

Hi Yo, Silver!

Although I welcome clichés in silent films, country lyrics, and *Archie* comics, I'm no fan of them in real life. When musicians or professors I know become entangled with, respectively, heroin or an undergrad, I don't pass judgment about their morality, professionalism, or weak wills, but rather I feel embarrassed about their unoriginality. By this standard, I should have been pretty ill at ease when I found myself in a rundown hospital on the Southside of Chicago, seated at the deathbed of a wizened old bluesman, choking out his final wishes in rural dialect.

Several factors, however, redeemed me from stereotypicality. The singer was not imparting rough-hewn wisdom to make me a better man, not trying to guide me toward the crossroads where the mystic secrets of the blues would be revealed. He wasn't sacrificing himself for my Caucasian redemption, and he didn't anoint me with coolness by sharing his essential "soul." Cool was not a commodity that the Black Lone Ranger, who was instructing me about which mask he wanted to wear at his funeral, had to share. When he rode the number 28 bus in his powder-blue Lone Ranger outfit, plastic guns by his side, a ragged, hand-sewn mask covering his face, urban teens laughed at him. Even in his element—blues clubs such as the Checkerboard Lounge, in which he'd become a fixture over the decades—the Ranger

was begrudgingly allotted only five minutes a night on stage with the band, singing one of the three Muddy Waters songs in his repertoire, receiving modest applause and no pay.

But despite being an outsider even among marginalized groups, the Black Lone Ranger had earned a place in Chicago blues history. Sadly, that place seemed to be a dark corner, solely consisting of faded memories made murkier by Old Style beer and Newport smoke; an oral history asterisk to tales of headliners and icons. And it was in regard to this fate of obscurity that the Ranger offered me something significant: a sense of purpose.

For the better part of the last twenty years, I've been able to gather a group of amateur music historians to document scores of forgotten figures, using the most meager of media outlets: do-it-yourself zines, community radio, and public access television. While we haven't been Alan Lomaxes or Harry Smiths (our documentations don't redefine music history), we've avoided the music magazine traps of letting publicists and advertisers determine editorial content. Although *Roctober* will never be



The author with Black Lone Ranger.

blessed with the budgets or circulation of the mainstream periodicals, it will never be cursed with oppressive word counts or demographic limitations. And even if we've never wielded enough power to put much money in the pockets of our interviewees (or in ours, for that matter), we take satisfaction in the fact that Google no longer mocks them with a smug "Your search did not match any documents."

I started publishing *Roctober* magazine when I was a student at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1992, if you can use the terms *publishing* and *magazine* to refer to a messy clump of stapled Xeroxes ornamented with crayon marks. I had been making photocopied comics, joke books, and newsletters since grammar school, but my inspiration for *Roctober* came

less from having printers' ink in my veins than from having a typewritten interview in my backpack and no place to publish it. Weeks earlier the six-foot-seven Sleepy LaBeef, a rockabilly behemoth, had played at Chan's Egg-roll and Jazz, a massive Chinese restaurant in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Motivated by a call for submissions from some punk rock locals for their proposed zine, some friends and I decided to go to the show and interview Mr. LaBeef. I had enjoyed the singer's resonating baritone several times in Chicago bars, and his down-home charisma, 1950s rockabilly credentials, and thousand-song repertoire held the promise of an amazing backstory. By pre-Internet standards, I had pretty good research resources: Brown's Ivy League archive at my disposal and access to a network of obsessive record and magazine collectors. But I was surprised to discover that there was little information to be found on a man I considered a legend. It was disappointing, but simultaneously exciting; while it was wrong that history had ignored Sleepy, we were in a position to correct that injustice.

The interview went well. But the zine we originally did it for—as went many of the best-laid plans of people who rocked tattoos and piercings before you could get them in malls—never happened.

Not wanting to let our work go unseen, and realizing that the best resource I had as an art school kid was a deep pool of talented peers, I asked my classmates to contribute comics, essays, illustrations, and origami designs as side dishes to the LaBeef main course. Thus, the first issue of *Roctober* was born.

Since then we've published almost fifty issues, most with color covers, averaging around 100 pages. Circulation ebbs and flows (peaking around 5,000, but usually settling at around half that) depending on the health of record stores, independent distributors, and the influence of review-



Roctober number 1 (1992). Cover art: Michael Lazarus.

ers. But we've always had a hearty base of fervent subscribers, and have never been at a loss for profoundly gifted (unpaid) contributors. We've featured work by some of the best underground cartoonists (including Jessica Abel, Chris Ware, and Ivan Brunetti, who let us publish his surprisingly unrepulsive audition samples for the *Nancy* newspaper strip); over 25,000 borderline-worthless record reviews (a not untypical example: our assessment of the band Orso read simply, "Bore-so."); exhaustive examinations of theoretical genres (like "robot rock"); and an ongoing exploration of everything Sammy Davis Jr. ever sang, said, or did. But the heart of the magazine has always been the lengthy conversations with lost, ignored, or forgotten artists. *Time Out* or *Spin* might ask a writer to boil down an interview to a word-count of 2,000, 700, or fewer words. If a *Roctober* conversation yields 20,000 worthwhile words, then that uncondensed epic is seeing print!

