

STALKING



REV.



RICH



August, 1998. I'm interviewing Ben Jones, a cartoonist who I followed for months as his semi-autobiographical character lived not-so vicariously through his mini-comic *The Violent Life Of Deathweasel*. At one point, he's telling me about another Boston area zinester named Reverend Richard J. Mackin. Consumer Defense Corporate Poet and real life reverend (of California's Universal Life Church), Mackin is the one-man-show behind his *Evidence of Active Thought (E.A.T.) Publications*. Ads for his zines adorn the back covers of Jones' first three minis. Aside from all that, Mackin was the one responsible for Jones' big leap into the zine world, all during one of their many get togethers on Sunday in Mackin's apartment in nearby Alston to watch *Simpsons* and *X-Files*.

Jones being the main subject, I didn't bother to delve into Mackin's work and how through his simple routine of writing letters to companies big and small, he's made himself, in some cases, a more ominous figure in the eyes of big business than most Naderites that marched through the streets of Boston

this past September (which would explain why Mackin even opened for Nader on the eve of voting day). Still, there was something about one unknown endorsing another unknown, as Jones had done with labeling Mackin "a local celebrity." One of the good things about alternative press is that if something artistic is being covered, even if there is a bias (as there clearly is with this piece), there isn't really any profit in being a trumpeter for an alternative artist. If a trumpeter's being blown, it's because someone really enjoys that person's work.

With those few words from Jones, I was influenced to seek out Mackin's work. Two years later, I'm still searching, but now it's mostly for new releases.

December, 1998. Mackin is holding a release party at *Flyrabbit*, the most unique thrift store in Alston and the rest of the Boston area, for his eleventh *Book of Letters and This Place Is Weird*, a black and white collection of his various art pieces.. Outside the world of comics, I haven't come across any other zinester whose work is "out there" enough to merit even a small in-store signing such as this one. I also haven't come

BY CHAD PARENTEAU

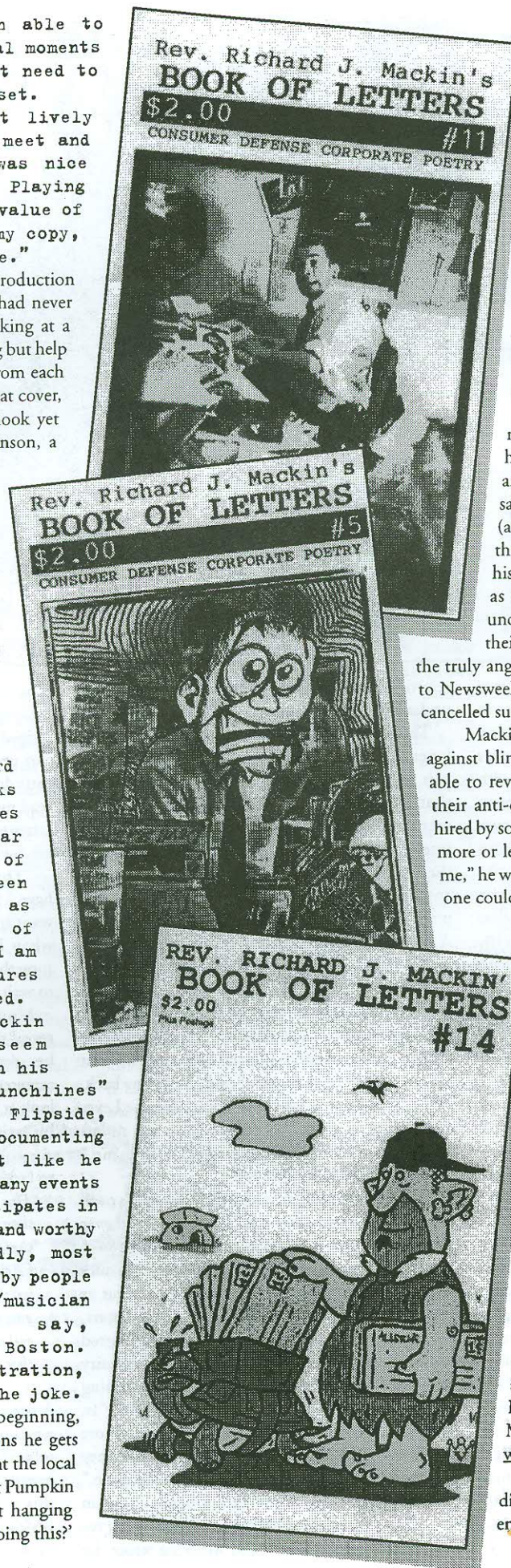
across anyone who has been able to take advantage of promotional moments the way he has and still not need to have drawing be his main asset.

