

The Importance of Being Dan Fishback

BY JONATHAN BERGER

Pity poor Dan Fishback. He's been a busy boy. Just six weeks after releasing his solo album, *Sweet Chastity*, the songwriter's gone off on tour with his band—or, rather, one of his bands—Cheese On Bread. It's his multi-

'Things are funny,' says Fishback. 'Fear is funny. Death and horror are funny. I think humor is just fear, in the end.'

state, big band project, and they're spending much of the summer cruising the U.S. with the Bloodsugars spreading the pop gospel wherever they can.

"None of us has toured this extensively. Not a show a day for a month," says Fishback. "We're gonna wreck ourselves."

When Cheese On Bread returns they will gear up for a planned residency at Galapagos. Hopefully this won't interfere with Fishback's latest (as-of-yet unwritten) multimedia performance about pedophilia and imperialism, to be performed in November at the Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia. Or the essay collection he's working on, or his

Still, the price of prolificacy is obvious.

"I've been juggling several projects for two years," says Fishback, "and at this point ... let's just say it's really hard to do everything well at the same time. At some point I have to start cutting things off."

But for now Fishback's happy to dip into a multitude of creative streams, writing songs that he'll perform solo acoustic, then writing songs for the five-piece Cheese On Bread, then working on a young adult novel, and back again. Part of what distinguishes each endeavor is the process that goes into it.

When Cheese On Bread began in 2002, it was just a duo with Sara FitzSimmons. "We met outside of a rock club in Philly where we told each other how bad we were at playing guitar."

They began to create a body of songs.

"Most of the songs on the old album were like 85 percent-90 percent me," says Fishback. "I would bring an unfinished song to Sara, and she would finish it, with the exception of 'I Like Cheese' [a 30-second anthem for the group], which is all Sara. The new songs are a little more diffuse."

Dibson Hoffweiler, acoustic guitarist for Cheese On Bread, details the band's creative method. "The arranging with Cheese On Bread is a long process, with five people tossing in

ideas," he says. "The new songs have been Dan coming up with lyrics and melody, and then two or three people working on the chords for the song, and the whole



Cheese On Bread.

Yoko Kikuchi photo

one-guitar AntiFolk shows, or the theoretical Laurie Anderson cover band. It's exhausting for Fishback to work on such a variety of projects but also rewarding.

"All of these projects feed off of each other," says Fishback. "We've gotten leads for Cheese On Bread through my performance art and vice versa. The more successful I am at any of these things, the more successful the rest of the projects become."

The projects often overlap. "A lot of solo songs have ended up Cheese On Bread songs. I think ... they're songs that start out feeling very tender and small and personal, but then I throw in some ridiculous metaphor, and I keep expanding on the metaphor, and all of a sudden I feel like John Donne, and I'm like 'I cannot play this by myself, this is ridiculous.' And luckily I have a project that plays ridiculous songs!"

group coming in to arrange it. I think this works well, as it starts out with Dan, and then slowly the whole band is involved with the song. It keeps things pretty cohesive, compared to the time where we all heard a song and no one really knew how to start out."

The band, also featuring Philadelphians Kevin Kelly and Matt Keesan, has a big messy sound and a frenetic performance style. Considering the dual-city nature of the group, maybe the energy on-stage exists because the band members are so happy to see each other. Fishback has a different theory.

"The boys just tapped into an aesthetic that was already there and enhanced it," says Fishback. "Their chaotic stage presence is an extension of what me and Sara were already doing—but me and Sara don't do that when we're by ourselves. It's just something that

happened when we came together. Cheese On Bread is like Voltron."

The band seems to have its own organic existence and a songwriting style that exists through collaboration. "I feel like Cheese On Bread is this personality outside of the band that we tap into," says Fishback.

Their new album, *Maybe Maybe Maybe Baby*, features the core of songs the band performs. Recorded before the new larger format of the project gelled, it is sweet and funny and sad. Fishback and FitzSimmons sometimes alternate lines, sometimes sing together, but always share attention.

"I feel like the shirt you leave behind when you go on vacation," FitzSimmons sings in "The Kiss Song," followed by Fishback adding, "I feel like I can't just let this slide, so you are on probation," then listing the circumstances under which the narrators will "ever let you kiss me again." Among them? "You'll have to change your whole personality." Of course, inherent in the exchange is that they will let the asshole kiss them again. It is at once humorous and unsettling.

