

misty's big adventure arthur russell of montreal patrick wolf bonnie 'prince' billy klashnekoff

plonk
music media other

issue 19

£3.30

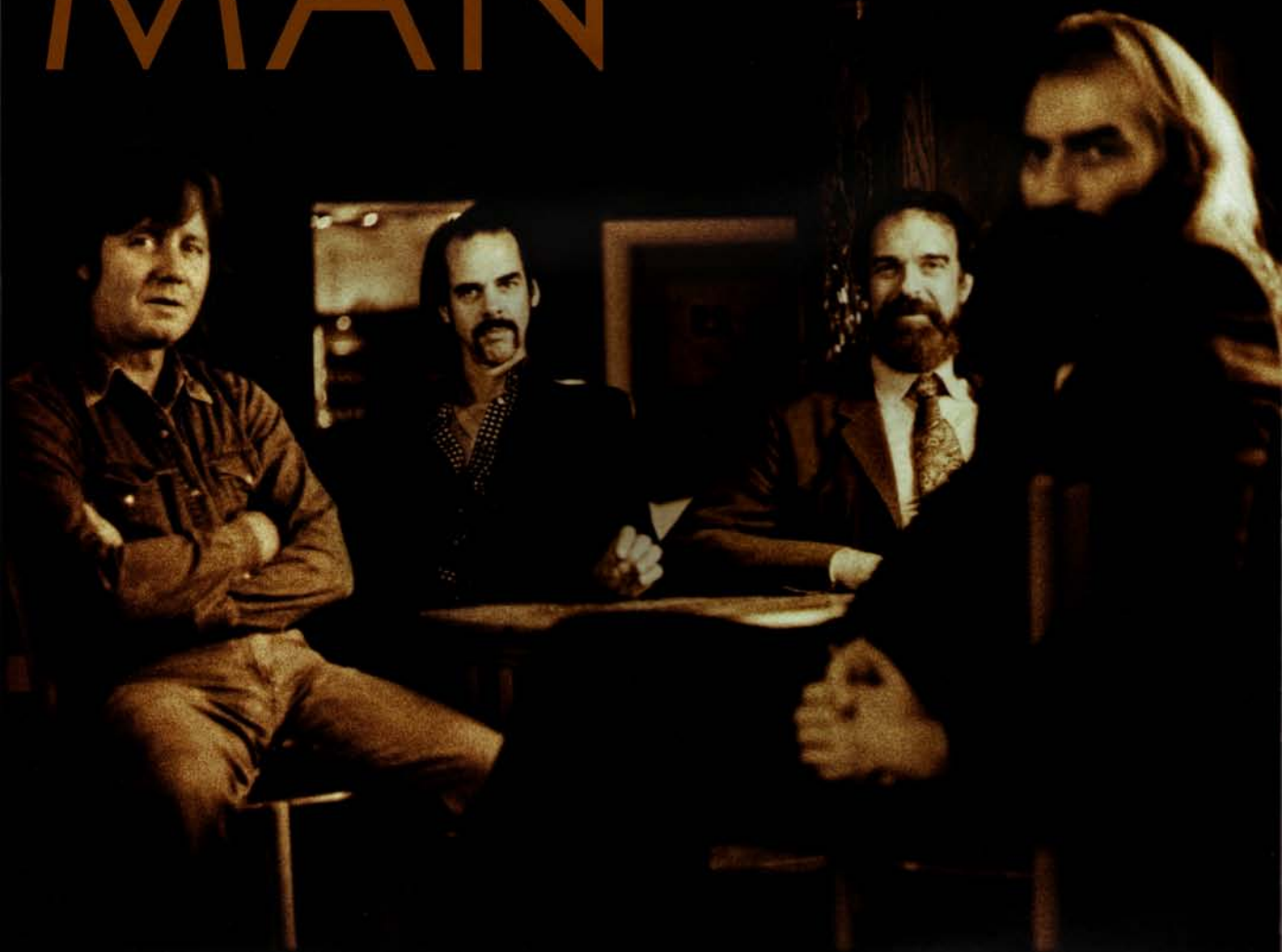


march 2007

GRINDER

nick cave's league of extraordinary gentlemen

MAN





Did you see those great Penguin Modern Classics Deluxe Editions from the US? I just found a few in the local Waterstones yesterday. We don't normally get US imports there, but there's obviously someone new who knows their stuff.

