

## **Punk's Not Dead: Resurrecting Punk Fanzines at Michigan State University Libraries**

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By Joshua Barton, Michigan State University Libraries, <http://staff.lib.msu.edu/bartonjp>

In recent years, libraries have had a renewed focus on attending to hidden collections: our backlogs of materials acquired and forgotten because of their ephemeral or inconvenient nature. Sharing in the motivation to tend to duties ignored too long, the MSU Libraries has made an effort to identify and allocate cataloging attention to our own hidden collections. My presentation today is based on one of my experiences in this effort in which I was able to resurrect and catalog a collection of approximately 170 British punk fanzine titles from the late 70s and early 80s left untouched in our Special Collections Library for over 23 years. Fanzines, that is magazines made by and for fans, first emerged in the 1930s as self-published, self-assembled collections of writings by fans of science fiction. The punk rock movement of the late 70s adopted fanzines as a communication medium, enabled by the availability of Xerox machines and motivated by the disenfranchisement of punk rock from the mainstream music press. They featured interviews with bands, album reviews, concert reviews and rants on music and politics. Punk fanzines' handwritten and/or typewritten text, cut-and-paste collages, photocopied pages and stapled format established the look and feel that would be reiterated by zines for years to come ("zines" being a term adopted in later years, signifying a genre that "fanzines" are just one category of, according to Stephen Duncombe's Zine Taxonomy (9)).

As primary sources, zines can be well understood by comparison to other formats. Jenna Freedman, a zine librarian at Barnard College, offers this comparison when discussing the zines emanating from the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s:

"Zine writers ... question, explore, lecture, and rant with not only a broad spectrum of opinions but also a shared openness and authenticity. Other forms of ... primary sources exist ... What differentiates zines is the motivation behind them. As the print expression of punk rock, unlike diaries, they are

written to be shared and are more likely to be shared in the author's lifetime. Unlike that of blogposts, the distribution of zines is somewhat controlled, reflecting an intimate connection between author and reader. And compared to 1960s-style alternative press publications, zines tend to be authored by individuals, not groups, and are thus more personal." ("Grrrl Zines in the Library" 53)

With such unique value as primary sources, one might expect to find zines in libraries and archives. There are several libraries with strong zine collections, including the Wisconsin Historical Society, the New York State Library, DePaul University and Barnard College, to name just a few. There has been considerable attention and an increasing body of literature on zine collecting in libraries since the 1990s. Nevertheless, zines in libraries are still uncommon. They are difficult to collect for a number of reasons, not least of which is their disregard for publishing conventions that libraries rely on to streamline collection, acquisition and cataloging practices – a situation that Billie Aul describes as a clash between libraries' conceptions of a publication and zine editors' conceptions of their zines (Herrada et al. 81).

However, for significant movements like punk, fanzines serve as essential primary sources that libraries ought to provide to users. Punk was a musical, social and political youth movement in its original manifestation, one that championed resistance to convention, unmediated personal expression and self-reliance – values that were fostered and upheld in the context of the "scene" and dialogues within it. The fanzines that punks produced in the late 70s and early 80s contain the free personal expressions of their authors. Their design and construction demonstrate the Do It Yourself (DIY) ethics that self-reliance mandated. They also capture the dialogue of participants in the scene, such as conversations between fanzine publishers/editors and correspondence from readers. They give firsthand insight into a living, evolving scene.

Among reasons to collect zines is the consideration of libraries' duty to collect points of view from "the fringe." Many advocates of zines in libraries cite the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights' second declaration:

Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval (American Library Association).

James Danky of the Wisconsin Historical Society cites zines as valuable in their documentation of points of view that would otherwise be lost (Dodge 669). Stoddart and Kiser point out three valuable aspects of zines that make them worthy of collection: the provision of alternative points of view, their embrace of individual expression, textually, artistically and otherwise, and the insight they provide into popular culture (192-193).

Existing scholarship on zines is varied and draws interest from many fields. Punk fanzines in particular have been of interest as voices of political resistance (Duncombe; Kucsma). They have also drawn attention from art and design historians for their establishment of DIY aesthetic elements (Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic" 74; Triggs, "Typo-Anarchy: A New Look at the Fanzine Revolution"). These are just two examples; there are many potential areas of interest that warrant the presence of these fanzines in the library.

As far as we know, our collection is fairly unique. We found that very few of these titles were held by other libraries in OCLC's WorldCat database. The only institution that had comparable holdings was the British Library, but since their records were not in OCLC, our collection required mostly original cataloging. It is possible that other libraries hold similar materials but have not cataloged them.

Our punk fanzines, held in our Special Collections Library, consist of titles dating from 1976 to 1983. They are nearly all from the United Kingdom, with just a couple titles from Ireland. Most are from England, with a smattering originating in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, in that order of prominence. No records exist for how and when the fanzines were acquired. This is unfortunate, but Special Collections staff are able to make some educated guesses about how we may have ended up with them.

We can confirm that they have been held uncataloged since 1985, perhaps earlier. At the time, certain bibliographers were very interested in collecting British materials, though

popular culture materials were not particularly desired. Therefore, it is likely that the fanzines were lumped into a package of British purchases by some enterprising book dealer. The size and condition of the collection suggests that it was obtained from a single collector. In any case, they were acquired and held unprocessed for at least 23 years, being periodically re-discovered but left uncataloged all the while.

