

On finding and committing to your life's work



Historian and comic author and editor Paul Buhle discusses the importance of a strong story, helping younger artists succeed, and why he makes work he believes in.

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As told to Sam Kusek, 4195 words.

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What drew you to graphic novels? Do you remember a book or a title that really stuck with you early on?

This goes back a long time, back to childhood and comics. My introduction to the best of comics came with the paperback reprints of *MAD Comics* into four paperback volumes, 35 cents each, circa 1955. I was 11 years old at the time.

Those reprinted the contents very badly; they reprinted from these nice large color pages to little black and white pages. Nevertheless, it was the most important visual satire magazine of the 20th century, created and edited and substantially drawn by [Harvey Kurtzman](#), the singular most important inventor of a kind of satire in which the genre itself is satirized and is a depth of social themes, with a courage that would allow Kurtzman and his collaborators to attack Joseph McCarthy, the rise of a heartless consumerism, and a general state of US postwar, prosperous society that was empty inside.

MAD Comics ends in 1955 because the coming of repression of comics, like the repression of communist socialists and others on the left. This puts things in a new direction, and *MAD Comics* became the much milder *MAD magazine*, which persisted and had great success, but Harvey Kurtzman left *MAD Comics* and tried several other satirical magazines. All were commercial failures, all three. He ended up as a teacher at the school for Visual Arts in New York, and being a great influence on the next generations of comic artists, including [Art Spiegelman](#).

He was my childhood hero, along with Willie Mays, probably until Martin Luther King. Satire also had a strong effect on me. Lenny Bruce would be another example. These different people provide me a way to think about things until the early to middle '60s, when I become involved in social movements from the Civil Rights campaign to the campus and anti-war movement. I got involved in several of the chapters of Students for a Democratic Society. And by 1968, I'm publishing a magazine for the chapters of Students for a Democratic Society called [Radical America](#).

In 1969, I published a comic book issue of this magazine called [Radical America Komiks](#). Explaining how this happened would be too complicated, but we're just at the beginning of the invention of a new kind of comic. Hereafter, artists themselves will be in charge. They're making hardly any money, but they have total control to do anything they want, which includes sex, violence, a lot of anti-war, anti-draft kinds of material.

The biggest figure, even greater than Robert Crumb, is [Gilbert Shelton](#). Shelton is the editor of *Radical America Komiks*, and I'm the publisher of it, as an issue in my magazine. So I'm already, in many ways, involved in comics. I'm not drawing, I'm not an artist, I'm not writing scripts, at least not yet. But I'm deeply interested in it, so I publish a second magazine, like the first, losing money on every issue, called [Cultural](#)

Correspondence. These two magazines are digitized, and you can find them on the web.

In this magazine, *Cultural Correspondence*, I interview various artists, such as Robert Crumb, Justin Green, Sharon Rudahl, and a handful of others who were struggling to hold on to the momentum of underground comics after 1970, when the head shop campus scene closes down, the counterculture is dying, and there isn't a market for those underground comics. Now I have to fast-forward..

Now I'm writing for places like the *Village Voice* and *The Nation*, sometimes reviewing the newer forms of comics, which includes Art Spiegelman, but also includes Ben Katchor and others on the scene in '80s and '90s.

Then, suddenly it's 2005, I'm more or less 60 years old, and someone comes to me and says, "Well, what about a graphic novel about the centenary of the Industrial Workers of the World? The most rambunctious, proletarian, fascinating labor organization in US history and North American history."

There's something called the One Big Union, which is more or less the same as the IWW. It's very syndicalistic, which is to say locally controlled. It doesn't believe in vanguard parties or political parties. It organizes the poorest workers, the migratory workers, the lumber workers, those at the bottom of the hierarchy. It's crushed by the US government during World War I. It basically survives only as a memory by the 1920s and 1930s, although it still has an office in Chicago for many decades after that. And it's the songs that they wrote, the poems that they wrote, these things become part of the common lore of the radical edge of the labor movement from then on.

So I come into contact with a group called World War III Illustrators, who make an annual comic anthology. It's still being published every year from New York. I meet these people, I embrace them, they embrace me, and we bring out this book, Wobblies, in 2005. It's big, it's delightful, it's still in print, and the art is fabulous and great, and conveys this message of what the Wobblies were, why they're interested, and why people should think about them today, including a mini revival, just about that time encouraged by the comic.

Well, this is a great thing. I finally came back to comics that had meant a lot to me when I was 11 years old, and now I could understand something that I could do with them. As a familiar magazine editor, I enjoyed being an editor and bringing art as well as prose onto pages and reaching as many readers as I possibly could. And spinning off from that, what is now 20, I believe, maybe one or two more, graphic novels from a variety of publishers.