I felt like a kid in a candy store. I just had to have them, and forget the fact that I already own almost all the titles in other imprints. But I'm such a sucker for great covers. And as a comics lover, how could I fail to be seduced by the likes of Frank Miller, Seth, Chris Ware, Jason, Chester Brown and Yoshihiro Tatsumi? Each of them has produced an original piece of artwork for the books: the fact that you get some awesome literature too is only a bonus.

So is the use of comic artists a sign of their being accepted in the pantheon of art? Is it a shrewd marketing ploy by a PR guru who has the target audience nailed? Who cares? Just enjoy the damn books and marvel at the glorious covers. If I had to choose one of them as a favourite, it would be a coin toss between Seth's *Portable Dorothy Parker* and Chris Ware's *Candide*. Ware probably just edges it. I'm such a sucker for his ludicrously shaped stick-and-ball figures. They crack me up every time. He's such a demon colourist and a genius of frame sequencing. The fact that he's also a writer of rare eloquence and sensitivity only helps to mark him out as the comics laureate of our times.

I remember the first time I heard of Ware being referred to in those terms. It was early in 2001, and Mike Morris was writing in *Tangents*. I was still easing into comics at that time, and Morris totally sold me. I couldn't find anything in my local stores, but an Easter holiday in San Francisco meant I was able to find a couple of his early *ACME* collections. It was a revelation. I read the Jimmy Corrigan episode in *ACME 7* and wept. This was visual poetry, comics like I could never have imagined and yet somehow knew I had always wanted.

After that I picked up as much Ware as I could. I particularly loved those outside *Big Book Of Jokes* titles. It was in the second issue of those that we were first introduced to Rusty Brown. The extended strips in the most recent volumes of the *ACME* series (16 and 17, now published by Drawn And Quarterly) take us back to Rusty's childhood to fill in the back-story. And what a back-story it is, with the bumbling and seedy Mr Brown senior, the obnoxious longhaired Freak bullies, the new-to-townners Alice and Chalky White and the strange cameo of Mr Ware the art teacher who smokes pot in the back of cars with his students. The relationships in *Rusty Brown* are, like those in *Jimmy Corrigan*, stressed out to breaking points, cracked and fissured beyond repair. Even the youthful bonds of the put-upon outsiders are flawed: "How come you're really only nice to me when we're not at school?" says Chalky to Rusty in the 1973 souvenir pull-out calendar (right) in that second volume of the *Big Book Of Jokes*, which pretty much says it all.

Another of Ware's classic characters is Quimby Mouse, which I always saw as homage to the classic

George Herriman *Krazy Kat* comic of the Thirties and Forties. No surprise, then, that Ware designs and decorates Fantagraphics new *1939-1940 Krazy And Ignatz* collection. I first came across *Krazy Kat* in the psych/garage fanzine *Strange Things Are Happening* in the Eighties. Because of that, I had it down as a freakbeat underground comic from the Sixties, somehow connected to the likes of Robert Crumb – how naive I was!

But really, that psych connection is right in there, and when you explore some of those old American comics from the Twenties through to the Forties, there's a lot of latent psychedelia, years ahead of its time. Operating within a simple structure of characters and motivations, Herriman was able to go to town with a surreal imagination. Less is more, indeed. It all fits.

comics

krazy days

Words: Alistair Fitchett

Alistair Fitchett celebrates the art of Chris Ware and rediscovers a freaky feline from the Thirties



When you explore some American comics from the Twenties to the Forties, there's a lot of latent psychedelia, years ahead of its time

