I don't know if it has to be. Everybody who associates with me associates with me voluntarily. I don't impose myself on anybody, so what's the problem? I don't believe the personal's political.

GROTH: *You don't?*

SPAIN: No. I reject that. I think that the personal and the political are the opposite. Because politics basically deals with the state, which is a coercive apparatus. And the only justification for coercion is to create less coercion. So of course we have to jail people who harm us, simply because if somebody beats you up, they're interfering with your freedom. And so the coercion of locking them up is lesser than having to sustain getting beaten up by some bully. Really the purpose of society should be to create more freedom. So in terms of personal life, in that I don't force anybody to associate with me or beat anybody up … uh, any more. I don't feel any inconsistency by being a womanizer. What does that mean? You tell me.

GROTH: *Well, I think it just means you like women.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right, really. I like sex, right. I like heterosexual sex. You go to a politically correct bookstore, and you'll see all kinds of gay, lesbian porn, but you won't see any heterosexual porn, so—what sort of vision is that for the future, in which the majority of people, who are heterosexual, are going to be suppressed, while a sexual minority is going to be given freedom? What's progressive about that?

GROTH: *In this one story, you do suggest an almost Crumbian ambivalence towards women, a love-hate relationship. Is that accurate, or — ?*

SPAIN: No, I love them. I love women.

GROTH: *Unconditionally?*

SPAIN: Well, maybe not unconditionally. I taught my daughter how to do the arm gesture, you know, how to give somebody the arm. "Va fungola" in Italian. Sometime later, I was rebuking her and her mom because her mom had given her a task to do that she wasn't ready to do, and she had spilled something or something like that, so I was calling them a couple of dumb broads. Then both of them turned to me, mother and daughter, and they both gave me the arm. I was so proud.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Well, given your position that the personal isn't political, what do you make of the current various Clinton scandals?*

SPAIN: I don't care who he fucked. I think what it is an attempted *coup d'état*. I think Richard Mellon Scaiffe didn't like the last election, so he's using the vote that really matters, which is all of his big bucks. That's what this is. The idea that Starr is not a political hatchet man is ludicrous. There's a guy named Dozier who was funneling money to David Hale, who's Starr's main witness. The woman who saw this is an ex-girlfriend of Dozier, and one of the things that they were using to discredit her was that she uses Tarot cards. Now, why is this any more of an element of discredit than the fact that Starr's a Holy Roller? I watch this stuff continuously and read *Salon* magazine,

and it's utterly fascinating to me because you're really seeing an attempted coup in progress.

GROTH: *A coup of prigs?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. I think I mentioned it earlier in this interview, this is a preview of what will happen when the right takes over. You will have some moralistic pecksniff checking you out, taping your conversations, etcetera. This is what the religious right is.

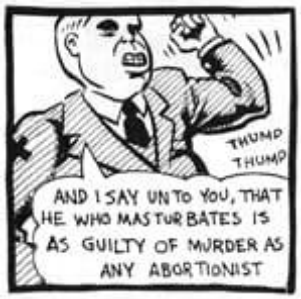
GROTH: *Well, you know, the biggest or most prominent difficulty with the proposition that the personal isn't political, I think, comes into play with sexual harassment. What's your take on that?*

SPAIN: Oh, that's different. You know, it's one thing to say something to somebody, but if you're shouting something in someone's ear, it becomes a form of assault. Besides, an employer-employee relationship isn't really personal. There is that element of potential economic coercion.

GROTH: *Or a President.*

SPAIN: Or a President, right. I mean —

GROTH: *Do you think there's any legitimate inquiry, in terms of whether Clinton is hitting on women, and coercing them because of his position of power?*



Originally printed in San Francisco #7 (1983) and collected in Trashman Lives!

SPAIN: Paula Jones' case is about whether he did it, and whether she suffered any adverse consequences as a result of turning him down. On both counts the court seems

to have ruled that there's a lack of evidence. Grabbing Kathleen Willey's tit, that is a form of assault in my opinion. On the other hand, when you see those letters Kathleen Willey wrote to Clinton … If you were Hillary, that might disturb you a little bit, because those letters seem to be a little more than just some political supporter who agrees with Clinton's program. So it becomes a complicated thing. Yeah, of course, grabbing some woman under almost any circumstance could lead to a potential charge of assault. Everyone should be free of assaults on their own person. On the other hand, Paula Jones is so clearly some pawn of these right wing guys that it's hard to take that stuff seriously. What's interesting is, the women's movement has been chastised for hypocrisy, whereas the so-called pro-family movement isn't called on the carpet for hypocrisy in that they made no complaints about Starr trying to get Monica Lewinsky's mother to testify against her. This is your so-called liberal media.

GROTH: *And even the right's got its hypocrisy in denouncing Clinton, but not Clarence Thomas.*

SPAIN: Yeah, correct. The Rutherford Institute suddenly becomes a champion of women's rights? That was a very quick conversion.

GROTH: *Well, it's so opportunistic on both sides …*

SPAIN: Well, I'm glad to say I didn't vote for Clinton in the last election.

GROTH: *Did you refrain from voting?*

SPAIN: No, no, I voted for [Ralph] Nader. You know, at least I voted for something good. It was closer to what I wanted, but I guess if it definitely was a choice between him and Dole, I would have voted for him. You know, I kind of like Dole. Bush and Quayle had the same effect, of somebody scraping their nails on a blackboard, to me. I found them personally repulsive. Dole's kind of a sinister guy. Reminds me of Stephen McNally in those '40s movies. So I personally found him somewhat appealing. But of course I would never vote for him.

GROTH: *One thing occurred to me reading your autobiographical stories, is that you seem to have been influenced — and tell me if this is even remotely true — by [Jack] Kirby.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I guess there was an influence. Jaccaber, who runs the Psychedelic Solution in New York, showed up at my house with a piece I had done. I vaguely remembered doing it at the *East Village Other* office on Avenue A. They published it in Grand Street. It really does have this Kirby influence. At the time, I had been reading a lot of Kirby. He really had a sense of action, he had a real two-fisted style, and I love the interview with him in *Comics Journal*. I liked that better than his work, even. It's interesting seeing how cartoonists evolved — when I was teaching, I would tell my students that they should get into something like sports or dancing, get into some physical activity, so when they drew the body, they would have some feeling as to how the body worked. That's an intuitive feeling. It's interesting seeing artists who do and artists who don't. But Kirby definitely was a physical guy, so when it was clobbering time, it was very convincing.

GROTH: *You weren't athletic, were you?*

SPAIN: I never went out for sports —

GROTH: *But you were still physical?*

SPAIN: I did a lot of jumping around. I used to run a lot.

