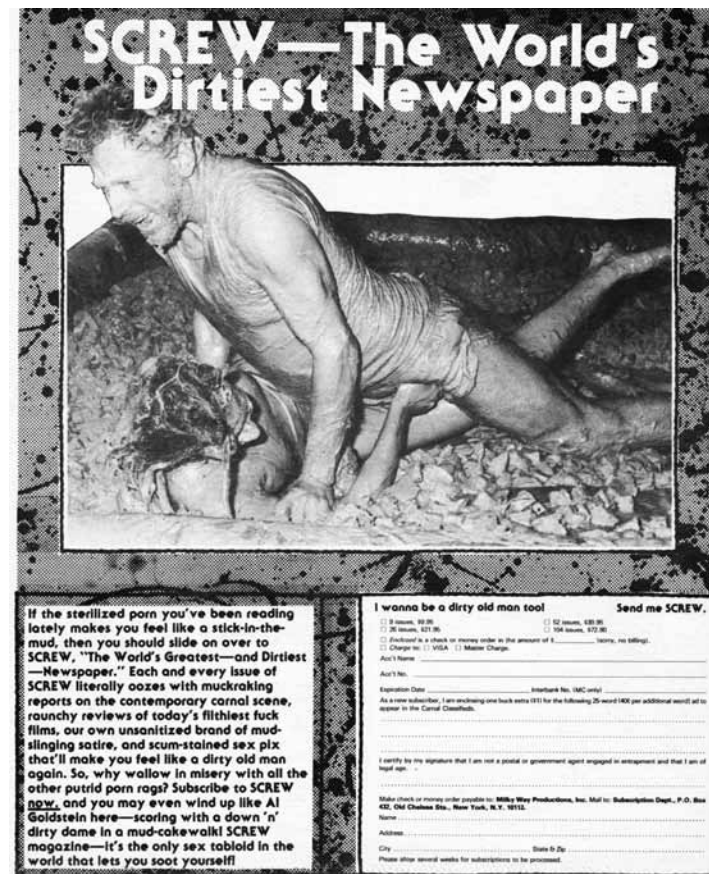


CHAPTER 18

BATTLE OF THE BAD TASTE TITANS

While these spin-off publications gave Al a chance to blow his loose change and indulge his peculiar obsessions, he also wanted to occupy center stage in the men's mag field and they would win him no points there. Enter the aforementioned publisher Lyle Stewart. The two had once planned to bring out a biography about Goldstein entitled *The Prince of Porn* but for some reason it never happened. Now, in 1978, the plan was to launch something called *National Screw*, a glossy, color magazine-format version of *Screw*. Unlike *The Prince of Porn*, *National Screw* actually surfaced, but it didn't last long, unable to compete with other men's market glossies, particularly *Hustler*, which had also established itself as a no-holds-barred working class counterpoint to *Playboy*. Larry Flynt's magazine had stolen *Screw's* thunder in the lowbrow sexual satire department while at the same time managing to make itself more palatable to middle American consumers. It was not as anchored to a single location as determinedly as *Screw* was anchored to New York City, and was not as dominated by Flynt's personality as *Screw* was by Goldstein's.

Hustler wasn't simply stealing *Screw's* thunder, according to Goldstein, but also its material. "Throughout the seventies and early eighties," he would assert, "*Hustler* stole shamelessly from *Screw*, becoming a colorized redneck imitator."²⁷ Redneck obviously in reference to their very diverse up-bringsings—Goldstein as a New York City Jew and Flynt as a (in Goldstein's eyes) dirty hillbilly from the hallows of rural Kentucky, from that cursed topography he so despised: the interior of the United States. Nonetheless, *Screw* was still unique. *Hustler* and its spawn had not a patina of underground sensibility, and Goldstein's flagship publication remained far more outrageous than Flynt's, whose famous



cover of a woman being poured into a meat-grinder that scandalized the country was timid stuff compared to the graphic gristle served up in *Screw* every week. But relatively few noticed; *Screw* was still being distributed primarily in Manhattan and in adult bookshops clustered in a score of other urban areas, whereas *Hustler* sold in the drugstores and supermarkets of middle America.