"Things are funny," says Fishback. "Fear is funny. Death and horror are funny. I think humor is just fear, in the end."

They also trade lines in it "Never Felt So Right": "We talked about old relationships. He said he never had a relationship. He said he was a creep, he said he hates his life. It never felt so right."

The songwriting is poignant and effective because of the shared perspective of the lyricists. Fishback explains that when writing C.O.B. songs, "We were both single and a little boy crazy. I also used to make an effort to write from Sara's point of view. I would collect things she said, and I would focus on her obsessions, and the result would be a sort of intersection between our interests and fixations. It's a method I picked up from the Split Britches Company."

The Cheese On Bread suite of songs is wonderful, and the most successful of Fishback's projects. "As goofy as Cheese On Bread is, I'm still convinced that our presence on stage has a radical significance that might help lead people toward radical thought and radical action," writes Fishback on their website.

As the group travels across America, reaction has been strong. "So many creative kids," writes Fishback, "all dancing around, open to conversation and ideas and enthusiasm."

The songs are filled with ideas. There's a great mix of strong melodies, great



Courtesy Dan Fishback

personalities, funny images, and lovely misery. "I've always felt that my songs were very dark," says Fishback. "The Cheese On Bread songs too, but more so my solo songs."

Of course, the more recent *Sweet Chastity* is a deeper and more emotional album. Mining the same territory of preciousness, precocity, and great hooks, *Chastity* is stronger than *Maybe Maybe Maybe Baby*, the songs more resonant. "I do feel closer to the songs," says Fishback, referring to his solo release. "Some of them are older—but in Cheese On Bread I'm careful not to trample on anyone's toes. I want a lot of different people to be able to step into the songs; in my solo material I have virtually no interest in that. The songs are solidly from the perspective of a very frightened, very passionate radical queer boy. Whether or not that boy is truly me is a different story."

It's hard to ignore the spirit of autobiography running through Fishback's entire catalog, but the title cut from his solo album, with the chorus, "I'd be a slut if I was hot," seems personal. As does the narrative of "Bad Canary," which mines Liz Phair's catalog for inspiration, but then finds it in New York band Pantsuit.

Please see BERGER page 5

Ange Mlinko
 Park Slope, Brooklyn
from Three Poems on a Theme by Connie Deanovich

1. *Edouard Manet Barque*

If a Shakespeare full of fake shipwreck then a corsage for a corsair notorious for his courtesy, for draining ponds to retrieve a toy.

If the tempests of spring threaten tennis with harpstrings then a rush to the ear like the deshabelle of the Sunday paper.

If lipstick reapplied after a salty snack makes the lines shift it's tricky.

Her velvet look a jewelbox salvaged when the drawer winks.

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PRINTED MATTER

I Really Think So

Elsewhere, number one

Gary Sullivan

Detour Press

I've always been a comic book fan. But to me comics always meant superheroes, caped crusaders, narrativity in its simplest form. Gary Sullivan's *Elsewhere* combines the visual excitement I find in comics with the wordsmithing I champion in poetry, resulting in a truly unique treasure.

In 'Japanese Notebook,' pop culture mixes with tradition, which is then fused with lines like 'he is a robot/ but can tell right from wrong,' or 'there are some sounds only I can perceive.'

In *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman discusses the idea of placing "stress on image rather than soundtrack." In the case of this first issue of *Elsewhere* consider "word" as "soundtrack." The front cover is a stunning myriad of colors and Japanese imagery. The title appears atop a hypnotically beautiful woman/doll. The back cover is covered in words, seemingly randomly organized, but at the same time appears to be a glance into a paragraph, or a peek into a story ("restaurant winter comes frosty," for example). Before even opening the book the reader anticipates entering a unique collage-world of word and image.

The back inside cover reveals that this is a book comprised of "words and images seen on my honeymoon in Japan." These materials are found, interpreted, reproduced, and reorganized. So begins the travel into the "Japanese Notebook."