GROTH: *Visually, the autobiographical stories are different from, for example, your* Big Bitch *stories. Stylistically, there is a much greater use of blacks, the panels are denser, more crowded, there's less negative space. There's something purposely proletarian and naturalistic about them. I'm thinking especially of something like "Evening at the Country Club" which, bizarrely enough, looks like a combination of Kirby and Jack Davis. Very powerful, grungy, physical, and violent, and every panel is completely crammed.*

SPAIN: There's nothing really conscious. I don't set out to have a different style with *Big Bitch*. In the autobiographical work, I have a lot of reference material, because every time I go back to Buffalo, I do a lot of sketching, and collect Buffalo material. I try to get buildings, old signs, etc. The version of that neighborhood is not completely accurate, but it's close to accurate. I've been back there a few times. The neighborhood has certainly changed a lot, but the physical layout hadn't changed that much. I could see places that had changed, but I try to keep the story consistent in itself. Actually, the prime source for the layout of that was a poster I did called "The Origins of the Beat Generation." It's a big poster of a gang fight. Just as I was finishing it, someone came over to my place who'd been there, someone I met in New York who was an older brother of somebody I hung out with. He was at that fight, and he told me it had actually taken place down the street in front of this church. The locale I have is better, in front of the Deco 28. It happened about six months later than the date I put on the poster.

Somebody put out a book on Buffalo '50s culture, and they traced down that gang fight, so when I did it, I just had a general idea. But as I did that — as I did all the Tooté strips, I just tried to keep it consistent within itself …

GROTH: *How accurate are the depictions of the characters, because —*

This panel is from “The Fighting Poets” (1997) is collected in *Cruisin’ With the Hound*. It features the infamous Tooté, a recurring character in Spain’s autobiographical work.

SPAIN: I actually have a picture of Tooté.

GROTH: *Because even minor characters look incredibly individualistic, idiosyncratic, and authentic. There’s a story titled “Hard-Ass Friday Night,” and all the characters in it are distinctive.*

SPAIN: Yeah, well I drew all those guys at some point or another.

GROTH: *Back then?*

SPAIN: Back then.

GROTH: *You actually use those old drawings as reference?*

SPAIN: No. I have no idea what happened to those drawings. But when you draw something, it helps to stick it in your mind. There’s a real great photographic record of that stuff. This guy who’s a Road Vulture, collected photographs of that time. So there’s a lot of material around, and I’m still in contact with a lot of those guys, so …

GROTH: *And the dialogue also seems incredibly authentic or even verbatim; was some of the dialogue stuff that you actually remember hearing?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *There’s one panel in here where a guy named Bob Debuff —*

SPAIN: Oh yeah, Bob Debuss.

GROTH: *He was picking on a fellow Road Vulture, and the Road Vulture says, “I wear my hair like this because I’m cool and if you don’t like it, you can just fuck off.”*

SPAIN: That’s exactly what he said, right.

GROTH: *And you just remembered this from — I don’t know, 15 years previously?*

SPAIN: Yeah, a lot of that stuff stuck in my mind.

GROTH: *In an odd way it reminds me of Kirby, because there's such a no-nonsense quality to the physical confrontations. Obviously, Kirby was exaggerated, because he was doing primarily superhero stuff, and what you're doing here is much more naturalistic. But in the sixth panel on this page, you have a drawing of this guy's head with a big boot coming down on it, and a word balloon saying, "Get fucking down there." So there's not a lot of frippery here.*

SPAIN: Yeah. Well, Buffalo's a low-smile area.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Tell me a little about Fred Tooté, who's in at least a few stories.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I think I'm working on about the eighth story he's in. Fred Tooté — we were good friends, and he was a good artist.

GROTH: *And he was also a bullshit artist, right?*

SPAIN: Yeah, he was also an incredible bullshit artist. He could have been a great cartoonist. We had this idea that we were going to become cartoonists, but we were both too out-to-lunch. I myself have always been a habitual drawer, just always drew. I just never stopped drawing. And I think — this is the sort of thing I've gone back and forth in my head — but if I had been more together, I could have encouraged him to develop that part of himself, and maybe he wouldn't have died an alcoholic.

GROTH: *Oh! He's dead?*

SPAIN: Yeah, he's dead. In one of the strips I have a part where he says that he always had this premonition that he would die a horrible death, and it was something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. He fell asleep with a lit cigarette butt, burned himself up, and lived on for a few days, died that way, and … years later, I tried to contact his son, who just told me, "I can't help you." He refused to talk to me.

GROTH: *I wonder why?*

SPAIN: I imagine that they just figure I had a bad influence on him. I'm sure we just had a bad influence on each other. But neither of us needed too much influence, you know. We already had our orientation, but when we got together, we had a lot of laughs, had a lot of good times …

GROTH: *Was "Fighting Poets" a real story?*

SPAIN: Yeah. It's a real story. It's a bunch of different stories put together. It didn't quite happen in that chronological order. A lot of the Tooté stories are real stories, but they're put together in such a way that hopefully gives them a good plot.

GROTH: *What is your conception of your responsibilities to autobiography? I mean, how accurate does it have to be, and how much do you think you can play with what really happened?*

SPAIN: Well, I don't make up stuff, maybe some minor things I'll make up to move the plot along. Basically, it's all true, and like I say, the chronology might not be exact, and I fiddle around with it a little. But it's basically all true.

GROTH: *There isn't a lot of invention.*

SPAIN: No. It's hard to top that stuff.

GROTH: *You don't have to. What do you think of Harvey Pekar's stuff, which is almost in autobiographical terms the opposite of yours —*

SPAIN: Yeah, I like his work a lot. You go through that stuff, and some will be not so great, some will be great. The thing that he has down so courageously is his own dialogue, his own internal dialogue.

HISTORY

GROTH: *One of your other modes, of course, is history, and especially East European/Russian history. What prompted you to do history in comics form?*

SPAIN: Well, I was certainly influenced by Kurtzman's work, which really made history come alive for me. And what you get as history is generally such a fairy tale that I just attempt to counterbalance it with a different point of view. Being Spanish, you really understand that there's a different point of view than the official history, because Spaniards have a unique place in the Anglo-American view of history. And, as you can imagine, Spaniards don't quite see ourselves in the same way that we are portrayed in the official view. I guess that gives me a dissident's perspective on things. When you look more, you see that it's not just Spaniards who are inaccurately portrayed. There's an official point of view, certain things are ignored and certain things are focused on. One can have a different focus, just as legitimate, so it's my pleasure to present that focus.

GROTH: *I assume in researching these stories, you tried to get outside mainstream historical sources to more radical historians.*

SPAIN: Well, yeah. A lot of it I knew already, a lot of it was stuff that I picked up later. In *Anarchy Comics*, where some of those historical strips appeared, there's a certain amount of research, but then there's a whole lot of history that any amount of reading will show that the popular view is just plain propaganda …

GROTH: *A couple of your stories that have to do with dog fights, "Blood and Sky," and "Lily Latvick, The Rose of Stalingrad," reminded me very much of the Kurtzman-Alex Toth collaborations.*

SPAIN: Well, thanks. Toth is the guy that I really admire.

