

BROOKS: WHERE HAVE ALL MISSOULA'S GAMBLERS GONE? | MIKE ADAMS WANTS TO PUNISH PROTESTERS. BUT DID HE INVENT A REASON?

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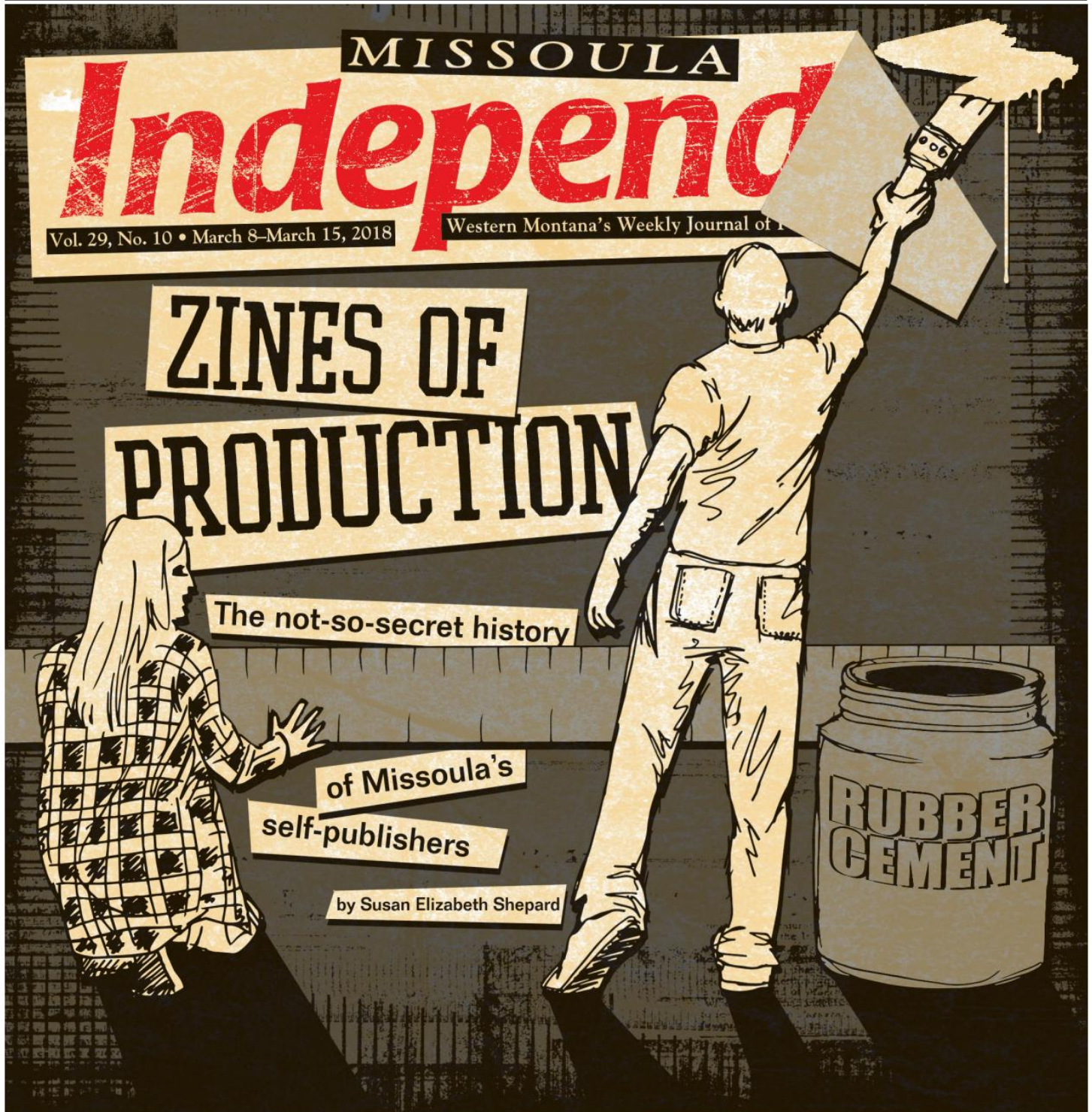
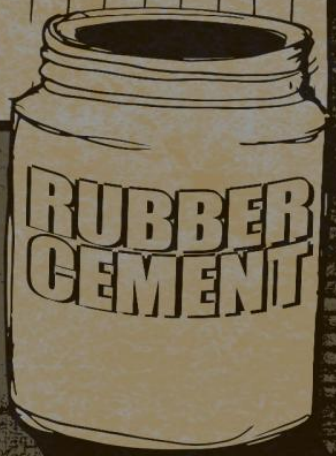
Western Montana's Weekly Journal of

