

Harvey Pekar, in Memory

By Paul Buhle

It is too early to grasp Harvey Pekar's overall impact on modern comic art, but it is clear that he created a new potential for comics as literature; and that this new possibility was deeply, unquestionably Jewish, in line with secular and progressive Jewish traditions. From the 1970s-80s, when his self-published *American Splendor* comic recorded real life in blue-collar Cleveland (the protagonist was a file clerk at the Veterans Administration facility), Pekar assayed the collapse of the cities and the social welfare legacy of the New Deal, likewise the coping mechanisms of those who refused to flee to the suburbs. *American Splendor*, the prize-winning 2003 film, reached millions, in North America and abroad, with this story and the personal saga within it. As British actress Helen Mirren said at the San Diego ComiCon in June 2010, Pekar and his film introduced comics to a new dimension that also reached serious artists.

At his last major public appearance, the Toronto Jewish Film Festival, in April 2010, Pekar, who wrote but did not draw his strips, crossed swords with MacArthur Prize awardee and comic artist (also *New Yorker* illustrator) Ben Katchor, who offered his own view (not for the first time) that anyone could become a comic artist with sufficient willpower, thus integrating idea with art. The suggestion did not sit well with Harvey, who could on occasion become almost as cranky as his public reputation suggested. He first insisted that he lacked the talent for drawing (Katchor batted this down) and then, more reasonably, that his specialty was conceptualizing and scripting, and that the actual art was best left to others. Pekar was forced—but also allowed—to work with all kinds of artists, across every possible generational and other barrier, thus creating in his own way a comic art of extraordinary breadth and complexity. Pekar's non-drawing, but also the nature of his collaboration with artists, offers a dimension little discussed, but also a key to his own particular genius and contribution to the field.

As Pekar was growing up, his Yiddish-speaking, Polish immigrant family lived in a double decker not far from their little grocery store in Cleveland. His family was not unusual in having one member, his mother, an avid reader of the (Communist) *Daily Worker*, a father working long hours in the store, and sons growing up thinking of education as the route to upward mobility. At age nine Harvey was passing out leaflets for presidential candidate Henry Wallace, the former vice-president hugely popular in wartime, but overwhelmed by anticommunism as the 1948 election approached.

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Notwithstanding his father's religious faith, Pekar grew up a deeply secular Jew uncomfortable with the prospect of the Bar Mitzvah and the rest of the mainstream Jewish experience, including identification with the new State of Israel, beloved by his parents. Russia did not interest him, as illusion or disillusion. But the implicit tenets of the Popular Front, including a determined anti-racism, reached him early and sustained him. He was suspicious of power-holders, of militarism and of all manner of bourgeois pomp; his favourite pastimes were baseball and, after a while, jazz. By the time he dropped out of college and began to work for the Veterans Administration as a clerical worker in the local hospital, his behavior was established, and it was here that he encountered comic artist Robert Crumb, nearly broken from a terrible childhood but working away at the American Greeting Card Company and looking for a pal.

After much contemplation (dramatized in the film *American Splendor*), Pekar began achieving publication in 1972, with a one-page strip, "Crazy Ed" (about a Cleveland character), drawn by Crumb, in *The People's Comix* (a half-ironic title). He worked with a half-dozen other artists over the next few years and developed his own characteristic method of collaboration: pages of white paper divided into panels, usually six per page, stick figures set out and the dialogue written on the page somewhere or on a separate sheet. In the meantime, a remarkable "Underground Comix" phenomenon had emerged and already begun to fade.

Launched as strips within the local underground newspapers, but also as an offshoot of the psychedelic music posters created in the Bay Area, "Comix" (coining a new word or at least spelling) assumed a comic book form but with starkly different contents. They were uncensored, full of sex, often violence (much of it directed against the Establishment), ecological queries, and quite a bit of story-telling, updated to the tastes of the antiwar, marijuana-smoking generation of readers. Robert Crumb was king, no doubt, with sales ranging into the half-million, but dozens of other artists had good years.

