

CHAPTER 17

DEATH MAGAZINE: DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Goldstein had proven adept at spinning sister publications off from *Screw*, each seemingly more bizarre and short-lived than the one before. But his strangest detour into doomed publishing ventures had to be *Death* magazine, a monthly tabloid that bubbled to the surface in the summer of 1978

The first issue of *Death* magazine

startles supermarket shoppers

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The industry of death: Goldstein solicits serious paid advertising

Beauty-Graved QUALITY DOESN'T COST...IT PAYS!
SYMPATHY CARDS

- NO SALES TAX OUTSIDE ALA
- HEAVY WEIGHT VELLUM STOCK
- ORDERS SHIPPED DAY RECEIVED
- PACKED 25 TO A BOX
- OPEN ACCT. TO ALL RATED FIRMS

AMERICA'S LOWEST PRICES!
FREE SAMPLE KIT

DEWBERRY ENGRAVING CO. WORLD'S LARGEST ENGRAVER
 P O BOX 2311 BIRMINGHAM ALA 35201

APOLLO Lifetime Aluminum Cemetery Grave Marker & Flower Vase
 Installs Flush to the Ground. Personally Inscribed With Name of Deceased & Grave Location, Model S-6
 Available With or Without Cross. Please Specify.

APOLLO PRECISION CORP.
 410 Long Island Avenue
 Wyandanch, L.I. 11798
 Phone 516-643-6585 (For Prices)
 Display Available for Model S-6 upon Request
 Salesman Needed for all Territories

Our 92nd Year

Morgan Eye Caps
 ORDER FROM YOUR JOBBER
 or DIRECT FROM

EUREKA FLUID WORKS
 ROUND 1556-58 15th Street San Francisco, Calif. 94103

and gave him the chance to irreverently fuck with the taboo of death the way *Screw* fucked with the taboo of sex. With a tabloid that in form and substance played as both a parody of, and a sincere investigation into, the ultimate downer subject of death, Goldstein had whipped up a Dadaist masterpiece of the supermarket checkout rack long before the *Weekly World News* became hip in the eighties. *Screw* had been created as an antidote to the culture of scare mongering tabloids, but now he figured that if Joe and Jane Blow wanted to wallow in death, doom and tragedy, he would be honest about it and give it to them in spades. And of course

make a profit on it. With this in mind he crammed the back pages with serious ads for casket companies, eye cap manufacturers, colleges offering courses in mortuary science and quantities of what appear to be embalming fluid. *DEATH IS COMING! ARE YOU READY?* hyped the promotional slogan.

The first issue appeared in July 1978. It treated viewers to a photospread of Mexican mummies and a tour of NYC's "secret cadaver collection" at the museum of the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner – referred to in *Screw* lingo as the "museum of the strangely slain." Commonsense tips on how to cut coffin costs and a rather superficial overview of dead rock stars were also on tap. Other highlights included a focus on the morbid religious comics of Jack T. Chick, and, most curiously, a pictorial tour of the elegant Bois-de-Vaux cemetery in Lausanne, Switzerland, which Al and new wife Gina had personally photographed while on vacation. In one grainy photo a bearded Goldstein stands on a cobblestone lane, tent-like plaid shirt draped over his protruding belly, looking more like an embittered lumberjack lost in time and space than an underground publisher from New York.

Truth told, Goldstein had always been as fascinated by death as sex. Afraid of it, obsessed with it, courting it with every bag of chocolate chip cookies or plate of linguini he didn't need. He had a hostile relationship with his own carnality and over-indulged in everything to the point of near fatal gluttony. Death was the one thing he couldn't overindulge in, so *Death* magazine was perhaps compensation for being denied this freedom. Instead of a Screw You! or a



Low fashion: Goldstein
tours a Swiss boneyard

Fuck You! rant, his editorializing in *Death* took the form of a Death Rattle and assumed a more philosophical tone.