ZINES OF PRODUCTION

The not-so-secret history

of Missoula's
self-publishers

by Susan Elizabeth Shepard



Imagine the internet just goes away tomorrow. Even worse, it disappears at the exact moment you're about to share a strong opinion, a perfect joke, a clever recap. While you're sitting there, phone in hand, about to furiously type "Kale is just collard greens that went to private school," the Wi-Fi goes kaput. The cell service drops. The cataclysm of your choice shuts down social media and instantaneous self-publishing of all sorts. Where does your opinion and insight go now? Are you supposed to just stop people on the street and yell it at them?

Back when rants and raves couldn't just be blasted into the world with the tap of a thumb, expressing them to a wider audience required setting them down on paper. Then you had to paste that paper into some sort of layout, take it to a copy shop, duplicate it, collate it, fold it, staple it. You'd leave copies at record

stores, bookstores and punk houses and maybe mail a few to friends. Congratulations, you just became a zine publisher.

who made them. The *Independent* certainly wouldn't be the same.

A new Missoula zine called *Brine* carries on the tradition of putting it on paper and passing it around. The latest issue, which came out in February, is cause for reflection on Missoula's rich history of lo-fi self-publishing.

THE 1990s

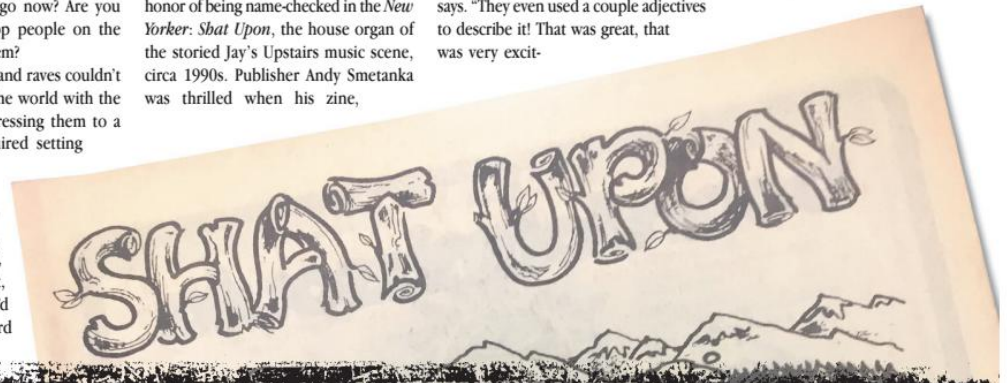
Only one Missoula zine had the honor of being name-checked in the *New Yorker*: *Sbat Upon*, the house organ of the storied Jay's Upstairs music scene, circa 1990s. Publisher Andy Smetanka was thrilled when his zine,

which he published under the nom de zine "Rusty," was mentioned in a story by William Finnegan, who recorded his time on the road with the Missoula band Sputniks. Twenty years later, with three yellowed newsprint issues of *Sbat Upon* in front of him, he still sounds tickled.