It would be too much to go into great depth about this, but among the most delightful, admired, and best-selling would have to be a biography of Rosa Luxemburg, a biography of Che Guevara, an adaptation of Howard Zinn's *People's History of the United States*, and most recently, a few months ago, an adaptation of Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz's famous book, An Indigenous People's History of the United States, and a whole succession of other comics and other themes.

And in recent years, my connection with [the publisher] Between the Lines, our subject.

The people [at Between the Lines Books] have been really wonderful in working with me. The books that they bring out are just fabulous. I've never been happier with a publisher, even knowing it's not a big rich company and there are not going to be big advances to artists and so forth. But getting together with them, I was able to create, with an artist and writer, a book called The Bund, which is really the story of the Jewish secular left and its very big role in Jewish history, its role in a Yiddishkeit or Yiddishness, which is a language and a way of seeing Jewish life that is not nationalistic, but is egalitarian, in the same way, deeply Jewish.

This book, *The Bund*, has had a lot of great readers and even an encouragement in helping people who are on the Left, happy to be Jewish, but don't view their Jewishness as centered in the state of Israel. So it's both a beautiful book and also it's a way of seeing a very important piece of history with a lot of meaning today.

So I want to skip onto the current book, and then I'll go back to some other reflections about comics, and the world of comic art, and so forth.

The idea of the book Partisans came from the deep reality that fascist movements, fascist governments are all around us today, and very much, in many ways, a threat in the US, even if the fascism with the giant letter F doesn't seem to be so much present. What does that mean? And more important to me, since I'm only taking a little section of that giant question, how was fascism fought in a past era? A lot of answers to this, but in one instance, people who were very, very brave and well organized created an anti-fascist movement called the Partisans during World War II. It basically was behind the lines, behind the Germans and Italians. It used to be thought it was a bunch of armed men. And it was a bunch of armed men, incredibly courageous against huge odds.

But it was also, as more recent scholars have told us, about communities of men and women and children—often a lot of women and children because the men were off in the armies. They organized themselves together to provide a wide variety of ways to resist the Germans in particular, but resist the allies of the Germans in all of the incredibly horrible things they were doing in occupied countries in part of Western Europe, mostly Central and Eastern Europe. So we have Russia, Hungary, Greece, Italy, France, and several others, all involved in this struggle.

After the Second World War, there was a great desire in the US and Western Europe to discredit the Partisans. Because after all, the armies won the war, who cares about citizens and so forth? The other reason to discredit them was that the Partisans were frequently led by communists, and parts of Eastern Europe emphatically by Jewish communists. This is all part of a memory that many in power would wish to entirely suppress and have everybody else forget about.

But among the things that appear in this book, and a previous comic that I edited called ¡Brigadistas! about the Spanish Civil War, is that volunteers, thousands and thousands of volunteers from around Europe and elsewhere, went into Spain to fight Franco. They were ill-equipped. They were arguably betrayed by Stalin's orders. But nevertheless, they fought hard, they learned how to fight, and sometimes acquired the weapons to fight.

When the possibility came for those survivors came to return to their own countries and be part of the Partisans, they were the ones with the advanced skills who could take on the fascist invaders or the fascist native rulers and learn how to teach, how organize people against them. The story of the Partisans, the anti-fascist movement in Italy, is fabulous. There's so much to it. But that movement in France is well known. The story of the Partisans in other countries is not so well known, and is tremendously important to understand today.

And, now we go to the art. There's almost more than a half dozen artists. Most of them are writing their own scripts. I gather them from among my pals in the past to work with me. I have a collaborating co-editor, Raymond Tyler, who's been working with me for two or three years now and is taking over what I've been trying to do now that I've reached the age of 80. We work with these artists, not dictating what they should do, but encouraging them and helping them where we could. We worked with the publishers at Between the Lines to make this finally come into existence. And, that's the main story I need to tell today. Because after all, *Partisans* is the book that I hope folks reading this will take an interest in and help out with the Kickstarter campaign.

In the comic space, the role of an editor is often overlooked—people may feel like they don't need one, especially in creator-owned spaces where folks may have a very clear vision of what they think they need. It's great to hear you've being able to help people shape their own stories and get untold stories out into the world. Tying it back to the beginning with another great editor, Harvey Kurtzman... Did you ever have the opportunity to meet him?

I had a wonderful experience in 1969, shortly after the publication of *Radical America Komiks*. I had a new friend named Denis Kitchen, who would go on to be publisher of the largest number of underground comics in the mid-1970s. He'd been in touch with Kurtzman. He'd invited Kurtzman to Milwaukee to speak at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. So he gave me an address. I sent a copy of *Radical America Komiks* to Kurtzman. He was always interested in new things. He published Gilbert Shelton, he published Robert Crumb, and others. He wrote me an enthusiastic letter and we corresponded a little bit.

