

The Zine Scene: Libraries Preserve

ALTERNATIVE, EPHEMERAL, UNDEFINABLE—ZINES PROVIDE A UNIQUE GLIMPSE OF CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

In 1992, Mike Gunderloy, the former editor of *Factsheet Five*, a newsletter that regularly reviews zine publications, issued a press release announcing his intention of donating his huge collection of zines to a library. Gunderloy wanted to give his collection to a library that would not only preserve it, but make an effort to get people interested in studying those contemporary, underground, antiestablishment, and often ephemeral products of self-publishing known as “zines.”

“Our library is right across the river from where Mike lives, so we got real excited,” recalled Billie Aul, senior librarian, manuscripts and special collections section, at the New York State Library in Albany. “We were the first one there and got the collection.”

The *Factsheet Five* collection at the New York State Library occupies 300 cubic feet of shelf space, includes between 10,000 and 20,000 titles, and is the biggest and most comprehensive collection of its kind in the world. “Mike got copies of zines that were being published by all kinds of obscure groups in the 1980s,” Aul explained. “It’s a phenomenal collection.”

The *Factsheet Five* collection is also an acquisition that reflects a trend in librarianship. In addition to the New York State Library, a number of libraries across the country are beginning to collect, preserve, and make zines available for researchers, including DePaul University, Bowling Green State University, Michigan State University, Washington State University, and the San Francisco Public Library.

Chris Dodge, a cataloger at the Hennepin County (Minn.) Library and an expert on the alternative press, remains skeptical that the library profession is making a concerted effort to preserve zines, but he added, “Any effort to diversify collections of nontraditional material—for example, zines, comics, and graphic material—is heartening.”

No one can really define the term “zine,” say zine cura-



Desktop publishing makes anyone a zine publisher. Here,

tors and experts, but such publications share a number of characteristics. They have offbeat, frequently provocative, and often weird names, such as *Baby Fat*, *Diseased Pariah News*, and *Holy Titclamps*. They lampoon, attack, parody, entertain, or instruct on virtually any imaginable aspect of our culture, from AIDS to poetry, dirt bikers, New Wave comics, and the popular television program *Beverly Hills 90210*.

A zine is almost always unsophisticated in appearance and format, often produced by desktop publishing, collated by hand, and limited in audience and distribution, usually to fewer than 2,000 copies.

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the Latest Trend in Publishing

By Ron Chepesiuk



a sampling of the collection at San Francisco PL.

traditional media is not an appropriate forum," explained Andrea Grimes, special collections librarian at the book arts and special collections center of the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL). "They are getting into print for the first time."

SFPL includes zines as part of its Little Magazine Collection, which started in the 1960s and had as its impetus the Beat movement and hippie counterculture. Grimes estimates the collection has 1,000 titles, of which 20% are zines. "It will be very difficult to study the literary life of San Francisco since the 1960s without using the zines in our Little Magazine Collection," Grimes explained.

Randy Scott, a librarian who curates a large collection of

zines at Michigan State University (MSU) in East Lansing, believes that zines serve a useful social purpose. "Zines are a form of communication among like-minded isolates all over the world," he explained.

The MSU zine collection, said Scott, can best be described in three categories: comic zines, science-fiction zines, and queerzines, a recent development that, according to the librarian, has "gender-bender avant-garde promise." MSU has more than 1,000 science-fiction fanzines dating back to the 1960s, including a significant number of *Star Trek* zines.

Outside the mainstream

Zines shouldn't be confused with the familiar alternative press publications that have their origins in the 1960s. "Zines are usually published informally and are the effort of one person or maybe a couple," Dodge explained. "The alternative press that began in the '60s and is thriving today is more structured than the zine and is more like the traditional press, with editors, associate editors, staff photographers, and advertising."

But Aul maintained the zine is still a part of the alternative press tradition extending back at least 200 years in American history. "There has always been a publishing network in this country outside mainstream publishing and that includes zines," she explained. "So zines are really just another form of alternative publication."

In 1992, an estimated 20,000 zine titles were published in the U.S. alone, and zine watchers say the cottage publishing "industry" is growing at the rate of 20% a year. "Zines are an important part of popular culture because they reflect the attitudes and values of the masses," said Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, rare books and special collections librarian at Washington State University (WSU).