"That was a real high point. For any other reader of the *New Yorker*, it was just some passing blip of local color, or, 'Oh, that's quaint or funny,' but for me, I was starstruck, like 'Wow!,'" Smetanka says. "They even used a couple adjectives to describe it! That was great, that was very excit-

ing. Definitely its highest-profile appearance as far as I know."

Expansive in scope, *Sbat Upon* covered Missoula's underground bands, but also published lengthy stories about environmental activism and international travel, as well as shorter pieces that Smetanka, in retrospect, sees as precursors of today's ever-present internet listicles, like "Weirdly Named Places in Wales that You Might Like to Visit" and "Hobbit Excuses for Being Late to Work."



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What zines lack in instant gratification, they gain in atmosphere and tactility. In contrast to the flattening effect of the web, where everything tends to look the same, zines embody the specific times and places of their creators' ambitions. Whether it's yellowing newsprint or copy paper smudged with toner from a hurried Kinko's print job, a zine's very existence is evidence that someone cared enough to create an object.

As with many literary endeavors, Missoula has consistently produced more than its fair per capita share of notable zines, and many stalwarts of this city's cultural scene cut their creative teeth in self-publishing. You could make a pretty strong case that Missoula wouldn't be the city it is without its zines and the people



Smetanka's zine also gave a home to whimsical concepts like "The *Sbat Upon* Two-Dimensional Museum of Minor Rock Relics," which included photos and descriptions of ephemera, including a ball of pubic hairs from the Melvins' King Buzzo and a leftover green onion from a meal that Jeff Ament had eaten.

"It would have taken you a lot of effort 20 years ago to anthologize the weird variety of far-out information and oddball stuff that's packed into a *Sbat Upon*, but nowadays, that sort of stupidity, you can get in five minutes," says Smetanka, who became the *Indy's* calendar editor in 1999, and later its arts editor. Since then, Smetanka has gone on to storied achievements in the visual arts and filmmaking.

From 1996 to 2001, Randy Palmer published *Spaghetti Dinner and Dancing*, which contained passionate music coverage alongside Palmer's writing about his personal interests. Palmer now lives in Coeur d'Alene. "In Missoula, only a handful of people knew that I published a zine. I was kind of shy about it in person, but I loved the anonymity of being a print personality," Palmer writes in an email. "I usually put a few for sale at Ear Candy, and gave them to friends. I wrote for *Sbat Upon* once and got insanely drunk at Andy's *Sbat Upon* wrap party."

The scene was so vibrant there was even an intra-city zine beef when an issue of the punk zine *Aggro Scab* took potshots at Smetanka and *Sbat Upon*: "It's

and he quips that the original art is going to put his kids through college someday.

Two other current Portland residents, Zach Dundas, editor of *Portland Monthly* (and featured in Finnegan's *New Yorker* article as a member of the Sputniks), and Dan Engler, co-owner of Occidental Brewing, contributed to Smetanka's zine, but before that, they published five issues of *Mumblage* and distributed them through record stores from Seattle to Boise to Portland.

"We were triangulating the punk rock that we were into and our interest in magazines like *Raygun*, and we loved stuff like the Loompanics catalog, which is this insane publisher that put out all kinds of anarchist and libertarian literature," Dundas says. "We were just basically into weird stuff, and *Mumblage* was supposed to be about all the weird stuff that we were into. And I think on that limited basis, we succeeded."

It also helped him land a job. "I got offered a job writing at the *Independent* part-time because Eric Johnson" — the *Independent's* founding editor — "liked *Mumblage*... I'd kind of known him before, but that's when he was like, 'Hey, you should come write for the newspaper.'" His co-publisher, Engler, would later come on board at the *Indy* as production director. Zach's brother and bandmate, Chad, also wrote for *Mumblage* and the *Indy* before going on to a career in sportswriting and fiction.

