

VISUAL ARTS

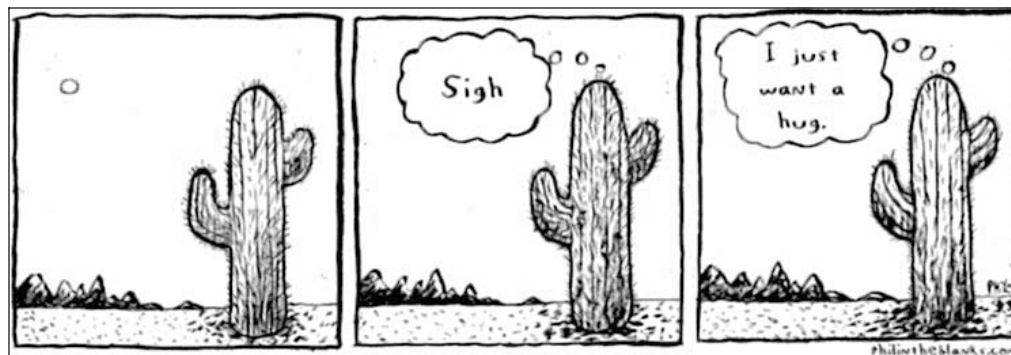


Illustration by Phil McAndrew.

Cybercomics to the Rescue

CNY comic squad posts graphic art On-line

by LAUREN BURGER

A shaggy-haired artist sits at a table in a bar, pencil in hand. From his back sprout angel-like wings. He overhears friends mocking him for spending his time drawing instead of hanging out with them. Sullen and isolated, the artist walks out of the bar, with his newsboy cap pulled down tight on his head.

Yet the artist who drew this self-portrait, Mike Stevens, is anything but alone. Along with his friends, Sean "Stuv" Holbert, and brothers Tyler and Phil McAndrew, he is a member of a motivated group of local comic artists who create and share comics through the internet.

Like a team of superheroes in the comic books they grew up reading, these young men play an integral part in each other's story development. Phil McAndrew, 20, is the leader, the one who organized his high school buddies to start a website, www.foundhatpress.com, to post their drawings. Stuv, 19, is the philosopher, able to find the irony in situations and turn it into scripts. Stevens, 19, is the comedian, quick with a friendly jab to nudge his friends towards better work, but with an intensity, in both his work ethic and his drawings. Tyler McAndrew, 18, is the reluctant one, who shied away from the world of comics, until he discovered they could offer more than cliché superheroes.

They strongly influence the direction of each other's art. This is particularly evident when they produce a collaborative effort called a

jam comic. One artist starts by drawing a panel and passes it around the group, with each adding an additional frame. They never discuss what the storyline or style of the comic will be.

"By the end, the final comic looks like

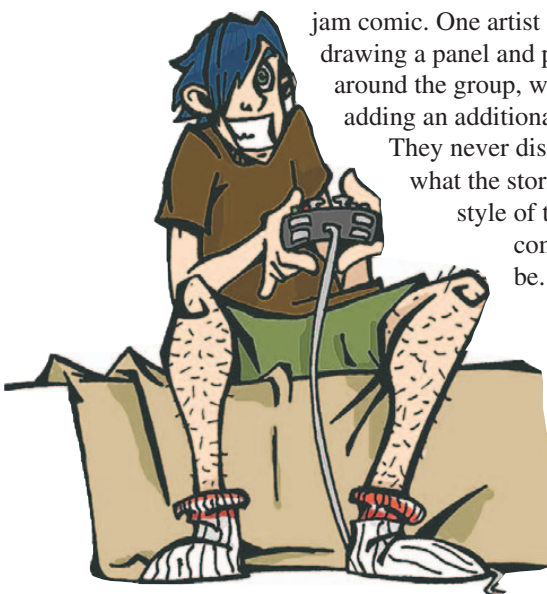


Illustration by Mike Stevens.

one singular artist," said Stevens. "We just play off each other so well."

Each has a unique drawing style. Stevens' comics are influenced by graffiti-art mixed with a bit of anime, the style of drawing derived from the Japanese animation. Phil McAndrew counts Tim Burton and Jim Henson as influences, obvious from the gaunt features of some of his characters exhibit and the Muppet-like look of others. Tyler McAndrew describes his current work as "really me just kind of squeezing all of the Dr. Seuss from my childhood out of my system."

Stevens and Tyler McAndrew attend Syracuse University, Stuv is studying at SUNY Buffalo, and Phil McAndrew is an illustration major at Daemen College. Their styles are still developing, as they take more classical art classes. All four credit figure drawing classes for improving their skills.

"Just in the last two years that I've been in school I've probably gotten about 8,000 times better at drawing," said McAndrew. "I look at things I drew six months ago and I want to re-draw them."

In the world of comics today, the internet serves as the independent press. With a scanner and Photoshop, anybody can create and post comics for the web. Online websites are a popular venue to share comics, particularly because of the instant feedback from internet comic fans.

"All it really takes is one little good comment from someone you've never met to help you want to keep on going," said Stevens, whose drawings frequently win competitions at online sites.

Competition sites are one way that the four artists have found other illustrators with similar styles and developed friendships with them.

"We found a couple of people who dug our style and we dug their style," said Stuv.

They post their competition work through www.crowncommission.com, where two popular challenges are hosted. The first, Strip Fight, requires weekly comics with a theme put forth by the site organizers. Visitors to the web site can then vote to determine the weekly winner. The second is Daily Grind Iron Man Challenge. This site began as a friendly competition among a few artists. Its popularity exploded through the comic forums and now over 60 artists compete weekly. This Web site teaches an important lesson on

the deadline pressure of submitting a comic, Monday through Friday, like artists for a daily syndicate.

"I'm forced to produce new material every day and it's an excellent artistic exercise," said McAndrew. "Being able to produce work and then get feedback almost instantly from my peers has been invaluable. It's really helped me grow as a cartoonist."

One paid subscriber web site, www.serializer.com, features Bean, a comic drawn by Phil McAndrew and scripted by Stuv. The strip is described online as "a cartoon epic, filled with monsters, crooked villains, popsicles, and adventure." The idea was born from a stick figure comic, written entirely in Spanish, that Stuv drew during a 24-hour competition. That competition is a national contest that challenges cartoonists to write, draw and ink an entire 24-page comic within 24 hours. Stevens is the only one of the four who has completed a full comic in that time.

A year ago Phil McAndrew revamped his existing web site to create, Found Hat Press, as a forum for himself and 10 other artists, located as far away as Arizona and California, to share their work. The eleven artists will self-publish an anthology of new work, most likely a staple and copy job, aptly named Found Hat Press.

Phil McAndrew will also be published this month, for the first time, in an anthology titled "You Ain't No Dancer." An online friend he met through Strip Fight chose McAndrew's work to include in the book.

This past summer the Westcott Community Center, where the comic artists took figure drawing classes during high school, hosted their first gallery show, Little Squares. The walls of the small gallery space were covered from floor to ceiling with thumb-tacked pieces of paper, an anthology of their comic strips.

The four friends approach drawing comics with different intentions. Stuv and Tyler McAndrew draw for fun. Phil McAndrew and Stevens see art as a possible career choice. While they might have outgrown the superhero comics of their youth, they have not outgrown the creativity and the energy of this art form. ■

Lauren Burger received her undergraduate degree in television, radio and film from the Newhouse School of Public Communications and worked in television development and production, as well as corporate marketing.