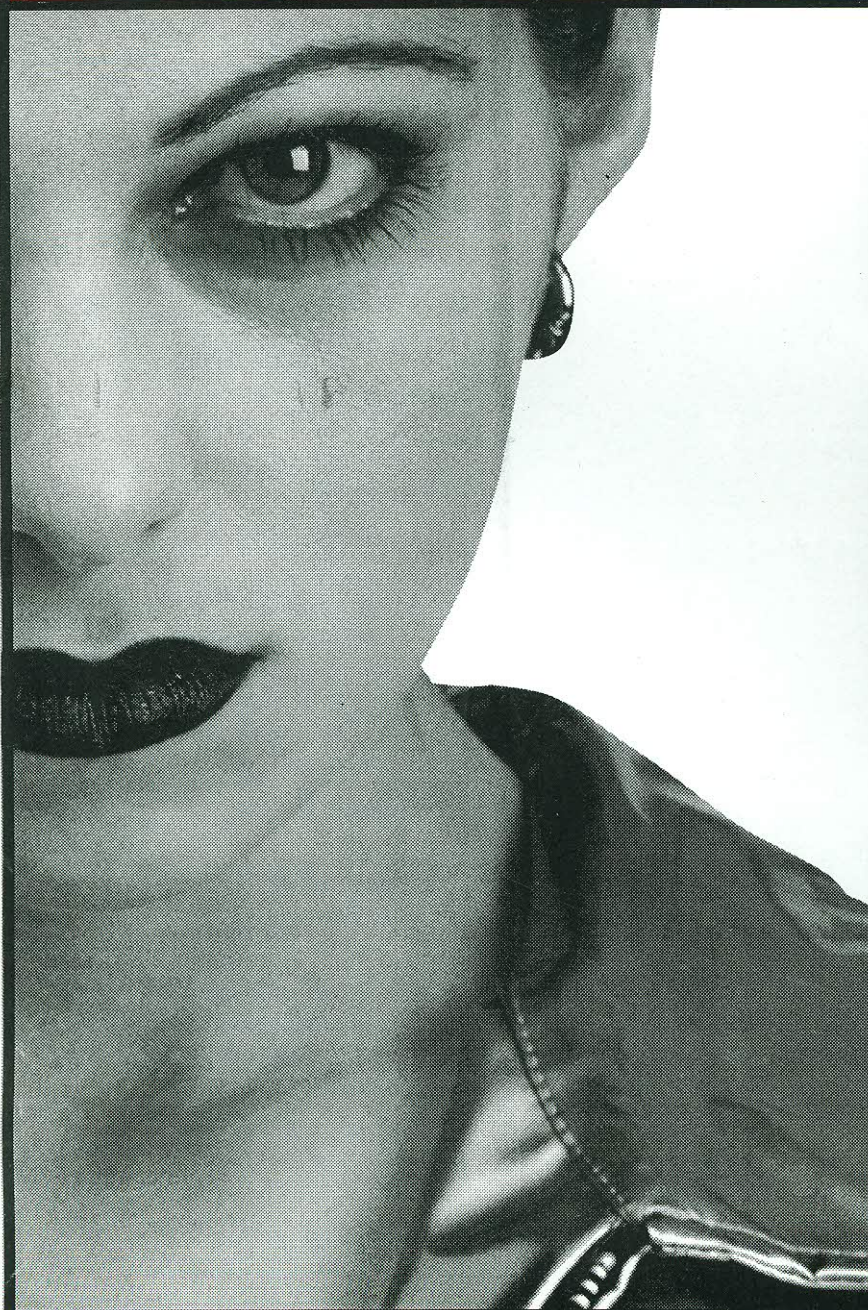


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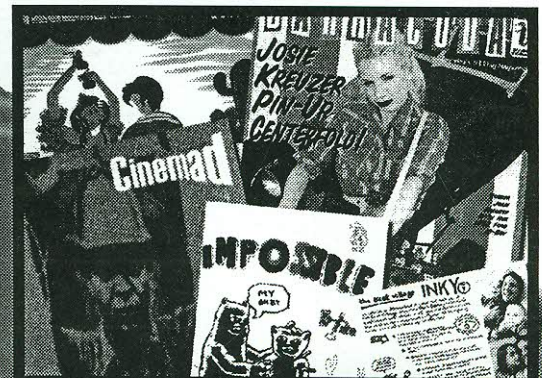
• MAGAZINE



Jordan Crane's **NON**



The making of **DIAL 5**



LOTS of reviews!!!