Because of the small but lively turnout, there was time to meet and talk, and of course he was nice enough to sign the book. Playing off my original joke of the value of his autograph, he wrote on my copy, "Hope this doubles the value."

My initial thoughts about the zines production then hold true now. Even if Mackin had never said it, it's clear that the years of working at a local copy shop chain have done nothing but help him. That Mackin learned and grew from each project more evident than than with that cover, which sported the most professional look yet with a photo by Duncan Wilder Johnson, a fellow graduate of the Massachusetts School of Art and another visual artist who has found his main artistic outlet to lie in the written and spoken word. The two make up half of their spoken word compilation *On Tour Without A Band* and embarked on a mini-tour earlier last year, with Mackin luckily avoiding death by a reckless driver in New Jersey.

September, 1999. I'm standing nearby a group of individuals led by Richard J. Mackin, who only weeks earlier was handing out invites to his "Non-Protest". As far as I know, it's the first of its kind. If there have been others, perhaps they were as poorly attended by members of the media as this one is. I am the only one taking pictures that's not directly involved. My habit of covering Mackin related events must seem unhealthy. Mackin, through his zines and his "Sucker Punchlines" column in the punk magazine *Flipside*, shows no problems toward documenting his own life, so it's not like he needs a publicist. Luckily, any events he either creates or participates in I've always found enjoyable and worthy of outside attention. Sadly, most of them seem to go unnoticed by people outside of the DIY/artist/musician crowds—which is to say, unfortunately, most of Boston. Although with this demonstration, most passersby seem to get the joke.

Mackin, during the non-event's beginning, reminisces about some of the reactions he gets from people, whether it's his protests at the local Niketown or his preaching of the Great Pumpkin every October. "People that are just hanging out will say, 'So do you get paid for doing this?'"



No. 'So you're just out here for no reason.' But you're out here for even less reason!"

At one point, Mackin even mocks my note-taking, imagining what I must be writing: "This is Chad's journalism notebook. 'August 22, did something with Rich Mackin. Boy, he's a Crackpot. April 22, did something with Rich Mackin. Boy, he's a crackpot. March 8, interviewed Rich Mackin. Boy, he's a crackpot.'"

Now it's December, 2000; and with a new fourteenth *Book of Letters* already out and a solo spoken word CD in the works, I'm sitting in my room, wondering who the crackpot really is.

Over the last few years, Mackin has gained much attention in the alternative press world for his series of zines. The ones that stick with people are most likely the playful ones, such as his ongoing salvos challenging the makers of Lever 2000 soap to (ahem) come clean as to how they came up with their catchy name. Still, Mackin earns full marks for his occasional sarcastic and very defiant letters, such as those to Gillette, who wrote to assure him—unconvincingly—that they have significantly reduced their testing of products on animals. Then there are the truly angry letters, few and far between, like his responses to *Newsweek* magazine's hustling for more payments on his cancelled subscription.

Mackin is also on his way to making his irreverent salvos against blind consumerism his day job. Though he wasn't able to reveal much about his new job with TRUTH and their anti-cigarette campaign, he did mention that he was hired by someone who had read his zine. "People can imagine more or less what an antitobacco campaign would do with me," he wrote me recently. In his most recent *Book of Letters*, one could see some sort of prelude of things to come from

his work on behalf of TRUTH. In a letter to Kraft on their decision to recall products using genetically altered Taco Bell corn, Mackin brought up the fact that "your parent company, Philip Morris, is best known for selling products that are all about being unsafe. In fact, aren't cigarettes PROVEN to be dangerous while mutant corn is only PROBABLY dangerous?" The old saying, "I'd do this for free," seems very true for Mackin and his current occupation. He even held a zine workshop in Seattle on behalf of TRUTH this past August.

