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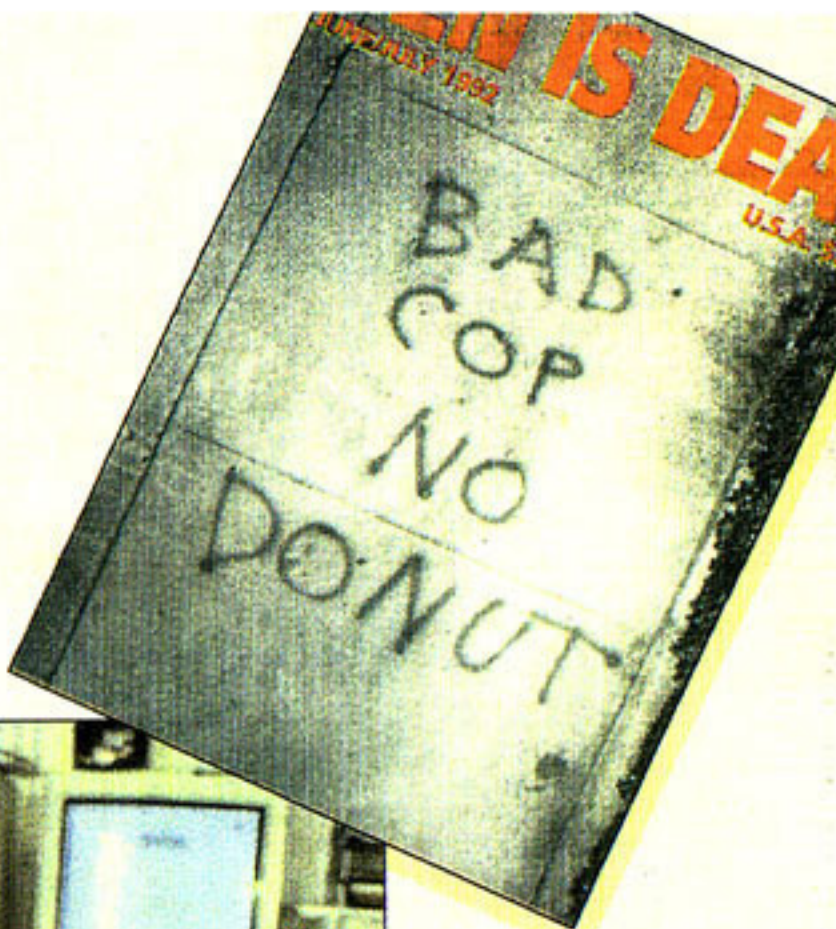
MARCH 7, 1993

## VIEW

Los Angeles Times

# Behind THE Zines

So what if they aren't 'real' journalists. Do-it-yourself magazine publishers are offering a peek into fringe cultures, oddball obsessions and unsung life styles.



By MARK EHRMAN  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**B**en Is Dead. Screambox! BOING BOING. These are a few of the zines—idiosyncratic, home-grown publications abounding with erotic comics, features on performance artists like Torture Chorus, instructions for making your own CDs and ads for nose rings and pheromones.

Thanks to the increasing affordability of photocopying and desktop publishing equipment, practically anyone can be an ersatz Citizen Kane.

"We've created a whole magazine and nobody knows anything about journalism," says 24-year-old Darby Romeo, creator, publisher, editor and—according to the masthead—*femme fatale* of Ben Is Dead, produced in her apartment.

Skip the newsstands. You can pick up the zines at independent bookstores like Amok on Vermont in the Los Feliz area, at Tower Records and at some coffee houses.

Some are free. The cost of many is about the same as mainstream magazines—\$2 to \$4. Articles and ads run to the young and underground in books, music, videos, clubs, fashions.

Each offers a peek into a different fringe culture, oddball obsession or unsung lifestyle. Some are slick; others, a couple of badly typed sheets stapled together. Circulations range from a handful to the thousands. A few manage to keep a fairly consistent production schedule, although irregular appearances appear to be the rule.

All are idiosyncratic. Most are naughty and irreverent. Frequently, zines are tasteless.

As to an all-encompassing defi-



Kerin Morataya, left, and Darby Romeo publish Ben Is Dead from their apartment. "We're faking it," says Romeo, who started the zine on her father's old computer.

inition, "it's one of those I-know-it-when-I-see-it things," says Mike Gunderloy, an Albany, N.Y.-based archivist and co-author of the recently released "The World of Zines," a catalogue of more than 400 such publications.

"The best we were able to do [for a definition] was 'a zine is any small publication that's done for love rather than money.'"

Among the most venerable here is Pasadena-based Flipside, which has been around for more than a decade mixing poetry and fiction with reports on underground rock and roll and youth culture—common themes in the zine world. Its production values seldom rise above tightly packed type and cheaply reproduced black-and-white photographs.

