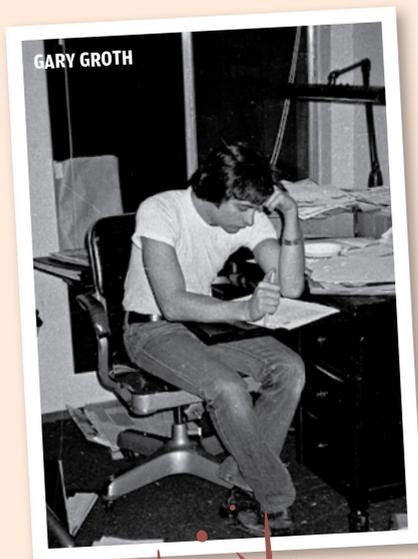


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ARMED and DANGEROUS

How rebellious indie publisher Fantagraphics survived tumultuous turns to take on the industry and blaze new trails for the art form

By Sean T. Collins

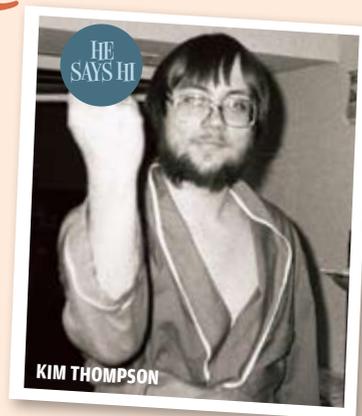


“The cops were scared sh--less of us,” recalls Fantagraphics co-founder/co-publisher Gary Groth. “We were much better armed than they were.”

It was a gray Saturday in September 2007, and the staff of celebrated alternative comics publisher Fantagraphics had loaded into a van and driven an hour or so north from their Seattle headquarters to an isolated stretch of woods in the tiny Snohomish County town of Sultan, Wash. Once there, they lined up their targets—televisions, computer monitors, bottles of cleaning products, even a lawnmower. Unloading an assortment of guns that included a 9mm, a 10mm, a rifle with a telescopic lens, a .45, a .44 Magnum, a .357 Magnum and a 12-gauge shotgun—plus some bayonet knives, just in case—these guardians of comics’ cutting edge proceeded to blow the crap out of everything in sight.

“It’s a long and distinguished tradition,” says co-publisher Kim Thompson of the company’s annual “Shoot-Out Party.” “Before there even was a Fantagraphics, back when it was just Gary and me, he and I used to go out and shoot at a friend’s farm, just bring Hawaiian Punch cans and blow the hell out of ‘em with a Magnum.” As the company grew, so did the arsenal. “We’d buy bombs at the Indian reservations under the table and set them off in cars and fridges and washing machines,” Groth says. “There was one [lawnmower] that blew 50 feet up in the air. We thought it was gonna land on us.”

This time, though, the shoot-out party had some party crashers—the sheriff’s department. Turns out it’s illegal to shoot



up a bunch of electronic equipment while trespassing on private property. No charges were filed, though there were a few tense moments when the cops, with hands on their holsters, first approached the Fantagraphics crew. “They were very wary of us,” says Groth, “until they realized we were just some goofballs from Seattle.”

Goofballs? Perhaps. But Fantagraphics is deadly serious when it comes to the business—and the art form—of comics. Groth, Thompson and company have spent over three decades with their metaphorical guns blazing on behalf of the notion that comics are *art*, more than capable of producing powerful images and telling sophisticated stories. Their ammo in this battle: a hall-of-fame lineup of comics and creators, from alternative comics pioneers such as Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez to living legend Robert Crumb to classic strips *Krazy Kat* and *Prince Valiant*.

It hasn’t always been easy—the publisher’s been kept alive by everything from public pleas to porn to *Peanuts*. And thanks to the outspoken opinions expressed in Fanta’s magazine *The Comics Journal*, they’ve taken as many shots as they’ve dished out. But according to Groth, the aim has remained the same all along: “Our love is to publish great cartooning, in whatever form that takes.”

ORIGINS AND OMENS

Long before publishing any comics, Fantagraphics was founded with the simple ambition of talking *about* comics.