The granddaddy of the '90s zine scene was *Inner Muscle*, from Josh Vanek, who still writes about music for the *Indy*. Vanek also started the Wäntage record label and the long-running Total Fest. He published *Inner Muscle* from "1994 or '95 to 1997," he says. "I don't know that there was a ton of foresight. Mostly we were interested in getting free music to review and covering bands we liked."

It didn't take long for *Inner Muscle* to make friends and enemies. The latter included Tim Bierman, who has managed Pearl Jam's fan club for the last 20 years, and at the time worked at Rockin' Rudy's.

"I think our first issue, I put a bunch of free copies of this 7" compilation that I put out, and there was a piece in there about Tim Bierman's band," Vanek says. "He had this not very good band and we sort of disrespected them. They always would find their way onto opening slots, this bad band, so in our first issue we said they stank." That went over so well that Bierman threw Rockin' Rudy's delivery of that issue, compilation and all, into the dumpster, Vanek says.

Like Smetanka, Vanek is glad to have the record of the era. "I like the idea of having some kind of product to show for that time. I'm kind of proud generally of it, although some of it you sort of look at 25 years later and think what an idiot you were."

ZINES ON STAGE

On Friday, March 9, *The Independent* will celebrate local zine publishers with an evening of discussion, readings and zine exchanges. Many of the zinemakers in this story will be present, and some will have zines to trade or sell. The event is open to all ages.

When: Friday, March 9. Doors open at 7 p.m.

WHERE: The ZACC Basement, 235 N 1st St. W.

WHAT: Missoula zines panel discussion at 7:30 PM. Participants include Debby Florence (*Slumgullion*), Tess Fahlgren and Halisia Hubbard (*Brine the Zine*), and Andy Smetanka (*Shat Upon*)

Zine readings at 8:30 p.m. Featured readers include Ladypajama, Charley Macorn, Tess Fahlgren and Rashid Abdel Ghafur

MORE ZINES: The ZACC Basement is also home to a zine library where some of the zines mentioned in this story can be read. The Zine and Small Press Collection at the University of Montana's K. Ross Toole Archives contains a nearly complete run of *Mumblage*, among others.

and is currently working on a Missoula documentary, *A Place Sort Of*, that was partially funded through Kickstarter. One supporter reward is a *Sbat Upon* anthology, so he anticipates revisiting the zine.

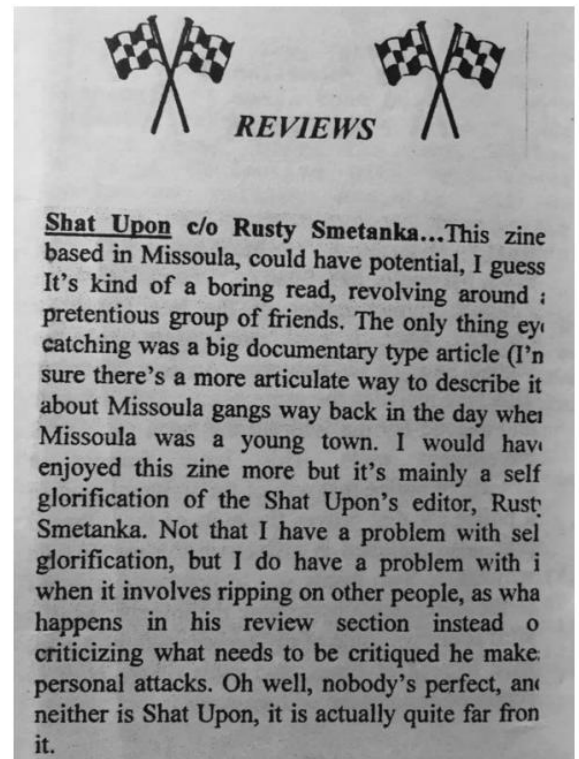
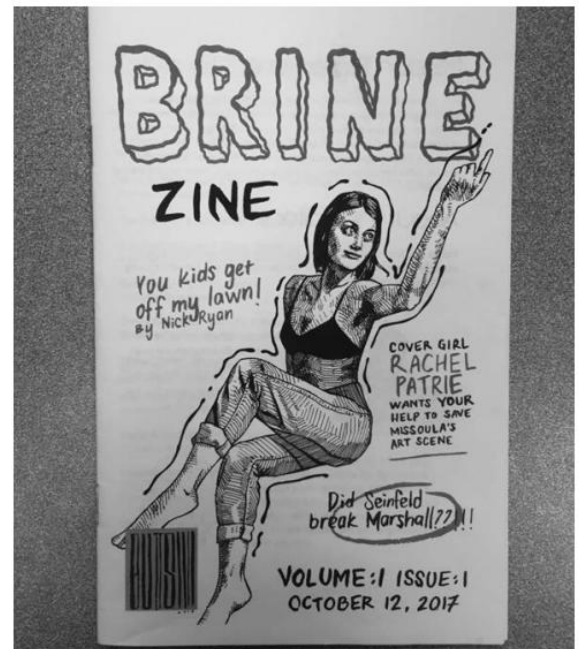
"I'm not going to be able to do that without adding some 20-years-later commentary and some new content," he says. "Next thing I know, I'm basically planning a new issue of *Sbat Upon*."

