

Saved by the Beagle

A year ago, Seattle's Fantagraphics was on the brink of bankruptcy. Now it's in the black, thanks to good ol' Charlie Brown—and a pair of dogged believers who turned a cranky fanzine into the most widely respected comics publisher in America.

by Michaelangelo Matos

It's easy to get lost looking for Fantagraphics' headquarters. Situated just off I-5 on Lake City Way Northeast, it's neighbored on the left by a, shall we say, imaginatively decorated house: hand-painted signs and bizarre metal tchotchkes leap about the exterior fence like a Dalí birdhouse explosion. Visiting for the first time, it's tempting to mistake that oddball unit for FHQ. Hey—maybe comics people really *are* all nuts!

That fantasy begins dissipating as soon as you walk up to the 28-year-old publisher's actual offices next door; go inside and it disperses entirely. For one thing, this office is a two-story house with a basement, an old place with a surprising number of rooms around a surprising number of corners. The kitchen is triangulated by a staffer's desk, a Xerox machine, and the refrigerator, which itself is a couple steps away from the office of Gary Groth, the company's president and the majordomo of *The Comics Journal*, the monthly news and criticism magazine. Groth's office window overlooks a back porch and the alleyway. The house is not brightly lit—the better, one suspects, to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

"You should have seen it before," says Eric Reynolds, leading me to a basement room full of newly built metal shelves. An affable, sandy-haired, 33-year-old Californian, who began as a Fantagraphics intern over a decade ago and is now publicist and special projects editor (he helms *The Complete Crumb Comics*, the ongoing series dedicated to the godfather of "underground comix," Robert Crumb), Reynolds is showing me the company's extensive, neatly kept library of old comics and research materials. "The old shelves were way less efficient," he says.

Until recently, the shelves weren't all that needed fixing around here. Since its inception in 1976, when a 22-year-old Groth took over a nondescript collector-listings tabloid, *The Nostalgia Journal*, and refashioned it into the sharply critical and frequently controversial *Comics Journal*, Fantagraphics—based first in Washington, D.C., then in Stanford, Conn., and Los Angeles, before *Hate* and *Neat Stuff* artist Peter Bagge convinced Groth and longtime business partner Kim Thompson to come to Seattle in 1989—has seen more than its share of financial trouble. "It was a shoestring thing early on," says Thompson. "Even when we were in the red, we were in the red by \$200, you know? If you're a small operation, you really can't lose that much money."

But Fantagraphics stopped being a small operation sometime during the 1980s, after Groth and Thompson began publishing comics as well as comics criticism. Los Bros. Hernandez's *Love and Rockets* debuted in 1982; soon, Fantagraphics began amassing the most impressive and influential roster in the business: Daniel Clowes' *Eightball* and *Ghost World*; Peter Bagge's *Hate* (as crucial an artifact of Seattle's rock explosion as Nirvana's *Nevermind* or Mudhoney's "Touch Me I'm Sick"—Mudhoney's Mark Arm, incidentally, once worked for Fantagraphics); Chris Ware's dense, mesmeric *Acme Novelty Library*; Jessica Abel's *Artbabe*; Joe Sacco's *Palestine*; and reprints of classic Crumb, the '50s maverick Bernard Krigstein, and newspaper classics like *Krazy Kat*, *Pogo*, and *Prince Valiant*. All of which made Fantagraphics much beloved and universally admired (well, except by those stung by the *Journal*) and, frequently, put it on just this side of bankruptcy. Independent comics have never been big moneymakers, but with dozens of titles and top-quality printing—and sales that hovered around 3,000 apiece—Fantagraphics dangled over the precipice repeatedly, at one point issuing an e-mail plea for fans to buy their back stock in bulk.

Then, a few months ago, Groth and Thompson nailed down the multiyear rights to reprint, in its entirety and in chronological order, another newspaper classic: Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts*. It's a blockbuster deal that guarantees Fantagraphics will actually be around for another 12 years. Until this spring, no one at the company was certain if it would be around another 12 weeks.