"We are simultaneously repelled and fascinated by death," he ruminated in the inaugural issue, pictured bear chested as if ready to lie down upon a mortuary slab. "And yet," he continues,

though it is of great interest the simple truth is it is probably the least understood and least joked about area in life. It is for this reason that we've produced Death, the world's first publication devoted to death. Death seeks to illuminate the dark shadows and help us come to grips with the condition few of us face until we are forced to. The old joke that we don't have to learn how to die, although possibly funny, just isn't true. We really do have to know how to die, and to laugh at death, in order that we may better live. As John Donne, the famous English poet and cleric wrote in the sixteenth century, death "comes equally to us all, and makes us all equal when it comes."

We at this publication hope to both amuse and bemuse you. We hope to share with you our fears, sorrows, concerns and preoccupations. We hope to make the preparations for death easier, the explorations of what lies on the other side clearer and, most of all in the most democratic of all experiences, to ventilate the humanness of our condition and the universality of the experience of dying. We hope that you will find this first issue of Death at very least intriguing, for it represents but a promising glimmer of what, with your help, we hope this exciting publication will become.

Such reflective prose coupled with quotes from Epicurus and John Donne was a clear departure from his rantings in *Screw*, but this new approach didn't make it any easier to move copies and *Death* sank faster than a corpse with cement overshoes. And yet, however quickly it was destined to be elbowed to the back of the newsstand by the deluge of publications being pumped out by the likes of Myron Fass (who

The ghoulish and surreal collide in
issue two of *Death* magazine

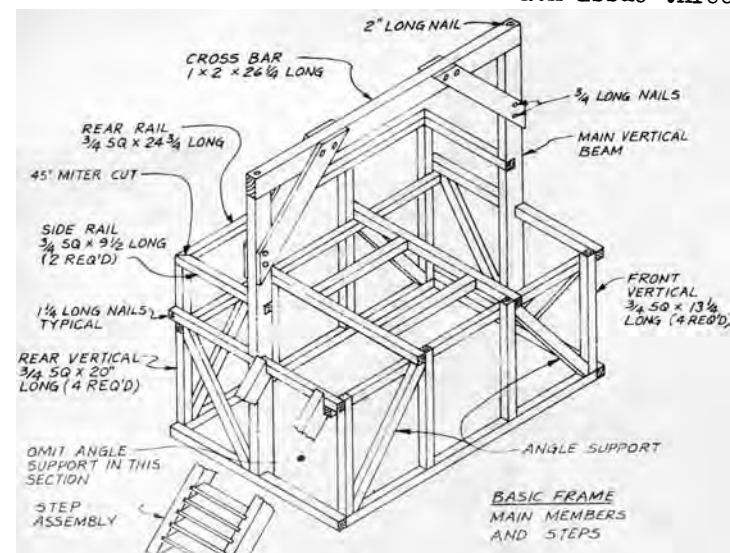


was, at that time, producing *Ancient Astronauts*, *Beatles Film Festival*, *Official UFO* and *Jaws of Blood*), Al once again had the new and startling idea.

The front page of the next issue featured a mockup photo of Jayne Mansfield's fatal car wreck with her smiling head superimposed on the pavement next to the crumpled vehicle. IS JAYNE MANSFIELD REALLY DEAD? queried the headline.

In issue three managing editor Steve Becker guested the Death Rattle column with a very poetic and existential rumination on how death and Bergman's movie, *Wild Strawberries*,

The gallows schematic from *Death* issue three



had intertwined in his consciousness.