These punk fanzines are just one case among many of the hidden collections problem in libraries, in which materials are amassed but remain unprocessed and/or uncataloged and therefore hidden and inaccessible. In today's online research environment, if materials are not described, organized and somehow declared as available in online catalogs or some other access system, then there is little chance that the public or researchers will make use of them, or even know they exist. Some of the forces that keep collections hidden are intractable cataloging difficulties (something may just be too difficult or too labor intensive to adequately catalog), institutional priorities for cataloging that divert attention from certain types of material, and – yes, unfortunately –prejudice against types of material and points of view. In our case, it seems that the punk fanzines were stashed away and forgotten for the first two reasons: too hard to catalog, and not important enough. As the attitude toward popular culture studies at MSU became more favorable, their importance or lack thereof became less of an issue – not to mention the growing awareness of the many good reasons mentioned earlier for providing access to zines in libraries. What our punk fanzines needed was a convergence of the will and ability to catalog them. This convergence came in 2008 when I was invited to apply my recently completed serials cataloging training to any of the uncataloged serials in Special Collections. Personal interest led me to the punk fanzines. Within a year, the collection was cataloged, but not without a few hard decisions along the way.

One hard decision was whether to catalog them as serials at all. The diversity of some fanzine titles from issue to issue makes it desirable to catalog each issue separately, providing subject headings for each band and individual featured. This would provide fairly granular access for discovery by users searching for information on specific people or bands. However, this would exponentially increase the effort needed for cataloging. Cataloging as

serials – with one record for all of the issues of a given title – eases the cataloging burden and makes the materials discoverable at a general level, but at the sacrifice of granular access. Since I was the only cataloger working on these materials, we took the serials approach.

There are measures the cataloger can take to circumvent the loss of granular subject access for zines that the serials treatment entails. With some guidance from literature on zine cataloging and in consultation with other catalogers, I discovered and implemented a few strategies. The first was the inclusion of genre terms, namely the genre term “Fan magazines.” This is a local implementation of genre terms that is not standard practice yet, though the term itself is established as a Library of Congress Subject Heading (the heading was “Fanzines” until very recently – a change that we have some discomfort with as our materials usually refer to themselves as “fanzines”, as does the literature about them). Including this term allows the punk fanzines to be collocated within the online catalog and browsed along with other comparable materials.

Secondly, names and/or pseudonyms of editors and publishers are included as a note whenever possible, a practice also observed by Barnard College (Freedman, “AACR2 -- Bendable but Not Flexible: Cataloging Zines at Barnard College” 234). Individuals responsible for the publication of a serial are usually not noted in a serial record, but these materials seemed to warrant such a note. These fanzines are usually very personal projects and linking them with the names of their creators is likely to be useful for users trying to find them.

Noting editors and publishers is just one example of a broader strategy of including as much keyword-rich text in a zine’s record as possible. Other means of doing this are still being explored. For example, I have been experimenting with the inclusion of summary notes that would include historical or contextual information. Besides getting this information from examination of the fanzines themselves, I have proposed using the website Zinewiki.com, which is a Wikipedia-style repository of information about zines. It features entries on many popular and obscure zine titles, all of which are made available under a Creative Commons license that allows for their re-use. This proposal is currently under review, but it, or

something like it, could significantly enhance the discoverability of the fanzines in our online catalog.

Cataloging of the collection was completed in early 2009 and yielded some welcome reactions almost immediately. It helped us attract a significant ongoing collection of punk materials collected in Flint, MI during the 80s and 90s. It has also seen use in a self-directed class in MSU's Residential College in the Arts and Humanities that decided to focus their classwork on punk fanzines, using our collection as primary sources. We expect that research interest in the collection will grow as the general public and scholars become aware that we have these materials.

The collection has potential for future development. Cataloging it means that we now know what we have and do not have, so we are able to pinpoint and acquire issues needed to complete runs, or add titles that we do not hold. It gives the Library strength in an additional area of popular culture studies, where we already have several collections of distinction. The fanzines would make a great digitization project, given the high national and international interest in punk. However, they are rife with copyright implications that may impede such a project. At the very least, they could be considered as candidates for digitization of preservation copies that could then be loaned to other libraries within the context of Fair Use. Conversations about this have yet to occur at MSU.

A development that could create greater exposure for the fanzines would be to frame them as a discrete collection. Currently they are only discoverable as separately cataloged serials in our online catalog. It may be beneficial to create a separate online presence for the collection, perhaps a dedicated Web page with a browsable title list, or a separate, self-contained database. This could be explored if we discovered that there was demand for this kind of access.

For the time being, the sense of accomplishment of resurrecting a hidden and forgotten collection such as this is satisfying enough. The fanzines are an important component of the legacy of punk and useful to anyone interested in it. The experience of re-discovering and cataloging them will inform our work on comparable hidden collections as we continue to unearth whatever our predecessors at MSU may have left us and the sense of

contributing to the representation of the fringes of popular culture in our collection is very rewarding indeed.

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