Sullivan's range as a poet is impressive. He is capable of writing beautiful lyric letter poems (as in *Swoon*, coauthored by Nada Gordon), but is also one of the founders of flarf, a random appropriation of found text that ultimately results in nonsensical hilarity. In *Elsewhere*, he uses a varying nine-panel per page format to combine rich black and white image with curious captioning. This sightseeing, visually and verbally, reminds me of Joe Brainard's *Ten Imaginary Still Lives*. Brainard, also an artist and writer, wrote in "Imaginary Still Life No. 2," "I close my eyes. I see white. Lots of white. And gray. Cool gray. Cool gray fabric shadows. (It is a painting!)." I get the same feeling of imagination and creativity, along with a sense of discovery, when leafing through "Japanese Notebook." Pop culture mixes with tradition, which is then fused with lines like "he is a robot/ but can tell right from wrong," or "there are some sounds only I can perceive." Images range between the familiar, cell phones, to cartoons, to more realistic scenes, and even to the "Flying Dutchman."

Sullivan successfully redefines my idea of the comic. He takes the best of two creative worlds and produces the sort of feeling that shouts, to quote *Elsewhere*, "I love your present time!"

—ERICA KAUFMAN

More Poets Appear

The Tiny, issue one

Gina Myers and

Gabriella Torres, eds.

Many pleasures await readers of *The Tiny*, a new magazine edited by Gina Myers and Gabriella Torres. Ithaca's Karl Parker has contributed three poems, one of which offers what might be the magazine's motto—"A living windowframe, where the sky burns through."

Mary Ann Samyn offers a little prose piece, "Two Bits of Tiny," on fragmentation and dolls, then follows with remarkably spare lyrics whose titles signal mental adventure—"From a Purely Mechanical Standpoint," "Uses of the Imagination," "What Was Dredged Up," "What Happened Next." Hazel McClure's "Letters" and "Ghost Frames" give body to experience in unsettling ways—"The land and its sores/ are monuments to abandonment."

Noah Eli Gordon and Sara Veglahn team up for "Public Displayed," which searches for some sort of meaningful public space as seen through various modes of transit—bicycle, train, car—trying to "count the layers of ethnicity in trainsetville." Mark Lamoureux steps up with "a matrix of bilious conjecture embedded" in two poems, one a contemporary urban hellscape ("Come On Chameleon"), the other a surrealist nod to Stevens, "Self Portrait as a Talking Snowman" with some choice oddments of vocabulary—"You falcons regardant, you falcons recursant/ everyone/ wants the ratte of wings/ for their birthday."

Jim Behrle chimes in with "She Once Had Mad Ups." "I don't believe in angels because of *you*/ who played a Ferengi on Voyager."

Many more poets appear. Maureen Thorson says, "I got a robot to love and nurture/ It wasn't a calculated thing"; Daniel Nester has three poems, including one that taps Spinal Tap; Geof Huth brings a little essay, "Why Visual



Courtesy Detour Press

Carve editor Aaron Tieger offers suitably tiny invocations of infrathin moments. I like his 'Autumn' a lot.

Poetry," plus some samples of the form; Aaron McCullough gives some gorgeous little poems "of" Jan Vandemeer; Shafer Hall seems to imagine the dark aftermath of a small-town scandal in "And Then the Whole Place Got Dark"; Carve magazine editor, and cursed elf (ask him, he'll tell you) Aaron Tieger offers suitably tiny invocations of infrathin moments. (I like his "Autumn" a lot.)

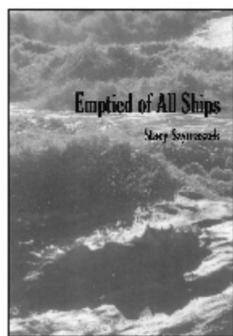
There is a lot of other good stuff by writers I am yet unfamiliar with and I am looking forward to reading. In all, an exciting debut for *The Tiny*.