Best of all, he seems to have found a job which doesn't interfere with his commentary and reporting, which he should be known more for, especially when you consider his documentation of the past (and as of this writing, still ongoing) election year, taking time to cover the mock-campaigning of street performer Vermin Supreme and his quest to become Emperor for a New Millennium (this and more can be found on Mackin's website, the newly named www.richmackin.org).

Does this article's format seem like a stalker's diary yet? Read on just a bit more. The mock journal entries are, as you can tell now (and probably could



AUGUST 1999: RICH MACKIN (center) and fellow non-protesters

tell from the start), are a wink for past comments he made to me. Call this, if anything, a tribute to the one who got the ball rolling for me in reporting for and about independent media. For years Mackin has been promoting a small press scene with great success, seeing how he has almost been completely ignored for it. His Beantown Zinetown events held at the Massachusetts School of Art have received zero outside reporting. Too bad. In a city that is taking pride in becoming another generic tourist trap, Mackin showed me and others that there's whole other, more real side to living a city, no matter how hard the city tries to make it go away. And if he's lucky, Boston is just the beginning.

January, 1999. Bukowski's is a bar near both the copy store job he'll eventually escape and the watering job I'll still be stuck at two years later. It's my first time in the place, but Mackin recommends it for the food.

I'll step in there months later to talk with one of the owners, who will confess that she really doesn't like the author who this establishment was named after. My pressing for the story as to how it was named will make me realize what a fitting place it was to talk with Mackin about his ongoing and often one-sided correspondence.

White Whale was to be the culmination of his numerous letters to Lever 2000. It had started with a simple letter that can be read in Mackin's first Book of Letters and heard on the On Tour CD: "Your big selling point of your Lever 2000 is that it cleans all my body's 2000 parts. What 2000 parts? Could you list them? Technically it only cleans one part-the skin-as far as I can see. Are you

referring to different areas of the body? I just don't understand. Please inform me."

This led to their now relatively famous form letter and passages such as this. "The very fact that you were interested enough to write us indicates that we have achieved our goal of creating a memorable advertisement. Obviously, it was our intention that using the number product name and the fact that Lever 2000 is milder to the skin than any other antibacterial or deodorant soap on the market; it is formulated for use on the entire body." A second letter asking for clarification—a real answer, actually—only received the same letter slightly modified: "The very fact that you were interested enough to write us again [italics mine] indicates that we have achieved our goal..." This led to a correspondence that has been stretched out for many books. "A friend of mine from way back, who's been keeping tabs on me, said that the Lever 2000 quest was like my Moby Dick, my never-ending search that will someday destroy me," Mackin told me in Bukowski's.

The debunked quest seemingly reached its peak with a visit by Mackin and friends to the Lever warehouse in 1998 to seek an audience with any of the three consumer representatives, whose names Mackin knew by heart. The runaround was as blatant and hilarious as it had been in their letters. More than two years later, a less-than-half-hearted response was sent in response to a Lever inquiry postcard Mackin distributed in Book 6, explaining that they named their soap Lever 2000 "in anticipation of the new millennium." In a footnote to this reply in Book 14, Mackin writes, "How they can write a letter like this seriously is beyond me."

This wasn't the fist time that projects ended in not quite the way he expected. A similarly big to-do occurred some years back when he wrote the

local Star Market and everyone else involved in the making of the cans their iced tea mix were put in, judged by Mackin to be too difficult for a normal can opener to open. His influence led Star to introduce a new foil tab, which Mackin, after a reading of letters to Star held over at a friends house, attempted to open this new top, only to have the tab break off without tearing the foil at all.

