

R.I.P. "RAP SHEET" (1989-2009)

by Rob Imes

In *T-Frags* #207 (June 2009), I wrote a column noting the demise of the BPP co-op. Little did I imagine that less than a year later I would be writing about the possible demise of another small-press co-op, the Small Press Syndicate (SPS), following the cancellation of their long-running club newsletter *Rap Sheet* in December 2009. As with the BPP, some members of the SPS have also been members of the UFO, including current members Steve Keeter, Jim Main and J. Kevin Carrier. The future of the SPS is currently in doubt, their presence now solely on the internet (just as the BPP was near the end), with its webmaster Daniel Nauenburg promising to keep the website alive for at least a year, until the decision to renew the domain name will need to be made. It's a good website (www.smallpresssyndicate.com), where sample pages of current SPS publications can be viewed, and a message forum where members can post (although only a fraction of the membership regularly does so). The SPS is the most prominent comics co-op after the UFO itself, and it would be a shame to see it go. It fills a niche, since the co-op's rules are less demanding than those of the UFO; for example members need not trade zines with their fellow members nor regularly submit columns to the newsletter to remain members in good standing.

Sherman Burnett, creator of *The Energons* and many other mini-comics since the 1980s, was a co-founder of the SPS, a member of the co-op for most of its existence, and had served a few terms as Chairman of the group in the past. Sherman recently gave me some background on how the SPS was formed: "I originally created a club called the Association of Small Press Publishers or ASPP for short. There were maybe 6 members who joined and I published one issue of a club zine -- *New Dimensions* #1. For whatever reason the club disbanded as quickly as it formed. Aaron Tracy, publisher of *Omnibus Illustrated* and *Brandie the 6 Year Old Psycho*, saw an ad for the ASPP in one of the many review zines from back in the day and wrote to me inquiring about the ASPP. I told him it was disbanded, but I still wanted to get some sort of club for the newer small pressers going. We kicked around some ideas and invited a third guy, Sean Hale, who was publishing a reviewzine himself, to join us.

"Within a month or two we had our name and purpose: The Small Press Syndicate with *Rap Sheet* (keeping the motif going) as the newsletter title. And our primary focus would be on the fun side of small press publishing -- mainly trading zines and collaborating with each other. Aaron Tracy served as the first Chairman, but only for a half year. The group was formed in the summer of 1989, so he was in charge until we could have an election. By this time several small pressers had joined the group. Lee & Chris Erwin, Danny Bolleri, Brian Dettmann. I served as Chairman the next year. The main credit for the club continuing past that point has to go to the third Chairman of the group, Chris Erwin. He saved the group from going under and got some real attention for the group. Membership tripled. And as they say the rest is history."

Chris Erwin was succeeded as SPS Chairman in 1993 by two co-chairs, Tyim Courts and J. Kevin Carrier. (Kevin's *Fantasy Theater* comic has been an SPS memberzine since its first issue was published in November of that year.) Steve Keeter, who joined the SPS in 1992, wrote in *Skeet's Fan Forum and Review* #7 (Feb. 1993) -- which carried both the SPS and UFO symbols on its front cover -- that "*the SPS zines that I have received all seem to be of a high quality, and such talented pubbers as Randy Reynaldo, Jim Main, Michael Neno, and other notables are members. Former Chairman Christopher Erwin has remarked that the SPS wanted to avoid the seemingly stringent set*

of rules that the UFO has in its constitution, and to create a club that was easy to join and easy to stay in.” By 1993, the SPS had grown to over 30 members. Over the years members came and went; later Chairmen included Jack Bertram and Jim Pike, among others.

Current SPS Chairman Dale Martin (creator of *Watusi the Talking Dog*) had announced in 2009 that he would be stepping down as Chairman (and publisher of *Rap Sheet*) when his tenure ended at the end of the year. As that time drew near, Dale encouraged any members interested in taking over as Chairman to let him know. Apparently interest in the position was low, and on November 8th, Dale posted on the SPS message board asking, “Should the *Rap Sheet* reach an end and this [internet] forum become our new meeting place? Like I said above, I hope that wouldn’t happen to the SPS, but it may be what we’re faced with.” In response to his post, some SPSers offered their suggestions on how to let the zine go out with a bang. Dale replied on Nov. 30th, “Wow -- it’s sad to see that members are putting more energy (judging by comments on this thread) into sending the group off into the sunset than keeping it going.”