—JOSHUA COREY

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EAST VILLAGE

This Other's East Village Beginnings From the Motor City to My City

BY ROGER HITTS

I was born a poor white boy in the sticks of the Midwest. Each night my blue-collar father would come home all sweaty and dirty from a 10-hour shift at the foundry, pick up his 1954 National six-string, and strum himself into a righteous state with a Hank Williams number. My brothers and I wore hand-me-downs, walked four miles to school and peed in the woods. To make our own fun we trapped crayfish in the creek, or, better yet, climbed to the top of a 25-foot evergreen, and waved back and forth from the top branch until it snapped. We'd fall in a slow, surreal fashion, branch by branch, tree limb by tree limb, back down to terra firma. It was like an elevator ride from hell. We scrapped, ate scrapple, played Scrabble, and picked at each other's scabs, mental and physical.

While most of my friends' dreams pretty much began and ended with an assembly line job at General Motors, and being able to afford a Cutlass Supreme, I had a bigger itch to scratch. I can probably attribute it to all the rock magazines that flooded our rural mailbox each month. Looking at those party pictures of Iggy, David, Lou, and Patti making the scene at Max's and the Mudd Club stirred my desires. New York City seemed like some cool alien planet and these people looked like their feet had never stepped on a rural clod of dirt. Why sweet home Alabama kiss my ass, I wanna be your dog!

It took some time in the journalistic minor leagues but I finally made it to New York City, my Eden (or my Valhalla depending on how you look at it), in 1989 plying my trade as a celebrity reporter. That farm boy training has served me well. I came to the city ready to climb fire escapes, find back alley exits to clubs and hotels, and, yes, even climb an

occasional tree at Central Park to get a glimpse of, progressively, Tom and Mimi, Tom and Nicole, Tom and Penelope, Tom and Katie, and probably, soon to be, Tom and Mary-Kate. I'm much more star-struck though when I run into one of those old denizens from my Rock Scene reading days than by any old boring-ass Julia Roberts or Jack Nicholson sightings.

I bumped into Iggy once at a Nirvana concert at The Pyramid in 1989 and almost soiled myself. And to this day when I spot Jayne County or Lee Black Childers at Don Hill's I follow them around like a puppy dog.

But a trip down Avenue B really whets my whistle for nostalgia. I'll never forget when an older friend got his driver's license and we snuck out on a school night and drove 25 miles to catch Blue Oyster Cult on the Agents of Fortune tour, circa 1976. The Cult were teen manna from heaven, but we really scratched our heads over the warm-up band—a motley, cartoonish collection of New Yorkers called the Dictators, led by former pro wrestler Handsome Dick Manitoba. They played a

set so far off what the regular touring bands (like Foghat, Uriah Heep, and the J. Geils Band) played it was like they were from another planet. It exposed a great dividing line that night: Blue Oyster Cult was from Long Island, and while they were certainly an odd band of the period with their sci-fi lyrics and vague neo-Nazi undertones, they were still pretty much a standard rock band. The Dictators, from Brooklyn, were completely off the map.

These days Handsome Dick isn't hard to find. Most nights he's behind the bar or standing in front of his fine little watering hole Manitoba's on 6th and B. We share a common bonding experience; my daughter Liana and his son Jake were both born Dec. 1, 2002, and our happy occasions were commemorated on Page Six under a new arrival round-up called Stork Report.

Of course with Dick being a club owner and rock star and me being a celebrity hack who just happened to marry well, Manitoba got first billing.

I've already chewed Dick's ear off ad nauseum about seeing him play the Flint IMA so we usually content ourselves with talking about our kids. To think I share a domestic bond with this guy who made my jaw

drop when he took the stage some 29 years ago gives me pause for a smile. But I know Dick still has a burning artistic side. At a Dictator's reunion show at Little Steven's Garagefest at Randall's Island last summer I watched in awe as Dick, Ross The Boss, and their henchmen pretty much smoked the rest of the day's laundry list-length bill.

Still, it's those nights out when I don't have to chronicle the latest Renee Zellweger or Jack White quickie wedding that makes life worth living. A celebrity-less bar crawl through the East Village at some ragged establishment Lindsay Lohan would be frightened to enter really does it for me. It usually starts off with a trip to the Motor City Bar where I continue to tittle even though looking at the Mitten State kitsch from back home has long since lost its luster. When my Michigan friends come to visit NYC they always get a laugh out of the 1950s-era clock hanging behind the bar. Pictured is the St. Clair Shores lighthouse with the words, "Detroit—Where Life Is Worth Living." Well, maybe 50 years ago.