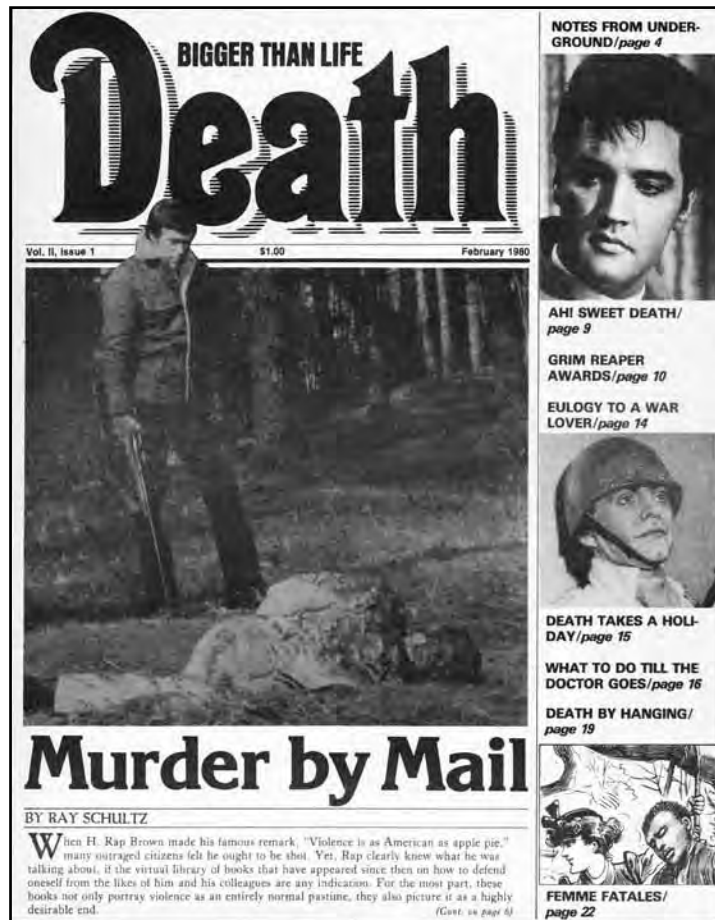
A feature on DEATH GOES TO THE MOVIES rubbed elbows with coverage of the New York State funeral director's convention, a how-to-build-your-own-gallows schematic and part two of DEATH FOR BEGINNERS, a feature explaining cremations, necrophilia and embalming, among other topics. In the letters column a man asked how he could go about getting himself stuffed and placed in his "own environment, surrounded by my various keyboard instruments" after death, and wondered what the Board of Health might have to say about it, signing off by begging for a prompt and truthful answer as "my death depends on it."

And that was it, nothing more was heard from *Death* magazine until a year and a half later when another copy appeared out of the blue. In his Death Rattle column from volume two, issue one of February 1980 (apparently volume one only ran three issues), Goldstein reveals that "*Death* received such a pathetic response from the public that it was not only buried but cremated. Although we printed 600,000 copies, we sold only 200,000, one of the shabbiest sales figures in

publishing history... Most news dealers and wholesalers won't touch a newspaper called *Death* because, as they say on Broadway, it just ain't upbeat enough."

Searching for an apt metaphor, his thoughts turned to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein:

Doctor Frankenstein's monster, created from the rotting dead and vitalized by an electric spark, was so ugly that even his creator abandoned him, casting him out to spend his short life



An undignified death: The last issue wheezes off the press

Over the top: A darkly satirical ad from the last issue

Page 2/DEATH

A dead child needs your help. Now.



Remember little Magdalena, 8 years old, and her brother Pedro Jose, 4, who were victims of their teening Colombian slum? Remember we asked you to help them? They were hungry and living in a house without water or light. They slept in packing crates left by American coffee buyers. Their mother was killed by a hit and run ox cart carrying manure to the outskirts of town. Their father? Well, you know how it is in teening South American slums. Now, do you remember these two children? Sure, you do. But, when we asked for your help you refused, said you gave at the office, turned the page, or sent back our gummed labels. Well, we are asking again.

Magdalena and Pedro Jose are dead. They are lying, wrapped in rags, on the floor of their rat-infested adobe house. No one is sitting watching their little corpses through the long nights.

Why is it that children remain above ground longest?

Perhaps because there are so many dead children that the sight of their corpses lying about no longer affects the civilized world. American children are lucky; specially made boxes, from pine to mahogany, are available for them when they die. You don't see American children lying dead in the streets. How can we allow other children to die without hope of a coffin.