I had never heard of the SPS or *Rap Sheet* before 2009 (that I recall), having only recently become interested in small-press upon reviving *Ditkomania* in 2008. I subscribed to *Rap Sheet* beginning with #141 (March 2009) and was pleased to be able to follow another long-running co-op zine in addition to the UFO’s own *Tet-Frags*. I knew that Dale would be leaving the Chairmanship at the end of the year, so I hoped that the next Chairman would be able to maintain *Rap Sheet*’s high quality. I rarely visited the SPS website’s message forum, so I was greatly surprised when *Rap Sheet* #146 (Dec. 2009) arrived in my mailbox, along with a check from Dale returning to me the remaining balance of my sub. The final issue happened to be the “all-comics” issue and so there were fewer columns than usual, and next to nothing about the zine’s long history.

“I was aware that Dale was having a hard time trying to get someone to step up and run the SPS,” Sherman Burnett told me, “but I was sure that someone would step up. Didn’t happen. I’d do it myself, but I just don’t think I’m going to have the time and now apparently most members have decided that maybe it is time for the group to die. It’s sad really.” Long-time small-press creator George Stasinos (*Big George Comics*), was also surprised by the demise of the newsletter. “I never imagined that the days of the SPS and *Rap Sheet* would end. I have been a member of the SPS since November 1992. It all began with as little as six members [in 1989] and ended with eighteen members. That just seems odd to me!”

As noted at the beginning of this article, the SPS still exists (for now) on the internet. The demise of *Rap Sheet* demonstrates to me the continued need for a printed newsletter as a meeting-place for all members of a co-op, for without it the members may find themselves out-of-the-loop, especially those members who are not actively online. There’s also much small-press history and creativity (especially true for *Rap Sheet* since it had an original comics serial titled “Carpal Tunnel Syndrome” which utilized members’ characters in the storyline) expressed in its pages over the years. Perhaps some of the SPS members who enjoyed contributing to *Rap Sheet*, and receiving it in the mail, will be interested in joining the UFO, where a regularly-published printed newsletter is still a vital part of the co-op experience.

RAP SHEET

OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE SPS. #1

JULY 1989

Greetings, and welcome to the first issue of Rap Sheet, the official newsletter of the Small Press Syndicate (SPS). Sorry about the lateness of this ish but there are certain inherent problems with the forming of a new club and it seems that having clear communication lines is one of them. Hopefully, this problem will be eradicated as we go along. I'm afraid that because of the lateness of this issue I will have to make the deadline for next ish August 31. After all, this is the "July" issue, and in order to stay on the proper bi-monthly schedule, (for voting purposes and stuff), I must request your articles A.S.A.P.

Thank you,
Aaron S. Tracy
SPS Chairman

HIGHLIGHTS

A hearty welcome goes out to Matt Szcwcyk, Lee Erwin, and Cris Erwin to the SPS! As our new members we wish you a long and enjoyable future in the small press. We will be anxiously awaiting your articles in the next issue of Rap Sheet.

Matt Szcwcyk
835 Mt. Hope St.
N. Attleboro, MA 02760
Company name: E+M Comics

Lee/Cris Erwin
1 David Lane 4A
Yonkers, NY 10701
Company name: Starlight
Comix

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SEAN'S ARTIKUL
FOR SPS

Um, whoa.

I want all of you to contribute to Sneak Peek #5, okay? Free Advertising!

See, um, I'm glad that we got the club together! It's lookin' good! We've got the 3 founders, Matt S., and the Erwin Bros. When there are 10 or so of us, I wanna do a special ish of Sneak Peek featuring SPS! In fact, I'm tryin' to do one with Pizzaz!

"I think its groovy now that people are finally gettin' together now."

Trip?! NO! Freedom Rock!

It's been a pretty riputo summer, I guess. I've completed drivers ed., got my license! We went to Disneyland in June, and going to Conn. in a few weeks!

I wish I had some wisdom to share, wait! I do! Send Lee Erwin a tape and ask for Centaur and Toxik music! It's really cool!

Um, I have lots of comics to trade so send me some of yours.

THANK,
SEAN P. Hale

ROLL CALL:

SHERMAN BURNETT
LEE ERWIN
CRIS ERWIN
SEAN P. HALE
MATT Szcwcyk
AARON S. TRACY

IMPORTANT NOTE:

No one, save Sherman Burnett and Aaron Tracy have put money into their accounts. They are supporting this club alone. send in money now to strengthen your accounts. According to the club's const., one must pay in order to recieve further newsletters.

ABOVE: The first page of RAP SHEET #1 (July 1989), the first issue of the SPS newsletter, which consisted merely of one double-sided sheet of paper. The next issue, #2 (Sept. 1989), was *two* double-sided sheets of paper. Co-founder Sherman Burnett notes that "Rap Sheet didn't become a digest zine till issue #10."