Roger Hitts photo

Of course, with such a variety of dank drinking holes to choose from, the names and places change even if we don't. Piano's was an interesting place to hold court when The Donkey Show made its home there. And wither the Wa Wa Hut, where such organic, unaffected debauchery went down that its new tenant Niagara seems like a pale reminder of those years when you could let the most extreme side of your personality burn bright. Walking the streets of the East Village I still feel the ghosts of the Alcatraz, Spiral, Brownie's, Bond Street, Chase, and The Mission. They're all where my liver enjoyed its youth.

Some things stay the same on their face but change just enough to bring a tear to your eye. I've been drinking at Blue and Gold for all of my 16 years in NYC, and while the place hasn't changed one iota on the inside, its soul is gone. That soul was Christina, the affable Eastern European senior citizen with the leather pants who simultaneously served as bartender, waitress, and bouncer. To see her sneak up behind a 6'5", 250 pound guy causing trouble back by the pool table, grab him by the ear and twist his lobe to the sky while leading him out the door was a thing of grace and beauty. She passed away a few years ago and while the place remains the same, its soul left with her.

There are still the old stand-bys such as the Marz Bar or slightly cleaner Max Fish, which still amuse. Rififi's has been a welcome addition to Village nightlife. The other night I found myself up on stage in the club's backroom sucking Jack Daniels out of a rubber hose that was run through the burlesque barker's mouth on through his nostril. My very first nose shot. My lady friends like to get their nails done while drinking Stoli screwdrivers at The Beauty Bar. For just a few dollars more you can go by The Bowery Ballroom most any night and catch a band that will probably inspire ya to whistle for a few minutes.

Sometimes I kick myself (though no fault of my own) for being born too late to catch the '70s Village heyday, or for not moving here directly out of college to at least see Rome while it crumbled. But to hell with it; you can still make your own fun and there are still very real reminders of what you may have missed strewn over these streets that feel like home.

It exposed a great dividing line that night: Blue Oyster Cult was from Long Island, and while they were certainly an odd band of the period with their sci-fi lyrics and vague neo-Nazi undertones, they were still pretty much a standard rock band. The Dictators, from Brooklyn, were completely off the map.

Where You Should Be

The Fort at the Sidewalk Café

94 Avenue A (at 6th Street)

East Village

Mondays, 8:00 p.m. - 3:00 a.m. (7:30 p.m. sign-up)

www.antifolk.net

New York City's longest-running open mic is the Fort at the Sidewalk Café. It's been an institution for more than 10 years, and it comes from an even longer tradition. Lach, a 20-year veteran of the East Village music scene, created the Fort in the early eighties to play the music he believed in—acoustic music with punk energy.

People from blocks around flocked to the after-hours club and its reputation began. The AntiHoot was born, and lives on to this very day.

Every Monday at 7:30 p.m. people still rush to the Sidewalk Café to sign up to perform their two songs or eight minutes worth of material. This is little different than any

other open mic in the city. What makes the AntiHoot special is the energy that Lach puts into the show and the community that he engenders.

Regulars return repeatedly to see acts they love and hate, and all credit the flow to Lach. Telling a series of "comfort jokes," humorous one-liners that make first-timers smile and regulars groan, while interacting with almost every performer on stage. Lach runs a tight ship with a whole lot of ego. No one is on stage for much more than their allotted time, and no one upstages the boss. It's Lach's show, and he manages it very well.

Clearly people agree. The sign-up list often numbers 80 people, though it seems a little lighter during the summer. The show goes until three in the morning and ends with a set by Lach. He riffs off of his back catalog and song suggestions from the audience. Then there's the free tea, a chamomile campfire, where the few remaining artists and audience members sit back, relax, and reminisce over the last seven hours' entertainment. It's an exhausting evening, but performers keep coming back. So does the audience. The AntiHoot is addictive.

—JON BERGER

BERGER from page 1

The entire album is beautiful. From the complex imagery in "Gl Joe Song" to the cabaret style of "The News Today" ("Every moment I think of you I'm not fighting against war") to the C.O.B.-like "Misery Cake" and the bonus track, "Bisexual Boy," everything's great. There are no bum tracks on the album, even though Fishback describes the recording process as "this crazy, produced, electric nightmare. It was a very grueling and rewarding process."