## Prologue

When I interviewed cartoonist and self-publisher Jordan Crane, it was back in June of 1999, when the long-overdue issue of his anthology *Non* debuted at the Million Year Picnic comic store in Cambridge. This included an appearance by nearly all the contributors, including notables Brian Ralph, James Kochalka and Dean Haspiel. All were on hand to draw free caricatures for any passersby interested. Among it all, Crane either participated in the drawing chores or stood passing out promotional postcards.

It looked like a good time was had by all, especially with a barbecue party at Crane's house when it all ended. However, after I talked with Crane, I took with me a feeling that I carry even as I started writing this months later – a feeling that he would have rather been somewhere else.

Not that his disappointment stemmed from the issue itself, which had the most pages and contributors to date. And though *Non* had less of his work than he would have liked (Crane told me he was too occupied with a 20-page story for the eighth issue of the Fort Thunder anthology *Monster*), it did carry another chapter in the ongoing story "Floating." Set in Boston, it's a story that doesn't allow him to show his impressive ability as a humorist. Instead, it shows that Crane is already

making the transition from a cool smart-ass in comics to a capable fiction writer in comics.

No, the source of his frustration lies not in his body of work, but rather in the availability of that work to the public. On the other hand, the words spoken below are from someone who is not prematurely bitter by his failure to reach the masses, but someone who is fervently ready to begin doing so with no view of any end result in sight.

## And Now, Mr. Crane

Before we dove into his anthology as a whole, we focused on "Floating," his sole contribution to *Non* #4 (besides the wraparound cover) which began in the prior issue. Three months after he moved to the Boston area from California, he started the story for reasons which only at first didn't seem to have any relation to each other. Still, as he explained it, I felt he would have felt better if he had said, "Just 'cause."

"I was starting it to start it basically," he said. "I was like, 'If I don't start it, it's never going to happen.'"

"I really wanted to learn about how to draw shadows," said Crane, "so it was sort of, 'Okay, fine. I'll draw a noir story.' But I didn't want it to be with detectives. I wanted it to be just a completely good-hearted person, a regular Joe ... Not regular

Joe, but just a non-evil person that doesn't have evil intentions."

"I've never had a good explanation of 'Floating,'" admitted Crane. "It changes a lot. The second chapter, when I first started out to do it was absolutely, totally, completely different than how it ended up being. Except for the ending and the beginning of it, everything else was just a huge, huge change."

"What I had intended," he added, "initially sounded like a really good idea, and then I started working on it, and it just felt like what I was doing was really played out; it had been done a million times before. In this case, I guess, I felt it was important to sort of write about what I know, what I understand."

"I wanted to really understand the motivations of all the characters," said Crane, who originally wanted his good-hearted main character in "Floating," the aptly named Henry Good, to rip off a crime boss. "First of all, it's hackneyed. Second of all, I know nothing about crime bosses. And even crime bosses, they have to have motivations. I don't know what their motivations are. But there's got to be more than just, 'They want the money.' They're not just in it for the money. There's certain things that drove them to that in the beginning, certain reasons they wanted to have it illegally instead of legally. Why did they take an easy route, which is

Interview by Chad Parenteau

not actually that easy?"

"While drugs are involved," he said, "they're involved to an extent in which I feel comfortable writing about; and the motivations behind the actions are not straight money or drugs. They're more family-oriented. I felt much better about this. I can understand it better, and it seemed a more interesting approach to take."

This led to the family-driven motivations of Steve, the shadier character in the story. "I'm planning on having him play a large part," said Crane. "I'm actually starting to get more interested in him than Henry."

