



### **Assembled in the Margins: The History and Culture of Zines**

**In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines are independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs, and in towns across the USA, assembled on kitchen tables. They celebrate every person in a world of celebrity, losers in a society that rewards the best and the brightest... creating a culture whose value isn't calculated as profit and loss on ruled ledger pages, but is assembled in the margins. -Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.**

In 1997, Fred Wright, a doctoral student at Kent State University, declared zines as being "one of the most interesting cultural phenomena of the past two decades" (Wright, online). At that time, there was an estimated twenty-thousand in existence and academics studying zine culture argued that zines could no longer be pushed aside by mainstream press. Zines, they maintained, had to be accepted as a significant, permanent part of the North American cultural landscape (Wright, online).

It is difficult to define everything a zine is. Typically, zines are described as noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation alternative magazines that are produced, published, and distributed by the creator (Duncombe 6). Constructed with readily available supplies, zines are usually produced on plain white paper in a mixture of typed and handwritten lettering, interspersed with sketches, drawings and cartoons. Often, zine creators cut their articles up and place the pieces in a particular layout. The final layout is photocopied (technology permitting) and the zine is ready for distribution. The result is a visually stimulating representation of the highly personal nature of zines.

Today, the types of topics covered by zines include everything from veganism, to punk rock, to politics, to sexual orientation, to television, to clothing, to identity - the list is truly endless and limited only by the imagination of the zine creator or *zinester*. It is important to recognize that zinesters are not simply angst-ridden adolescents using the self-publishing medium to swear and curse (although they certainly can be). Most zinesters are the intelligent children of middle class professionals who have a message. Stephen Duncombe further explains:

White and raised in a relatively privileged position within the dominant culture, they have since embarked on 'careers' of deviance that have moved them to the edges of this society . . . they're simply not interested in the "big game" that is the straight world. In short, zine writers and readers, although they'd be horrified to be tagged with such a pat term, are what used to be called bohemians (8).

With so much of the production process of zines embodying counter-culture, grassroots efforts, zines have historically been used during some of North America's most definitive alternative, social and counter-cultural movements. Most recently, hippies, beatniks, punks and riot grrrls have written and self-published zines ("Zines," online). But this is not all-encompassing. While many people think of zines as being a relatively new phenomenon, exploding during the 1960s and on, the self-publishing, politically and personally charged nature of zines has been around for much longer.

One could argue that in their loosest form, zines have existed since people began to write, copy and self-publish. Historically, they could even be traced back to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century ("Zine History," online). However, the publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* in 1776 is generally considered one of the earliest popular zines in North American history. Although not labeled a zine at the time, it has many of the markings of one: self-produced, low budget, political, and personal. Other pre-twentieth century self-published material includes flyers and pamphlets distributed during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century women's suffrage movements. (It is interesting to consider the embracement of zines by the Riot Grrrl movement to come two hundred years later.)

However, the first use of the term, *zine*, was not used until the 1920s. Seeing a void in the amount of coverage their favourite genre received, fans of science fiction literature began

publishing their own fan-magazines. In 1926, Hugo Gernsback published *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine devoted solely to science fiction (Perkins, online). Many more soon followed. The expression, *fan-magazine*, was shortened to *fan-mags* and then *fanzines*. As these science fiction fanzines grew in popularity, eventually, they were referred to simply as *zines*.

During the 1940s - 1960s, zines became the primary outlet for those critical of the political climate in both Canada and the United States. As Stephen Perkins explains, "the underground press was just one part of the matrix that constituted the so-called counter culture" (online). He continues, "Drugs, rock music, the war in Vietnam, and racial inequality were just part of the volatile mix that would alienate many from the dominant 'establishment' culture, into the search for and the construction of, a more authentic culture that reflected the concerns of this generation in revolt" (Perkins, online). Zines became the outlet for those striving to construct a more authentic culture. Unfortunately, because of their critical nature and the highly conservative political climate, zines from this time period quickly became stigmatized by mainstream society for being radical and deviant. But throughout all the negativity, zines still remained popular. As the 1960s progressed into the 1970s, alternative expression became more widespread and zines grew to encompass more and more subjects, including art, music, feminism, and queer politics.

The 1980s and early 1990s saw an enormous swell in the popularity of zines and zine production for any and all topics. Easier access to photocopier machines led to an even wider distribution of zine trading and selling. Zines, like always, became excellent ways for smaller political groups and communities to get their word out. The Riot Grrrl movement of the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, benefited immensely from zine publication, using the medium as a way to state their place in history. The editors of the popular zine, *Riot Grrl*, stated, "We're tired of being written out - out of history, out of the "scene" [music, politics, and the media], out of our bodies. For this reason, we have created our own zine and scene" (Duncombe, 66).

As the 1990s progressed, zines garnered more and more attention and became one of the foremost visual expressions of alternative North American culture. Although usually associated with young people, many zinesters of the 1960s and 1970s were getting older and still continuing to self-publish their zines, alongside teenagers.

The arrival of the internet, the popularity of electronic zines (e-zines) and blogging have built on the culture created and

perpetuated through more traditional (print) zines, but not replaced it, at least not yet. For many, it never will.

### **Timeline of Zine History**

**Mid-18th century** – *Common Sense* as well as other American Revolution pamphlets published, such as those encouraging western expansion in North America.

**Late 18th/Early 19th centuries** – Women's suffrage flyers distributed.

**1926** – Hugo Gernsback writes and distributes *Amazing Stories*, the first "zine" specializing in science fiction stories.

**1926-1930** – Associations of science fiction fans begin to crop up.

**1944** – Invention of xerography (modern photocopying).

**1950s** – Popularity of underground press grows as a result of strict U.S. government policies.

**Mid-1960s** – Underground newspapers use offset printing as an inexpensive way to spread written opinions regarding politics, as well as those in art and comics.

**1960s/1970s** – Zines develop a sort of stigma due to their so-called radical political ideas, tendency towards experimentation, criticisms of modern culture, and innovative layouts and designs.

**1966** – The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City hosts a mail art exhibit.

**1967** – Start of the UPS (Underground Press Syndicate). *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *East Village Other*, the *Berkeley Barb*, *San Francisco's Oracle*, *Detroit's Fifth Estate*, *Chicago's Seed*, and *Austin's Rag* are all founding members.

**1970s** – Art movements such as Surrealism, Fluxus, Situationists, Neo-Dada emerge, sparking artists' zines.

**Mid-1970s** – Zines are created devoted to punk rock music.

**Late 1970s** – Indie music and the "Do It Yourself" ideology starts to catch on.

**1980s** – In order to publish, many zines begin to rely on copy machines.

**Early-1980s** – Mike Gunderloy's *Factsheet Five* begins, which would eventually become a national publication devoted to reviewing zines.

**1980s and 1990s** – Start of the Riot Grrrls movement, whose zines include *Riot Grrrl*, *Queenie*, *Heck*, *Yummi Hussi*, *Literal Bitch*, and *Conscious Clit*; *Seventeen* magazine showcases Sarah Dyer's *Mad Planet* and *Kikizine*.

**1990s-2000s** – Desktop publishing hits the zine world, ezines are distributed online.

(Timeline courtesy of "Approaching the '80s Zine Scene" by Stephen Perkins.)

#### Resources and Works Cited

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