University of Maryland journalism-school dropouts Gary Groth and Mike Catron, both veterans of the comics fanzine scene, formally incorporated their publishing venture Fantagraphics in 1975. After a brief flirtation with the rock-music press, they took over the Texas-based *Nostalgia Journal*, a collector-gearred pulp-culture magazine. "We bought it with the idea of expanding its editorial content to include much more coverage of comics," says Groth. Inspired by the kind of hard-nosed journalism that had recently exposed the Watergate scandal, Groth established the tone of *The New Nostalgia Journal* from his first issue, July 1976's #27, which contained a lengthy investigative attack on the business practices of the rival *Buyer's Guide*.

The point, Groth says, was to treat comics not as the province of collectors loading their dusty shelves, but as a living, breathing art form that deserved hard-hitting reporting and reviewing. "*The Comics Journal* was really the anchor of the company, [and] it was possibly the first time in the history of comics when a magazine actually devoted space to negative reviews of comics. Of course, the criticism ran the gamut from being wildly ecstatic to harshly negative, but it just took people aback that we would criticize comics so harshly. This was the first time comics creators and publishers were confronted, month after month, with a lot of negative criticism. They pretty much flipped out."

Over the years, the *Journal's* no-nonsense attitude, particularly when Groth was at the helm, has prompted feuds with figures ranging from *Cerebus* creator Dave Sim to science-fiction author Harlan Ellison to Marvel Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter. According to Groth, he was even banned from the Marvel offices.

The negative tone probably shouldn't have come as a surprise, since according to Kim Thompson, a friend of Groth's

who came aboard in 1978 when Catron departed for a PR job at DC Comics, the late '70s were a terrible time for the kinds of sophisticated comics the *Journal* was searching for. "That was a really dead spot in comics history. Marvel and DC were pretty much in decline, at least in creative terms. The underground wave [of the late '60s and early '70s] had crested and fallen back. The top level [of the entire industry] was Steve Gerber's *Howard the Duck*. It was almost a ground zero at which to start."

The notion that *they* were the change they'd been waiting for, to paraphrase President Barack Obama, hadn't yet crossed their minds.

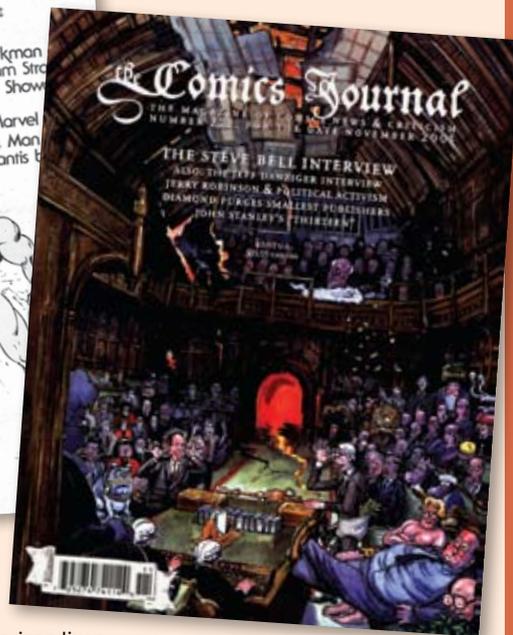
FROM 'ROCKETS' WITH LOVE

By the early '80s, the industry began showing positive signs of creativity and innovation. "Certainly [Will Eisner's] *A Contract with God* was important," says Thompson. "That was a good early warning shot. And there were still good undergrounds being produced—Crumb never stopped working, for instance."

Meanwhile, Fantagraphics' first foray into comics publishing came about as a result of the "if you build it, they will come" principle. Having successfully set up a relationship with the half-dozen distributors that made up the fledgling Direct Market at that point in order to publish the *Journal*, Groth and Thompson had unwittingly created the infrastructure to start putting out comics as well. Their first was 1981's *Los Tejanos*, a graphic novel by underground veteran Jack Jackson about the Texas-Mexican War, but it was a