The zine explosion of the '90s, spurred in part by the maturation of the '80s-born national DIY network, made a strong mark in Missoula. By 1996, local teenagers were well into the zine scene. Leif Fredrickson, younger brother of *Indy* arts editor Erika Fredrickson, wrote a story for Hellegate High School's student newspaper about the newly created zine collection at UM's Mansfield Library, and a pair of teenage sisters published a Riot Grrrl zine called *Mad Gerl*.

kind of a boring read, revolving around a pretentious group of friends... I would have enjoyed this zine more but it's mainly a self-glorification of the *Shat Upon's* editor, Rusty Smetanka... Oh well, nobody's perfect, and neither is *Shat Upon*, it is actually quite far from it."

"There were some good-natured rivalries, and then some people for whom it was their sort of awkward way of introducing themselves," Smetanka says.

Sbat Upon's legacy includes early work from the Missoula diaspora currently populating Portland, Oregon. Carson Ellis, the illustrator responsible for the visual identity of her husband Colin Meloy's band, the Decemberists, did some of her earliest work in the form of *Sbat Upon* cover art. Smetanka says those covers might be the first thing Ellis did for publication aside from local show fliers,



PREVIOUS PAGE: Andy Smetanka says this issue of *Shat Upon* was rejected from Bernice's Bakery.

TOP: The first issue of *Brine the Zine*.

BOTTOM: A review of *Shat Upon* from *Aggro Scab* #3.

"It would have taken you a lot of effort 20 years ago to anthologize the weird variety of far-out information and oddball stuff that's packed into a Shat Upon, but nowadays, that sort of stupidity, you can get in five minutes."

But maybe more important than the record of an era was the example *Inner Muscle* provided. "I started seeing it around and got to know Josh before there was a *Shat Upon*," says Smetanka, who later published a split issue of *Shat Upon* with *Inner Muscle*. "He was kind of a paladin like that, in that he took the

"Actually doing" is the animating spirit that continues through Missoula's zine scene, filtered through the refusal to bother navigating professional channels and an insistence on creating exactly what you want to see.

body was doing any of that stuff," Florence says. "I just did it on my own, and I had a blog, and I would mail my zines to people." Then one day she saw a flier for the Missoula Free School. "I got really excited because it was like the first sign of anything radical happening here that I had noticed," Florence says. "So I got ahold of them and asked if I could teach a zine class. And like 20 people showed up to it." Florence went on to start *Slumgullion*, a zine and publishing collaborative that had a long reach in Missoula. It began as a student organization at the University of Montana and became a founding tenant in the ZACC. Florence taught classes, published a *Slumgullion* zine, started a zine library at the ZACC and pedaled a mobile zine cart around town behind a bicycle. Basically anything that could be done with a zine, Florence did it, and taught other people how to do it, too.