GROTH: *Oh, do you?*

SPAIN: Yeah. It's interesting. Toth is the first artist that I really recognized as a kid. He did something for *Mystery in Space*, one of those comics. And just the way the story was laid out, it evoked something of that science-fiction dream state that I could flip into when I was a kid. I've had this sort of thing happen to me three times: When I was a fairly small kid, when I was older, and once in, it must have been about 1977. It was a semi-dreamlike state of mind that I could just flip myself into, and it was better than being stoned. At some point I realized that when I was getting stoned, I was just trying to revive that state of mind. But it had nothing to do with getting stoned. I must have been maybe ten to 12, or maybe even later. It faded off as I got older. But it really was triggered by science-fictional imagery.

GROTH: *Without drugs?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. I was around ten or l2. But certain things could act as a talisman to do that. And this strip by Toth was one of those things that evoked that feeling. It was really a great feeling. It was better than being stoned.

GROTH: *Alex Toth is better than being stoned!*

SPAIN: Having been stoned plenty, I know whereof I speak. But there was this other period, it must have been in 1977, and it seemed to be triggered by three things. There was some movie, a late '40s comedy, the song Blue Bayou by Linda Ronstadt, and a dream I had about strange '30s airplanes flying around my old neighborhood that could trigger something I felt as a kid in the late '40s. I understand that revealing this to the world will remove any doubts that I'm an inveterate space-case, but most of my friends

have probably guessed that already. Besides, I seldom miss a deadline. Anyway, for a few months I was able to tap into an altered state similar to the state of mind triggered by a strip done by Alex Toth sometime in the early '50s.

GROTH: *I felt that among your historical stories, "The Blue Boot" was particularly appalling on a personal, political, and historical level. Where did you dig that story up?*

SPAIN: It comes from *The 900 Days of Leningrad* by Harrison Salisbury.

GROTH: *You have a love-hate relationship with Stalin, and I remember many years ago I was in San Francisco, and we were sitting in a local tavern and I seem to remember you telling me, "Well, you know, Stalin wasn't such a bad guy." I didn't know shit then, I was thinking, "Gee, I thought he killed a lot of people." Do you think you do have a love-hate relationship with Stalin, or how would you characterize it?*

SPAIN: Well, I do think that he really was such a bad guy. He also did great things. They recently had a documentary on Stalin and they were digging up every piece of unsubstantiated gossip and all kinds of distorted ways of looking at things to condemn Stalin. The thing about Stalin is there's plenty of well-documented things that you can use to condemn Stalin; you don't have to go into the kind of distortions that they did.

GROTH: *I was going to say, you don't really have to fabricate anything.*

SPAIN: Right. The guy they had solemnly intoning about Stalin being a mass murderer was another mass murderer, Henry Kissinger. *[Laughter.]*

GROTH: *Well, they must have been trying to be ironic.*

SPAIN: Well, it reminds me of when Poland had a military Communist government, they had a program called "Let Poland Be Poland." They had representatives of different countries getting up and talking about how bad it was to have a military dictatorship, and the last country they had getting up and lecturing Poland about the evils of military dictatorship was Turkey, which was a military dictatorship at that time. This is evidence of how stupid they think we are.

GROTH: *Well, whoever got Kissinger in there must have a good sense of humor.*

SPAIN: Or just utter contempt.

GROTH: *Or maybe he thought it takes one to know one.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. The thing is Stalin was really a great military leader in World War II. Stalin won World War II, if not singlehandedly, fairly close to singlehandedly.

GROTH: *Well …*

SPAIN: Look it up. How do you want to look at it? If you want to measure it by time fought, you want to measure it by territory conquered, you want to measure it by casualties …

GROTH: *Do you really think Stalin deserves that much credit as opposed to the Russian people and various other Russian military leaders? Because he also gutted the military and set the military back many years in the late '30s.*

SPAIN: By purging all those guys like Tukachevsky.

GROTH: *He did himself and his country a great disservice by doing that.*

SPAIN: You can make that argument, but in the first place, you didn't have to do anything to get bumped off by Stalin. If he just woke up one night and had some paranoid notion about you, then you were in trouble. Who was the guy? I think it was Rakosovsky, who was purged, and at some point they just brought him out of the prison camp and brought him into the General Staff, and gave him back his medals and his position and everything. He was standing there, completely bewildered —

GROTH: *Just get out there and kill Germans?*

SPAIN: Yeah, right, go out there and kick ass for Stalin, right. And he did. But Zhukov, who most people have never heard of, is the greatest military leader of the 20th Century. He and Stalin. If anybody doesn't think so, let me call their attention to the Battle of Kursk, which I'm sure you know is the greatest tank battle in history. Stalin was involved

in planning up to a very minute level. When you hear people saying that they should have let Patton go all the way to Moscow — if they had, it's doubtful he would have returned.

GROTH: *Do you admire the kind of ruthlessness that's required to be a great military leader?*

SPAIN: I don't know that admire is the right word. I'm glad we haven't had to fight that kind of war on our own soil. But we certainly have our share of skeletons in our closet. And we've been in the most ideal situation you could have. I mean, it's hard to make a direct comparison of Russian history to American history. You really appreciate how great America is when you read about Russian history. There's a good book, it's called *Blood and Laughter*, about the underground press in Russia. And at some point in Russia it was forbidden to use the word "constitution," so people didn't even know what that word meant. Russia comes out of history [under] suppression that America never really saw, and that Europeans, maybe Spaniards and Eastern Europeans and people living in the south of Italy, saw recently, but most of western Europe hasn't seen for a few centuries. So we can be glad that we haven't had that kind of history except, of course, for black people. But this is the history Russians come from. So from that perspective, Stalin isn't that surprising. It's not a question of admiring Stalin, even though there are certain aspects of him that are admirable. He stayed in Moscow and faced down Hitler. But on the other hand, being an enemy of Stalin was bad, and being a friend of his wasn't that much better.

GROTH: *There wasn't that much distinction.*

SPAIN: Right, there wasn't that much distinction at times, but on the other hand, he was really a fascinating guy. In other words, I don't know that admiration is the right term, but on the other hand, it's completely fascinating.

