

Foreword



Justin Green's Musical Legends By Marc Weidenbaum

Inevitably, it came down to the punchline. Justin Green knew he was finished with one of his monthly Musical Legends comic strips when its final panel had come into focus. He contributed the strip for a decade to Tower Records' *Pulse!* magazine, and though as a freelancer he might have missed the occasional deadline, as a storyteller he never missed a beat.

Each entry in Justin's Musical Legends tells a story from music history in comic form—most true, some mythical, some imagined. Whether it's the mundane day job of minimalist composer Philip Glass, or an assault by racists on crooner Nat "King" Cole, each strip closes with the perfect timing of a tale well-told. A sitting president granted honorary membership in a rockabilly band. Two elderly entertainers depicted as lithe boxers. Aged folkie P.F. Sloan, leaning on his walker, still singing "Eve of Destruction" at a

retirement home. The Grim Reaper leading Gene Vincent, one of rock'n'roll's original bad boys, to what may be heaven or hell, but in any case means an eternity of listening to J.S. Bach.

The punchlines aren't always comical. Sometimes they are just punches, to the heart or to the gut. When Lil Harden Armstrong, ex-wife of Louis, passes away during a 1971 concert performance, all we see is a stool tipped on its side below a coffin-like grand piano. Many of Justin's subjects in Musical Legends are unheralded or forgotten. Diminished stars are his stock in trade—not idealized rock'n'roll icons but real people who had real lives during which they made music.

Time and again, the closing images in Justin's Musical Legends are simply thoughtful and loving, pitched perfectly to the musicians he's describing and the stories he's telling—as when he pictures musical inventor Raymond Scott spending his declining years programming a computer in bed, or when he describes folk hero Joan Baez as the Betty Grable of the peacenik set, in whose number Justin counts himself.

That Baez-Grable joke carries particular weight, because Justin is responding to a caricature of Baez by another cartoonist—Al Capp, who had dismissed her as "Joanie Phoanie" in print. Justin is not of Capp's era, but of Baez's. He came of age with comics' "greatest generation," the Underground figures of the late 1960s and early '70s such as Robert Crumb, Bill Griffith and Art Spiegelman—artists who, based largely in San Francisco, saw comics as a means for not only self-expression and self-exploration, but also for self-flagellation.

Justin has been deservedly credited with cementing autobiography as a fundamental of modern comics. His early work, most famously the alternately hilarious and harrowing *Binky Brown Meets the Holy*

Virgin Mary, pictures a young boy flummoxed by faith and desire. One wishes it were only fiction. What's fascinating about *Musical Legends* is that having made such an impact in autobiographical comics, Justin was able to move seamlessly into biographical ones. Much of this success, of course, stems from his deep love of music, especially the finger-pickers of a bygone era. He's also a fine finger-picker himself, with a style comparable to his art: craft-minded, but unhindered by technical perfectionism.

During the ten years with *Pulse!*, Justin covered a lot of musical ground, from marching-band luminary John Phillip Sousa to the rap trio the Beastie Boys to rock legend Jimi Hendrix. Many of these strips he wrote himself, but he also had a rotating roster of guest writers, including various *Pulse!* editors, all of whom benefited from Justin's wisdom.

Though I was the editor who introduced Justin's comics to *Pulse!* magazine, I learned a lot about storytelling as Justin and I worked together through multiple drafts in an attempt to sum up the comedy of the ill-fated 8-track cassette and the tragedy of singer Nina Simone's life—not only about the pacing of the panels, but the balance of words and pictures and, of course, the importance of closing on a resolute image. After I left the magazine fulltime in late 1996, other editors took responsibility for editing his work. In *Pulse!*'s final year of publication (it closed down in December 2002, after 19 years) Justin switched gears, choosing to draw strips based on anecdotes submitted by the magazine's readership.

During the decade he produced *Musical Legends*, certain cultural figures, such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles, loomed large over his drawing board, making multiple appearances. So, too, did lesser lights, notably the colorful jazz fiddler Joe Venuti. In one strip, Janis Joplin is touchingly eulogized; in another, with an acer-

bic script by Carol Tyler (Justin's wife), she is imagined in a world in which Prozac has dulled the edges, and lengthened the lives, of rock's great risk-takers.

But there's one person who appears most regularly in *Musical Legends*, and that is Justin Green. When telling the tale of pioneer blues guitarist Mike Bloomfield, Justin closes the strip with himself, hunched over his guitar, failing to approximate the wonder of Bloomfield's playing. While researching the acrimony that led a journalist to attack Janis Joplin (yes, Joplin again), Justin was so lost in his thoughts that he wandered out of the public library without checking out his book; that scene closes the strip. For another, he hands his art supplies to his and Carol's talented teenage daughter, Julia Green, who drew a celebration of Rancid, a punk act whose charms are lost on Green the Elder. And in his final *Musical Legends* strip he tells a personal anecdote about being stuck on a train at a young age while working-class African-American women sang a New Year's vigil. This final strip brings Justin's work full circle, back to his early autobiographical comics; it is a fitting close to *Musical Legends*, which is less a collection of biographical shorts than a serialized biography of popular music in the Twentieth Century.

Back when Justin was first contemplating a monthly contribution to *Pulse!*, *Musical Legends* was not his only idea. He also considered a serialized fictional story about a blues singer making his way around America. No doubt that blues singer is still riding the rails of Justin's imagination, and he'll make a public appearance in good time.