One attendee of Florence's zine class was an artist and writer known as Ladypajama, at the time a journalism student at the university who had published an underground newspaper while attending Hamilton High School. "We would get in trouble for making mockeries of things," Ladypajama says. "There were multiple times we got threatened to be expelled. That would have been our dream come true if we did!"

When a friend returned from the East Coast with an issue of *Real Life Diary of a Boy*, Ladypajama discovered the world of personal zines, in which the primary topic is the zinemaker. "That's my favorite kind of zine ... and that's the kind of zine I make," she says.

Ladypajama says Florence's Free School class gave her the confidence to make her own zine, which she began publishing regularly after moving away from Missoula in 2006, to keep her friends up to speed on her life.

Twelve years later, Ladypajama continues to publish *Blab Blab Blab* every month, a consistency unusual in the zine world, which she credits to the pressure created by her decision to sell pre-paid subscriptions. The obligation to make sure subscribers get what they paid for means that she can't just wait for inspiration.

"I have to make it every month, and it doesn't matter what the content is," she says. "The one thing journalism school did for me was instill deadlines. I have put out some terrible zines because the deadline was here, so I literally Sharpied on paper, 'I have no motivation at all! Here is a zine.'" More often, *Blab Blab Blab* contains a detailed vignette, or notes on being a mother, or whatever else she's thinking about.

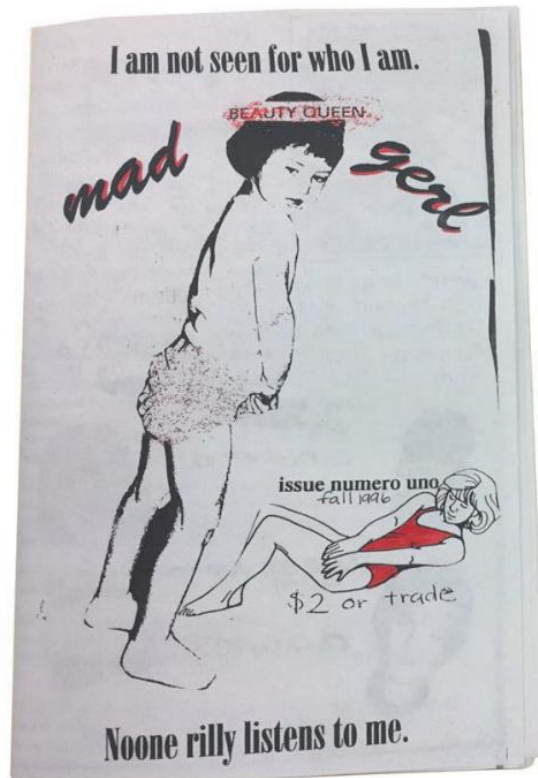
The *Slumgullion* collective tended toward artistic and poetic endeavors, as opposed to the music-focused zines of the '90s, and included contributions from visual artists Courtney Blazon and Theo Ellsworth, who would go on to careers in art and illustration. Ellsworth has published a number of art zines, and illustrated the poster for this year's Big Sky Documentary Film Festival. Blazon is the only artist who's knocked Monte Dolack out of the top spot in the *Indy's* Best of Missoula in the last five years, taking the top spot in 2016.

And all along, other local zinemakers continued to take the scene as their subject. A 2006 zine called *Afterbirth* positioned itself as a publication for "mostly the people you see at local punk and hardcore shows — the demographic that most of the Missoula literati and company would like to believe doesn't exist." In the time-honored tradition of DIY zines everywhere, *Afterbirth*, whose publisher was listed as "Chuck Fuctarded," positioned itself as an alternative to whatever publication was inexplicably ignoring its interests. In *Afterbirth's* case, that was a certain local alternative weekly, of which it wrote: "Every week in the *Independent* we see another review of another endearingly bohemian art rock band that is just as boring as the one they reviewed last week."