As this text is being written, Magdalena and Pedro Jose are among the 20,000 children in the world registered by The Christian Children's Burial Fund and awaiting a sponsor to provide shroud, casket, plot, and stone.

You can bury a child for only \$15 a month for 2 years. Please fill out the coupon and send it with your first monthly check. You will receive your buried child's name, photographs of the child in the casket and in the plot, plus a description of the cause of death and details of the actual dying. You will be encouraged to send flowers to lay on the grave.

You can even have the satisfaction of knowing that even if you wouldn't give money to keep these children alive at least you gave them a Christian burial. It is time. Somewhere in this world a child's corpse is rotting.

I WANT TO HELP, FINALLY!

I want to bury a boy girl in
 (Country) _____
 Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State _____ Zip _____

Mail today to:
BURY THE CHILDREN, INC.
 Box 432, Old Chelsea Station,
 New York, NY 10011

seeking acceptance and love from the human world. Well, we all know how far he got.

What you are holding in your hand is the Frankenstein of publishing, a... monster among the "pretty" magazines that flourish... But Death is risen. We have restored Death to life because we realize we have an obligation, not to those who spurned our fledgling monster, but to the 200,000 souls who find the subject as enthralling as we do. I, like you, am scared shitless of dying. Dying at any age is dying too soon. To give us life and then snuff it out is the sickest, cruelest joke that fate has ever played. Some of the best advice on lengthening life

was written by Alexander Bogomoletz, a Russian doctor and scientist whose life spanned two world wars and a revolution.

He said, "The scorn of death is one of the best methods of prolonging life... the best way not to die too soon is to cultivate the duties of life and the scorn of death." This is our objective in this, our fourth issue of *Death*. We will parody, satirize and scorn death because there are no options. We will stand up to death knowing we cannot win. We will spit in death's eye; we will urinate on death's shoes, we will laugh at death in order to fully face the challenge, the opportunities and the risks of life. We do this because we have no alternative! To do anything else is to be dead already. So, I resurrect and rededicate this newspaper, not to death which is our subject matter, but to life which is our choice. *L'Caim!*

Al was ready to give *Death* another chance but the judgments of the buying public were much more merciless and there is no evidence that the publication lived to fight another day. Yet, as we shall see, he was still threatening to bring it back as late as 1985.

Some very strange cross-cultural pollinations were taking place in the underground at this point and Al's closing editorial could have functioned as a manifesto for just about any punk band, not least, say, the Los Angeles group called *45 Grave* with a lead singer who went under the name of Dinah Cancer. Although Al, with his bulging waistline and gluttonous appetite for gold chains and oversized diamond-studded watches was as square as could be, there were similarities between the punk movement and this little patch of underground turf he had carved out for himself.

Death did indeed resonate with a punk aesthetic. While heavy metal bands "worshipped" death, punk bands scorned it. Punk was ugly and *Death* was ugly too, "a monster," as Goldstein defiantly proclaimed, "among the 'pretty' magazines that flourish." *Death* adorned newsstands just as punk was hitting the headlines. It was taboo-busting, fearless,

Jello Biafra seeks support in *Screw*, April 11, 1988

ROCK & ROLL IS ON TRIAL



This time it's for real

The nationwide climate of anti-rock hysteria has begun to claim real victims:

