

CITYSIDE



A Major Mac Attack

'Hacker Chick' Blazes Her Own Trail to Success in Electronic Publishing

By Kit Roane

Jaime Levy fancies herself something of a new breed of electronic publisher. She does not sleep ... often. Surrounded by several user-friendly Macintosh computers in her Hollywood apartment, the self-described "hacker chick" works in clockwork rapport with the machine's mouse, juggling pages, pictures, and audio bytes as the magazine "pages" take shape and sound.

She is searching for a quote to illustrate her latest piece, "Ambulance." The story comes from underground publisher and Sinistry Press founder Monica Moran, with graphics taken from Jaime Hernandez's comic book series *Love and Rockets* and industrial music provided by FIREHOSE mogul Mike Watt. This is multimedia with a dark, irreverent edge. Some might say it's ghoulish.

"Hey, here's a good one," she pipes up, excitedly scanning the chosen text. "They all went kicking and screaming but their bodies did different things. Her blood seemed far more vibrant than John's yellow pink fluid. If you chopped her three ways it might eliminate another tenuous autopsy. Starting with the head ...," continues the now giddy Levy, skipping a few unimportant lines. "Waking up each morning was enough to fuck them all up good. Just walk right up and tear their heads right off. What a cake walk."

"He's psychotic," she explains. "He" being a serial killer moonlighting as ambulance driver extraordinaire, a banshee who would put to shame even moviedom's recent cutlery meister, Dr. Giggles. His proposed victims are five of L.A.'s twentysomething generation. As useless as they are bold, these characters' predilection for "meth" and mayhem has landed them on a deserted road and in the path of fate, taking the form of the ambulance man.

Levy spends her days in a spacious apartment on the fringe of a dilapidated Hollywood, chitchatting out her home in cyberspace and inviting all her friends to join in. She wants to be the Charles Foster Kane of electronic publishing. "Ambulance," her most ambitious and demanding project to date, is set to hit the racks next month and may prove her mettle. For the past two and a half years, she has honed her talents by producing electronic magazines that combine a hip-hop-inspired farrago of graphics, print, and sound bytes. In the



Jaime Levy, with cat, mouse, and "Ambulance"

beginning, she admits, sounds were lifted from Public Enemy, et al. — but she has mended her ways and now asks permission first.

Levy's magazines are an industrious proletarian response to electronic publishing, thriftier and less pretentious than the CD-ROM fare lining the carousels of software and electronics stores. And she is beginning to make monkeys out of the naysayers who see the 3.5-inch microdisk as a techno-relic soon to be usurped by big-block technologies like the laser disk.

Electronic publishing was not Levy's first calling. The twenty-six-year-old Los Angeles native, who was born in the Scientologists' Hollywood high-rise (at the time

it was still Cedars-Sinai Medical Center) and grew up in the San Fernando Valley, says she led a very "Woodland Hills-like upper-middle-class existence." At the time, her trip was "just being in this environment where everybody had nice cars and no ambition." Film work became an obvious choice.

"When you grow up in L.A., everybody works in the movie business," explains Levy. At eighteen, she enrolled in San Francisco State University's film and video program to "do the art thing." There she was introduced to the magic of electronic publishing.

While flirting with San Fran's "bad video art scene," producing such memorable reels as an industrial music/skateboard epic, Levy met a "really cool" guy who was producing pornography on his Amiga. She describes one of his works, "an animation sequence of a baby sucking his dick." This was love of a different sort.

"He was taking a disk and putting labels on it and sending it out for free to all of these geeks," she says. "I said, 'Gee, I'm gonna try doing this' — something a little more straight."

After graduating from San Francisco State, Levy entered N. Y. U.'s masters

program in Interactive Telecommunications and began to hone her Mac manipulation skills. *Cyber Rag* was her masters thesis project. After receiving a positive newspaper writeup, she decided to create more cyber 'zines.

"I didn't want to make this as some sort of computer thing," she says. "I wanted this to be for the guy who just got his Mac, the guy who doesn't even know that it can play sound or do animation. He just puts it in and freaks out." She plans to keep the disks inexpensive, and therefore accessible. "The disks I buy [cost] only around forty cents. So, let's say I make this thing and sell it for six bucks, not forty or sixty or what people are paying for software right now. Then, if you hate it, it's disposable. You

PHOTOGRAPH FOR THE READER BY KIT ROANE

can throw off my files, rip off my label, and, it's cool, no trees wastage," she says. Levy hopes to have a series of electronic rags on the stands, with other artists also producing for her line.

Filling the magazine's needs on the frazzled edge of a shoestring budget has made Levy fluent in Hollywood's universal dialect — schmoozing. She croons with a bitchin' mix of sugar and salutations, "Like, 'Ethyl Meatplow, I love you; can I sample you in my next disk and will you send me a tape?' Or saying, 'Hey, Adam Parfrey, you're the coolest writer in the city; will you write something for me?'" She says that most people are more than happy to oblige, since her disks are fairly promotional.

A sideline benefit for Levy is that she gets to hang out with many of those over whom she has fawned from afar. She counts Parfrey, publisher of *Apocalypse Culture*, and Ethyl Meatplow as two such cases. "I'm generally afraid to call someone up and ask them to do something if I don't know them. But it seems that, when I really get into something, then I usually end up gravitating toward it," she explains. "Like Meatplow, I was just fascinated by them and like now I'm friends with the lead singer and I get to hang out with them. But I never even thought I would get to meet them."

Levy's employers have not always been so agreeable. Her regular gig is doing free-lance layout art for corporations, which she complains uses virtually none of her skills but is what one is reduced to when "you make something that isn't normal."

"Making CD covers is not my life," says Levy, reminiscing about her brief stay at one of L.A.'s multinational recording conglomerates before management gave her the axe. "I'm just here to make money, so stop treating me like shit!" she exclaims to an imaginary executive.

"I'm just trying to make the bucks to get these disks out, so I end up free-lancing at these places. The next magazine disk was going to be about hate — big articles about how much I hated L.A., naming names of people who fucked me over, all these terrible things that, if I printed them, would ruin my career. I just don't know if people want to read that on a

screen." She has decided, instead, to produce a disk written by local editors, since the writing on her magazine disks has already drawn fire from members of this branch of the media.

According to Levy, cyberspace has been unduly influenced by and unfairly attached to tie-dyers and "geeks." "People just associate computers with hippies or nerdballs, and that's just not true anymore," she says. "Like fractals — everybody thinks that I'm doing fractals and that I'm a hippie. Computers are tools. It's not all that hippie stuff, fractals and virtual reality."

She sees the latter as the crowning achievement of a dead culture. "It's so stupid, and expensive. It's not for the common man, it's for these really rich people who want to set up something like the movie *Sleeper* in their house. You know what they are using virtual reality for right now? Shopping. You put on these goggles and suddenly you're in a mall, shopping."

Her thing is electronic publishing, and she has no time for bulletin-board masturbation or the hippest trend in glow-in-the-dark virtual-reality caps. "I did see myself as an artist but I am now, more and more, seeing myself as a publisher — because artist is just too lame now.

"I want to be able to go into a bookstore and, instead of just books, they will have a whole wall devoted to electronic books and magazines. I use a really simple, bonehead interface because I don't want people to have to play with the keys. Just point and click, that's all. Anybody who owns a Macintosh should be able to experience this technology."

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