The final reason for starting the "Floating" story was his desire to draw architecture. "I really felt there was a lot of feeling to be had in architecture that I hadn't done until now. I like the really straight lines, and I think they're really evocative of a whole lot of good stuff. I just wanted to use them."

"Floating" is also a departure from the wise-ass, condescending voice he has used in humor stories past, such as the first issue's first story, "You Can Be Poor and Still Be Happy," which he called, "100 percent autobiographical."

"It's sort of me hurting me, I guess," he said about the story. "I don't know why I chose that particular voice, but it's the only really easy way for me to do it."

He said the strip's idea originated in a state of near-sleep, which is how he gets a lot of his ideas for comics. "It's where you're just thinking about everything, and I end up doing that a lot," he said. "Being an insomniac and all that sort of thing, it is a state I spend a lot of my hours in."

Other factors leading to writing the "You Can Be Poor..." strip included post-collegiate poverty. "I had no money. Completely fucking broke. Couldn't get a job to save my goddamn life," he said.

Born and raised in Carson and Gardena, Crane later graduated from the University of Southern California with a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering, a degree which, he said, ties into his life in no way whatsoever other than being "a monthly drain on personal resources

paying back my loan."

Still, Crane preferred his education to what he would have received in art school. "I think I would have very been stuck into whatever style or mode of thinking the teachers gave to me. The few art classes I have taken I absolutely hated. The teachers just don't tell me what I want to know."

"All throughout my childhood I was – well, I mean pre-college – I really liked building things," he said. "I rebuilt my car entirely. I just liked mechanical crap. It was just sort of a natural progression."

This inclination helped him when going into the world of printing. Crane's first foray ever into printing, in fact, was the first issue of *Non*.

"I asked a lot of questions from a lot of people," he freely admitted. "I didn't want to fuck up."

When I brought up to Crane parallels I found between him and Dan Clowes (creator of the graphic novel *Ghost World*), it didn't get a favorable reaction from him. "I certainly don't aspire to it," he said, though he did like some things about Clowes' work.

"I don't think there's any particular style of any artist that I really like," he admitted. "I want something really evocative and at the same time cute to look at."

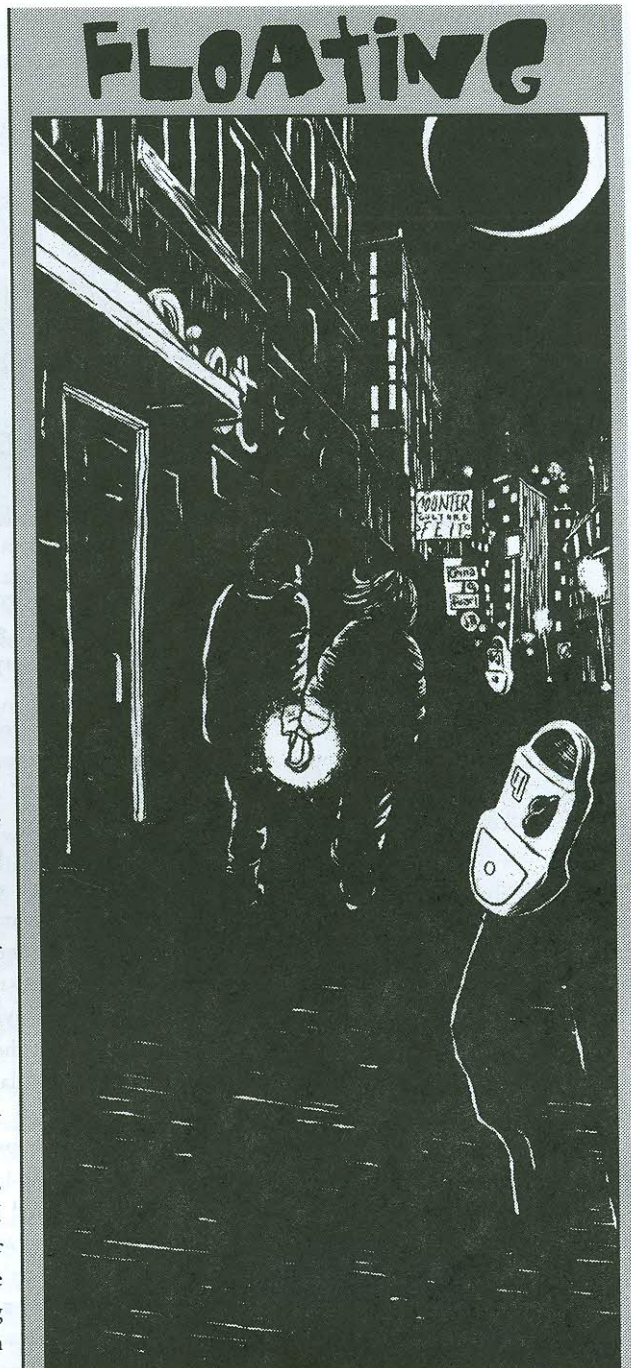
Crane, however might have damned himself – though in an amusing way – when he cited as the major influence an artist whose work is inspired by Clowes: Adrian Tomine (The two artists are, in fact, practically neighbors.) Admittedly, Crane was more inspired on by Tomine's do-it-yourself attitude.