- On August 11, 1987 ex Dead Kennedys vocalist/songwriter Jello Biafra and four others went on trial before a jury in Los Angeles on criminal charges stemming from a record album. Each defendant faces up to a year in prison and a \$2,000 fine. The legal implications of this case are enormous; for music and art and free speech in general.
- The targeted album (*Frankenchrist*, by Dead Kennedys, Alternative Tentacles) included a poster of a painting by the renowned, Oscar-winning artist H.R. Giger.
- An 18-year old record-store clerk in Callaway, Florida, is slapped with a felony charge for selling a rap music cassette to someone four years her junior. She faces up to five years in prison. The store has already shut its doors.
- In Goshen, Indiana, Marianne Hatfield is targeted by a local church group with death threats and attacks on her children, friends, and property because she publishes a music magazine, *Rock Rag*.
- The FCC picks an alternative news station as its first target in a crackdown on "explicit language" in radio. It moves on to force New York's controversial *Howard Stern Show* out of national syndication.
- New immigration laws are used to bar musicians, speakers, and journalists from entering or appearing in the United States.
- Rock music magazines from *SPIN* to *Tiger Beat* are removed from Wal Mart and other convenience stores after a TV evangelist claims the magazine are "pornographic."

The Biafra/*Frankenchrist* trial is the test case. The prosecution knows it. We know it. And we need your help. Refusing to plea bargain, Biafra and the four co-defendants pleaded not guilty to the charges in Los Angeles. The cost of the trial will be very high.

The **NO MORE CENSORSHIP** Defense Fund has been formed to help with these expenses. In return, we offer well researched information on this and other censorship cases and how they affect you: your right to free speech and access to information.

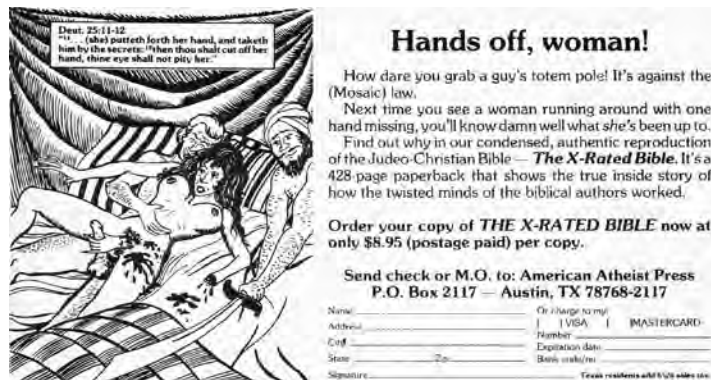
Please send correspondence and contributions to:
NO MORE CENSORSHIP Defense Fund
 P.O. Box 11458 San Francisco, CA 94101

tasteless and darkly hilarious, a body blow against the frigid norms of bourgeoisie propriety that would never permit any real contemplation of sex or death. In issue three of *Death*, for example, there was a two-page layout entitled THE ART OF DYING that featured the goth punk artist Colette who staged her own death as an art happening. And the whole atmosphere of the Milky Way Production offices was far more punk than hippy. *Screw's* staffers often moved in the same circles as punks and other New York underground types, partly because it tended to be a young staff generally drawn from a pool of scribes who had or would write for other quasi-underground publications like the *Soho News*, the *N.Y. Rocker* and *Psychotronic*. Punk was famously "anti-sex" and in its own beguiling way so was *Screw*, at least "anti" the

concept of sex that the media was selling to the masses.

AI was telling us that love sucked long before punk adopted the phrase as its mantra. Indeed, Goldstein's welter of spin-off publications foreshadowed the punk fanzine movement of the eighties, which promoted the idea of giving public vent to private obsessions. The cartoons of the religious Chick publications, which *Death* magazine had already paid homage to, would be championed by zine "pioneers" like the Church of the SubGenius in the eighties, as if they were discovering them anew. In fact, *Death* magazine was a zine more than anything else, although AI would have blanched at the appellation.

Punks were noticing what Goldstein was doing. As late as 1988 (in issue 997), Jello Biafra, lead singer of the *Dead Kennedys*, was seeking common cause with *Screw* readers via a back page ad entitled ROCK & ROLL IS ON TRIAL. In the ad, sandwiched between phone-sex and massage parlor spots, Biafra's record company sought contributions to its No More Censorship defense fund, all of this stemming from the August 1987 trial of the punk singer and four others for publishing an allegedly obscene painting by H.R. Giger as part of the album, *Frankenchrist*. (*Screw's* back pages provided refuge for a host of fringe causes: in the same issue the American Atheist Press advertised *The X-Rated Bible*.)