TODAY

On a chilly evening in February, a small group of arty Missoulians gathered at Ceretana, the Westside studio collective. The occasion was a First Friday Zine Workshop commemorating Rashid Abdel Ghafur's 37th birthday and the concurrent release of the 37th issue of the zine he co-publishes with Julie Tompkins. *Olgoi Khorkboi* (the name is a colloquialism for Mongolian Death Worm, a Gobi desert cryptid that resembles the sandworms of *Dune*) that's been coming out every two months since publication began in 2012.

Abdel Ghafur had been writing a dystopian science fiction novel and had considered self-publishing it as a book, but found the printing cost-prohibitive. Instead, he decided to serialize it as a zine.



Mad Gerl, a Missoula Riot Grrrl zine from 1996.

kind of ideas that, for a lot of us in the '90s, we would have had over a few beers, and having the idea and riffing on it was better than actually trying to do it. Josh was actually doing those sorts of things, putting out records and putting out zines, so that was inspiring."

THE 2000s

The indie culture boom of the '90s had subsided by the time Debby Florence came to Missoula from Minneapolis. "[Zines were] a normal part of my personal subculture, and then I moved here and no-

Abdel Ghafur also plays music in the black-metal band Zebulon Kosted and is a visual artist, and one microscopic studio in Ceretana had his artwork on display. The rest of the common space was given over to socializing. Threadbare rugs covered the floor, and several young people sat on a couch, cutting, pasting and drawing.

Two low coffee tables were pushed together, topped with baskets of magazines to cannibalize for content. There was no instruction, just communal cutting and pasting. Missoula musician and artist Nora Justice had brought along some treasures: a 1937 copy of *Nature* that everyone was invited to clip from, and a beautiful color-cover pamphlet made by Deer Lodge prisoners in the '60s — a true small-press rarity.

The next morning, a sunny Saturday, the co-publishers of *Brine the Zine* are at Clyde Coffee, paging through their first issue and talking about their contributors. Each story pairs a writer and an artist. *Brine* is a generalist's zine containing horoscopes, recipes, personal narratives and interviews.

Co-publishers Tess Fahlgren and Halisia Hubbard met and became friends in a ceramics class a few years ago. Last October, they put out the first issue of *Brine*, and a second last month.

Fahlgren and Hubbard can't help but pick at the little errors that went unnoticed in editing, like a misspelled word, and their failure to include an email address for contact information, but they say that didn't stop people from reaching out after publication. "When it first came out, I would get random stuff from random people, but it's been a while since that came out," Fahlgren says. "And really, there's not that many strangers left in Missoula."

Not many, but not none. As small as Missoula is, Fahlgren and Hubbard hadn't known about the previous night's zine workshop, and were excited to hear about it.

Before *Brine*, Hubbard had been putting out a personal zine called *Latterly*. Hubbard used *Latterly* to keep in touch with friends during a time when she was too busy to socialize. "It was kind of hard to keep the momentum," Hubbard says. "And then I had this dream to do a collaborative magazine-style zine, and I told Tess, kind of in passing, and she was like, 'Yeah, let's do it!' Then all of a sudden it wasn't a joke anymore and we had to make it."

Both Fahlgren and Hubbard have writing and art backgrounds. Fahlgren has a English degree with an art minor from UM, and Hubbard is double-majoring in journalism and fine art. They say they want *Brine* to be a celebration of Missoula cre-

ators in a time when people may not feel like celebrating. "It's a nice outlet when there's so much shit in the world. We don't want politics [in *Brine*]," Fahlgren says. "That's kind of what our name represents, too — turning salt into something more productive," Hubbard says.