"The first comic that actually made me go, 'Goddamn, I really can do this myself, and I should was *32 Stories* [Tomine's collection of *Optic Nerve* mini-comics], the introduction where he just basically explains that he just started drawing them and making photocopies; and all of a sudden it just was like, 'Ah, wait. This is completely acceptable.'"

Crane actually got to meet him during the 1999 Wondercon. "He's really cool. He's a great guy," he said. "I needed him for everything I could get out of him, but there wasn't a whole lot I could get. The main one was, 'How the hell do you answer your mail?'"

Though he doesn't receive a lot of mail, he is at a loss on what to do with it. Still, he remembers not only writing to Clowes, Tomine and other cartoonists in the beginning, but also receiving encouraging words. "The point is that they wrote back, and I was very impressed and I was very happy and psyched that they actually took the time and wrote back."

"That's what I want to do," he explained. "I want to be able to talk to other people and be



I really wanted to learn about how to draw shadows, so it was sort of, "Okay, fine. I'll draw a noir story."



YOU'RE POOR.

I AM KINDA HUNGRY.



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encouraging, or just communicate, whatever, with them and not just blow it off."

Despite the cartooning camaraderie he has found in the New England area, switching coasts was purely for personal reasons, escaping what he called the "pointless torture" of a long-distance relationship with his girlfriend, who is currently studying medicine at Tufts. Still, the group he found in the area to be "a godsend."

Though popping up in Highwater Books advertisements of late, he said he would like to remain independent.

"I really want to get into bookstores," he said. "Tom Devlin (of Highwater) and I have various schemes on exactly how we're going to do that and if it eventually would prove more profitable to be published by Houghton Mifflin. To get into bookstores, maybe that would be the way to go. But as far as actually having another comic book publisher publishing me, I'm not going to do that."

On the more reputable companies like Fantagraphics and Drawn and Quarterly, he said, "While I love their books and don't mean them any disrespect, none of them count in the real world, at all."

"One of my primary concerns," continued Crane, "is I would really like to work, all year, drawing comics. I'd like for that to be my job instead of working furiously for five months on comics and then having to work like a madman for another five

months doing design to get myself out of the debt that I got into publishing the issue. It's very chaotic right now."

"For that to happen, of course, people need to have an awareness of comics and for people," he said. "Regular people."

"We don't count," he said, referring to the current audience comics has. "We don't matter, we're like, you know, a thousand people through the whole country who read independent comics. Maybe more read Marvel or DC, but they're still no more a blip on the radar of pop culture."

With the way trade paperback collections of comics and graphic novels have been treated in most mainstream bookstores – with both superhero and alternative titles placed in one spot to be forgotten – I was reminded of an article that accounted how *Maus*, the famed Holocaust story by Art Spiegelman, was found in the humor section.