The mighty Black Lone Ranger was not the perfect *Roctober* interview (his piece is not included in this collection). This is in part because myth and mystery were so important to him (his tall tales outnumbered truths), but also because his low-key career did not have an epic arc that reveals itself in a lengthy, relaxed conversation. We've had some of our best luck with folks whose work might be familiar, but whose biography is unknown (like Sam the Sham of "Wooly Bully" fame); with figures once embraced by the press, but abandoned so long ago they deserve reexamination (David Allan Coe); or with stellar talents like Billy Lee Riley who traveled in the shadows of legends, never getting the big break themselves. But often our best interviews come from the true fringes. A band such as Zolar X may have expected mainstream success, but their quirks, ridiculous antics, and bizarre lyrics understandably never got them beyond their small core audiences. And sometimes the most interesting subjects have been genuine unknowns, like Guy Chookoorian, whose success came in a genre so peripheral (Armenian American novelty parody records), it nearly qualifies as ether.

To deliver these interviews, *Roctober's* brilliant group of contributors work countless hours on articles that require them to be researchers, private investigators, interrogators, psychologists, and in some cases, prison chaplains. In addition to a shared desire to bring these stories to light, each writer brings along his (or, in rare cases, her) own motivations. Gentleman John Battles values the relationships he builds with his heroes. One could say he collects semifamous friends the way he collects rare records

and monster movie memorabilia. But a more accurate assessment is that he offers profound loyalty to people used to being screwed over. Before his recent career revival Roky Erickson, garage rock legend and electroshock therapy victim, spent decades with only a handful of people he could trust, and he counted Battles among those few.

Though I suspect his record collection rivals Battles's, Ken Burke is more a proselytizer than a procurer; spreading the rockabilly gospel is his sacred mission. A fine musician himself, Burke's tireless work tracking down the genre's heroes, villains, and scrubs are acts of religious fervor undertaken with the precision and dedication of an illuminated manuscript transcription.

Other *Roctober* writers are driven by more personal but no less profound motivations. James Porter grew up in Pill Hill, a middle-class African American neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, where many working musicians make their homes. His consumption of pop culture involved great intensity (every music-themed article, TV show, and radio broadcast meticulously catalogued and cross-referenced in his photographic memory and scrapbooks) and broad diversity (inspired by his father, a Chicago cop with a love for country and western). Today, when James engages a veteran musician in deep conversation, he is not so much delighting in nostalgia but rather filling in the puzzle pieces of his own youth, figuring out what made him the only kid in his schools in the seventies whose tastes extended back to the fifties, across oceans, and beyond color lines rarely crossed in notoriously segregated Chicago.

Conversely, Jonathan Poletti is as interested in scattering his puzzle pieces as putting them in place. Unlike Gentleman John, he seems just as satisfied if his intense research and journalistic doggedness creates for him enemies rather than friends of his subjects. Mr. Poletti makes innumerable phone calls, maintains thorny correspondences, and tracks down obscure, unpopular texts in pursuit of profiles that ultimately seem to be less about their subjects and more about exploring and deconstructing his own, often ugly, notions of personal, gender, and sexual politics. Ultimately, I expect Jonathan will someday publish a collection of his studies of Zolar X, Jobriath, Lenny Bruce, Wendy Carlos, and the rest of his obsessions, which will collectively read as one of the most jarring, vivid autobiographies ever published.

My ulterior motives are a bit more selfish than those of my colleagues on righteous journeys of gallant service or redemptive introspection. I've

never been a particularly sensitive soul when it comes to rock 'n' roll consumption, foregoing the poets and balladeers for the more intense and absurd corners of noisemaking. Not long after launching the magazine, I realized that my greatest reward for tracking down howling R&B shouters, ridiculous gay disco art freaks, and bizarre garage rock eccentrics is that their untold histories and far-out philosophies are usually as wildly pleasurable as their music. To a degree I may be helping these artists tell their tales as a significant service to art and history. But mainly I do it because I *really* dig being entertained. Having Sugar Pie DeSanto share stories of warding off James Brown's advances felt like watching an awesome 3-D movie. Being eye to eye with Oscar Brown Jr. as he critiqued the U.S. government with language that bordered on sedition was positively thrilling. And hearing Paul Zone vividly describe the Fast's stage show, in which breakfast cereal and number-2 pencils were substituted for pyrotechnics, made me experience the kind of pure, honest laughter that comes too rarely in adult life.