Ben Is Dead, like Flipside, covers underground youth culture in non-slick black and white.

"I never learned anything about how to put a magazine together. We're faking it all the way," says Romeo, who began publishing in 1988 after her father gave her his old computer. The name came from a dream she had that her soon-to-be ex-husband was dead.

The popular, though as yet unprofitable, local zine has its editorial offices in the Miracle Mile apartment Romeo shares with roommate/co-editor Kerin Morataya.

She started the publication, Romeo says, so she wouldn't have to pay for records or admission to clubs. "I was desperate and broke at the time." As a publisher, she gets into clubs free, and bands send her review copies of their records.

Each Ben Is Dead issue explores a theme. The glamour issue featured items like "Beauty-En-

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ROBERT DUKELL / Los Angeles Times



# ZINES

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Mort," "Voodoo and You: Releasing the Beauty Within," "The Guide to the Perfect Car Crash," and other "service" pieces unlikely to be duplicated in the pages of *Vogue*.

Besides increasing circulation from 1,000 to 16,000 copies per issue and achieving a commensurate improvement in size and slickness—plus raising the price from free to \$2.50—Ben Is Dead has even spun off a sister publication, *The I Hate Brenda Newsletter*, devoted to vicious gossip about Shannen Doherty of Fox TV's "Beverly Hills, 90210."

Gays and lesbians are another major zine-producing subculture, generating hundreds of what they call "queer zines."

Publishers of these zines have held two national conventions, the most recent of which, SPEW II, a sort of festival of networking, music and art, was held in February at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition (LACE).

This zine category includes such titles as *Better Homos and Gardens*, *Su Madre*, *Teen Mom* and the lesbian-oriented *Screambox*. The genre squarely tackles issues like gay-bashing and AIDS and also serves up the usual poetry, literature and countercultural news,

usually accompanied with a heavier dollop of dark humor than found in the mainstream gay publications—such as the *Disease Pariah News*, published in Oakland.

"Zines are a rejection of mass popularity," says Dennis Cooper, novelist and SPEW II curator. "It's less about getting interested in numbers and is more about speaking the truth and finding comrades. The queer zines are the same. It's the kind of organized in this weird subculture, finding the people who relate and seeing how many there are."

There's no defined audience or subject for the eccentric *The Last Prom*, a cheap (\$1), pamphlet-sized repository for the esoteric whimsy of Burbank-based author/publisher Ralph Coon, whose editor's note says, "I will try to unearth as much arcane knowledge as I possibly can on the given topic. This isn't a radio station so don't write me requesting that I cover a certain subject. Start your own zine."

The first issue's subject is the smash-'em-up driver education film "The Last Prom." Coon promises his readers "in-dept [sic] research into the sexiest man on television . . . spunky television evangelist Dr. Gene Scott" for his encore.

Probably L.A.'s slickest zine, professional typesetter Jim Goad's *Answer Me!*, also takes a free-wheeling approach to subject mat-

ter. Its editorial content is divided between rants like "The Family Must Be Eliminated" and "I Hate Men," to reportage, such as his article on Orange County's Vietnamese gangs.

In contrast to the misspellings that plague much of zinedom, Goad issues a "Typo Challenge," daring readers to find an error in his 99-page publication. Also unlike most zine creators, Goad is a professional journalist who wrote for *Playboy* and various music magazines.

Disgruntled because of what he says was censorship, Goad and his wife, Debbie, decided to go it alone from their Hollywood apartment.

The Goads, like the publishers of *Ben Is Dead* and other zines with an unfettered editorial policy, found that many of the printers they approached refused to print their zine. Had his original choice of printer taken the job, instead of the more expensive outfit that finally ran it, Goad says *Answer Me!* would be making a profit. As it is, Goad says he is losing money.

*Answer Me!* is something of a print version of Howard Stern-variety talk radio. "I really have no philosophical agenda," Goad says about the eclectic and provocative subject matter he dishes out, such as interviews with David Duke and the Geto Boys, a Houston rap group. "To me, it's just something that I'm interested in."

Still, *Answer Me!*'s clean layout

and in-your-face hostility must have struck a chord. The Goads' second issue has gone into three printings, for a total of 8,500 copies at \$2.50 each, and Goad promises a 10,000-print run for the soon-to-be-released third issue.

In 1988, Mark Frauenfelder, a mechanical engineer, and his wife, Carla Sinclair, first published their zine, *BOING BOING*, with a run of 100 copies.

"I thought it would be fun to do a zine about the way that fringe cultures and subcultures were using technology," Frauenfelder says. "At that time, technology was reaching the point where people on the street could afford it."

