

Salute to Spain Rodriguez

—Ed Sanders

Fellow Fug Ken Weaver first brought my attention to Spain Rodriguez, who was living in the Lower East Side and doing class-conscious, radical comics and designs for the *East Village Other*. This was 1966, when the Fugs were performing sold out shows at the Players Theater on MacDougal Street in the West Village.

Spain hailed from Buffalo, where he had begun his career as an artist and had been involved with a bike gang, the Road Vultures, which provided great material for Spain's burgeoning art. His work sometimes had a macabre tone, but under it all his humor, often gentle, shone forth, and his radical politics also. Spain was a curious soul, and studied history intently, especially the times of social struggle.

EVO was located on the east side of Tompkins Square Park between 9th and 10th Streets. Spain later described the Park: "I've lived all around Tompkins Square Park. It was a great place for counter culture back in the day. Kim Deitch and I lived on 8th and Avenue C, in a building that was taken over by a Puerto Rican street gang. They used to kick holes in the wall and steal Kim's paintings - which were very beautiful and my girlfriend's panties. The landlord was afraid to come by so we just stopped paying rent."

The great creativity of the Lower East Side during those years was made possible in good part by rent control. Rent Controls had come about in New York City through the ceaseless agitation of tenant organizations during the Depression, which led to a limited rent-control law in 1939. During WWII a group called the United Tenants League formed, whose work helped lead to the Office of Price Administration which set up wartime rent controls in NYC. These rent controls stayed in place for decades after the war and helped make possible the poetry-bebop-novelist Beat Generation ban-the-bomb hipster/hippie mimeograph Thought Boom of the '50s and '60s.

The Lower East Side had been slums since the overcrowdings after the War of 1812—and had seen radical movements rise on its streets created by, among others, the Yiddish-speaking Socialists who came to the U.S. in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to escape oppression and pogroms in Russia and other Eastern European countries.

There were cheap pads, affordable food, a person didn't have to have five part-time jobs to survive, and you could buy enough pot to roll maybe twenty joints for five bucks. One of America's lasting disgraces—its lack of concern for affordable and dignified housing for all (which yet respects clean water and open space)—was not so much in evidence then. Gentrification, fueled by greed and political corruption, would not come to the Lower East Side for another decade or so.

The Rise of the Underground Press

Around the nation were what they called web presses, sturdy printing machines with large rolls of newsprint attached, which normally were used to print used car brochures, college newspapers, and the like. There was always a slot in the production schedules for these web presses to print almost anything anybody wanted, including the burgeoning Underground Press. *EVO* was first printed at a press in Bordentown, New Jersey and later at a web press in Long Island City.

In addition to *The East Village Other*, underground newspapers began to flourish, including the *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Chicago Seed*, *San Francisco Oracle*, *Milwaukee Kaleidoscope*, Detroit's *Fifth Estate*, *Berkeley Barb*, *Georgia Straight*, *Great Speckled Bird* and others. They were part of the glory of the '60s brought to us by the unused portions of the great Bill of Rights.

EVO became a soapbox for The New Vision. It was part of a generation that fervently believed that important and long lasting changes would occur in the United States which would bring free medical care to all, affordable rents, great art and great music, plus an end to war and the growth of personal freedom and good vibes. It also pioneered a brilliant collage/montage feel to the design and layout of the paper. The earliest issues of *EVO* featured the Captain High cartoons of Bill Beckman. Soon the excellent artwork of underground comic artists such as Spain Rodriguez, Kim Deitch, Trina Robbins, Art Spiegelman, R. Crumb and other comic artists appeared on its pages.

Spain became an *EVO* staff member, and began a series of cartoons starring *Trashman*, *Agent of the Sixth International*. Spain's politics began on the Left, continued on the Left and ended on the Left. As he stated in a later interview, "I had been interested in politics and history when I was in high school but, you know, it was more instinctual and more aesthetic and it slowly evolved. There's a party, and they're probably still around, the Socialist Labor Party, and they would have these get-togethers, and I would get involved in that. So, you know, I developed a Socialist outlook. As a matter of fact, me and Walter Bowart (one of the founders of *EVO*) would get into these intense discussions on those issues. So once I did *Trashman*, I already had that kind of Marxist outlook." *The Collected Trashman* was published in '69. *The Other* also published Spain's all-comic tabloid, *Zodiac Mindwarp*.

Spain created a strip, "Tales from the Hideum," the concept of which the Fugs borrowed for one of their routines in concerts in the fall of 1968.