"That's a real problem that a lot of my projects have," he also told me. "It takes me longer than I want to get around to actually presenting it. Just when I say, 'okay, I'm gonna put together this,' something new develops, And I say 'Oh, I'll have to wait.'"

Most of his projects that have surprise endings reveal much more than he intended. Even though he never got an audience with Lever's representatives, he and his readers got an interesting look at how companies operate. He puts it best in his written version of the Lever saga on his web site entitled "My Quest" after recapping his face to face encounter with a Lever representative.

This is where I get scared of myself because this then starts to have a point to this stupidity... If these guys are so secretive about what their FREAKING NAME means that a person whose job it is to deal with consumers can't give a straight answer or even TALK to someone about it, what evil could they be up too? I mean, they can't admit that their name is made up to sound cool.

A similar portrait was painted for Mackin' readers when in his eleventh Book of Letters, which briefly told of his letter to IBM, with a similar innocent question. "I was wondering, are you aware that this is a sentence? I BM. As in I, me, have to BM." Without having given his phone number, he was contacted by them and unofficially asked

to cease and desist.

With Mackin's knack for creating fresh new insights, I pity the cigarette companies and whoever deals with Mackin. They'll wish it was just another lawsuit.

April, 1999. Earthfest is how Boston officially celebrates Earth Day. The celebration involves many soft rock bands, as the whole event is sponsored by local lite station WBOS. It also involves non-environmentally sound food vendors and booths of environmental groups placed far away from the festivities. Trash of all kinds, recyclable and otherwise, will be scattered all over the grounds by the day's end. It's also the place Rich Mackin will flex his DIY muscles (for the second year in a row) by passing out his "Litter A Park For The Earth" propaganda. Like last time, he's joining in with others.

"Litter a Park For The Earth!" was also the theme for his third and last foreseeable issue of Protests Are Your Best Entertainment Value (PAYBEV). Mackin was passing these out to passersby while easing me in to my first encounters with Supreme and fellow street performer Ian MacKinnon. We were both there in anticipation of the latest planned protest of the Church of Euthanasia, a group headed by Chris Korda, the son of Simon & Schuster mastermind Michael Korda. Korda takes pride in calling his small group a pro-environment, anti-industrial, anti-humanity suicide cult, though none have killed themselves yet. They take pride in crashing events with banners that say things like "Save the Planet - Kill Yourself!" and "Eat a Queer Fetus For Jesus!" Mackin draws a line or two at saying he's a supporter of the COE, but in the past he has gladly revolved his own, friendlier information campaigns revolving around them.

"Holding a small sign saying something logical does not necessarily draw the attention of having a banner saying something illogical," he told me back in Bukowski's. "If I was doing something, and I could get the Church of Euthanasia to show up even if they were totally unrelated, I would just because they would get the attention, and then it'd be up to me to say, 'oh, well, this is what we're doing.'"

He was doing quite a bit of that as the COE's makeshift raft was bobbing up and down on the Charles River with their "Save The Planet - Kill Yourself" banner acting as a unintentional sail and playing "spoken-word" versions of techno pieces from Korda's album Six Billion Humans can't be wrong. This included "Buy" with its title serving as the mantra and "Fleshdance" with its manta: "Cow chicken pig human, cow chicken pig human. What's the difference?" Somewhere in between, Korda took time on the speaker to denounce the environmentally-unfriendly businesses in charge of promoting Earth Day, even borrowing Mackin's "Litter A Park" catchphrase at one point.

A motorboat started circling the boat and

creating waves, adding to the already existing turbulence coming from the wind and their large banner. Eventually a boat commandeered by police went out to them. An official police boat follows. Eventually, they were asked to take the wind-whipped banner down and be led to shore. For their safety, not to censor them, or so they said. On land, cops later asked them to leave. A small group of young people gathered on the Charles shore to watch the raft being "pulled over" then brought back to shore. They responded to this with chants like "Fuck the Pigs!" and "Free the Charles River!" The most prominent one, though, was "Free speech now!" Mackin chanted that one and so did I, to my surprise. At one point Mackin even yells, "Freedom of Speech isn't good for business!"