Brine's publishers have the luxury of working in the internet age, and they aren't opposed to putting their content online. But they also want their zine to function as a physical artifact of the Missoula they know right now. Fahlgren says it's important to them to produce something both they and their contributors can take pride in, now and in the future.

"I want it to be really good. We take it really seriously," Fahlgren says. "And that's not something I just want to allow to disappear."

Which points to one of the key appeals of zines: Unlike a website, where content can be lost to a redesign or the abandonment of a domain, zines can't be deleted. And they'll always reflect the conditions of their making. Zines embody context that's stripped away by the internet, where a story can travel far beyond its origins. Zines have to be taken as a whole, with the feel of paper and physical imperfections making it clear that the product passed through human hands.

They also make for natural collectors items, and as long as zines have been around, zine enthusiasts have compiled them into personal libraries and local collections like the one in the ZACC basement, or institutional archives like the one at the Mansfield Library.

The very thing that gives a zine its archival value — its existence on paper — inevitably limits its audience, and that sense of scarcity and physicality makes for a satisfying moment when a zine publisher holds her finished product in hand.

Fahlgren and Hubbard laugh remembering the scramble to print the first issue of *Brine*. It turns out that advances in desktop publishing haven't made booklet sequencing any more intuitive now than it was 20 years ago, and when they went to print copies for *Brine's* first release

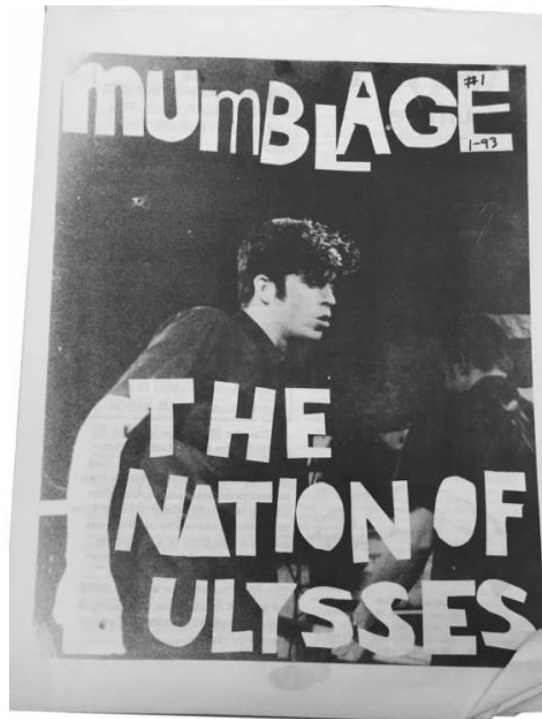
party, they discovered the pages weren't in the right order. Hubbard had to make some very-last-minute adjustments.

"The *Kaimin* was there and took a photo of us as we saw our stuff printed out on the page for the first time, and this is like a real photo of us being excited," Hubbard remembers. "It was pretty emotional!"

identity — so distant from coastal media and attention, isn't built on the drive to embody personal passions using whatever tools are at hand.

"I think the combination of education and boredom is a powerful one. That was definitely part of the story in [the 1990s], and I imagine it still is," Dundas says. "There's a lot of smart, am-

"There's a lot of smart, ambitious, interesting people in a city that doesn't have a commercial media infrastructure that's very big, and so there's a lot of having to create it yourself."



The first issue of Zach Dundas and Dan Engler's zine *Mumblage*.

Also satisfying was the response. "We decided to do a release party. We didn't know if anyone was going to show up," Hubbard says. "And like 50 people showed up!" One attendee approached Hubbard to tell her, "This is what Missoula's all about."

Maybe not *all* about, but it would be hard to argue that Missoula's creative

bitious, interesting people in a city that doesn't have a commercial media infrastructure that's very big, and so there's a lot of having to create it yourself."

If the internet goes down tomorrow, that necessity, and that opportunity, will be alive and well in Missoula. **fj**

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