He kept up friendships throughout his life. As Spain said of Art Spiegelman, "Art is the first underground cartoonist I ever met and he's a good friend to this day. He always says something that gets me to argue with him, and about the epochal impact of R. Crumb who arrived on the East Side, Spain commented, "When Crumb hit the scene he was like a tornado. There were underground artists before him but he was like a bolt of energy."

And as Crumb noted in *Crumb on Others*, "Spain's my buddy, my old pal, one of my best

friends. I've learned a lot from Spain. I greatly admire his artwork. He is such a strong, committed, communist, left-wing guy. I know I can always count on him to give me a clear, concise Marxist theory or reaction or viewpoint on whatever's going on in the world, which I appreciate very much actually."

As a revolutionary, Spain was ever eager to use his art to help out most aspects of the Great Cause. He was always available for the design of flyers and ads for benefits in the Lower East Side. An example is his drawing for the June 28, '67 "Community Defense Fund" benefit at the Village Theater (which would soon become Fillmore East), to raise money for bail and court costs for beat-hippie defendants.



The Peace Eye Trial

In the spring of 1967, I went on trial in New York City, charged with obscenity for my mimeographed magazine, *Fuck You! A Magazine of the Arts*. The history of this case is covered extensively in my memoir, *Fug You*. In May of that year, after a trial, a three-judge panel declared me innocent, and so I decided to thoroughly enjoy the Summer of Love, by refurbishing and rededicating the Peace Eye Bookstore, site of the police raid a year and a half earlier that had resulted in my arrest.

I threw a reopening party, and announced a sequence of exhibitions at the refurbished "Peace Eye Bookstore and Gallery."

June 27-July 3 “Literary Relics & Paintings of the Lower East Side”

July 4-17 Steve Weber— “sculpture, constructions and ejaculata”

July 18-31 Spain Rodriguez — Drawings and Paintings! (One of Spain’s exhibited works was a refrigerator door upon which he had painted a biker. Ahh I wish I had kept that beautiful door in my archive.) Here’s the flyer for Spain’s show:



August 15-28 Ted Berrigan and Ed Sanders— “recent paintings.”

All the exhibitions except Ted and my paintings actually occurred.

Ted and I had agreed to collaborate on some paintings. They would have been great! with my esoteric fascination with Egyptian hieroglyphs and symbology combined with his super-charged New York School genius! One of my lasting regrets is that I just didn’t go ahead and purchase some framed canvases and get together with Ted to create a series of fresh paintings for the proposed opening!

Spain also designed the front sign of the famous Digger Free Store, located on East 10th near Avenue A, in the fall of 1967.



In the winter of '68, I decided to move Peace Eye from its location on East 10th street into the *East Village Other* office at 147 Avenue A, between 9th and 10th. On February 28, I signed a lease, \$150 a month. *EVO* had moved its offices to 2nd Avenue above the theater that would soon become the Fillmore East. I gave the *Other* \$500 in key money and hired people to get it ready—scraping, painting, putting in shelves.

Spain Rodriguez designed the new Peace Eye sign—chrome yellow letters on red—and a fine Eye of Horus:



Spain designed a series of posters for Peace Eye which I had printed in late '68. Here's one of them, titled "Wash Me":



Spain in Comic Art Show at Peace Eye
November 7, 1968

In the fall of '68 I began gathering original art from some underground comic artists whose work I admired for a show at Peace Eye, which I, for some reason, titled "Ape Rape— An Exhibition of Lower East Side Comic Art," which opened November 7. Spain Rodriguez

designed the flier announcing the exhibition. I think it was the first underground comic art show. The walls were packed with great works— pages from R. Crumb's notebooks, and original strips by Crumb, Art Spiegelman, Kim Deitch, Bill Beckman and of course Spain Rodriguez.

PEACE EYE
AN EXHIBITION
OF LOWER EASTSIDE
COMIC ART
BECKMAN
CRUMB
DEITCH
SPAIN
SPIEGELMAN
OPENS THURSDAY
NOV 7 7:10 PM
PEACE EYE
177 AVE A

I sent out a press release with text such as

"These comic strip plexi are high energy spew-grids which at their best discharge intense power & beauty in to the brain as the eye slurps across their surface. The jolt of such immediate energy creates in the beholder profound sensations of mirth, anarchy, poetry, sodomy-froth, Hideum apparitions and somehow, faith. It's not easy. These artists live & work together, constantly comparing a million ideas and anecdotes, cackling & chortling over the pushy violence of the world, annotating with their tense disciplined rapidographs the terror in the wall...."