What's next for Fishback?

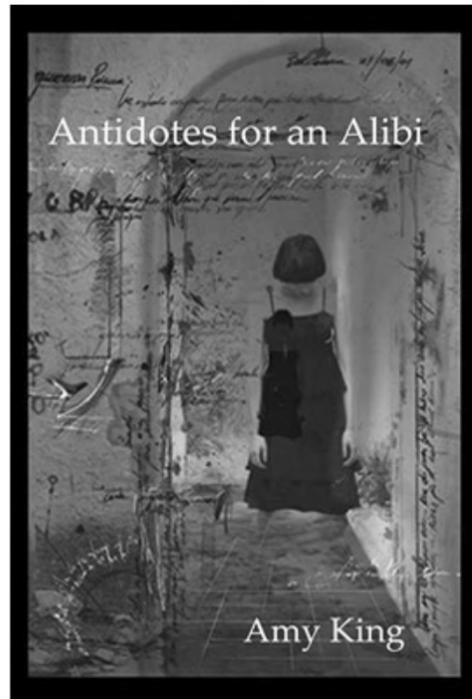
"I will probably record another solo record before the next Cheese On Bread record. It's all planned out. It's called *Mammal*. Dibs [Hoffweiler] will probably record it. It's going to be much more acoustic and lo-fi."

Hoffweiler also plays electric guitar in Fishback's newer band, The Faggots, which fleshes out his solo work.

"I liked working with The Faggots a lot," says Hoffweiler. "It was very lively, a lot of fun. Things felt easier with The Faggots, because there wasn't any debate on whether we should put an instrumental section in or not, change one of these chords, etc. It wasn't dictatorial—we worked back and forth—but song structure was definitely set."

The Faggots put on a very tight show, with none of the surging chaos that makes up a Cheese On Bread show. It offers Fishback a more structured performing alternative.

And it's just another activity that swirls among Fishback's variety of projects. Poor Dan Fishback.



"A sexy collection of poems ... mysterious and surreal."
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—Doublewide

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Next Summer

Next summer I will build my box all over again.
 Next summer I will kill the drag that is the year's passing
 like other years that have crested and drowned themselves
 in the undertow.
 Next summer I will go to the sea to see it all over again.
 Next summer I'll be me, and you'll be you again.
 Next summer was the last one. Next summer will be the one
 after next.
 Of course, some summers are unlike other summers, and then
 again some are the same summer all over again.
 I was going to visit last summer. Now I will have to visit
 next summer.

Bruce Covey

Atlanta

Instructions

1. Open the box & finger the contents
2. Arbitrate the arbitrary contradictions
3. Sand the sharpness & whittle the smooth
4. Slide C into D & hinge
5. Apply adhesive, book the widget
6. Spring the winter's lost onto fall
7. Glaze with a fine absence
8. Sprinkle, coat, frost, unveil
9. Fertilize its convoluted conception
10. Accept production, integrate, differentiate
11. Lighten the wings with bulb to ascend
12. Narrow the angle for a single perspective
13. Paint full of bitter melons, bumpy landscape
14. Limn with scissor sunset of snapshots
15. Nail wheels to deflation, parry
16. Ride into the electric descent



Russell Salamon and Kent Taylor watching d.a. levy set type for his renegade press books, c. 1963-1964.

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| Sept. | 29 | Chain (Oakland, Calif.; Philadelphia) (no Oct. rdg.) |
| Nov. | 3 | Aerial Magazine/Edge Books (Washington, D.C.) |
| Dec. | 1 | 3rd Bed (Lincoln, R.I.) |

2006

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
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| Feb. | 2 | Burning Deck Press (Providence, R.I.) |
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About the Poets

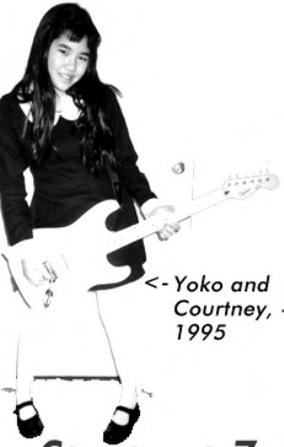
Ange Mlinko (cover) is the author of *Matinees* (Zoland Books). Bruce Covey's book *Ten Pins, Ten Frames* was published by Front Room Publishers. Litmus Press put out Mark Tardi's *Euclid Shudders*. Matvei Yankelevich is an editor of Ugly Duckling Press.