IT IS NO EXAGGERATION to call *Peanuts* the most successful comic strip in human history. Charles M. Schulz Creative Associates, the late cartoonist's management branch, approves more than 24,000 products for 900 licensees a year; when Schulz died in 2000, he was earning \$20 million a year. Two years ago, a U.S. study determined that the only cartoon character more recognizable than the *Peanuts* cast was Mickey Mouse. And it's difficult to overstate just how important it's already proven to Fantagraphics. Prior to 2004, the biggest title on Fantagraphics' roster was Clowes' *Ghost World*, whose Terry Zwigoff-directed 2001 film adaptation spurred it to sales of 100,000 four years after its initial release. *The Complete Peanuts 1950–1952*, issued in May, has sold more copies in four months, hitting No. 19 on *The New York Times* best-seller list; the second volume, covering 1953–54, is due next month and should sell comparably.

"Schulz is a rare breed of cartoonist," notes Reynolds. "Even though he comes from this very mainstream place, every cartoonist loves him, underground or overground. He's the Beatles of comics, absolutely."

If that's the case, though, Fantagraphics is more like Sub Pop—a well-known, highly regarded, but still relatively small publisher, most of whose best sellers wouldn't sell enough to stay on a major label for more than an album or two. For Fantagraphics, being put in charge of *The Complete Peanuts* is akin to Sub Pop being handed the Beatles' master tapes for reissue. And Fantagraphics has done the strip right, with gorgeous design (the art director is *Palookaville* artist Seth, aka Gregory Gallant, whose style was deeply influenced by Schulz) and ambitious outlay (Fantagraphics is planning two a year for the next 12 and a half years, 25 volumes covering 50 years of weekly strips, including Sundays).

"United Media's partnership with Fantagraphics has been successful due to their clear understanding and appreciation of Charles M. Schulz's body of work," says Helene Gordon, vice president of Peanuts Worldwide. "The quality and integrity they bring to this 'complete' series is unparalleled in this publishing genre."

Launching the Post-Underground Era

Gary Groth was in his early 20s when he bought *The Nostalgia Journal* in 1976, but he'd been knocking about the publishing world since his teens. The son of a U.S. Navy contractor who was raised in and around Washington, D.C., Groth had put together his first comics-related publication, *Fantastic Fanzine*, in 1967. "I don't think I was a very serious 14-year-old," says Groth. "I was obsessive, but I wasn't serious."

Groth would become serious about criticism, picking up on movie critics like Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael and the "new journalism" of writers like Hunter S. Thompson when he was 18. In the middle of a spotty college career, he worked briefly at *Media Scene*, a movie and comics magazine, as production and layout assistant to its editor, pioneering Marvel Comics artist James Steranko.

After dropping out of his fourth college in 1974, Groth put on "a rock and roll convention" that ended in financial disaster and, with partner Michael Chetron, dabbled in music-magazine publishing with the short-lived *Sounds Fine*. Soon afterward, in 1976, Groth and Chetron bought *The Nostalgia Journal*, a tabloid tip sheet that Groth classifies as "an adzine—basically, the editorial content is there to justify a second-class mailing permit. It didn't matter what the content was. We wanted to make it more editorial

driven. And we felt by doing that we would get subscribers and beef up the readership and get the advertisers to follow.”

Thompson came aboard in 1977, at age 21. Like Groth, Thompson had an American government contractor father; his mother was Danish, and he grew up all over the world, primarily in Europe. He began reading European comics as a child; American comics came later, in his early teens. “I had been involved in doing things like fanzines and corresponding with American comics fans all throughout my teens,” Thompson says. “When I came to the U.S. in 1977 and met with Gary through a mutual friend, I was ready to roll.”

In the early '60s, Marvel had revitalized the comics industry with a slew of superhero titles—*Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, *Thor*—that brought a hip sensibility to an increasingly fusty comics world. In 1968, Robert Crumb went even further, publishing *Zap Comic* (misspelled to differentiate it from its mainstream brethren), the “underground” title that launched a thousand others. Freely laden with sex and violence, and usually written, drawn, and lettered entirely by one artist, the undergrounds were far more personal than Marvel’s or D.C.’s titles, usually disdaining or parodying superheroes. They were also distributed primarily in tie-dyed T-shirt, black-light poster, bong, and record outlets—“head shops.”