He was, at the time, to make a living, to get health benefits, scripting a *Playboy* strip called Little Annie Fanny. And this was the middle of the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement. So I wrote to him and said, "You were my childhood idol. How can you possibly be engaged with Little Annie Fanny in *Playboy* magazine?" And he

wrote me back and said, 'I desperately need the money. That's the story on Little Annie Fanny.'" I thought, "Good. This guy is not only sincere, but he's willing to explain it." And in fact, Little Annie Fanny was heavily edited, mis-edited by the editor of *Playboy*, and he resented being under the guy's thumb, but could do nothing about it.

I maintained a little bit of contact with Harvey Kurtzman. But Denis Kitchen, who was his literary executor, invited me somewhere around 2007, 2008 to write a biography of Harvey Kurtzman. I should go back and say, for one reason or another, in the 1980s, I'd begun to write biographies of left-wing people I admired, from my real savant Trinidadian board guy named CLR James, famous for writing *The Black Jacobins* to William Appleman Williams, the great historian of the American Empire, to Abraham Lincoln Polanski, the greatest of the noir film directors, who was blacklisted in Hollywood and made a comeback, but was treated most badly in the Cold War.

So I was familiar enough with writing biographies. I liked the process of writing biographies, that with Denis Kitchen, we produced *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman*, which is as much art as text. Another biography of Harvey Kurtzman, all prose, appeared a year or two later, is a very fine book. But *The Art of Harvey Kurtzman* is the very first biography of Kurtzman to appear. And I was really happy to do it. By the time we did it, Harvey had died. But it's emphatically a tribute to one of the great figures of visual satire. People say he inspired Saturday Night Live. And I think Lorne Michaels himself said that. So that the stamp of this kind of humor with a socially significant element remains something which has been very important.

Let me talk a little bit about comic art at large. The underground comics are succeeded by alternative comics, which have fewer readers in the '80s and '90s, but various artists find various ways to reach an audience, often through syndicated newspapers. In one way or the other, Ben Katchor is a great example, but there are other examples just as good.

Somewhere around 1995, commercial publishers become sufficiently interested in comic art as a commercial enterprise, as a profit-making enterprise, to begin to publish books, publish what were never before, but would now be called graphic novels. There's no doubt whatsoever that Art Spiegelman and the comic book Maus played a crucial role in this. It legitimated comic art, and he got a Pulitzer, so that others could come in behind.

A very important company, Fantagraphics, which had been urging comic art upon people for 20 years with book publishing and a journal, they had an opening to begin republishing great comic art from all periods, but also new comic art in substantial amounts. And they continue today to be a remarkable publisher of comics as daring as Joe Sacco's latest comic about Gaza, called *War on Gaza*.

Now, there are a thousand other things that could be said about graphic novels, but one is that comics took a boom upward, for good or ill, when the Comicons held annually in San Diego began to include film producers, which is to say films based upon superheroes became rather suddenly gigantic, enormous. There had been Superman films before, some of them very good, but now there was a giant new enterprise of making millions and billions of dollars.

So suddenly, something about comics was appearing on the financial pages of the Toronto dailies and *the New York Times*. This was something new and it made the idea of graphic novels very popular. The second thing it develops is simply the web, that people can write, draw digital comics and publish, in that new sense, digital comics without any significant expense. And even if it's difficult to reach readers to read them, at least they've been able to express themselves in experimental ways and, as we say, become artists in their own lives.

The other thing that happens is the globalization of this phenomenon. I reviewed a few months ago a comic from Prague, I'm going to fail to name the malady that this young woman had, but she lost all of her hair on her head and had to face the question, "Shall I buy an expensive wig? Shall I have an operation which would be of dubious value? Or shall I adapt myself a real life story of the artist herself to not having hair on her head?" And eventually, by becoming a comic artist and joining with other women, there's an international group called Ladies Do Comics, where they encourage each other. So she publishes this comic in Prague, and a local friend of mine of Providence does a translation from the Czech-it's published.

Is it usually successful? Is it somewhat successful? Who knows. But it's a vital example of the way in which the genre has provided young people, I have to say, especially but by no means only young women, with a way to explain themselves to themselves, of dealing with real problems they had, physical, psychological, or whatever, and also developing their own art form. I think of these books that come across my desk and deal with personal stories as opposed to history, more of them are by women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, and they have put a very definite stamp on the 21st century nature of comic art. It's a very remarkable development.

Are there any subjects or stories that you're still hoping to explore in the graphic novel format?

