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## Here's to comic artists

Jam sessions encourage talents to drink and draw with fellow cartoonists

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Entertainment Reporter

"Could I borrow a pencil?" asks a large man, approaching a table at the back of the bar.

"2B or 4H?"

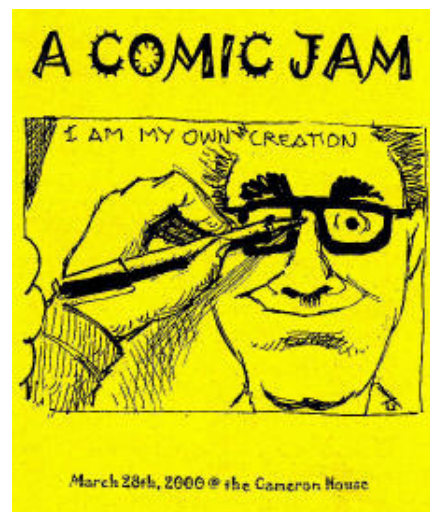
On any other night of the month, this would be odd bar-room conversation, but tonight is the Comic Jam, and eraser bits are floating in the beer. Littered among the ashtrays and half-empty pint glasses are technical pens, Sharpie markers, Liquid Paper and German erasers. It's the gear of the comic book artists who have annexed the back of the Cameron House on Queen St. W. for their monthly communion, the Toronto Comic Jam, an event that invites artists to leave their studios to drink and draw in the harsh realm of the public.

"In social situations, comic artists often find themselves doodling in notebooks and drawing on napkins, and they feel awkward," says Dave Howard, creator of Toronto's Comic Jam, which takes place on the last Tuesday of every month (except December), with the next instalment tomorrow night. "They find this to be a wonderful inversion - everybody's drawing. In fact, to not draw is an anomaly."

Like a musical jam session, a comic jam is a collaborative effort. It works like this: An artist strolls into the bar, orders a beer and sits down at a table with a piece of paper and his or her preferred drawing instruments. After sketching a panel that sets the premise of a story, the artist hands the paper off to a fellow cartoonist, who continues the story. The page is handed around the room, with each new artist bringing a twist to the style and storyline of the comics, which get raunchier as the empty pint glasses pile up.

When the page is completed, it's taped to the wall for display. As the night goes on and more pages are completed, the bar magically transforms into a gallery of comic art. After the jam, the pages are compiled and published as an anthology that is available to contributors only.

"There's a time when people's inhibitions break down, and it becomes a party. The social interaction happens when people pass the pages around," says Howard, describing the event he's been organizing for five years. "It's a really interesting part of the night when the wall is covered with pages, and you can



WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT: The front cover of a book of comics compiled at the Toronto Comic Jam in March 2000 at the Cameron House.

walk up and see the whole event in one shot. There's one point in the evening when everyone's hanging around the wall talking about the comics."

There's an unmistakable hint of pride in Howard's voice. It's clear the event is his baby, an occasion he holds close to his heart. Ever since he was exposed to alternative comics - R. Crumb's *Fritz The Cat* specifically - he's been passionate about the world of underground comics, and this is his contribution to the subversive scene. Before establishing the Comic Jam, Howard published what he considered a comics equivalent of a literary magazine, called *Don't Touch Me Comics*. He says he was hoping to bring some credibility to the genre of independent comics, the eternal cultural underdog.

"In university, I saw all kinds of writers groups and literary magazines. It seems like they had all this help and legitimacy. Comic artists don't have that same history."

"I perceived that what young comic artists needed was the same kind of model that young prose storytellers had. There was a perception that it was okay for them to be doing what they were doing - that it was a tough but worthy life, and that they could support each other."

To Howard, support and a sense of community have always been lacking for comic artists, who generally struggle in solitude for success in the low-paying and under-appreciated industry. But in the mid-'90s he saw a glimmer of hope. It was the Montreal Comic Jam, organized by Rupert Bottenberg. Howard decided to establish the event in Toronto to combat the isolating effects of a career in art, and to create the sense of community that had been missing.

"Something strange happens when people draw together," he says. "It helps people get out the feeling that they're alone in their basements drawing. With the Comic Jam, my hope is that the artists will influence each other. I like the cross-pollination of ideas. I like the idea of artists meeting each other and exchanging phone numbers."

Many artists, such as illustrators and animators, have found themselves in careers that exploit their skills rather than their creativity. For Allan Bunce, who works as a senior storyboard artist for Nelvana, the Comic Jam is an opportunity to wield art tools for fun instead of cash.

"I do drawing for a living, but this is free from trying to make money," Bunce says, not looking up from a wobbly sketch that has one-pint-too-many written all over it. "This is way more pure, and has to do with what I loved about drawing in the first place. It's drawing for the hell of it. It's the neatest thing you can do on a Tuesday night - it's my big social event for the month."

A survey of the room illustrates a profound, universal appreciation for the jam. Matt Daley has been coming to the event since it began in November 1996, and his expressive, brushy drawings have been a consistent highlight of the Comic Jam book.

"When I was in high school, I wanted to be a cartoonist and illustrator, and there wasn't anybody to relate to. Comic arts aren't really appreciated in North America," says Daley, an aspiring illustrator. "Too many people think of it as a throwaway form of art. But this has a good community feeling. This is a good way to get feedback on my art. It has helped me develop."

Toronto cartoonist and illustrator Steve Manale shares those feelings. "It's a great morale booster. It's not for work, it's drawing comics for the sake of drawing comics. And it's great to see what artists can do on the fly. They relax because they're drinking and there's no pressure."

But that sense of relaxation can dissolve in a hurry when one of Toronto's famous comic artists decide

to pop in for a cameo appearance. When Jay Stephens (*The Land of Nod*), Dave Sim (*Cerebus*) or Joe Matt (*Peepshow*) show up with pen in hand, the amateur comic artists sharpen their pencils, and needless to say, spend a little extra time on their drawings, hoping to create the perfect panel.

"There's an overwhelming feeling when you get handed a page that has a Jay Stephens panel on it," Daley says. "It's like, 'How am I going to follow this?' But that's the challenge and fun of it."

Howard recalls the first time he worked on a page with a big-name cartoonist: "In one of my first jams, I got to draw with Joe Matt, and it totally blew my mind to be drawing with this guy. It gave me a tremendous amount of self-esteem."

While it isn't rare for successful cartoonists to participate in the jam sessions, even some mainstream names on occasion such as *King Of The Hill* creator Mike Judge, there is one group that doesn't have sufficient representation. The Comic Jam attracts in the neighbourhood of 25 to 45 people, but on average, women only represent about 10 percent of the crowd.

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The next Toronto Comic Jam is tomorrow at the Cameron House (408 Queen St. W.), beginning at 9 p.m. There is no cover charge. For more information, check out <http://www.torontocomicjam.com/>

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