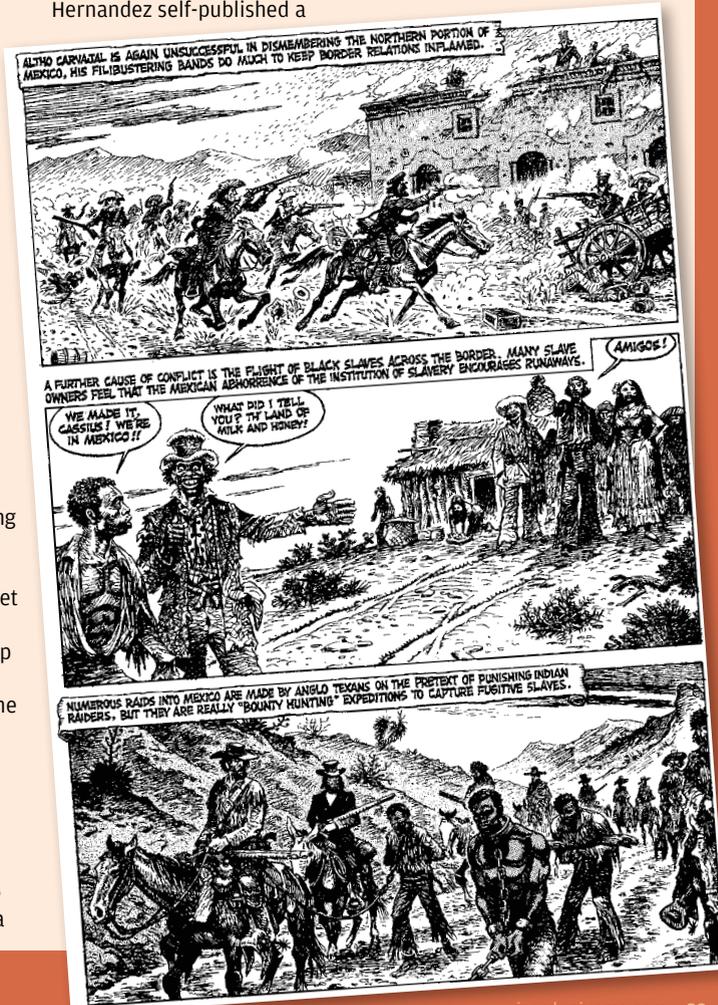
different sequential-art look at Mexican-American lives that would truly put Fanta on the map as a publisher to be reckoned with.

Exploding out of the Los Angeles punk scene, brothers Gilbert, Jaime and Mario Hernandez self-published a



ABOVE: *The Comics Journal*

BELOW: *Los Tejanos* interior page



Love and Rockets #15 cover



32-page comic called *Love & Rockets*. "After a lame attempt trying to shop it around at a local convention, Gilbert got the idea to send it to the *Journal* for a possible review," recalls Jaime. "I liked the magazine because it was different from the other fan trades. It had higher standards for comic art, called out the bullsh-- going on in the comic biz and was

just plain nasty. It reminded me a lot of the punk music magazines I was reading at the time. Maybe [a review] would get us some kind of free advertisement, even if they hated it-- in the punk days, a trashed review was a good sign!"

With art as accomplished as the best mainstream titles, attention to the unique details of Latino and punk culture and an

uncompromising, sophisticated approach to adult topics, the book instantly caught Groth's eye. "Here were the kinds of comics that we'd been championing in *theory*. That was a revelation. I was so smitten by it that I called them up and basically just asked them, 'Would you be interested in us publishing this?' They jumped at the chance, and the rest is history."

Fantagraphics re-released an expanded *Love & Rockets* #1 in the summer of 1982, in time for the San Diego Comic-Con. Before long, the series, which chronicled the long-running sagas of Jaime's bisexual punk rockers Maggie and Hopey and Gilbert's fictional Central American village Palomar, became the core title not just of Fantagraphics, but of a burgeoning movement of intelligent, ambitious sequential art. Along with a pair of anthologies helmed by giants of the underground scene—Art Spiegelman and Francoise Mouly's avant-garde *RAW*, launched in 1980, and Robert Crumb's visceral *Weirdo*, debuting in 1981—*Love & Rockets* helped create the "alternative comic." Clearly different from the Big Two's spandex slugfests, it was also a breed apart from both the underground's Vietnam/Watergate-era taboo-busting books and the other indie publishers' superhero, fantasy and action-adventure efforts.