Only a handful of these artists were Jewish, perhaps because of the Bay Area-based (rather than New York-based) nature of the field's development. But young Art Spiegelman could be counted, likewise the leader of the distinct genre of women's liberation comics, Trina Robbins (daughter of a prominent, left-leaning Yiddish journalist), Sharon Rudahl (who most often drew on Jewish themes, some of them historical) and a few others. By the mid-1970s, the drug-paraphernalia "head shops" where comix were sold had begun to be shut down by police order, and the Youth Culture was fading away. In a few years, "Underground Comix" would be replaced by "Alternative Comics," by no means so rebellious or widely distributed, but closer to the "art comics" of today.

Unlike most scriptwriters for commercial comics—where the tasks are broken up into piecemeal work, and the imagery is firmly established—Pekar was experimenting widely as he went along. The drawing itself was not necessarily realistic, but Pekar's characters were psychologically credible. They were and remained mostly people out of everyday life, destined to remain unknown to anyone but their families,

friends and fellow workers.

This was a natural extension of Pekar's own persona in *American Splendor*: from its origins in 1976 onward, Pekar's daily life dominated the narrative, whoever happened to be chosen as artist. This was the persona of Pekar himself, at comic book events around Cleve-

land and beyond, with Harvey selling and autographing copies. In a way, it was related to his earlier pursuit of going to used record stores with Crumb, pawing through old 78s. But this time, it was comics devotees pawing through **his** works in various current and back

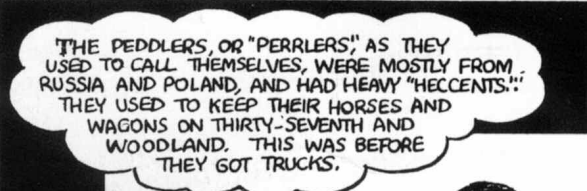
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"PA-AYPER-REGGS!!"

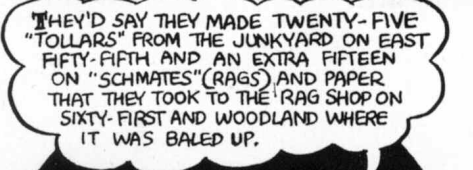
STORY BY HARVEY PEKAR
ART BY R. CRUMB
©1981 by Harvey Pekar



"SITTING ON HIS WAGON WITH A WHIP IN HIS HAND - THIS WAS LOCAL COLOR!"



"THEY USED TO GO TO "ORRORRA" (AURORA) TO PICK UP "METTRESSES," "BETTERIES" AND COPPER, GO TO TURK'S DELICATESSEN AND BRAG ABOUT HOW MUCH MONEY THEY MADE."



"THEY TOOK GREAT PRIDE IN ORDERING CHOCOLATE PHOSPHATES AND CORNED BEEF AND SALAMI SANDWICHES FOR THE GANG AT TURK'S DELICATESSEN. THE GUY WHO SPENT THE MOST MONEY WAS HELD IN HIGHEST ESTEEM."



issues, looking to **him** as the artist of note, his output worthy of being collected.

He was popular with many comics readers, especially Cleveland homeboys (and some girls) from the beginning, and by peddling back issues, he could sell up to 10,000. With *Underground Comix* in the process of collapse and *Alternative Comics* still searching for a niche, *American Splendor* was a niche all its own. It was also a site for young artists, especially Cleveland-area locals, to work at low prices but get published and known, and to enjoy what was for most a valuable experience, with few of the blow-ups of the usual creative conflicts. Future artists as someday notable as Neil Gaiman picked up *American Splendor*, appreciating what Pekar and his artists had introduced to a trade known mostly for superheroes, funny animals and the hippies of the *Undergrounds*.

Justin Green had introduced the autobiographical comic with the obsessed Binky Brown, and looking through various “comix” of the time, it’s easy to discover barely-hidden treatments of the artist-self. But even here, Pekar was unique. He worked at a pretty boring job, ran into ordinary folks who would have seemed out of place in the Bay Area, and by indirection, expressed a working-class view of life worthy of a Studs Terkel interview. Canadian artist Sethⁱ observed that Pekar captured a modern loneliness, and Joe Sacco (who did a dozen pages of jazz stories for Pekar) observed that Pekar offered something that helped bridge the gap between the *Undergrounds* and the emerging comic art of the late twentieth century. Alison Bechdel added that because Pekar’s comics were not about anything, they had a sense of compassion that comics, as escapism or self-indulgence, so often lack.