"That's something that definitely has to change," he admitted, "but I think *Maus* being in the humor section has a better chance of being sold than being in a comic book store. I would rather it be in the humor section, because then at least a sort of beachhead is made. At least it's there. It takes another step to get it into its own actual section."

"That's why I wouldn't go with any other publisher. I respect them, and I know Fantagraphics is doing everything they possibly can to get into bookstores, but they're not, yet,

and what's the point?"

This led into why he thinks he will beat other publishers to Barnes and Noble: "My scheme – and if they beat me to it, it's not secret or anything because the more people doing it, the better, because the more chances for anybody's recognition – my scheme is something that will probably sell in bookstores and the adoption of a publishing routine, a format that can be published routinely, about a year apart. Something on the lines of your basic book publishing model."

At the time, Crane had been working on a story on [thecomicstore.com](http://thecomicstore.com), where he's featured under the title "Vodvil." He's been using a nine-panel grid drawn on 9" x 12" paper. At 53 pages a year, he hopes to average five stories in that timeframe. After later breaking them down from the repetitive nine panel-per-page format, the end result would be 200 pages of his work – or, as Devlin and he have discussed, perhaps a combination of other artists – in a 5" x 6" book.

"It's a really nice format. I have several books that are like this," he said. "A lot of Japanese books are like this."

The format, Crane noted, is also more affordable due to its small, pocketbook-like size and its novelty size may allow it to be placed closer to registers, where people might pick it up on impulse.

"It works on every level I've been able to think of so far," he said.

Crane's eye for novelty can be

seen just by surveying the four issues of *Non*. Issue one (now sold out) started as a 5.5" x 8.5" format, growing a little more over the next three issues. At issue 4, however, Crane might have found his limit at 7" x 10 5/8" with rounded corners.

"I was hoping to keep it growing in size, but financial considerations are starting to come into play. Apparently you reach a max size, and then it starts getting really expensive after that."

Crane laughed at his slighted goal. "I figured I just keep going. Like, 'Oh, what the hell, you know, just get really big.' I think it's getting better with each issue, and so theoretically by issue number 8 when it's huge, it'll be also really good. Retailers will grumble at the shelf space, but people will still buy it."

His cover illustrations, while more whimsical, are also pretty disciplined. "I wanted to give myself constraints to work in because I think given too much freedom, dreck happens really easily," he said. "I just wanted to put really tight constraints on what every single cover needed to have on it and then work within those constraints."

All of his books to date have a wraparound cover with a redheaded woman on front and an unrelated, nonsensical cartoon image on the back either uttering or presenting what I thought to be made-up calligraphy. Crane, however, assured me that it was not.

"It's Japanese characters," he explained, "and they mean, 'nani.' It's

pronounced 'naw-nee,' and I'm told it means 'what' with a question mark after it in Japanese."

Not knowing anything about Japanese characters, he asked a friend which one would sound like "non" the most. "I just really like the way Japanese characters look. That's all."

He was particularly proud about this past issue's cover, meeting all of his restraints and still being able to draw what he set out to. "I really wanted to draw a black girl watching TV in a simple, clean apartment setting, and I was like, 'Oh, damn! How can I possibly put a redhead on the cover now?'"

"Then I was like, 'Oh, yeah. On the TV.' Boom. Okay, cool. It works," he said, laughing.

Something that also seemed calculated by Jordan is the running theme of abuse throughout all of *Non*, particularly self-abuse through alcohol and drugs.

"It's personal experience and a friend's experience," he said. "A lot of the drug references are sort of shorthand for actively engaging in destructive behavior and sort of taken in glee about it. You know you shouldn't be doing it, it's fucking you up, but you're addicted to it."

Crane, however, asserts there was no plan towards this, and that he almost unconsciously began this shorthand method.

"It seemed naturally just to make a lot of sense to do that, he said. "I've started to try and understand exactly why I'm doing that and use it with more awareness about the reasons behind it and give those reasons some other voice instead of just, you know, 'Again with the drugs.'"