"Gradually, it dawned on us that we were something called an 'alternative comics' publisher, but I can't tell you exactly when that happened because we didn't have any grand plan to become one," says Groth. "We were always flying by the seat of our pants, and we never had any five-year plan—we barely had a five-month plan, and we only had that because we had to send our solicitations to Diamond three months in advance. But when the Hernandez Brothers started, cartoonists like them, with the same ambitions, started coming out of the woodwork."

BUILDING A LEGACY...

Having moved from their original headquarters in Washington D.C. and now operating out of the same large Connecticut house that many of its skeleton-crew staff lived in, Fantagraphics began receiving submissions from young cartoonists inspired by the company's unorthodox approach.

One of the first was Peter Bagge, whose series *Neat Stuff* debuted in 1984; he was soon joined by Daniel



Clowes, who launched his detective-spoof series *Lloyd Llewellyn* in 1985. "I did a 10-page color *Lloyd Llewellyn* comic when I was around 23 and living in New York City, and decided to send it out to some publishers for feedback," Clowes says. "I wasn't expecting much—maybe just some advice or words of encouragement—but Gary called me a few weeks later and offered me my own bimonthly comic. That was a big thrill."

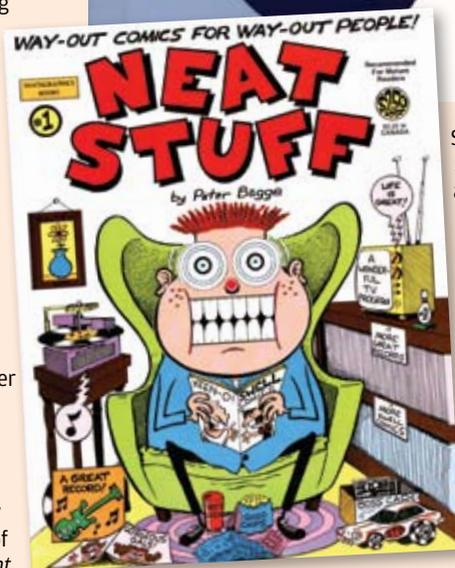
Clowes and Bagge both went on to great things with the publisher as the years went by: Clowes' one-man anthology series *Eightball* gave rise to one of the company's bestselling graphic novels, *Ghost World*, whose film version marked the breakout of Scarlett Johansson and earned Clowes an Oscar nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay. Bagge's caustic chronicle of Seattle slackers, *Hate*, became one of the grunge era's most memorable memoirs and served as Fantagraphics' unofficial flagship title as the publisher settled in the Emerald City, where it moved in 1989.

But there was more to Fanta beyond the infusion of new blood. The company began publishing reprints of classic comics *Prince Valiant* and *Popeye* as early as 1983, and even wooed the godfather of underground comics himself, Robert Crumb, into publishing *The Complete Crumb Comics* with Fanta beginning in 1987. "Talking him into that was no small achievement," Groth recalls. "It was a real watershed moment for us."

Key to Fantagraphics' appeal was its adamant stance in favor of creator ownership and creators' rights. "We felt very strongly about that, and we took our model from the underground comics, where the creators owned the work, and there was virtually no question about it." Indeed, the *Journal* became one of the main battlegrounds during the mid-'80s struggles of artists such as Jack Kirby for original art and royalties. In other words, they weren't in it for the money...and it frequently showed.



ABOVE: Daniel Clowes's *Ghost World*



MIDDLE: Peter Bagge's *Neat Stuff*

...FLIRTING WITH DISASTER

"It's always been hard to weather the storms," Groth says of Fanta's place in an industry frequently beset with financial meltdowns. "We've always operated on a shoestring. But when there's just so little money ever, you get used to operating that way, so that when there's a little bit less money, you can deal with it." During the '80s, mainstream-friendly titles offered cash infusions, from the one-shot *X-Men Companion* to John Byrne's *The Doomsday Squad*, an early Byrne effort Groth purchased from the ruins of Charlton Comics. Over the years, the company would also become a second home for ambitious books from artistically restless mainstream creators such as *Amazing Spider-Man's* Gil Kane and *Weapon X's* Barry Windsor-

Smith. Meanwhile, *Amazing Heroes*—a magazine conceived as a more mainstream-friendly *Comics Journal*—ran for 200 issues and, according to Thompson, helped keep the company afloat until the popularity of then-recently launched *Wizard* eclipsed it. "I don't carry a grudge or anything—it's the circle of life," Thompson laughs.