By the time the *Journal* got off the ground, though, the field was, as Thompson puts it, “The worst it’s ever been, even to this day. The undergrounds had pretty much collapsed under their own weight and under the weight of the head-shop busts, while in mainstream comics, the hot flash of the early Marvel Comics just got recycled and recycled and recycled.” (In the mid-’70s, head shops were targeted by a government crackdown that John Ashcroft’s minions are echoing right now.) “There may have been one or two oddballs out there, but just eccentric screwball things,” Thompson says. “There were no independent comics. There was nothing going on.”

Needless to say, the spirit of critical inquiry with which Groth and Thompson imbued the *Journal* was not widely appreciated by the larger comics industry, then or now. “It’s never been very popular with mainstream publishers,” says Thompson, “but we were particularly bitterly resented early on. Eventually, they began to accept us as this cantankerous creature that you couldn’t really reason with. It was completely different, because fanzines were just all adulatory; they couldn’t envision doing comics any other way than it was being done. The idea of actually having comics that weren’t superheroes and comics that were actually owned by the cartoonists rather than big corporations was just science fiction [to them].”

Early on, a few targets of the *Journal*’s criticism bit back, or tried to. In 1982, “we were sued by an artist named Rich Buckler, because we called him a plagiarist in 48-point type,” says Groth drolly. “That got as far as depositions, and then he quit, because we pretty much proved that he *was* a plagiarist. Our lawyers started showing up with a stack like [motions with hands] this tall of his art and the art he plagiarized from, went through it piece by piece, and he caved.”

In 1984, the then-publisher of the *Comic Buyer’s Guide*, Alan Light (no relation to the music journalist), filed a libel suit against Groth and the *Journal*. “I criticized him in the magazine,” says Groth. “I forget what I said, but I probably accused him of some sort of ethical lapses or something like that. Anyway, he sued for \$2 million. We had to fly to Rock Island, Ill., and our lawyer, who was [then] currently handling our other two cases, flew in to handle him.” Light dropped the suit in 1986.

The most notorious of the suits came from someone who was criticized not by the magazine itself but by one of its interview subjects. In 1980, science-fiction and comics writer Harlan Ellison described Michael Fleisher, the writer of *The Spectre*, to the *Journal* as “certifiable. That’s a libelous thing to say, and I say it with some humor. . . . He really is a derange-o.” Fleisher, not amused, initiated a \$2 million lawsuit against Ellison and the *Journal*; he lost seven years later, but not before Groth and Ellison began squabbling

and Fantagraphics paid \$200,000 in lawyer's fees. Still, Groth says the three dismissals have "discouraged any more—we have not been sued for libel since."

BETWEEN THOSE lawsuits, Fantagraphics' owners began putting the little money they had where their big mouths were. In 1981, they issued *Los Tejanos*, a 150-page graphic novel by Jack Jackson, a Texas artist who'd been active during the underground comix era. Though *Los Tejanos* was successful, Thompson says, "I think we only got really motivated [to publish comics] with *Love and Rockets*."

Love and Rockets wasn't the first American independent comic book of the post-underground era, but it was the one that codified the publisher's reputation as a champion of visionary comics art. L&R was and is written and drawn by Oxnard, Calif., brothers Jaime and Gilbert Hernandez (their older brother, Mario, also contributed early on). Each had a singular writing, drawing, and storytelling style; each created miniworlds of his own, collected in a pair of big hardcovers (Gilbert's *Palomar*, from last year, and Jaime's *Locas*, due this fall). "They self-published the first issue," says Thompson of Los Bros. Hernandez. "They figured that nobody would ever want to publish it. So they mailed a copy of it to *The Comics Journal*, hoping for a review." Soon, Groth called the brothers and offered to publish it.

When *Love and Rockets* debuted, underground comics consisted primarily of, as Thompson puts it, "*Batman* with tits—just like regular mainstream comics, but with a little bit of sex and violence thrown in." The Hernandez brothers may have had a knack for beautiful female characters, but the stories—rich, multifaceted, character- rather than plot-driven—were an anomaly. Along with Crumb's *Weirdo* and Art Spiegelman's *Raw*, which appeared around the same time, *Love and Rockets* helped reinvent the comics underground for a post-hippie age, and it put Fantagraphics on the map.