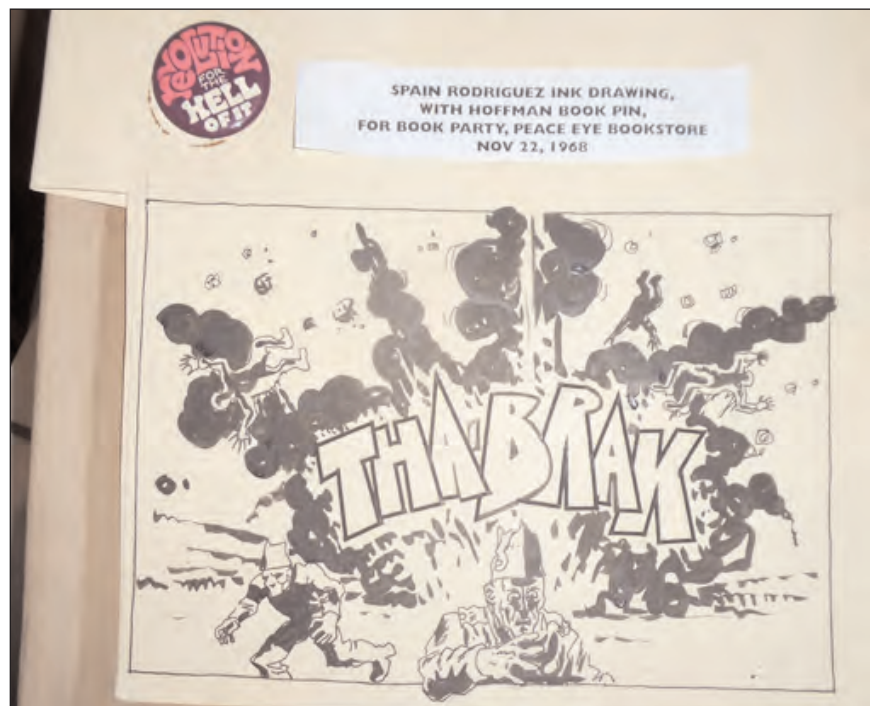
I used Spain's far-reaching word "Hideum" in the release.

Peace Eye was packed that night—even Robert Frank showed up!— and so were the fine-drawn walls:



The Author Standing in Peace Eye
with the Comic Art on the Wall

I sponsored a book party for Abbie Hoffman's just-published *Revolution for the Hell of it* on November 22, 1968. Spain provided a "Thrabrak!" image for a design I put up in the Peace Eye Bookstore window that evening:



In the course of taking over the old *East Village Other* offices, and in putting on an exhibition of Spain's art at Peace Eye, and the Comic Art show, I collected about 50 pieces of Spain's art, including comic panels, designs for benefits, an original 1966 *EVO* front page layout, various drawings, and even a group of preliminary drawings and sketches for his comics. They are a cherished part of my archive. Also, in my garage in Woodstock, after all these decades, is Spain's red and yellow Peace Eye Bookstore sign from early '68!

Spain left the Lower East Side for San Francisco in late '69-early '70, the same year I spent a lot of time in California investigating the so-called Manson Family for a book. Spain arrived in S.F. just as the underground comix movement was beginning to boom and became an associate of the original Zap Comix group along with Robert Crumb, Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin, S. Clay Wilson, Gilbert Shelton, and Robert Williams. Spain was one of the main organizers of the important cartoon-creator labor union, the United Cartoon Workers of America.

He flourished in San Francisco, becoming pals with Janis Joplin. "Janis took me out in San Francisco. She was a beautiful woman and her mouth tasted like whiskey and cigarettes," he later recounted. He did illustrations for Frank Zappa's "bootleg project" where Zappa bootlegged his own music, and put them out in a box which Spain designed.

Spain fit right in. He worked all the time during the next decades. He married a filmmaker Susan Stern with whom he had a daughter, Nora. His wife created a film about him, *Trashman: The Art of Spain Rodriguez*. For years, Spain designed posters for the San Francisco Mime Troupe, whose motto is "Overthrowing capitalism, one play at a time, since 1959."

What some say is Spain's masterwork is an illustrated biography of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Che: A Graphic Biography* (published in late 2008 by Verso Books). Spain brought his research skills and brilliant drawing into tracing the life of the great Revolutionary.

Thus Spain Rodriguez held fast to his youthful vision of a sharing and better world, working till the end. One final project was a cartoon history, collaborating with two storytellers, of a particularly odious act of future President Andrew Jackson, back in the early 19th century.

Hail to Radical Roots that STAY Radical Roots
Hail to Spain Rodriguez in the Time-Mists!
Hail to Trashman, Agent of the Sixth International!

—December 2012