A third marriage, to Joyce Brabner, and Pekar’s appearance on the David Letterman Show, settled his life and raised his profile, creating a context for almost all the rest that he would do. Seen from Pekar’s point of view, David Letterman was setting him and Cleveland up for ridicule, and he tolerated it up to a point, but no further. That he tolerated it for a time can be best attributed to Pekar’s unending financial woes. In spite of an earlier diagnosis and treatment for cancer, he actually retired from the VA only because stress and depression overwhelmed him, as the *American Splendor* film was being shot in Cleveland. He needed the money, and there was never enough for his own sense of security. Among those equally successful in prestige, Art Spiegelman got a Pulitzer Prize (as well as huge sales of *Maus*), Ben Katchor received a MacArthur Award with several hundred thousand dollars attached, and even Allison Bechdel and Lynda Barry had steady newspaper serialization. (Pekar’s serialization in *The Village Voice* ended quickly.)

The film *American Splendor* launched him properly, for the last seven years of his life, with college and other appearances and a celebrity status that his early antiheroic status had never attained. This is where I come in. Pekar had been in touch with me for a decade or more when he offered to script an historical incident for *Wobblies!*, a book produced for the hundredth

anniversary of the Industrial Workers of the World. From there, we worked together fairly steadily (if by no means exclusively) until the end of his life, on subjects ranging from the New Left antiwar movement to the Beat generation and Studs Terkel’s interviewees to the history of Yiddish writers and Yiddish culture (including his own childhood memories).

He had, apart from our collaboration as well as within it, taken on a role as historian and social critic, eager to tell the story of an African-American GI in Vietnam, or of Macedonia as one peaceful spot in the Balkans, or of a quasi-New Left Trotskyist and bohemian (this one has been drawn but not yet published), and if he had lived, a saga of the contemporary Middle East, including his own distancing from his parents’ fervid faith in Israel.

Pekar worked hard at extending himself, and in this way, demonstrated his character as a self-educated Jewish intellectual of an older generation, learning in the public library and from used books that he bought at low prices. He declared early on that comics could “do” anything, and he sought to be the living proof. He worked harder and faster in his final years, as if the opportunity had finally come, or he was running out of time.

Something else should be said about Pekar’s public character, as experienced by so many audiences of comic fans or ordinary college students, often people with no particular political sensibility (although rarely of a conservative bent). Pekar was a Mark Twain type of speaker, very funny but entirely straight-faced. He played a Harvey Pekar role, including the grumpiness, wore clothes that were likely bought at a Salvation Army thrift shop, either as a deliberate statement or simply because he was never inclined to spend money frivolously, walking miles rather than taking a cab. He was the opposite of the professor who has risen from the immigrant lower classes and wants to make good in the wider literary world. Not because he disdained being successful—he needed the money and enjoyed the attention—but because he neither celebrated the existing society, nor thought himself superior to the ordinary folks who belonged to it.

Well, maybe a little on that last point. Like so many left-leaning Jewish Americans, Pekar was amazed at the stupidity of the Gentiles with their credulousness toward war (or owning guns) and the military-industrial-financial system. And like so many, he could get more angry at fellow Jewish Americans who gloried in these (and benefited from them) than he could at practically anyone else. He was involved in an immanent critique, here as in so many other ways. Pekar was an exemplary 20th century citizen who lived onward, for a while, into the 21st century, with his best values intact. Not that he was a political activist or self-conscious cultural avant-gardist. He was only a writer with the humane commitment of a great writer.

Others will have a great deal more to say about Pekar’s influence on comic art. It may be sufficient to say that less than a handful had more influence on the maturity of the field, taking it beyond juvenile subjects and juvenile approaches. Without ever securing real celebrity or a steady income, he achieved in comics what he sought to achieve: the proof that comic art, no less than the novel or film, can do anything. ♦

ⁱ Pen name of Gregory Gallant. . – Eds.