Flynt did have some close encounters with the underground, when, in 1978, he asked *Realist* founder Paul Krassner to become editor of *Hustler*. Krassner found the offer so absurd he couldn't turn it down. And Flynt also bought the *L.A. Free Press* and put Jay Levin in charge of it, with the

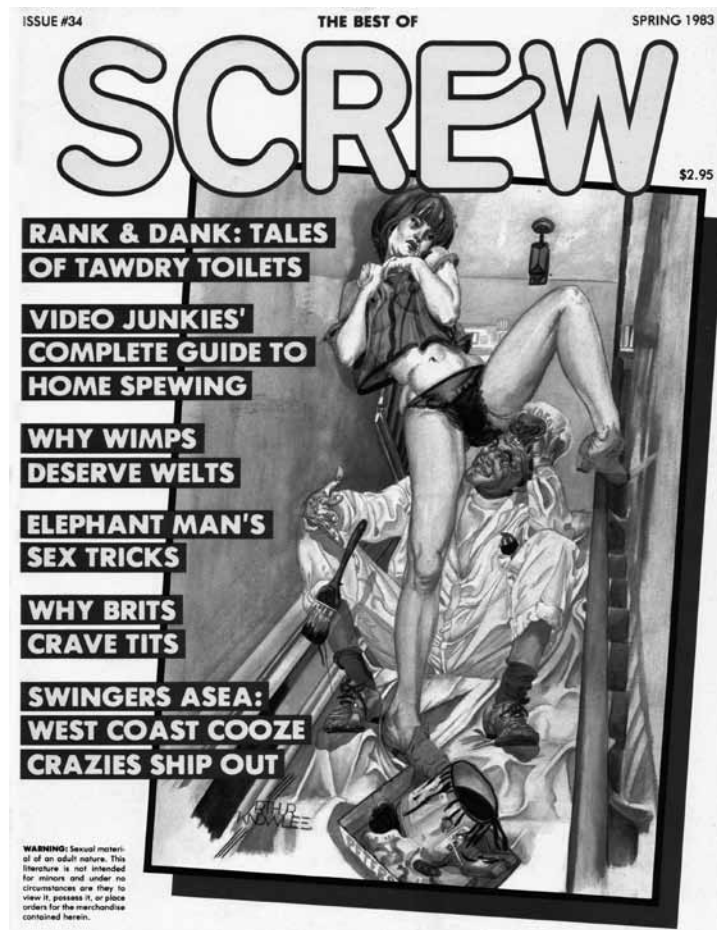
intention of turning it into the *Village Voice* of L.A. But these ventures, which happened just after Flynt had supposedly been born again, were short-lived: Krassner lasted just six months and Levin was fired after ten weeks over disputes about editorial control. A week after Levin was fired Flynt was shot: the money-losing *L.A. Free Press* was closed for good and Flynt's flirtation with the underground ended. A close associate of Goldstein would later write that Al "consistently played second fiddle to lesser outlaws." Larry Flynt,

whom Goldstein considered a friend and visited in the hospital after the shooting, was a much more famous but indeed lesser outlaw.