The WSU library has a large collection of counterculture comics, many of which are zines, dating from the 1960s to the present. Like most libraries preserving zines, the WSU library built its collection through the generous donations of individuals—in this case, Paul Bryant, a member of the English department, and Steve Willis, a New Wave comic artist and former librarian.

Primary source material for historians

"Zine comics can tell us a lot about slang and language in our society, so they are as valuable a special collection as anything a library can collect," Miletic-Vejzovic observed.

Kathryn DeGraff, head of special collections at the DePaul University Libraries in Chicago, considers zines to be a form of primary source material as important for the study of the history of today's mass culture as letters, diaries, and scrapbooks. "Unfortunately, the telephone and

e-mail are replacing letters as the principal form of communication, so a lot of history is disappearing,” DeGraff said. “If we don’t preserve zines, historians and other researchers are going to have to write about our era solely from secondary sources.”

The DePaul zine collection, titled the Chicago and Great Lakes Underground Press Collection, grew out of the first annual Underground Press Conference, held in Chicago in August 1994. Like WSU’s zine collection, DePaul’s grew out of the interest and support of two individuals: Ted Anton, a member of DePaul’s English department, and Batya Goldman of the Chicago-based Mary Kuntz Press. The collection extends from 1980 to 1995 and includes 200 titles.

Most zine-collecting libraries have limited their focus by type or geographic area, but a few libraries like the Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green (Ohio) State University have broad collecting themes. “Our Popular Culture Library’s unusual collection of primary materials has earned it an international reputation as a resource for interdisciplinary cultural research,” explained Head Librarian Alison Scott. “So our focus is broad and includes all of American culture.”

The Popular Culture Library has made considerable efforts to publicize its resources, Scott explained, because of the public’s perception that the library’s nontraditional holdings, such as its zine publications, are eccentric in nature and so are not as serious or as valuable.

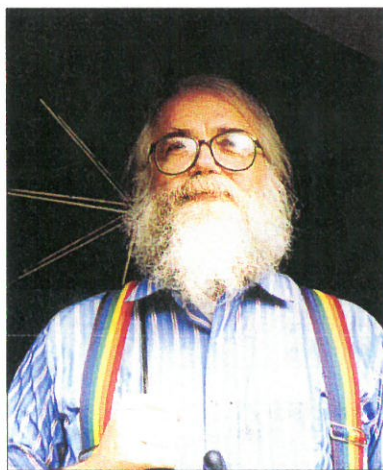
Curators say that, although the zines they curate are of recent origin, scholars and students have begun to use them for research. Unfortunately, though, many zines will never be preserved. “Because of their underground nature, zines are often difficult to locate because many are published for just one or a couple of issues and die,” Scott explained. “For every zine that is collected, I’m sure at least another six fall through the cracks.”

Many zine publishers, moreover, don’t want their zines preserved in a library because they don’t want to be institutionalized; in fact, they often resent the fact that libraries have zine collections. “Zines are counterculture and their publishers like to be outside the mainstream,” DeGraff explained. “They feel that having their zines in a library flies in the face of what they are doing. I understand their point

of view, but I think it’s the library profession’s responsibility to try to convince zine publishers that their efforts should be preserved in a library.”

But for those zines that end up being preserved in a library, many difficulties arise in handling them. Much to the chagrin of the technical services department, many zines don’t have dates, frequently change their titles, and often involve original cataloging. “A lot of effort has to go into cataloging zines, and in this day of dwindling library resources, that’s hard to justify,” DeGraff said.

Many libraries find it easier to handle zines as archival collections rather than serial titles. “We won’t use OCLC,” Aul revealed. “Instead, we are writing archival finding aids to describe our zines. We plan to put information about them in the online catalog, but it will be a very brief record.”



Zine curator Laila Miletic-Vejzovic (top left) at Washington State University believes zines reflect the values, attitudes, and language of the masses; Billie Aul (above center), senior librarian at New York State Library, examines the Factsheet Five Collection with Roger Ritzman and Ian Duckor; Randy Scott (left) at Michigan State University calls zines “a form of communication among like-minded isolates all over the world.”

Given the ephemeral nature of zines and their value as a record of contemporary culture, zine curators would like to see more libraries make a more active effort to preserve zines. “Zines can be found in almost every community in the country, if libraries look hard enough,” said Miletic-Vejzovic.

Scott added, “Libraries preserve records of man’s cultural communication, and since so much communication today is going on outside the ‘old’ commercial and academic channels, we have to seek out nontraditional materials like zines.” ❖