Roctober launched at a good time to start a zine. Our notoriously messy layout has always embraced the literal cut-and-paste aesthetics of classic zines, but working in the desktop publishing, cheap Xeroxing, and computer-scanning era has its advantages over the purple-fingered mimeograph period, or the days of sticky Smith Corona typewriter keys. In the early '90s, with some help from Seth Freidman's righteous revival of the *Factsheet 5* zine guide, there was an explosion of thousands of small-press publications, predecessors to today's millions of blogs and specialty websites. High school kids, music geeks, and shut-ins the world over became accustomed to mailing off an envelope stuffed with a few well-concealed dollars and waiting a wildly variable period of time to get an off-the-grid, quirky publication in return. It didn't hurt that zinedom's main cheerleader, the DIY-centric punk rock scene, was going through an uncomfortable, but lucrative, mainstreaming. At one point during the Green Day-led pop punk boom, *Maximumrocknroll*, the not-for-profit "punk bible," was making so much money that they randomly sent checks for a few hundred dollars to *Roctober* and, I assume, dozens of other zines.

Although *Roctober* was on the surface slicker and more professional-looking than many of its Kinko's-born brethren, several things made it clear that we had more in common with a ninth-grade-girl's-diary zine than with an ultrahip indie rock mag, or MTV-friendly music glossy. The most important of these has always been our refusal to recognize demo-

graphic boundaries. We pride ourselves on our ludicrously expansive definition of rock 'n' roll, that includes, but is not limited to, R&B, metal, punk, rap, doo-wop, disco, noise, one-man band music, gospel, jazz, glam, country, big band, and any vaguely rhythmic audio produced by monkeys, little people, or professional baseball players. In addition to this, we strive to stand out by having an approach that is more populist than hipster-ism usually allows. Instead of making readers feel stupid for not knowing about some obscure performer, our writers share their enthusiasm for their subjects in such an infectious way that it holds the interest of those who have yet to, and may never, hear the artist's music. Each interview's introduction is meant to offer welcoming information to the innocently ignorant and artful affirmations to the intimately informed. Readers respond because our kooky subjects are respectfully presented, without a hint of ironic distance, as genius auteurs rather than sideshow spectacles. Never buying into "so-bad-it's-good," the unwritten *Roctober* manifesto makes it clear that any art that isn't boring is high quality. Certainly everything bombastic or colorful is not great; loud, melodramatic music can be unoriginal or insincere enough to elicit yawns despite thunderous volume and lightning-like flash. But genuinely strange, unprecedented, joyfully out-of-kilter work is almost never dull.

We often receive mail stating that *Roctober* is the music magazine for people who thought they were totally over music magazines. And when we are reviewed a frequent theme is that there is something revolutionary about making readers interested in music they didn't think they cared about. This is typified by an excerpt from a *New Disorder* webzine review: "(*Roctober's*) not all punk, or even a little bit punk, but the magazine as a whole couldn't be more punk."

People frequently ask me if *Roctober* will transition to a web-only publication at some point. Obviously, given the current economics of both the music and print industries, this



Roctober number 41 (2005). Cover art: Derek Erdman.

seems like it would make sense, yet our work would not be possible in cyber-zine form. Our virtuoso contributors are willing to toil over articles and interviews without pay in large part for the unique reward of physically holding the work in their hands. Likewise, I would not put in the hours without the prospect of being able to fantasize that I am walking in the footsteps of iconic print magazine editors like *Mad's* William M. Gaines, *Famous Monsters of Filmland's* Forry Ackerman, or *Maximumrocknroll's* Tim Yohannan. I love magazines, and would like to think *Roctober* is an offspring of not only the punk zines I dug in the eighties and the goofier rock magazines I loved from the seventies like *Creem* and *Rock Scene*, but also of the fabled mimeographed sci-fi fanzines that preceded their rock 'n' roll successors. I grew up in awe of the voluminously researched articles in the *New Yorker*, the abstract haikus that were the regional rankings in Wrestling fan mags, the sublime balance between Civil Rights Movement coverage and bikini cheesecake shots in Chicago's own *Jet*, and the glorious absurdity of teenybopper rags, such as *16*, Britain's *Smash Hits*, and Cynthia Horner's *Right On!* (which championed Prince before any other publication). I was blessed to grow up in Chicago, a city that not only had a great public library, with dusty boxes of '60s hippie newspapers and '70s punk magazines in their periodical archives, but also had stores like Larry's, Bob's Newsstand, and Shake, Rattle & Read that made ancient monthlies accessible.