"BOS is cheesy!" someone shouted right afterwards. Mackin didn't miss a beat, shouting, "It's not that great of a mix!"

Though I ended up laughing for most of the events, Mackin still took time to say that this is why he named his zine PAYBEV.

October, 1999. The Oni Gallery. With another invite from Mackin, I'm at the random birthday party celebration of friend Jeremy Rosenberg (he picks the day his Birthday is celebrated every year, apparently), who isn't here to see tonight's mix of Spoken word performers, Mackin included.

Mackin, it should be said here, owes a bit to Don Novello, the real name of comic Father Guido Sarducci, who (not to get more confusing) wrote letters to various political officials under the pseudonym Lazlo Toth during the Nixon and Ford administrations "Toth's" letter to Nixon justifying how to explain using the word "kike" is alone worth seeking out a copy of The Lazlo Letters.

Mackin, however, was inspired after writing one innocent letter to M&M's about their name and hadn't seen Novello's book until after the fact. "For two seconds, I was like, 'Aw, someone else already did this. I'm not that creative at all'; and then it kind of made me think, 'well, that kind of validates it as an art form.'" Plus, Mackin felt he had his own twist. "For the most part I'm writing as me, the guy who's writing crazy letters, just at face value without any secondary motive."

Both times at the Oni, located as a since torn-down Kingston Street warehouse in Boston's Chinatown area, Mackin had his own way of validating what he did as an art form (the letters I mention here are in Mackin's 12th Book of Letters). I had seen the early signs in February of that year. He had written to the people who made Cheez Its snacks just to tell them about a former co-worker who at the time flipped out on the entire staff before quitting and throwing a box of Cheez Its at someone. They never replied.

Later in October, I got to hear something in his letters that had something I only caught hints of prior: a very Life Affirming aspect most every other form of art has once in a while. In that year's series of letters, even more slices of his actual life became

intertwined with his thoughts and observations. Mackin's crackpot antics were almost set aside and in their place was Rich Mackin himself. The zenith for that performance and the year was a letter to Peggy Lawton Cookies, where Mackin told a story about how he befriended a fellow pinker with a Mohawk and a surly look on a train to Connecticut by offering Peggy Lawton Cookies. "In case you are the type to be prejudiced against guys with Mohawks," he wrote, "he also went to MIT and later taught at Tufts."

"Anyhoo, why does every Peggy Lawton Oatmeal Cookie look like it has a finger print in the center?"

Mackin, after reading the letter to the small gathering of faithfuls, then stated for the record, "This is why I do what I do," before reading the following: "Dear Mr. Mackin, It was another one of those hot and oppressive mornings here, that is until we read your kind and encouraging letter. We now feel like the cool breezes have refreshed us. What a lift to hear from a happy customer!" Nobody in the audience could stop from laughing until he finished that and showed off his complimentary Peggy Lawton key chain.

April, 2000. The Biodevastation protest, a direct and controversial protest planned in response to the BIO 2000 conference is in full force when I finally arrive. The people in butterfly costumes are in full force. The press conference becomes interrupted by a Biotec representative. The happy go lucky events are interrupted by the Korda his new COE banner (among many old staples present) "Human Extinction While We Still Can" Even the Free Mumia Abu-Jamal people are to be found. And of course, there are the police, who in the wake of the WTO conference went to great lengths to ensure that there would be no riot. Their overdoing it is the reason I expect a riot to happen. That's one reason why I don't want to photograph Mackin when I run into him, to save film. Also, there's the fact that I've been doing a lot of reporting that either involve him directly or at least mentions him as a source. Even two of the cartoonists I've interviewed over the last year I first met at Mackin's Beantown Zinetown. I'm tempted to write an article entitled "Six Degrees of Richard Mackin."

So I didn't photograph him, though I regretted it later, recalling him with his laboratory coat and Flipside press pass. We walk up to each other, he looks at me, and once again he doesn't miss a beat. "So all the crackpots are out today."

I felt like he included me in that statement. I felt like I finally belonged. Take that anyway you want.