GROTH: *What did you think of Lenin?*

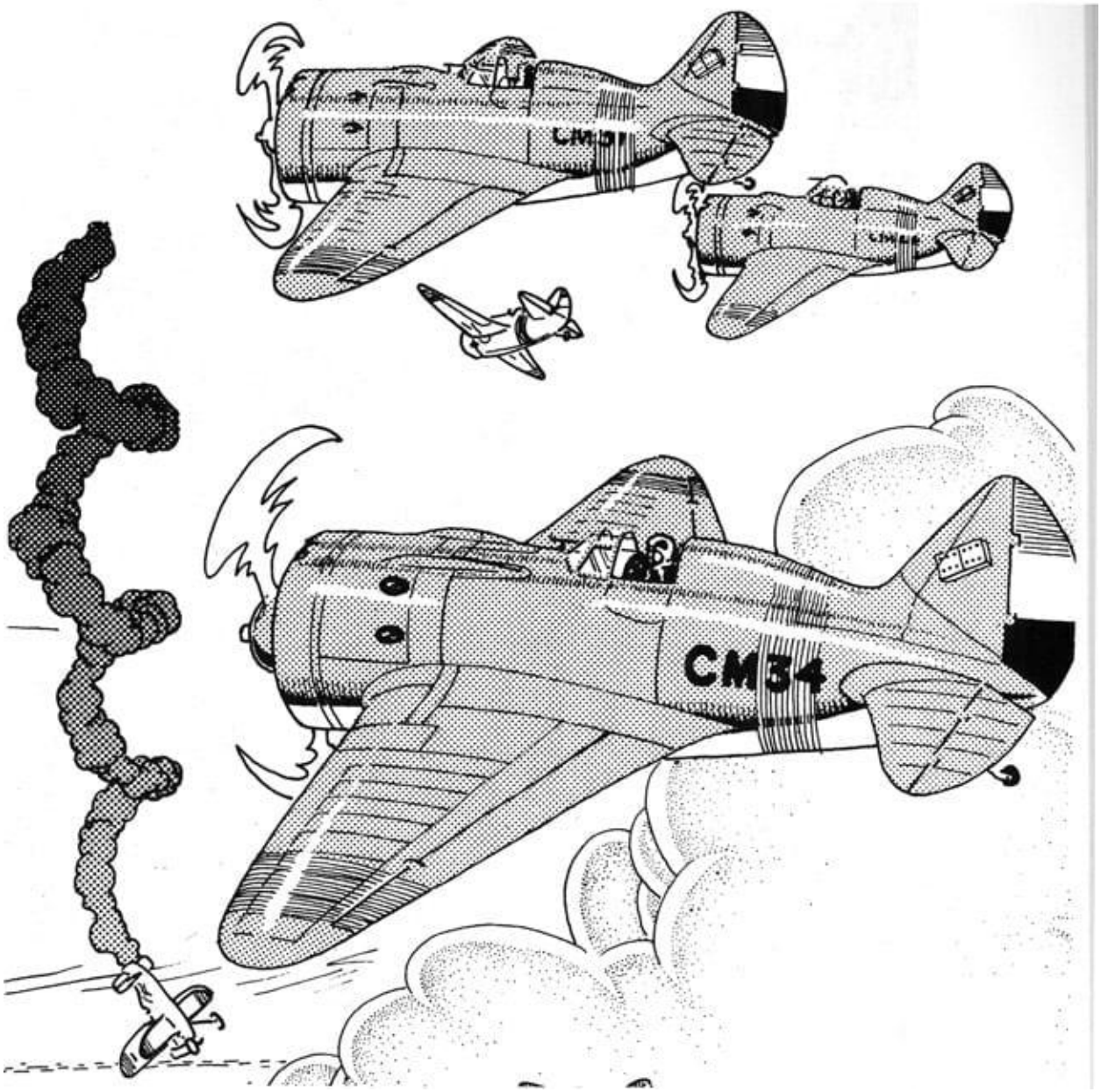
SPAIN: Oh yeah, Lenin was great. You know, Lenin is in my opinion the most admirable guy in the 20th Century.

GROTH: *And why is that?*

SPAIN: Because he was the one guy who created the first government that was a government for working people. In fact, in the United States, the term "democracy" wasn't really in major usage until the Russian Revolution. Suddenly America started using the term "democracy," and then the whole New Deal resulted from the Soviet Union showing that workers could take power and run a government which made the American business class more conducive to granting reforms. Now that there isn't a Soviet Union, the American business class is more determined than ever to roll back all those reforms. So Marx is proven to be correct once again when he said that the capitalist system cannot reform itself.

GROTH: *Don't you think that even Lenin, though, towards the end of his life, started perverting Marxism, and discrediting it by the oppressive methods he was starting to use?*

SPAIN: In the first place, it was a society that just had a history of incredible repression. And it was not a situation where if you resign power, if the Bolsheviks decide to hold an election and lost, they could retire to the countryside. Look at what they were up against: if Reds caught White officers, they would put them on an iceberg and use them for target practice. But when Whites captured Bolsheviks, they would stick them into the boiler of train engines. The atrocities of the Whites were really ghoulish. That was the situation they were in. Plus, Russia was invaded by 15 countries. You know, if you look at the American civil rights record during that time, this was the time when, in America, lynchings were common. If you want to compare Soviet society with contemporaneous American society, look at things as they really were. This is a society that paid a certain lip service to freedom, on the other hand, thought nothing of carrying out the most blatant repression that you can imagine. So, yeah, Lenin did what he had to do to stay in power, and so did everybody else. But Lenin was at least on the side of working people, and Woodrow Wilson was not. Woodrow Wilson was the guy who was making the world safe for democracy, as he was jailing political opposition in America.



"Blood and Sky" (1978) is collected in *My True Story*, and shows how Spain was influenced by the Toth/Kurtzman war comics.

GROTH: *Speaking of world-class leaders, what is your assessment of Roosevelt?*

SPAIN: Well, he was certainly better than Hoover.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Don't go out on a limb now, Spain.*

SPAIN: *[Laughs.]* There was that reform impulse in America, and at the beginning of the century, there were people who were really trying to make American democracy

work. There were many reformers. They also gave us Prohibition and drug laws, but I'm sure they were well intentioned. There's always that impulse in America, of people who actually believe in democracy as opposed to the cynicism of the people in power who just look at it as window-dressing for their own self-interested goals. But on the other hand, this is the history of America, of people who are appalled to see their fellow citizens suffering. This touches them. So, I think you give credit it where it's due.

GROTH: *What is your opinion of the thesis that Roosevelt actually saved capitalism from itself?*

SPAIN: I think that's a strong argument. I think that there's a certain amount of ambiguity in all of us. You can always really speculate about someone's real intentions. Johnson is an even better example. Here was a guy who just couldn't stop pressing the war in Vietnam. On the other hand, you get the impression that he really did have a genuine feeling for poor people. There was also a whole lot of ferment going on, which certainly helped that side of him come to the fore. If somebody does a good thing, you have to give them credit for doing a good thing. Even Nixon did some good things. On the other hand, there's always some ambiguity. You can always make the case that they just did it because they had to do it. There's good aspects to capitalism as well as bad. To me, a whole lot of what occurred in the Soviet Union was the result of this feudal society that preceded them. The American Revolution didn't automatically bring about democracy as we know it today. You can't just walk into a country and take over and wave a magic wand and make everything the way you want it to be. It's always a struggle, a struggle for every person to try to do their duty as a citizen and become involved in the political process when you'd rather be sitting around watching the game. Roosevelt backed a Republican for governor in a California election against Upton Sinclair, a Democrat, and used his support to get the Republican governor not to oppose the New Deal, so you always had those machinations.