Crane predicts a year from now, we'll see another issue of *Non* and a collection of some kind. He also looks to a collection of his shorter works in the faraway future. "If I ever publish those, I'm pretty sure I'm going to call it, *Stinky: A Collection of Jordan Crane's Shorts*. I know – it's a terrible title, but I'm so amused by it."

"I'm wondering if another *Non* is going to be out, actually," he admitted. "I've been along the line of trying to make a beach front in book stores. I've been very, very seriously considering taking a year off from publishing and sort of pushing the previously published *Nons* in a more public forum," he said. "Just trying to make inroads into the actual public having an appreciation of – or not even an appreciation. I don't care if they like them or not – just buying the fucking things."

## Epilogue

In November of 1999, with this interview's publication being delayed, I contacted Crane to touch base and see where his goals stood less than half a year ago. It turned out he didn't give up on *Non* and hoped to have the next issue out some time in July of 2000. Currently, though, the new release date is sometime in 2001 with a silkscreen dust jacket and 200 to 300 pages of work, including a new story called "Col-Dec."

What Crane emphasized more, however, was his newest work taken from his "Vodvil" strips entitled *The Last Lonely Saturday*, a 80-page, two-color book with an even smaller size than he envisioned back in July (4 1/8" x 6 3/8"). There was a limited run of a black and white version sold both at the 1999 Small Press Expo and San Diego Comicon; and the story itself was on display that same year at the Washington Street art center in Somerville.

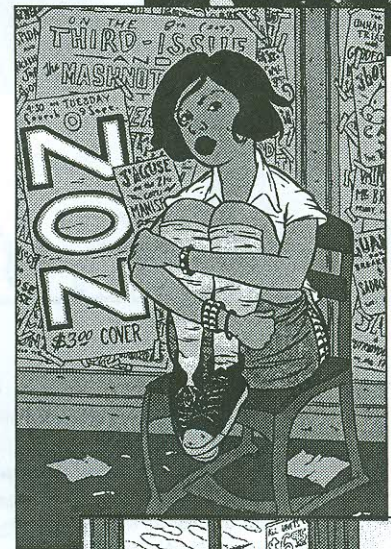
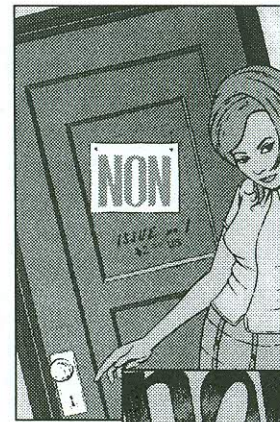
"It's got touches of light-heartedness, but I wouldn't call it humor. It's more serious I would say," said Crane, quoting to me the solicitation he wrote for Diamond distribution. "An old man writes many letters to his dead wife and then delivers them to her grave. When she reads them, she decides that something must be done."

This book is a direct result of his scheme to break into bookstores, which is still ongoing. His original vision, however, of having it right next to bookstore counters had been compromised by the time we talked again.

"More reality has come in. I've got a better understanding of what it actually takes to get into the book market," said Crane. "Aside from every once in a while, there might be a really cool bookstore buyer who happens to be in charge of a Barnes and Noble, but I'm probably not going to be on any big bookstore counters because the counter space is taken up by people in New York who have the money to buy it."