Yes. Since the late 1960s, I've been pals with and sometimes publishing sections of my magazines by people from the Surrealism movement. It's a movement that moved fast from 1924 onward, until the 1930s, disappeared sort of after the Second World War, and then has made sporadic reappearances. With the 100th anniversary exhibits in 2024, it suddenly reappeared in dozens of countries and attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors.

What does it mean beyond these particular paintings? What was the movement? Why was it important? Why is it important to think about it today? I'm not orthodox anything, any more than I'm an orthodox Marxist, but I'm encouraging the idea of a comic about the history of Surrealism. I've been trying to make it happen.

I'm also trying to develop a graphic novel about a figure that I mentioned, CLR James. Really the greatest Pan-African intellectual of the 20th century, and someone for whom I wrote a biography.

I haven't been able to do much successfully in ecology, and the many threats of global warming, and the disappearance of creatures of all kinds. I'd like to do that. I never had the scientific acumen to have a sense of self-confidence about it, but I urgently hope other people are doing that.

So, those, along with general themes of social movements, how they struggle, how they succeed, why they don't succeed. And individuals within those social movements, how we can understand those people.

I've been an American radical since I joined the Civil Rights Movement in central Illinois in 1960 and suddenly realized there's something deeply wrong with society. I'm continuing on. That's the main thing I could say.

I'm a scholar, and I'm also a reviewer of comics, something I do widely. People will find me easily on Comics Grinder, people will often find me in *Rain Taxi*, published in Minneapolis, in *Counterpunch*, published in California, and a number of other places, mostly online.

I'll continue on reviewing new comics as long as I'm able to do that and commenting on their social content, their artistic content, and try to encourage young artists. I also want to make sure people know about older phenomena in the history of comic art, which is now being studied as a significant field of scholarship, better than they have before.

I liked it when all the scholars of comics were amateurs like myself, and never took a course in comics history. Now there are courses and people are studying it, as students do, and they're learning a lot to say about the subject, and what its value is as an art form, as it has now been accepted.

Speaking of the younger generation of creators, what advice would you give someone who's looking to tell their story?

I think it depends upon one's aspirations. If your aspiration as an artist is simply to make [the work] available to people, then you can certainly find a way to do it on the web and you can find a way to reach people.

The second thing young people do is go to classes on comic art. These are being held around the country. For instance, the School for Visual Arts is one and there's Cartoon Academy in Two Rivers Junction in Vermont, which is another. And there are many other places. For instance, many artists make a living out of providing classes locally. So, if someone looks around very hard, they might be able to find these classes, and they might even be

free, or at a low cost at a local community college. That seems to be a really good thing to do: not only to develop the art as a comic art form, but just as important, in my experience, is to develop the narrative.

It's often said that weak art can carry a strong narrative, but a weak narrative can't be carried very far without some art. So the idea—as in every form of writing imaginable—is that the story is absolutely crucial. Developing the story is absolutely crucial. I suppose, then, it's really good to find somebody that you can work with.

If we go a further step and talk about getting published, this is something very different and it's problematic to find an entry point into the world of actually being published. It doesn't require being in New York, but a lot of that stuff seems to take place in New York. It doesn't require having an agent. I never had an agent. But there are many trade publishers that publish a handful of comics, and if a request to an editor doesn't come from an agent, they don't answer. That's my experience. So it can be very tough.

The places that are available to publish, especially to publish and offer advances on publication as opposed to royalties after publication, are fairly few and the road upward is difficult. But hey, this is the life of the artist from time immemorial. The artist in the poor living situation, except those poor living situations cost a lot more than they used to, so it's a double or triple story.

I'm also thinking back on artists that I've worked with, these very often very talented politically committed artists, who are working on weekends because they have a job during the week. Or somebody else in the household has a job, whether it's a husband, wife, whatever. Finding the time and encouragement and everything else that's required for the personal sacrifice and discipline of producing comic art is nothing to sniff at... It's something to take seriously and regard as a commitment, or becoming successful, or even satisfying yourself, will continue to be problematic.

Paul Buhle Recommends:

The upcoming demonstrations against the Trump regime, and the leading role of my hero, Bernie Sanders, in them, ardently supported by my organization, the Democratic Socialists of America.

The global solidarity movement in support of Palestinian rights and against Israel brutality in Gaza.

The ongoing courage of students, heirs to my 1960s days in Students for a Democratic Society, in the face of extreme repression, and the courage of teachers supporting them.

The legacy of Leftwing parties and radical movements going back to the 19th century, anarchist, socialist, communist, anti-war, feminist, black liberation, gay and lesbian, a legacy that continues.

My friends at Between the Lines for bringing out an important book at the moment when it is most needed.

Name

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Vocation

historian, author, editor

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Steve Chappell