Hands off, woman!

How dare you grab a guy's totem pole! It's against the (Mosaic) law.

Next time you see a woman running around with one hand missing, you'll know damn well what she's been up to.

Find out why in our condensed, authentic reproduction of the Judeo-Christian Bible — **The X-Rated Bible**. It's a 428 page paperback that shows the true inside story of how the twisted minds of the biblical authors worked.

Order your copy of **THE X-RATED BIBLE** now at only \$8.95 (postage paid) per copy.

Send check or M.O. to: American Atheist Press
P.O. Box 2117 — Austin, TX 78768-2117

Name: _____ Or charge to my: VISA MASTERCARD
Address: _____ Number: _____
City: _____ Expiration date: _____
State: _____ Zip: _____ Birth date (mm/yy): _____
Signature: _____ Circle numbers and fill in where indicated.

Ad for *The X-Rated Bible*, later re-printed by

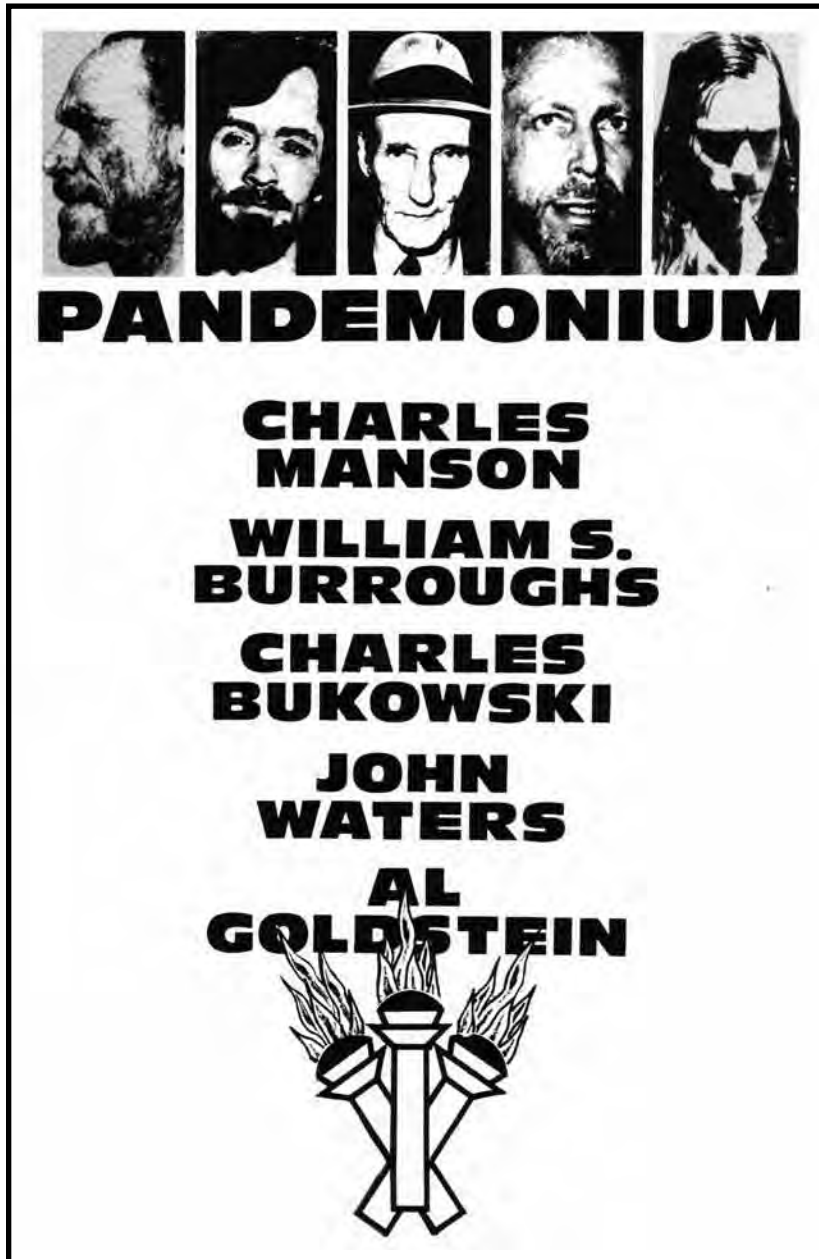
Feral House in 1999

To those literate few who haunted the back aisles of far-flung adult bookshops, AI had by then achieved a kind of underground credibility that the "respectable" alternative press never picked up on. Exhibit A: The appearance in 1986 of a self-published underground magazine from Cambridge, MA, called *Pandemonium*, in which an interview with Goldstein appeared alongside correspondence and interviews with the likes of Charles Manson, Charles Bukowski, John Waters and William Burroughs.

What was that all about? States the introduction:

When a large shark is caught by fishermen, its slippery, stinking, appallingly heavy carcass is hoisted up by its tail on the docks and its belly is cut open. The stuff that falls out is the stuff of legend: nails, spikes, entire tool boxes, rubber tires, buoys, chains, anchors, human skulls, an arm or a leg, a torso... Pandemonium has been conceived as a literary shark's belly, featuring some of the inedible, indigestible cultural flotsam of modern day America. Unedited. untypeset. Untouched. I like to think that if the slippery, stinking, appallingly heavy carcass of society was hoisted up by its tail and its belly sliced open, this is what would tumble out. I flatter myself in believing these pages to contain the literary spikes, anchors, rubber tires... with an occasional human arm or leg...