The couple's combination of cyberpunk fiction, how-to articles on making your own CDs and such wild-card pieces as "Home Surgery on Your Cat" tapped into the exploding cyberculture underground.

Five years and eight issues later, aided by the participation of such notable hackers and cyberheroes as writer Bruce Sterling and mathematician/author and software creator Rudy Rucker, *BOING BOING* is up to 12,000 copies per issue and Frauenfelder has defied the odds and quit his engineering job.

"It took off from the first issue and pretty much doubled every issue," he says. "It really appealed to a lot of neophiles—people who love new ideas and are inquisitive

about things."

Jaime Levy takes that idea of zines and home computers one step further. Her zine, *Electronic Hollywood*, covering what she calls "Hollywood, new technology and bad attitudes," comes out on a floppy disk that can be read on a Macintosh.

"I want to work with the disk as my format, so I can reach anybody who has a computer. I want to be seen as an independent publisher, sort of a cross between a record label and a magazine," Levy says.

*Electronic Hollywood* combines music and graphics with text and is designed as a general-interest electronic zine, though it is slanted slightly in the direction of cyber-space.

"It's not just about technology or computer stuff. It's for anybody," Levy says.

The most recent issue had an article on how the Los Angeles riots were portrayed in the media, as well as a review of a digital expo show.

One of the biggest success stories in the L.A. zine world—perhaps the entire zine world—is Chris Gore's *Film Threat*.

Eight years ago Gore, then a film student at Wayne State University

in Detroit, began the zine as a six-page photocopied affair covering the world of underground filmmaking and overlooked Hollywood tidbits. He dropped out and moved to Hollywood in 1989.

Last year *Film Threat* was bought by Hustler publisher Larry Flynt's LFP Inc. for an undisclosed six-figure sum. Now, *Film Threat* is a full-color glossy and Gore is editor-in-chief, ensconced in a Beverly Hills office.

He's also launched a second publication, *The Film Threat Video Guide*, which still operates independently.

Like Goad, Gore abhors the word zine. "It's a way of dismissing the information in these magazines," he says. "People tend to think that if something's typeset in *Time* or *Newsweek* it's necessarily true, but you can just as easily get reliable information in a Xeroxed fanzine."

Indeed, Gore points out, many mainstream magazines are beholden to other interests, which can cloud or censor their editorial thrust.

"Zines are beholden to no one but the publishers themselves," he says. "That's why they're exciting."

DEAR ABBY/ABIGAIL VAN BUREN

## Poem Puts Parents on Their Knees

DEAR ABBY: One of our patrons would greatly appreciate a copy of the poem you published several years ago. It begins, "Oh, heavenly Father, make me a better parent. . . ."

She said she had read it in your column about 20 years ago. If you could supply it, she would be extremely grateful.

—CONNIE SHAIR, Librarian  
Altadena, Calif.

DEAR CONNIE: The item is titled "A Parent's Prayer." It was written by the late Garry C. Myers, the founder of "Highlights for Children," a wholesome, educational monthly magazine—now in its fourth generation.

And here it is:

### A PARENT'S PRAYER

"Oh, heavenly Father, make me a better parent. Help me to understand my children, to listen pa-

resort to shame and ridicule as punishment. Let me not tempt a child to lie and steal. So guide me hour by hour that I may demonstrate by all I say and do that honesty produces happiness.

"Reduce, I pray, the meanness in me. May I cease to nag; and when I am out of sorts, help me, Oh Lord, to hold my tongue. Blind me to the little errors of my children and help me to see the good things they do. Give me a ready word for honest praise.

"Help me to treat my children as those of their own age, but let me not exact of them the judgments and conventions of adults. Allow me not to rob them of the opportunity to wait upon themselves, to think, to choose, and to make their own decisions.

"Forbid that I should ever punish them for my selfish satisfaction. May I grant them all their wishes that are reasonable and have the

an identical twin sister, and although we never dressed alike, we were constantly mistaken for "the other one"—even as adults.

After we were both married, my sister moved to another state. Last summer, my husband and I were vacationing at a popular resort, and at one point, in the presence of several strangers, he impulsively grabbed me and gave me a very passionate kiss.

A man I had never seen before witnessed it—and he kept staring

at me to the point that I noticed it and it made me uncomfortable.

A year later, while I was visiting my sister, she introduced me to her boss. It was the same man who had seen my husband lay that kiss on me. When he saw that there were two of us, he burst out laughing.

Then he confessed that he had assumed that what he had seen was my twin sister cheating on her husband.

—THE OTHER TWIN

DEAR READERS: I laughed at this:

"A mother hen, having some difficulty keeping her chicks in line, declared: 'If your father could see you now, he'd turn over in his grave.'"

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