

punk planet

ISSUE #65 | JANUARY AND FEBRUARY 2005 | \$4.95 in
\$6.00 cover

notes from underground

PILOT TO GUNNER | CRACKDOWN ON GRAFFITI | PIG DESTROYER | THE BLOW | SHOOTING THE IRAQ WAR



KRIST NOVOSELIC'S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE



Microcosm is one of those DIY companies that is so prolific, you wonder if the folks that run it ever sleep. Joe Biel and Alex Wreck run Microcosm out of a community center called Liberty Hall in Portland, Oregon where they write and distribute zines; provide a variety of politically-themed merchandise, including T-shirts, patches, stickers, and buttons; publish several books, including a fantastic zine resource book called *Stolen Sharpie Revolution*, a collection of cartoons from *Punk Planet* columnist Al Burian, a zine compilation from Urban Hermit and a recently published collection of the zine, *On Subbing*; they help to organize the now-annual Portland Zine Symposium; take time to teach people about zines and zine culture; and they are avid bikers who share my interests in the political aspects of cycling. In addition to all of this, Joe recently completed a video documentary about zines that he was finishing when we spoke entitled *\$100 and a T-Shirt*. (He also finds a few spare moments to review zines for this magazine, go figure.)

While sipping on a homemade beer from their next-door neighbor, I had the pleasure of talking with Alex and Joe about zines, bikes, and politics.

Interview by Zack Furness

How did Microcosm start?

Joe: It's a little bit hazy, but I think it was February of 1996. I was just lonely, bored, and wanted to contribute something to society that was greater than myself. It seemed like doing distribution was the best way to do it within my means.

Alex: Joe started in Cleveland.

Joe: There were probably between five and 10 people doing zines in Cleveland at the time, and I was distributing all of those. I had a bunch of stuff that you just couldn't get anywhere else—some of it was records, some of it was zines from other places, and we also started doing stickers. I moved to Portland because Alex moved here and

that's when the distro started to really change faces; we got books and zines and it got to be primarily focused around the context of people who were doing stuff and had no outlet for it. That was the one intent that has stayed with us.

Alex: We had the idea of doing a zine resource guide called *Stolen Sharpie Revolution*. We had all these ideas, and although I'd read books on zines before, this was more DIY. I kept talking about it and talking about it, and Joe finally said "You're never going to be able to steal enough photocopies to actually put it out, so how about we print it." That was the first thing we actually sent to the printer to have done, and that was in 2001 or 2002. It was a natural extension of only being able to go so far with things, and then having to take it to the next level.

What do you think is the best thing about doing zine distribution?

Alex: I like the people that you can meet. To be able to travel and realize that people you know are all over the place. We usually get people who are ordering stickers and T-shirts and then they figure that they might as well try this other stuff. Then we have people who order all the time and they write letters, saying things like "I didn't pay my rent this month cuz I wanted to buy zines." [Laughs.]

Joe: Those addicts, and the newbies, send us the most heart-warming pieces of correspondence and funny anecdotes that entirely makes this worthwhile. We hang up the best of those. We get letters from a lot of people that either have no access to the culture, other than the Internet, or have no way of connecting with it. I think that's what people really appreciate about Microcosm—they see us as really being an outlet to that sort of education.

Is that really motivating?

Joe: Yeah. I take on a lot of projects that will lose money even though now I'm not sup-

The image shows the cover of the book 'Stolen Sharpie Revolution'. The title is written in a bold, sans-serif font. The background is dark with some faint, illegible text and graphics.



posed to do that anymore, because my wage is paid through these projects. [Laughs.] But I still lean towards the ones that I want to do.

Alex: In this day and age, individuals don't feel as empowered, or as important, as they should. It's especially important to encourage young women to feel like they have a voice. I feel like zines do that very well, not just in realizing that you have a voice and other people want to read it, but that zines are very community oriented—you have a peer base *automatically*. I think that's something really important in zine culture.