Finally, schoolchildren, citizens groups, mayors and scientists are incessantly putting together these "time capsules," these vaults to be buried in the public square or these rockets to be shot into space... these cultural Whitman's Samplers, so-to-speak, to be dug up and digested by distant descendants or to be plucked from space, poured over and decoded by intelligent beings from other worlds. They'll get a dose of Joyce, Picasso, Einstein, Beethoven. I propose we include this humble volume in all such time capsules so these distant grandchildren and alien civilizations can get it straight from Burroughs, Manson, Bukowski, Waters and Goldstein too. Let's send the nails, the spikes, the rubber tires and the torsos into space...



Bad company: Left to Right—Charles Bukowski,
Charles Manson, William Burroughs,
Al Goldstein
and John Waters

An unholy five, if ever there were five, to unsettle middle America.

It is interesting to observe that in retrospect nothing the punk revolution generated in paper form was nearly as extreme or aggressively bizarre as *Death* magazine or *Screw*—none of its parodies so vicious or uncompromising or in many cases wickedly clever and fearless. In part this was because punk claimed a certain political significance whereas Goldstein eschewed political significance, or rather all politics was strained through the sieve of sex-and-loathing until the final toxic cocktail was not recognizable as politics. He was rather a true-blown anarchist/libertarian always in attack-mode, showering with acid satire friend as well as foe, making wicked fun of everything, as Jim Haynes complained, until nothing meant anything. All of this sprang from and represented a kind of absolutist evolution of Bauldaire's and later Henry Miller's gospel of total honesty. When taken to Goldsteinian extremes this led to the conviction that it was basically a repressed and dishonest world that could only be saved by shock therapy. Blow it all up and start over. *Screw* was the fuse.

But punks had little time for the likes of Henry Miller and Lenny Bruce, who had made such an impression on Goldstein's generation, and they could smell the trace elements of hippy logic a mile away. *Screw* was a rebellion against hippy ethos but was also inescapably a product of it. It was a dirty cast out child of hippyism, and you could recognize its parentage once you got past the self-induced stench. In its crusading sexual absolutism *Screw* was not punk, and its pornographic content was sure to alienate young rock trends who might otherwise respond to its message. It was, after all, about sex—surely a hippy obsession if ever there was one.