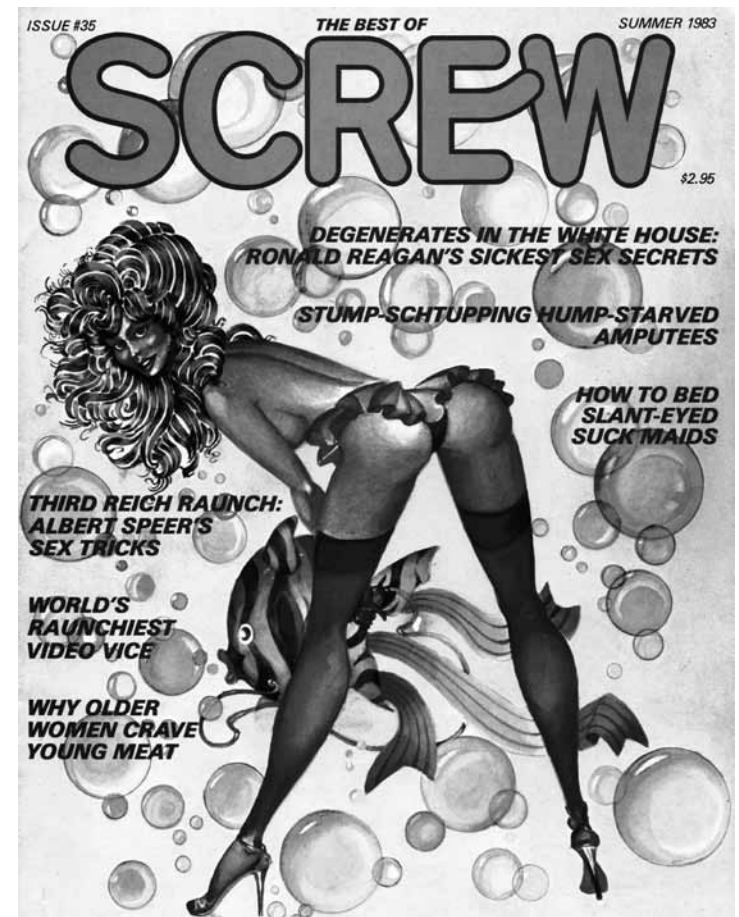
Goldstein seemed to be losing momentum and focus toward the end of the seventies, and there were multiple reasons for this, not least all the court battles that had left him exhausted and disillusioned.

And what was there to fight anymore?

There was a difference between fighting the good fight



Best of Screw was the closest Goldstein would...



...ever get to the glossier competing publications that were nationally distributed

and just riding a wave, a difference between attacking J. Edgar Hoover and attacking the guy at the drycleaners who ruined your shirt. Through the mid seventies all the barriers had fallen faster than anyone could have predicted and left Goldstein with a dwindling supply of hate objects to channel his anger. He defined himself by the pain he caused his opponents and by *having* opponents. If the opponents ceased to exist so would Al Goldstein. It was basic physics: he assumed shape and force only when in opposition. And now it was a whole new landscape. Gone were the days when he could destroy a hated politician simply by endorsing him. Those heady times of the revolutionary late-sixties were now memories as yellowed and brittle as the first copies of *Screw*.

But the job paid well. At his peak Al had apartments in Amsterdam, Los Angeles and sprinkled around Manhattan. He had a house upstate, a mansion in Florida, money in Switzerland, a Rolls, a limo and multiple other vehicles down in the parking garage. He had a yacht, a nanny, a maid, a full-time bodyguard, four secretaries and approximately thirty *Screw* and *Midnight Blue* employees. Waiting for his stretch-limo outside his townhouse at 247 East 61st Street every morning he would throw a friendly salute to good neighbor Bill Cosby who lived next door.

After his son, Jordan, was born, Al, Gina and the kid apparently lived a life of comparative domestic bliss. Here in his townhouse Al sought refuge from the chaos of the porn world and his own turbulent psyche, here he took solace in marriage, fatherhood, and the small routine joys of family life. Every afternoon he looked forward to leaving 14th Street far behind him and getting back home where, like Robert Young in *Father Knows Best*, he'd sink into his favorite easy chair, put on his slippers, light a cigar and start paging through the *New York Times*. "I still needed marriage, the trap of the bourgeoisie," he would admit. "otherwise I would have been swallowed up in the quicksand of the porn underworld."

CHAPTER 19

THE REAGAN EIGHTIES

If it seemed Al was sedating himself with material goods and drifting into the complacent lethargy of family life, well, that just wasn't the deal. Al needed new battles to fight, and he got them when Ronald Reagan was elected President.



It took the election of Ronald Reagan to get Al's mojo working again. Image from a 1983 *Screw*