EXPLICATE OR EXTRICATE

GROTH: *Well, to shift gears dramatically, one thing I discovered looking through your work, and something Jay Kinney touched on in his introduction to the* Trashman

collection, was that you depict very strong and liberated women. Big Bitch *is the most prominent example, but you also did a character called Sangranella, who is basically a ruthless female undercover agent. And what is interesting about it is it could be seen as politically correct or politically incorrect, depending on how you look at it.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *In one* Big Bitch *story in that character's collection, she takes on about five guys at the end of the story — sexually.*

SPAIN: Oh right, that's the one you're talking about, where she's with a rock star.

GROTH: *Yeah. And at first, it looks like she's being sexually taken advantage of, but in fact, they're actually playing into her hands, and she becomes the sexual predator, and by the end of the story, the men are all whipped dogs who are crawling around, and she's just kicking them in the ass, saying 'You bunch of limp-dick assholes, come on, get it up, I'm not through with you yet.' So I was wondering if you could explicate your feelings about how you depict these women characters.*

SPAIN: I don't know if I can explicate myself.

GROTH: *Do you think this is demeaning to depict her like this?*

SPAIN: Yeah, I kind of do think it is a little demeaning.

GROTH: *And what do you mean to do when you depict her like this? Because in a sense, you're having it both ways.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I think that's true. I think I am having it both ways. I don't know how to explicate myself on that one.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *You've got to extricate or explicate, one of those.*

SPAIN: Either one. I mean, I … I'll have to talk to Algernon about that one. I had misgivings when I was doing it —

GROTH: *I was going to ask you about Algernon Backwash.*

SPAIN: He wanted to be here, but he just had other commitments.

GROTH: *There was another story, a satirical story that also has this double edge to it, where … you're not big on plots, I've got to really decipher this sucker. Well, she's sent out as a secret agent on a train, and the female antagonist grabs her, and ultimately overwhelms her and trusses her up. And her faithful manservant, Asquith, which is another perverse element of* Big Bitch*, finds her, unties her, and then Big Bitch takes revenge on her opposing secret agent, lacing her food with Tabasco sauce and putting Wacky Glue on her toilet seat. And at the very end, there's a kind of capitalist triumph, with women wearing these high-heeled shoes that the oppressive Soviet regime is trying to suppress. So it's a pretty complicated story in six pages; can you talk a little about all the political currents you were dealing with there?*

SPAIN: Yeah, well, you know —

GROTH: *I mean, there's feminism, totalitarianism, capitalism, fetishism —*

SPAIN: — I like them babes wearing high heels. All those elements are there. Actually, the government that was looking out for its female citizens would attempt to regulate their footwear. I had been to Russia, and one of the things I liked about Russia was the fact that women had this somewhat out-of-style footwear, and —

GROTH: *By which you mean high heels?*

SPAIN: Well, they just had more clunky shoes.

GROTH: *I see.*

SPAIN: Which were more fashionable in America a few years earlier. But then stiletto heels came back, so in Russia they hadn't quite gotten around to that.

GROTH: *You're not pro-stiletto heels?*

SPAIN: They're OK, but I kind of prefer those clunkier ones more.

GROTH: *"Sawtooth pumps."*

SPAIN: Yeah, sawtooth pumps. In Russian they don't have a "th" sound. They have something that's close to it, but not quite, so when I wrote that, in Cyrillic letters, I had to come as close as I could. And the other thing is, when the Russian woman is sitting on the toilet, she's saying in Russian — let me see — something like, "Hooey, jopa," and I forget the other word. They're the three swear words I knew in Russian. Which is something like "dick, ass," and oh — and "peesda," "peestola," or something like that, which is "cunt."

This panel (1988) is from *SHE Comics: An Anthology of Big Bitch.* Thanks to a Russian film crew, Spain uses the correct Cyrillic letters in the word balloon for the enemy agent who loses to Big Bitch.

GROTH: *So these are actually real words?*

SPAIN: Yeah, these are actually real words. There was a Russian film crew that stayed at my house that night, the crew was at a big peace march that walked across the country. When the head of the crew saw that strip, he got a big kick out of it, and he took me aside and showed me how to write it correctly. And there was a woman who spoke English, and as he was taking me into the other room, she said something like, "Oh, he likes to speak that fuck talk." So there's a certain authenticity there, which — I don't know whether that extricates me from my political ambiguity, or —

GROTH: *Well, good try. It's such a concise series of ideological conflicts — feminism, totalitarianism, capitalism, all vying for some sort of control.*

SPAIN: Right. *Big Bitch* really represents capitalism.

GROTH: *Well, capitalism and feminism, because the last panel she's in, she's being eaten out while eating her ice cream cone. That's got to be a triumph of some sort for her.*

SPAIN: Right.

GROTH: *And in the last panel, there's certainly a triumph of capitalism. OK, we've discovered that you're really equating feminism with capitalism.*

SPAIN: Well, I don't know if I equate them or not —

GROTH: *Now we see your secret agenda.*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. Sometimes my agenda becomes unclear even to myself. I visited the Soviet Union in '87 and did some drawing in my notebook while I was there. In my notebook I did a drawing of all these Russian women marching in rank. I think it was published in *Comics Journal*. They all had this somewhat out-of-date Russian footgear. The title was "Shoe '87" in

This 1988 panel is from *SHE Comics: An Anthology of Big Bitch*.

Russian. When I was leaving the Soviet Union I had an Intourist cup. I had a tape from an American woman who lives in Russia who didn't want to translate it in Russia, and I had a bunch of other stuff that might be considered questionable. The customs agent

went through everything, I had fit some kind of profile. I fit a profile in Russia, I fit a profile in Finland of the kind of person who gets his bags searched. The guy went through my bags and ignored everything except my notebook. He went through the book, and when he got to "Shoe '87" the guy just stopped, he looked at that for a long time. Finally he let me go. *[Laughs.]*

GROTH: *A fellow traveler, no doubt.*

SPAIN: Yeah, so … I liked Russia.

WHY SPAIN?

