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## Makers' Dozen

Local Illustrators team up for *Twelve-Way With Cheese* comic anthology

By Rick Bird



There is the charming Zombie Marge, lovable Little Lulu as Little Voodoo, a campy look at local self-styled “superhero” ShadowHare and *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit models as zombies.

It is irreverent, whimsical, edgy, sweet, gross and just plain silly. Hey, it’s a comic book.

*Twelve-Way With Cheese* is a comic anthology featuring a dozen Greater Cincinnati illustrators showcasing their work. In a town where the local music scene often struts its stuff by releasing compilation CDs, it’s fitting that the first-rate homegrown creative design community is also looking for a little deserved attention.

The comic book works on several levels. It’s a wonderfully retro project hearkening to the classic styles and campiness of comic books from a golden pre-digital age when printed illustrations mattered. The reader will get an overload of eye candy taking delight in the creativity of the city’s seldom-recognized illustrator and graphic design community. And it’s a cheap thrill, just as a comic book should be.

The idea for the local comic anthology came from Tim Fuller, a Northern Kentucky illustrator best known for his comic book work in “The Blue Beagle” series. Fuller had spotted compilation efforts from illustrator communities in other cities on display at the Small Press Expo in Columbus, an annual convention for collectors and independent publishers. He figured, why not here.

“I knew we had great talent in this area,” Fuller says. “This anthology is a good cohesive sampling. I was astounded at the quality of the work we got for the effort.”

The 12 contributors include a mix of local newcomers and veteran artists. To name a few: Darryl Collins, a freelance illustrator for *Boy’s Life*, *Scholastic* and *SI For Kids*, has a Little Lulu spoof and the heart-wrenching back story of Bazooka Joe; Jerry Dowling, known for three decades in town for his caricatures, takes his work to an edgier level with a more demented take on several local figures; Darcy Voorhees, who worked on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* for 10 years in New York City before moving back to Cincinnati, offers a twisted look at relationships; Woody Hinton — an award-winning illustrator in the horror/fantasy genre, a longtime *CityBeat* contributor and a Northern Kentucky University instructor — gives us a truly scary tale of a certain former Reds owner who haunts the new stadium; Fuller has a Mike Hammer-style detective yarn, “In Cold Milk” about a “cereal” killer.

There is a forward from Justin Green, a pioneer in underground comics who has made Cincinnati his home.

Most of the contributors don’t make a living in the comic book genre. But, as Collins points out, almost all illustrators secretly wish they could.

“For our paying gigs we don’t have this kind of freedom,” says Collins, a former illustrator for Gibson Greeting Cards. “I work in the kid’s market and with the nanny-state going on — especially after Columbine — I can’t even show kids angry in a classroom situation. So this anthology is a chance to open up.”

The *Twelve-Way* collection is loosely narrated by Zombie Marge (yes, even in death, it’s hard for humorists to leave poor Marge Schott alone), an homage to the EC horror comics of the 1950s, which used a female zombie to introduce stories.

The easily offended might get a twinge from some of the cartoons. While there are a couple of pleasant children’s stories, this is not a comic book for impressionable minds. It does carry a “mature reader” rating.

Nationally, the comic book genre faces the same digital-age death spiral gripping newspapers, magazines or anything in print. But local comic bookstores say their audience has remained steady with stalwarts Marvel and DC still formidable marketing machines.

Like the independent music scene, indie cartoonists have used the Internet to shop their work in a shrinking print world where it’s almost impossible for a new comic strip to break into daily syndication. Actually, traditional comic book marketers have even lagged behind newspapers in offering digital content. But that might be because true fans of the art form revere retro.

“Our medium is so graphic intensive, fans prefer the actual physical book in their hands,” says Mark Cradock, manager of Comic Book World in Florence.

Cradock expects there to be significant interest in the local effort. He notes a lot of comic book consumers are secretly frustrated illustrators and will be happy to sample the homegrown talent.

Indeed, local observers say the Cincinnati market can boast more first-rate illustrators and graphic artists than what one would expect to find in a town of this size. There are certainly illustrator superstars here such as C.F. Payne, whose work has graced covers of practically every major magazine. And there is Loren Long, one of the leading children's illustrators and storytellers, who illustrated Madonna's children's book. Illustrators might be the most communal of the local creative niches, gathering for weekly lunches to share their work.

"The lunches are to commiserate, to compare stories and technique," Collins says. "You are making a living in a very peculiar way. Not even your spouse or best friends understand the process you have to do to get the work done."

If the local artistic community is under appreciated, Collins says that's often just the way it is in the world of the graphic artist.

"In their everyday lives people don't stop to realize how much illustration and graphic design surrounds them," he says. "If you just lived in a world of white signs with black lettering, life would be pretty dull."

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**TWELVE-WAY WITH CHEESE is available at area comic book stores including Queen City Comics in Pleasant Ridge and Comic Book World in Florence or through [comixpress.com](http://comixpress.com). Check out the work of the local illustrator community at [cincyillustrators.blogspot.com](http://cincyillustrators.blogspot.com).**

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