Still more unusual was the solution the company devised for its financial troubles in 1991.

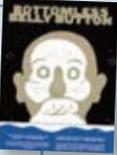
"We looked at our

money situation and were like, 'Sh--! Now what?'" recalls Thompson. Enabled by Diamond's recent decision to distribute adult material and inspired by *Black Kiss*, the artistically ambitious, decidedly dirty graphic novel from



BELOW: Gil Kane's cover to John Byrne's *Doomsday Squad*

FIND YOUR FANTA! No matter what your taste in comics, Fantagraphics has a book for you

| IF YOU LIKE... | THEN TRY... | WHY... |
|-------------------|---|--|
| The Walking Dead | House  | Fans of Robert Kirkman's black-and-white opus of horror and survival will find much to freak out about in this brutal, haunting story of three young explorers who enter an abandoned mansion...but may never leave. |
| Grant Morrison | Fletcher Hanks  | If you thought <i>Final Crisis</i> or <i>All Star Superman</i> was wild, wait till you get a load of the pure cosmic madness of the bizarre, violent Golden Age superhero comics in Hanks' works, such as his bombastically titled collection, <i>I Shall Destroy All the Civilized Planets!</i> |
| Indie Movies | Bottomless Belly Button  | Dash Shaw's gigantic graphic novel about a dysfunctional family's last weekend together before its matriarch and patriarch get a divorce is the kind of book you'll pass along to all your hippest friends. |
| Adult Swim | Tales Designed to Thrizzle and Maakies  | These surreal, gut-bustingly funny comedy series, by Michael Kupperman and Tony Millionaire, respectively, have both been made into actual Adult Swim shows. |
| South Park | Johnny Ryan  | The gross-out gags in Ryan's <i>Angry Youth Comix</i> and <i>Blecky Yuckerella</i> are so extreme and politically incorrect they make Cartman look like Garfield. Not for the faint of heart! |
| Napoleon Dynamite | Unlovable  | Based on a teenage girl's diary discovered in a rest-stop restroom, Esther Pearl Watson's cringe-tastic look at the life of a nerdy high-school girl in the '80s is, like, totally rad. • STC |

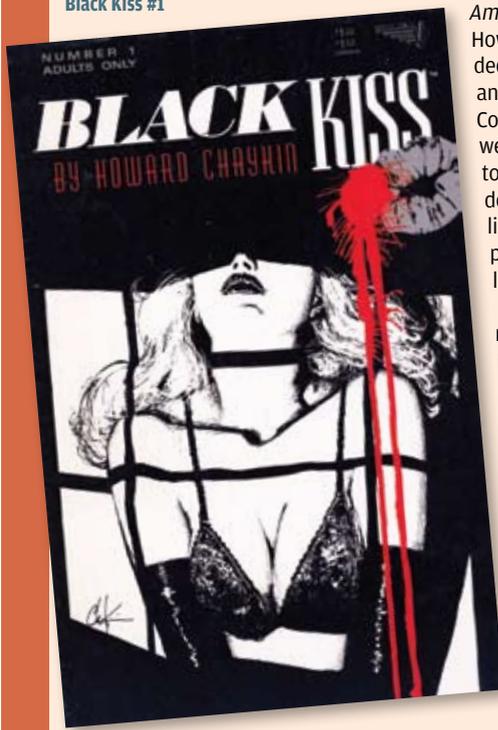
built up a sizeable library of landmark graphic novels. Los Bros Hernandez produced book-length stories *Poison River* and *Wigwam Bam*, while their fellow Fanta stalwart Clowes used his title *Eightball* to serialize his graphic novels *Like a Velvet Glove Cast in Iron*, *David Boring* and eventually, *Ghost World*. "My first Fantagraphics book was a Christmas present: the hardcover collection of *Ghost World*, given to me by the girl I was dating at the time," recalls current Fantagraphics mainstay Paul Hornschemeier (*The Three Paradoxes*). "I had zero exposure to underground or alternative comics at the time, so it was a revelation."