GROTH: *At what point did people start calling you "Spain"? Your first name is Manuel.*

SPAIN: When I was about 12, I was changing around with a bunch of Irish kids and they would all tell me about how great Ireland was. One day I said to them, "Spain's great, too." They said, "Spain? Spain isn't shit, Fuck Spain!" And so a series of wars ensued that culminated in —

GROTH: *In defiance, you took the name.*

SPAIN: Well, they started calling me "Spain." I became Spain, the personification of being Spanish, which was fine with me. We were good buddies, but we would have these little wars. It culminated on the roof of a small garage in my back yard. My parents weren't home. The rules of the game were I would try to get up on the garage using any means at my disposal, and they would keep me off using any means at their disposal, which included throwing chunks of metal that we found around the yard. They would try to whip me with – this stuff is somehow lying around my yard, these long strips of rubber. And I finally threw this piece of metal, and it hit Dave McKane in the head and drew blood. I was really sorry, and at that point we realized that we really didn't want to hurt each other. I was genuinely sorry that I drew blood, and we pledged eternal friendship, and that was the end of our little war. But by that point everybody was calling me "Spain."

GROTH: *And it stuck.*

SPAIN: And it stuck.

GROTH: *Huh! So what were you called before you got that nickname?*

SPAIN: They just called me "Manuel." Then, kids would stand outside your house and call your name until you came out, or you'd go over to somebody's house and go, "Oh Tommy, oh Tommy."

GROTH: *And you can became comfortable with that nickname?*

SPAIN: Yeah. That's what everybody called me.

GROTH: *Half the people I know don't even know your real first name.*

SPAIN: Well … it just seems I've been fated to carry this name. When I first started drawing comics, people confused me with Rodriguez, the guy who does stuff for the *National Lampoon*, so it was clear that "Spain" was going to carry into my comic book career.

BOOTS

GROTH: *You illustrated a comic called* Boots*, which came out a few years ago. This wasn't written by you. I don't have the author's name in front of me.*

SPAIN: [pause] It was Harry Kamper. He's now under the Witness Protection Program.

GROTH: *Harry Kamper is?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Huh! Well, that's an interesting introduction to your collaborator. This is one of the weirdest books I've read in a good long time. Can you tell me how you got involved in it? It's a long book, something like a hundred pages.*

SPAIN: Oh, it's actually about 52 pages.

GROTH: *Is that all?*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *Jesus! It reads like a hundred pages, Spain.*

SPAIN: *[Laughs.]* I don't know if that's a good sign. It's just 52 pages.

GROTH: *So how do you get involved in this project?*

SPAIN: Well, this guy approached me to do a book. He would have four pages of text, we'd get together and break it down into page layouts, and then I'd do in them in pencil, and if he approved it, I would ink the four and then he'd pay me and we'd move on to the next one.

GROTH: *So he actually wrote it in prose, and you broke it down into comics?*

SPAIN: Uh, yeah.

GROTH: *Were you told how many pages it was going to be total?*

SPAIN: He told me approximately. We had an idea of what it was — I mean, the pages on the script didn't quite correspond to the pages we turned out.

From Boots Vol. 1 (1997)

GROTH: *Did he give you a synopsis of the whole story?*

SPAIN: He gave me some brief thing, but I really had no idea of what was going to happen next, so it was a job for me at first. But I got into the story, it got to be like a serial, where I would be waiting to see what would happen next week.

GROTH: *I understand he's a rich lawyer. Is that true?*

SPAIN: I guess he's rich enough to spring for 20,000 copies.

GROTH: *Rich and crazy*.

SPAIN: I fixed him up with [Ron] Turner, who gave him the whole run-down on the publishing world. Ron told him that few people print 10,000, and probably he should not print 20,000.

He's some ex-CIA agent, who's now under the Witness Protection Program.

GROTH: *Well,* Boots *is a pretty paranoid fantasy. I'm not sure I can make out all of it myself.*

SPAIN: Well, yeah, there's going to be a #2. I mean, now I don't think he's so sure, but there's a whole lot of loose ends. I was disappointed that all the loose ends weren't wrapped up, but he wrapped up a whole bunch of them.

GROTH: *Can you give me your 25-words-or-less synopsis of what the thing is about?*

SPAIN: Well, a guy is shot during a gang fight, and for some reason, there is all this media attention on him, on a homeless guy, on a guy who would otherwise be obscure. Basically, the Mayor's aide convinces the Mayor to attend the funeral, which the Mayor is reluctant to do, but will do if there's some sort of police check on him to make sure he's not a crack dealer or child molester. They can't find any trace of the guy, they can't find anything, and no fingerprints. They put it on the Interpol, and the CIA, and everybody, and what this does is jacks up the mystery, and after awhile the media is into this, and there's this whole media frenzy: who is this guy? So the mystery begins, and it starts building from there.

GROTH: *There were religious overtones, weren't there?*

SPAIN: Well, the religious right takes over the satellite, and the Moonies are involved …

BIG BITCH'S SECRET AUNT?

GROTH: *Tell me how you came to create Granny McGurk.*

SPAIN: Oh, Granny McGurk. Well, *Thrasher Magazine* started a skateboarding comic. They needed a — the character just popped in my mind. Something that would be kind of off the wall, this old lady riding a skateboard. A tough old lady, at that.

GROTH: *I even detected your theme of strong women telling guys to go fuck themselves.*

SPAIN: Yeah, it's a funny thing. That's nothing that I set out to do, but—yeah, she could be Big Bitch's secret aunt.

GROTH: *Why did they come to you?*

SPAIN: I forgot exactly how it was. I met a guy, an art director, and he suggested that I drop over there, and I did. I'd done a few things for those guys, and as a matter of fact, I'm doing a series called "Speed Demon" for their new magazine called *Twist Grip*; so far I'm into the third or fourth episode, so that's coming along.

GROTH: *And what is this going to be called?*

SPAIN: They have a magazine called *Twist Grip*, which is a magazine for non-Harley Davidson motorcyles.

GROTH: *Are you a non-Harley-Davidson motorcycle guy?*

SPAIN: My first bike was a Ducatti, but my other two bikes were both Harleys. But there are all these developments that have transpired since I've ridden motorcycles, and so it's interesting to meet all the guys over there, get together, and we'd bang out ideas, and guys would come up with great ideas, and I'd come up with a few ideas too, and we bang out a plot.

This T-shirt design is featured in *Zodiac Mindwarp* #1 (May 2002).

INTO THE NIGHTMARE

GROTH: *The project you've been working on for what appears to be about three years, because the first page is signed "Spain '95"—*

SPAIN: Yeah, right.

GROTH: *— is* Nightmare Alley, *which I understand was the third or fourth book in the Neon Lit series.*

SPAIN: It's the third book, yeah.

GROTH: *And the second book came out two or three years ago.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *I'm not sure if there's even a fourth book in the planning stages, or —*

SPAIN: Yeah. I think he has a contract for seven books or something like that.

GROTH: *It appears that this was a major piece of work that spanned three years of your life.*

SPAIN: Yes, it did, yeah.

GROTH: *It's a tremendous amount of work. It frankly looks like you put more effort into this than just about anything else in recent memory.*

SPAIN: That's the way it feels, yes.