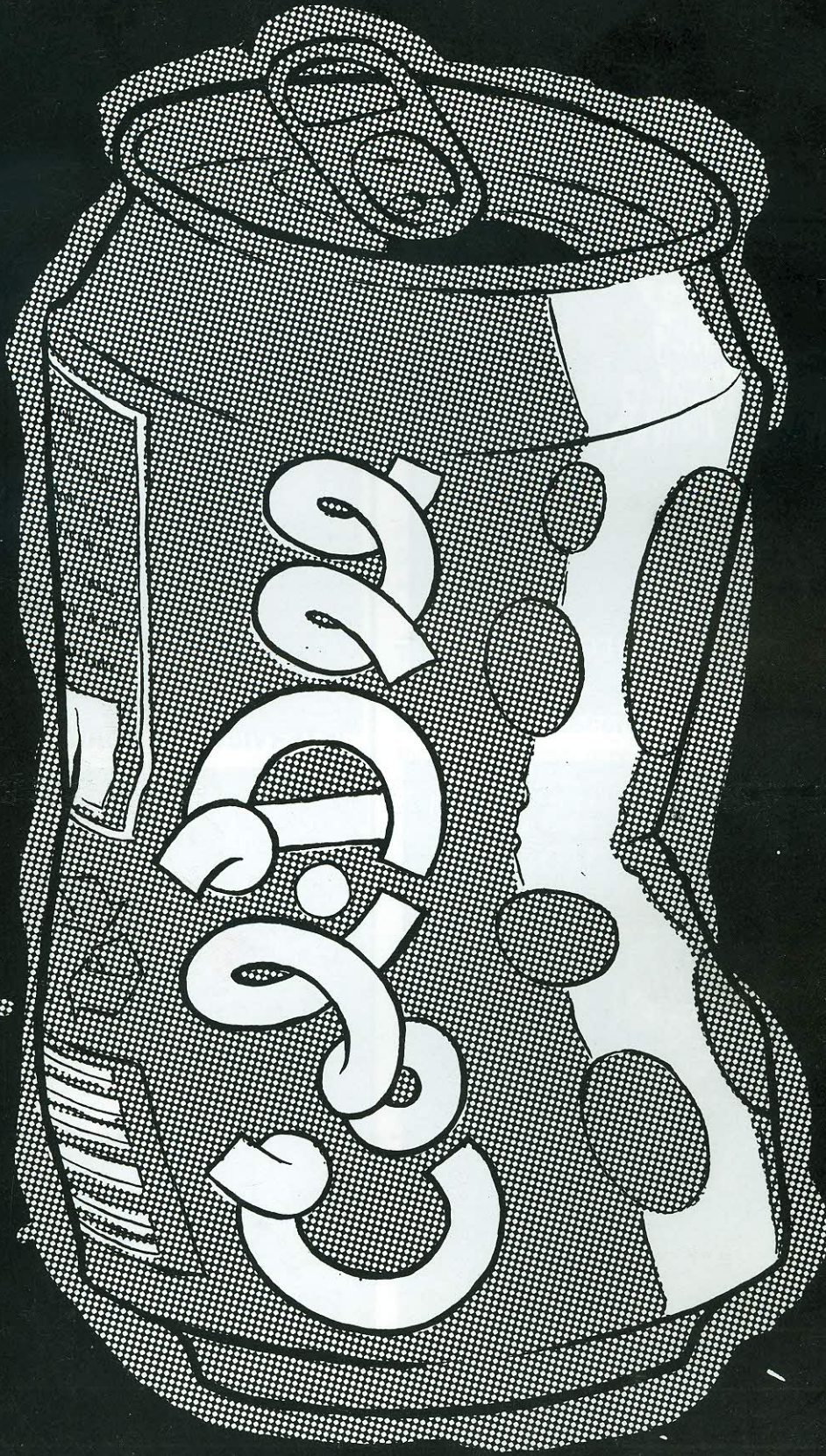
"Like everything, it really does come down to money in terms of advertising and you spreading the word," he said, "Still, you know, I'm plugging away. I'll be the tortoise."

*Issues 1 and 3 of Non are sold out, but Non 3 is currently available for free in PDF format at Crane's Red Ink website ([www.beat.com/jordan/index.html](http://www.beat.com/jordan/index.html)). Crane promises Non 1 to be similarly available soon. The print version of issue 2 is still available for \$3.50, as is Non 4 for \$6.95. NON 5 is scheduled for July. Those interested should check out the web site or write to Jordan Crane at [jordan@beat.com](mailto:jordan@beat.com)*



## UPDATE

Just as we were wrapping up this issue, we learned that Jordan was one of the March 2001 recipients of the Xeric Foundation Grant. These grants offer financial assistance to creators in the U.S. and Canada. Jordan's winning book is *Col-Dec* and will soon be available in comic book stores and through his website <http://red.beat.com>.



NON is a comic book.  
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