Ghost World was also the initial gateway drug for Brian K. Vaughan, the "Lost" writer and *Y: The Last Man* and *Runaways* creator who's one of the publisher's many vocal fans in the modern mainstream. Vaughan cites another of the company's best-selling titles as a major influence: *Palestine*, Joe Sacco's journalistic look at Israel and the Occupied Territories. "That had a huge impact on me, not just as a writer, but on my outlook of the world. I'd never seen anything quite like that or considered that comics could do something like that. It really blew my mind."

Perhaps the most influential and acclaimed title of all was Chris Ware's beautiful, melancholy series *The Acme Novelty Library*, which gave birth to the award-winning graphic novel *Jimmy Corrigan* and shaped a generation of young creators with its bold experiments in layout and design. "Anyone who's published as much as one issue of *Acme* has contributed much more to comics than I have," Vaughan says.

By the mid-2000s, the graphic novel movement that Fantagraphics and its creators helped pioneer had truly crashed the pop-culture gates, with reviews and interviews popping up regularly in the world's most popular publications. "I remember when we'd get a review of *Eightball* in *Time* and we'd be excited for months about it. Nowadays, it's like, 'Oh, there's another review in the *New York Times* or *Entertainment Weekly*. Oh, okay,'" Thompson laughs. "It's

Black Kiss #1



American Flag! creator Howard Chaykin, Fanta decided to go triple-X and created its Eros Comix imprint. "We were desperate enough to grab at any flotation device, then it was like 'Well, let's do pornography. People like sex!'"

Fanta's last, and most serious, cash-flow catastrophe took place in 2003, when their former bookstore distributor went out of business owing the company over \$70,000. Groth issued a plea on a variety of message boards and blogs, asking readers to quickly buy whatever

Fantagraphics books they could afford. With vocal support from creators like Spiegelman, Warren Ellis and Neil Gaiman, the company soon earned enough money to keep going. By that time, Fanta was on the verge of a windfall that would allow them to not only survive, but flourish.

FROM 'PALESTINE' TO 'PEANUTS' AND BEYOND

Though the regular "floppy" comic book format was the publishing method of choice for Fantagraphics' stable of creators well into the 1990s, it had become clear that their ambitious stories called for a format to match. "As cartoonists were doing more and more book-oriented projects, the novel-length thing became more of a natural," Thompson says.

Soon the company had



ABOVE: Jimmy Corrigan

BELOW: The Complete Peanuts

very gratifying. There's a certain element of 'it's about time.'"

Meanwhile, Fantagraphics itself is the healthiest it's been in years. Groth and Thompson give much of the credit to editor Eric Reynolds, who started at the company as a Dan Clowes-worshipping intern and who currently spearheads the company's publicity efforts, as well as serving as a pointman with younger creators such as Johnny Ryan and the rotating cast of contributors to the company's new flagship anthology, *MOME*. "By any standard, Eric's the stabilizing third wheel on the erratic Groth-Thompson bicycle," Thompson says.

But both financially and creatively, the biggest factor in Fanta's current success is none other than Charlie Brown. Beginning in 2004, with the approval of cartoonist Charles Schulz's widow Jean, Fantagraphics began publishing

The Complete Peanuts, a projected series of 25 volumes that will contain the legendary strip's entire 50-year run. In addition to serving in the money-maker role once filled by *Amazing Heroes* or *Eros*, Snoopy and the gang have initiated a new wave of lush archival reprints across the industry.

The end result? "We've been solvent for five years," Groth says proudly. "We don't have to sweat how we're doing financially on a daily basis." And there are more receptive readers out there for Fantagraphics' bold brand of comics than ever before. "It's what we kept hoping for, but it really only established a beachhead within the past six or seven years. Prior to that, we'd been banging our head against the wall. It's a weird feeling, a different kind of rollercoaster ride than what we're used to, but the kinds of comics we wanted to see have reached critical mass."

It's not the first time Groth

and company have been at the center of an explosion—literally, as chunks of washing machines and computer monitors throughout the woods of rural Washington can attest. And given the company's trailblazing track record, it probably won't be the last. 