GROTH: *The drawing is crowded with detail. And of course, the story plays into your love of pulp and the lurid side of life.*

SPAIN: The novel's a cult classic. You mention it to certain people, and they know it. I gave it to my father-in-law, and at a certain point he recognized it as the movie about the geek. It has a certain following.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *Were you familiar with the novel before you — ?*

SPAIN: I never — I'd seen the movie with Tyrone Power. It was done in '46 or '47.

GROTH: *Was it good?*

SPAIN: Uh, yeah. Yeah, I saw it, and I made a special effort not to see it [recently], because I didn't want to just do a comic book version of the movie. But I remember the movie as being really gripping.

GROTH: *Can you tell me how you got involved in doing this?*

SPAIN: Well, I've known the publisher, Bob Callahan, for awhile. And … we had done some small things together, and so this came down the line, and … the sad thing that happened is, this guy up in your area, I think his name's Zingarelli, a real good artist, he's done some really great things. Callahan put out a book called *JFK*, and it's about all these conspiracy theories. He did the art for it —

GROTH: *Right. Mark Zingarelli.*

SPAIN: The thing was, he was supposed to do it, but then his kid died, so, you know, that's not a circumstance under which I wanted to get to do this … I'm really sorry — I'd

never met the guy, but I'm certainly sorry that that happened. I was really sorry I ended up taking up with a book under those circumstances.

GROTH: *You know, now that you've mentioned it, I think I remember hearing that. He lives just north of here, and he's a very good artist.*

SPAIN: Yeah, yeah, he's a great artist. So … I wish him the best, man, I don't know how anybody can carry on with a thing like that, but — yeah, I took it over. He had already written a treatment for it, but I just went through the book myself, and did my own treatment of it.

GROTH: *When you say you wrote a treatment, how do you mean that, exactly?*

SPAIN: I wrote a rough outline. Then I penciled the whole thing. So that took awhile. And I just had a sense of the basic things I wanted to have in there. The whole book is great. His raps in there are priceless, so I had to cram as much of that stuff in there as I could. There's a few scenes I had to leave out because they weren't essential to the plot. The book could really go on indefinitely. But I basically banged out a treatment, and we would send them to them for approval at various intervals.

GROTH: *Now, who is "them"?*

SPAIN: Avon Books. They had to approve it. So they hung onto the pencils for a long time. They finally gave me the go-ahead to ink it.

GROTH: *Did they give you a specific page count?*

SPAIN: No, there was a general page count. We thought it would be like 111 pages — I guess *Perdita Durango* was 111 pages.

GROTH: Nightmare Alley *is actually 128 pages. I think this is the longest thing you've ever done. Did that present new problems for you?*

SPAIN: Well, it was a big challenge. It's like working out a Gothic cathedral by yourself. It presented me problems, but the book was so well written that it was really a pleasure, even though a kind of a masochistic pleasure, to just bang everything out, and to try to

do credit to the guy's script, because he just handled all these different characters in there, and he's really a sympathetic guy.

From *Nightmare Alley* (1995)

GROTH: *The lead character is sympathetic? Stan Carlyle?*

SPAIN: Stan Carlyle, right. There's all these flashbacks to Stan's childhood, and to Molly's childhood, so you kind of get some idea where they're coming from.

GROTH: *Did you say you thought Stan Carlyle was a sympathetic character?*

SPAIN: Oh, no. Well, I mean, he is and he isn't. You know. You can kind of sympathize with the guy. The guy's certainly an able guy.

GROTH: [Laughing.] *That's what I was going to say.*

SPAIN: I don't want to give away the plot. *[Laughs.]* What can you say? But I mean, on the other hand, there's some real sympathetic characters in there. I was glad to see him go after Grindle for all that bread.

GROTH: *Exactly.*

SPAIN: There were parts I had to edit, like the descriptions of Grindle in the book, you really get some idea of how much of a mogul he is.

GROTH: *Well, it certainly seemed like something that was right up your alley.*

SPAIN: Yeah, it was. The book is interesting to me, because it's really a proletarian novel. There's all these great proletarian novels that are in effect banned. So it's both things. It's a proletarian novel, and it's a cult classic. I identify with the writer's point of view, there's probably not too many guys that I can identify with as much as I could identify with [William] Gresham, so if he was around, I would want him to think that I had done a good job with what he gave me, so there was a special cause for me to try to do right by the guy.

GROTH: *Did you feel the need to amend your style at all in an effort to visually capture the atmosphere of the novel?*

SPAIN: Not consciously. I'm always trying different things. There's obviously a limitation as to what I can do, but I'm always trying to explore just what those limitations are. Because the author can think of circumstances that I've never done in a comic book before, I had to try to draw new things, and that was part of the pleasure of it. Some people are real circus aficionados. I never really have been, but I did as much research as I could, and tried to come up with enough stuff, looking at machines, and trying to get that authentic feel. I tend to work to the end, but leave empty spaces, and then I go back and fill them up. So when I go back, I'm fresh, and a lot of times I would try to explore the detail … things would come out, things I had remembered, things I would think up, and …

GROTH: *When you say you leave empty spaces, you mean in particular panels?*

From *Nightmare Alley* (1995)

SPAIN: Yeah. In other words, I don't fill every detail in the panel. I first ink the basic stuff, and take it as far as I can. At some point, I don't feel like going on, [so I] just move on. And then once I get to the end, I just go back and — or if I'm in the middle of something, I'm looking through what I've done and I get some idea I just put it in. Justin Green, when he did *Binky Brown*, he would hang all the pages up in his room. He said he'd just be compelled to work on them. I don't hang the pages up, but if you go back through your own work, you always want to touch up this or touch up that, or something will come to mind, because you dry up. At some point you just shoot your wad for that time, and then you just have to rest up. But when you come to it again, you'll be in a different state of mind, and something will pop into your mind that you couldn't imagine when you had reached that point of creative exhaustion, so … That seems to work for me. At some point you just have a feel for drawing people. Other times you just have a feel for drawing architecture. What I got into in *Nightmare Alley* was interiors, so I was watching movies, and looking at things, trying to think of the way some interior would look.

GROTH: *Well, you also capture the circus atmosphere really well.*

SPAIN: Oh, thank you. I tried to. But of course, the writing is so good, you know. The guy lays everything out, and the character Stan is a real believable guy.

PLEASURES

GROTH: *Do you make any kind of qualitative distinction between the work you write and draw, and the work that you draw from someone else's writing? Do you prefer one over the other, or — ?*

SPAIN: Well, if it's good, if somebody has a good story, that's more of a pleasure to do. I just learned how to write the hard way: bang out a plot and as we were talking about earlier, when I first did *Trashman*, I just would do whatever came to my head. And after a while I realized you needed a well-thought-out plot. And then just watching television and watching movies, and things like that, being a couch potato, you develop an appreciation for writers and even hack writers who crank out stories. When you see a crappy story, you learn to appreciate the good story, so you try to come up with a plot that's somewhat intelligent and fun ...