In my mind *Roctober* is as much a publication that honors the history of magazines as the history of rock 'n' roll. Our logo pays homage to *Right On!* We've had tribute covers of *TV Guide*, *Highlights*, and *Famous Monsters*. We published a "swipe" issue, consisting of articles reprinted from legendary, out-of-print music magazines like *Punk*, *Bomp*, and (my all-time favorite) *Kicks*, supplemented by new interviews with the defunct publications' creators. We've even published a *Mad Magazine* tribute issue so extensive that it led to one of my proudest moments in publishing: receiving a cease-and-desist letter on glorious Alfred E. Neuman stationery. Public Radio often brags of "Driveway Moments," broadcasts so intriguing that listeners remain in parked cars, glued to their radios long after reaching their destinations. *Roctober* is proud of our similar achievements: "Faux Constipation Moments," where our lengthy articles so fascinate a reader that he or she sits on the toilet long after their business is done. As long as there are toilet tanks, twelve-hour between-gig tour van rides, and slow days work-

ing retail at record stores, *Roctober* will proudly continue to be a “pulp and staple” publication.

Roctober has given me many gifts over the years, and it’s hard to isolate the highlights of the experiences it has allowed me to enjoy. The pieces included in this collection spotlight some of those moments (look for the delightful pornography-fueled event following the David Allan Coe interview), but there are myriad others. On the basis of one seminegative clause in a glowing review of his memoir, Eddie Shaw, the brilliant, self-critical bassist of ’60s garage punk band the monks invited me, a stranger, to be the only nonband and nonfamily attendee at the monks’ reunion weekend in the Minnesota backwoods. Slack jawed, I enjoyed bonfires, storytelling, and jam sessions with my all-time favorite “lost” band. A visit to the Chicago suburbs to get photos for an article about Jack and Elaine Mulqueen, a couple that hosted a local children’s dance show in the ’60s, inspired my wife and me to start *Chic-A-Go-Go*, a cult-favorite cable access dance show that we have happily churned out for over 700 consecutive weekly episodes. And spending time sitting in a Skokie deli eating kreplach with Milt Trenier, the jump blues legend who married his way into Chicago suburban Jewishness, was one of the most pleasant afternoons I’ve ever spent. Simply put, despite having made less money than a nonunion janitor and having put in a lot of ninety-eight-hour workweeks, *Roctober* has given me a profoundly satisfying life. I truly dig sharing the stories, music, and energy of some of the hippest square pegs in music history.

Not long after his bedside directives, the Black Lone Ranger rode off into the sunset. His brother (who was wearing a turban encrusted with costume jewelry when we met) and his sister (who did not dress like a character from a cliffhanger movie serial) were happy to receive the instructions from their mysterious sibling, and the Ranger’s funeral was held according to his wishes. Standing over the casket at Taylor’s Funeral Home and gazing at the masked man’s earthly shell (in full costumed glory, of course), I realized that the Black Lone Ranger had actually offered me more than an opportunity to document his existence. The way he spent years in the shadows of blues clubs waiting for a few minutes of action demonstrated the patience and optimism that define the lengthy careers of never-say-die *Roctober* artists such as the Good Rats, Oscar Brown Jr., and Zolar X. In each case they refused to succumb to negativity, conventional

wisdom, and, in some cases, reality. The lesson these icons of obstinacy offer is to never quit, even when you probably should. These days, this kind of quixotic stubbornness can come in handy for anyone committed to print media. It's especially inspirational if you publish a low-circulation zine focusing on cult figures so obscure that they barely have cults.

Although a nice slice of the local blues community came out to the Ranger's service, the Windy City did not pause and hold its breath at his passing the way we did when Studs Terkel, Walter Payton, Harold Washington, or Harry Carey died. In fact, his death was hardly noted save for one poignant obituary in the *Chicago Sun-Times* that respectfully honored most of the Ranger's fanciful mythmaking as fact. I was tremendously pleased to see a much-maligned man championed in mainstream print, and not only because it gave him the dignity he deserved. It also jogged the memories of thousands of clubgoers and Chicago Blues Fest attendees who had seen him in their periphery, and it introduced him to countless others. Most importantly, it helped inscribe his story in recorded history, echoing our magazine's goal of letting the world know that though they may be obscure, odd, and off the beaten track, people like the Black Lone Ranger are real, and their existence is worth noting.

Fortunately for that masked man's legacy there was a *Sun-Times* staffer who knew, and cared, about the Black Lone Ranger's story. That writer was a *Roctober* subscriber.