It also opened Groth and Thompson up to criticism that *The Comics Journal* at best indulges in plenty of conflict of interest and at worst is little more than a shill for other Fantagraphics titles. "In an ideal world, a magazine critical of comics shouldn't be published by the same people that also publish comic books," says Thompson. "But there's no real way around it. I mean, we can either stop publishing comic books—which I think would be a tremendous loss to everyone—or stop publishing *The Comics Journal*, which would also be a tremendous loss because there really isn't anything else that has risen to be a rival. Or just do what we do, which is just be as honest as possible on both levels."

Thompson is right that there isn't anything else like *The Comics Journal*. Though good comics criticism can sometimes be found in mainstream outlets, for the most part, the comics press has been primarily fan-oriented. And critical media in other fields are plenty prone to cronyism—see *Rolling Stone*'s continual deification of editor-publisher Jann Wenner's buddies Mick Jagger and Boz Scaggs. Still, it's hard to imagine even *Stone* doing something like 1999's "Top 100 Comics of the Century" list, which includes no fewer than 29 titles Fantagraphics had published at that point. And since then, they've put out volumes of that list's Nos. 1 and 2: George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Schulz's *Peanuts*, respectively.

"It wasn't a coincidence," says Groth. "I mean, basically, we've always wanted to publish the best cartooning we could get our hands on, so we make a list of the best cartooning, so it makes sense that as soon as we get our act together, we're going to publish it." Thompson, for his part, jokingly refers to the Top 100 as "our shopping list."

Black-and-White Booms and Busts

On July 25, 2003, Boise band Built to Spill played a Fantagraphics benefit at Ballard's Tractor Tavern; they also appeared at the Crocodile Cafe two nights later for the same purpose, this time with locals Kinski. The shows came right after an Internet-driven

push to buy the publisher's wares to help them through a bad financial hole, brought on by a distributor's nonpayment. But writing up the benefit for the *Weekly's* music calendar filled me with déjà vu; I'd written a similar blurb just a couple years earlier.

"Money has always been a struggle for us," says Thompson. "It's just sometimes been a more brutal struggle than others. There have been times where we have been more or less in the black, but there have also been periods where we had to resort to one or another desperate measure to stay alive—particularly in the last five years or so."

The 1986 publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* by Pantheon, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's dissection of the Batman myth, *The Dark Knight Returns*, by D.C., signified that comics had "grown up." The subsequent mainstream interest got Fantagraphics notice, with *Love and Rockets* frequently among the noted "mature" titles. Just as important—for financial, not artistic, reasons—was the work of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, who in 1984 paid \$500 to print *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, a funny animal/superhero title they intended to last one issue. Within a year, the extremely rare, self-published first edition of TMNT #1 began trading for hundreds of dollars on the collectors' market; with the animated *Turtles* series three years later, and a live-action movie following in 1990, the Turtles' success engendered a rash of copycats—hundreds of new, self-published, black-and-white titles every month, aimed at a collectors' market hungry for first issues.

"Between '89 and '91, there was just the smell of money," says Groth. "Everybody was doing a *Ninja Turtles* rip-off, and they were all selling 30,000 copies. There were a lot of new publishers coming in that were just publishing quantity. They were just cranking up their [title] list, publishing a lot of comics just in order to exploit this temporary boom."

FANTAGRAPHICS' SALES began suffering from the overheated *Ninja* market; they went from break-even to marginal sales status. To combat the slide, Groth and Thompson began Eros, a sex-comics line, in 1991. "We just kept falling further behind, financially, until it hit a crisis point," says Groth. "Then I came up with a great idea that sex sells, and it was like 'bingo!' I think within about nine months we were solid again. But we were always scrambling; even [early on], we did two volumes of *The X-Men Companion*—books interviewing the *X-Men* creators. We published *The ElfQuest Gathering*"—a tie-in with Wendy and Richard Pini's cult-favorite fantasy title. "All we needed was an extra \$20,000 a year to make ends meet," says Groth.

By the mid-'90s, the comics industry was booming again; the bubble lasted about four years. "The conventional wisdom is that in 1993, the American comic-book industry was a billion-dollar industry," says Reynolds. "By 1997 it was a \$300 million industry."