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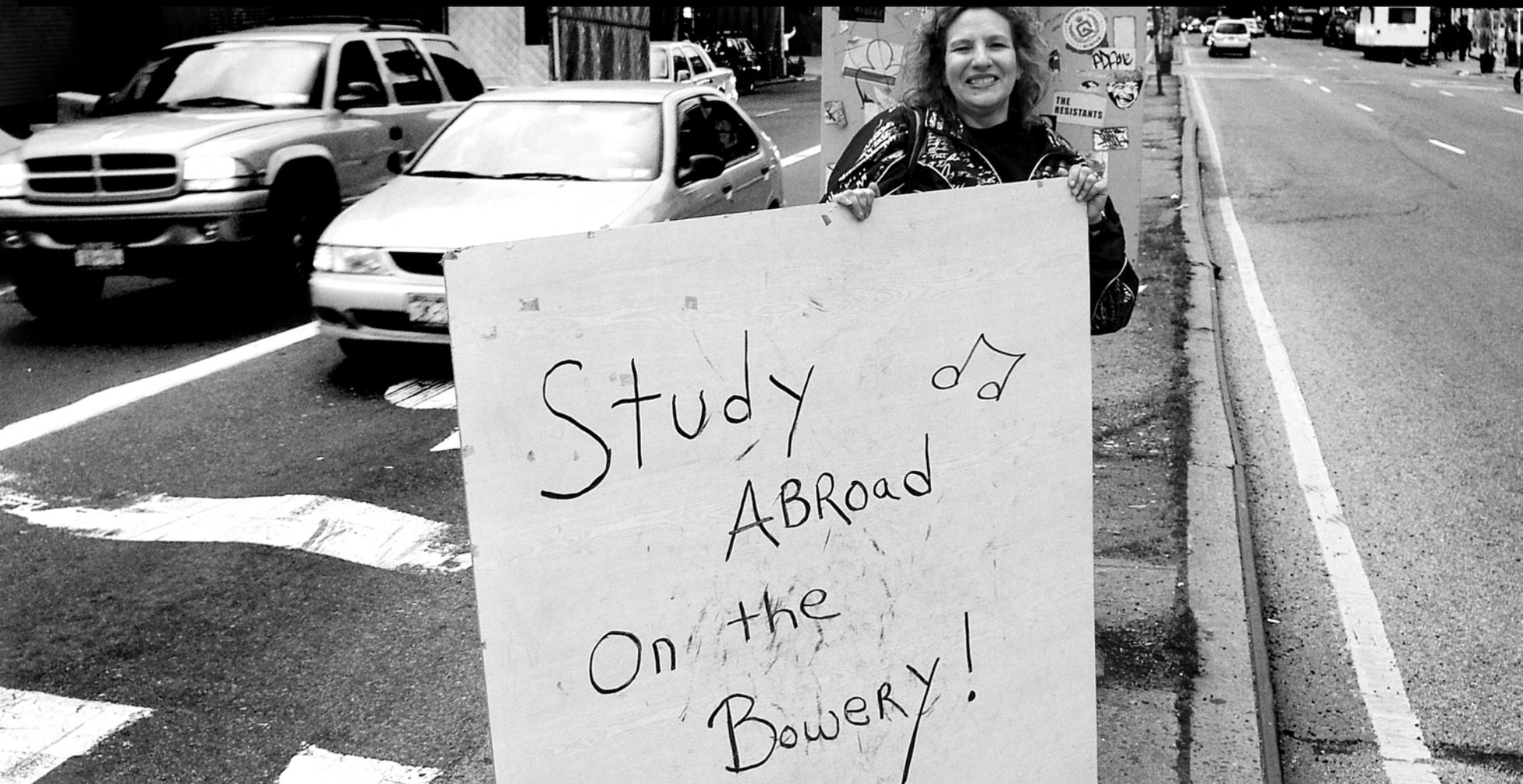
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