Joe: We do a lot of teaching. We guest teach at the university of Oregon where there's a class called "Zines and Democracy." It's always kind of weird when you're up there because it doesn't really seem like they care, and then six months down the road stories trickle back to us that "so and so's brother was in that class and he thought you guys were incredible." Or some kids will pick up steam through the year and start doing their own thing. I taught this class of talented high school students two years ago, and that was one of the best ones because they were *into* it. They really wanted to know how they could do it, and how to make it work for them. A lot of the public schools here are starting to incorporate programs where the kids are actually learning about zines, or about how to produce them.

From the project's logo to a lot of the stuff you distribute, bike activism plays an important role at Microcosm. How did you both get into biking?

Alex: I didn't really get into biking as a lifestyle until I moved to Portland. I used to walk everywhere and take public transportation and all my friends said "You gotta get a bike!" I encouraged Joe to start walking places and he encouraged me to ride.

Joe: I got excited about biking because I thought it was morally a good choice for me. I was kind of fed up—used to deliver pizzas and I got in two big car accidents within a

year where the paramedics told me I should have died. I thought driving wasn't a good idea anymore, so I didn't buy a car after the last accident and I've bike commuted since then. Six years ago now, I guess. ¶ That was a lot of it, but it was also punk politics. I had two friends when I moved into my first house who were into biking and we would just ride around *everywhere*. That was the first time I started commuting as an adult, and it was good to have people around who were into it at the same time.

Alex: The more you make yourself aware of the world around you, the more you learn from your environment. You start embracing what you do have and then you find other people who embrace it. From that, it grows from a personal choice to being part of your lifestyle and your politics.

Joe: Seven years ago, even people in the punk scene didn't really get it. People would throw eggs at me when I rode my bike! It wasn't how it is now, where it's becoming a lot more popular and accepted. I think people are really starved for information about it if they don't know. If they do know, they want the encouragement or something to go home and read when they're not biking—something to show symbols of pride.

By putting out zines and doing the distro through Microcosm, do you explicitly try to provide biking-related material?

Alex: People are really into it. It's not just people who are hardcore into biking, I think other people are reading this stuff because they are curious. I think that within our culture right now getting people interested in bicycles is really important. ¶ People are interested in them. There's definitely curiosity for it, especially within our ridiculous car culture. People realize that we can't keep going like this. Bikes are a good alternative for that.

Do you focus your efforts more on people who

are already into biking—like a lot of folks in the punk scene—or do you try and reach people who don't know much about it?

Joe: I'm pretty bored with punks, to be honest. I'm more interested in finding people who are taking it to a new level and their doing their thing. For example, there's folks around here who are challenging the city to do the things that they want done—like shutting down blocks for car-free day, or putting in more bike lanes for safety, or building bike racks. The things that they do are more interesting to me than younger punk kids riding their bikes.

Alex: Portland has a really long legacy of people involved with community who appreciate where they live and feel empowered about changing the things that are important to them. And, of course, there's a bunch of people that move here from other places, but they're still embracing the idea that we have control over the area that we live in.

Joe, at the same time you're still very connected to the zine community as well. Tell me about the zine documentary you are working on?

Joe: I've put in close to 1,000 hours now. It's mostly interviews, all informational footage, and now it's about making it more visually interesting. The premise is to explain zines to someone who doesn't know what they are, as well as someone who does; to explain the culture and every detail about it.

Alex: And to make it interesting so that people who aren't into zines would want to watch it.

Joe: Yeah, so those folks can learn something too. I've learned a shit-ton just doing it. I want to pass that on.

What would you like to see happening within the zine community and the bike community?

Alex: I'd like to see more zinesters on bikes.

Joe: I'd like to see more bikers doing zines, just 'cause we can't get enough of them. ☺

We get letters from a lot of people that either have no access to the culture, other than the Internet, or have no way of connecting with it. I think that's what people really appreciate about Microcosm—they see us as being an outlet to that sort of education.