Part of this was the increasing hold of video games—and later, the Internet—on young consumers. Comics were something that all kids and some adults read; over the past decade, they've become something some adults and a few kids read. An even bigger factor was bloat—publishers like Marvel and Image began issuing multiple covers of single issues, often with holographic foil, to appeal to the collectors' market. "It was like the savings-and-loan scandal in the '80s," says Reynolds, "where they were just bilking investors—in this case, 13-year-old kids who thought that a month from now their \$2 comic was going to be worth a hundred bucks. And, of course, that didn't happen, so you would have people that would come into the industry on a false pretense and then immediately [leave]."

Even more disastrous was the closing of Capitol City, one of the two major comics distributors of the period. "Suddenly, half our income is not there," says Reynolds. "From about 1995 to last year, there were probably about three times where we were really, really close to folding. It was close enough to where meeting payroll was going to be dicey. At that point, it's pretty scary."

Doing Justice to Peanuts

Still, says Reynolds, “there’s always been something that’s come along and seen us through to the next stage.” In 2001, it was the *Ghost World* movie; more recently, Chris Ware’s hugely acclaimed *Acme Novelty Library* and *Quimby the Mouse* are Fantagraphics titles that have sold well. And the company’s frequent financial struggles have not stopped Groth and Thompson from being ambitious—like going for *Peanuts*.

Groth had met Schulz in the mid-’90s, when he interviewed him for *Nemo*, a companion to the *Journal* focused on early newspaper comics. When the *Journal* approached its 200th issue in 1998, Groth asked Schulz for another sit-down. “It seemed like the right thing to do,” he says. “I went down to Santa Rosa, made an appointment, and spent all day with him.”

For part of the interview, Schulz took Groth to the ice rink he owned. During a break, the two chatted, and Groth brought up the idea of doing a complete *Peanuts*. “His initial reaction was, ‘Nobody would be interested in that,’” says Groth, who insisted that the work deserved the deluxe treatment. “Finally, he said, ‘Well, if you want to do something like that, that would be fine by me; call up United Media and talk to them about it.’”

UNITED MEDIA, *Peanuts*’ distributor, sent Groth a licenser package. “It must have weighed a pound,” says Groth, “and it had introductory material about what we’re getting into—and tons of things to fill out. *Peanuts* is a global phenomenon. They probably get requests all the time. They had a lot of papers to fill out—they wanted to know everything about the project, the advances you were offering. They wanted to determine whether it was financially worth their while—whether you were viable enough to do it, or if your idea was viable. We were putting out a million other fires at the time, and this was intimidating. It seemed like such a long shot; there were other, more urgent things I had to deal with at the time. So I just put it aside.”

Groth maintained contact with Schulz for the next three years. The cartoonist died in 2000—on the Saturday before the long-planned final *Peanuts* Sunday strip ran. Six months later, Groth contacted Schulz’s widow, Jean. “I wanted to give it a decent amount of time after his death,” says Groth, who sent a letter outlining his plans. “She told me, ‘You know, it’s a great project, but we’re really swamped right now; let’s just keep it on the back burner.’ I took her at her word, and every six months I would send her a letter and our new books [with] a short note saying, ‘We still want to do it.’ Eventually, in the summer of 2002, she gave me a call and said, ‘OK, we’re ready to seriously discuss this.’”

Surprisingly, the financial trouble Fantagraphics was going through at the time didn’t impede the process. In 2003, Groth says, “I called down to Creative Associates and just warned [them], ‘You know, we sent out a plea for help with financial assistance. You are probably going to notice this; we’re sending it on the Internet. But I want to assure you that if we make enough money doing this, that we’ll be fine.’ And they were cool. They basically figured that if we went out of business it wouldn’t happen, and that if we didn’t go out of business it would happen, so we were just going to sit tight and watch what happened.”

WHAT CONTINUES TO guide Fantagraphics—what made the Schulz family trust them enough to do *Peanuts* justice—is the overwhelming sense of mission that emanates from everything they issue. Thompson and especially Groth are driven by what comics should be, not how much they might make. If they didn’t publish *The Complete Peanuts* themselves, they’d be the first in line at Zanadu or Golden Age Collectibles when someone else did—and the first to complain that it wasn’t done right.

“At this point, I would say that if Fantagraphics vanished in a puff of smoke tomorrow, I suspect that most people who deserve to be published and most of the things that

deserve to be done would be done,” says Thompson. “You know, we essentially made it so successful that there are a lot of people that, should we falter, could take over.” Maybe that will happen eventually. But it looks like we’ll have another dozen years to find out.