GROTH: *Well, you're not big on plots.*

SPAIN: Well, I can crank out fairly elaborate plots, as you noted. I can get into an elaborate plot, but ... any piece of art has to give the audience a certain quantity of something. And it can be various combinations. Some things can have lousy plots, but you like them because they have good characterization. Some things just don't make it. They fall short of delivering to the audience. But somehow, a good piece of work makes you walk out of the theater, or finish reading a comic book, feeling satisfied. And a lot of times the plot is kind of predictable. The fact is, we spend our whole life watching movies and watching TV. We've probably seen more of this stuff than any generation has ever seen. We've seen every plot there is since we were kids, right? So somebody coming up with a new plot is fairly rare. But there's still room for some creative things, and there are still areas that you can create. In action alone there seem to be endless possibilities. You can see a lot of things that are poorly done that can be improved on.

Every so often you see a movie with a plausible fight scene. Like in *The Young Lions* where it looks like a real fight, where people actually get exhausted. The best one is Richard Lester's *Three Musketeers*. You ever see that?

GROTH: *Yeah.*

SPAIN: You know, where people are stumbling, and getting out of breath, and tripping over tables, and stuff like that. *[Laughter.]* So there's always that room for improvement of the genre. I just try to take my shot at all that stuff, and try to do the best I can.

GROTH: *It sounds like you're a big movie watcher.*

SPAIN: Yeah, I'm just a media aficionado in general.

GROTH: *What kind of fiction do you enjoy reading most?*

SPAIN: I read more non-fiction than I read fiction. Philip K. Dick was the guy that I last was really into. I read just about all of his science fiction novels, one after another. What's interesting is, I think that *Boots* has kind of a Dickian plot.

GROTH: *Yes, right.*

SPAIN: But the guy never heard of Dick.

GROTH: [Laughs.] *The same kind of mystical angles.*

SPAIN: Yeah, all the weird turns, and — Dick can really keep you going on. I was never bored reading Dick. I was into science fiction as a kid, and if somebody can come up with something new, I'll be happy to hear it. But you know, if I'm watching things on TV, monster movies and stuff like that, I — I like the *Jurassic Park* ones. I can appreciate things just from an action-content point of view. But on the other hand, I really like that kind of social commentary that Dick did, the way he would satirize things. But the thing about science fiction is that when it's good, it can capture the unexpected nature of existence. If you were to go back to 1950 and give somebody a history of what happened up to this date, it would seem like the most bizarre science fiction. Even though in some ways things are pretty much the same as they were in the '50s.

SPAIN ONLINE

GROTH: *You are doing something for* Salon*'s online magazine in collaboration with Justin Green and Paul Mavrides?*

SPAIN: Yeah. It's called "Dark Hotel." The latest word is it's coming up in September. It was supposed to come out last November. "Dark Hotel" is a great idea thought up by Bob Callahan: there's a night clerk who sends you up to various rooms, and in each room, there's somebody who will tell you a story. So each of us has a story that we tell, in 12 episodes. And it's going to be online, they were trying to get an individual sponsor for it, but they couldn't get anybody. But it's just such a neat idea, the stories are so good, that they just got to put it on.

GROTH: *Can you tell me what the stories you're doing are like?*

SPAIN: I'm doing a story that's based upon the CIA Safe Houses that they had in San Francisco in the '50s and early '60s, where they tried out LSD on different people. And Paul's doing a story about the ghost of William Burroughs that haunts the hotel and speaks in Mayan hieroglyphs. Interestingly, the guy who taught Burroughs Mayan hieroglyphs was the executor of the Lovecraft estate. And Justin's doing a story … I think Mary Gaitskill is the author.

GROTH: *And how does it unfold on the screen visually?*

SPAIN: Well, they had a version of it up, in which there were four panels per episode, so you go into the hotel, and you go into the lobby, and there's a guy, Drago, who's the night clerk, and there are various rooms. You press the button on the room. I also designed the front of the hotel, and you can go up an elevator. You can go the long way, or you can go the short way. Bob and me had differences of opinion on this. When I was into *Star Trek, the Next Generation*, I wanted to be there at the beginning and see each time the spaceship went through all those galactic effects. So my opinion was that each time you have to go through all this stuff, go to the night clerk, and go up the elevator, and stuff like that. He said that a lot of people would just get annoyed at that, if you go to some online thing, you just get tired of that shit, so he wanted to have some way so

you could just go directly to the story, then there's four panels, and that's the episode for the week, and the next week will be another episode.

GROTH: *How much work have you done on this?*

SPAIN: I've done all 12. I've finished mine. I think Justin and Paul have two or three to go.

GROTH: *Twelve episodes.*

SPAIN: Yeah.

GROTH: *And this may come out when?*

SPAIN: It should come out in September.

GROTH: *Would they ever do a hard-copy version?*

SPAIN: There's talk about that, yeah.

AN ANOMALY

GROTH: *Do you think comics is progressing as a medium? What do you think of the post-underground generation of cartoonists who followed you?*

SPAIN: They've got one guy in *Zero Zero*, that guy … White …

GROTH: *Oh, yeah, Mack White?*

SPAIN: I'm a provincial guy …

GROTH: [Laughs.] *How do you mean that?*

SPAIN: I like the kind of comics I do. I like realistically drawn bizarre tales. You know, I'm not really that broad about what I like — a lot of work that is good but not up to my notions of draughtmanship I tend to ignore. It's funny, I sent George Evans a bunch of *Zaps*.

GROTH: *Uh-huh.*

SPAIN: And he liked my stuff, but he said, ha ha, how do you manage to get on with all those surrealists?

GROTH: *Like Moscoso —*

SPAIN: Yeah, right. You know, I appreciate a lot of stuff, but the stuff that I really like is that adventure genre, so …

GROTH: *Which is almost an anomaly in underground comics —*

SPAIN: It's a real anomaly. Right.

From *Subvert* #2 (1972) collected in *Trashman Lives!*

GROTH: *I mean, Crumb I'm sure doesn't like any of that stuff.*

SPAIN: Ah, but all that stuff is really his school, all that funny comic stuff, so —

GROTH: *Yeah, yeah, but not action-adventure, I mean.*

SPAIN: No, not action-adventure. But in a sense, my stuff is closer to some aspect of Crumb rather than the real surrealist stuff. In *Raw* — there was all that surrealist and

expressionist work and much of it gets through my biases. I see the bizarreness, the surrealism of everyday life.

GROTH: *Sure.*

SPAIN: And Crumb does too, in that sense. I can only handle so many shaggy dog stories, although I have to admit that life is often like that. I'm learning to appreciate a wider range of things, but still a lot of the more arty styles get old quick for me. Still, I prefer the adventure-type thing. I'm sort of a committee of one on that. I'm hooked on good draughtsmanship.