Marc Weidenbaum
San Francisco, CA
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AUTHORNOONIST ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & APOLOGIES

It was my father's spirit that instigated this cartoon project. I'd done an illustration depicting him personally telling Frank Sinatra to *Shut Up!* in a Vegas nightclub setting. "The Chairman" had the nerve to revel with his cronies while my father's lifelong friend, the great Dixieland banjo player and singer Clancy Hayes, had to play over their noise. It was called "Great Moments in Alcoholism." This was '91 and I was living in Sacramento. Marc Weidenbaum was then an editor at *Pulse!* Magazine, published and distributed by Tower Records, which had its headquarters in West Sacramento. He had just seen the piece when he found out I lived nearby. He wanted to explore the idea of an ongoing musical biography cartoon feature.

We met at a Mexican restaurant and brainstormed several ideas. (I have absolutely no recollection of the "blues singer making his way across America" that Marc mentioned in his forgiving foreword).

"Those sound like they could be good comics," said Marc, "But are you sure that you could keep producing 'em on a regular basis?"

As Marc ladled huge dollops of hot sauce onto his tacos, I looked the young man straight in the eyes, and tried to speak with my father's self-assurance. "Absolutely. This is just my meat." It had to be. The previous year I'd broken my heel in a ladder accident, which had effectively ended my outdoor sign painting career. While there were countless opportunities to freelance within the Underground field, these could barely sustain a bachelor, much less a guy with family responsibilities. The appeal of a monthly strip was that the time-consuming selling of each idea, then the Jonesing for the paltry check would be eliminated. It would almost be like having a job. In looking for a monthly venue, the cartoonist probably faces longer odds than a basketball player does in trying to make the NBA. Though in our game such a plum would mean only a lower middle-class wage, many a penman would be overjoyed to have a regular glossy venue. Incredibly, I already DID have another monthly cartoon, for *Signs of the Times*, our nation's oldest trade magazine, which also has an international readership. That strip seemed to take care of itself. All the material was from my direct experience and hard-won knowledge in the sign field.*

As I cartooned onward through many *Pulse!* campaigns, I came to feel that it was a lost cause for me to be a true music historian. I would never produce a definitive biographical piece, because I simply did not have the experience, knowledge or desire to immerse myself in the literature or to consciously program a listening experience. Research became part of my job, though a wild-card in terms of the extra hours it might demand of my time. Deciding what to put in those little balloons and the narrative panels was tricky business, too. The biographical medium pushed me to constantly adapt a past tense narrative voice, setting a default moribund minor tone in a medium known for the zany action of wacky characters

* **The Sign Game** has been running continuously since '85. **Musical Legends** started in March '92, one month after Marc began running a strip by young Adrian Tomine. Comic friendly *Pulse!* also ran a continuing feature called **Flipside**, which Marc also edited.

in the present tense, I noticed that certain elements were beginning to show up in my work. These were visual conventions like men in profile hatching deals on the telephone with record logos in the background, drum sets, autos with directional cues in the background, musical notes radiating from various instruments, etc. Then there were the countless thimble-sized frontal portraits which couldn't be faked. Those mini-portraits called for trips to the library or open-ended fishing voyages on the internet. I took on the mechanical work as a necessary component to the storytelling. Having to flesh out the mechanical details of each biography often meant subduing the impulse to be subversive or self-expressive, which are stocks-in-trade for the humorist. Good feedback from readers helped me through times of doubt when I regarded myself, at best, as a public servant showcasing the lives of musicians. When I felt good about it, I regarded *Musical Legends* as a cosmic gift from some deal that my father had hatched in heaven.

My motive in seeking other voices to script the feature wasn't borne of sheer laziness. I felt that the scope of the strip was beyond the capability of any one person to handle. Because my musical tastes were eclectic, I thought there should be a plurality of authors. But there was no money in the Tower budget to pay for an additional writer's fee. When I had a good script from someone else, it *still* had to go through extensive re-tooling in order for it to work in cartoon language. I learned to be diplomatic in explaining my revisions. In time, staff members came to my aid, working on and off company time. Ned Hammad, Jackson Griffith, Peter Melton, Bill Forman and Marc Weidenbaum provided me with great material. They were fun to work with, entering into the production give-and-take with gusto. Knowing their competence as observers of the music industry helped me feel freer to push the visual side of the strip. Friends came to my aide, too. Ray Cushing, Steven Abrams, Frank Young, Bob Williams and Bruce Chrislip were solid senders. My wife Carol Tyler, a visionary artist and outstanding cartoonist, also helped me. In addition to the scripts she provided, her "saves" and valuable critiques are too numerous to list. Other voices, noted on the strips that they conceived, chimed in. Devoted fans of certain musicians urged me to consider their subjects. I widened the purview of the strip to include working musicians, whom I was able to interview. In doing so, I felt like a "chip off the old block." My father had a lifelong interest in helping musicians. I even encountered his presence when reading the autobiography of Anita O'Day. She said that there was a real estate man in Chicago who always made sure that her band had a place to stay. That was Pop.

The strip never got easier. I battled through each episode -- trying to beat comedy (or pathos) out of history. But I never took the opportunity for granted. I'd been given a chance to have a public forum. I slogged on through the '90s with *Musical Legends*, aware that it was not to be my life's true direction, but for the time being, an interesting detour. *Then came 9/11!* Cartoonists across the board from Tom Banuk (who felt he had a "new responsibility" towards his Funky Winkerbean readership) to Art Spiegelman (whose firsthand account of the incident is chronicled as a cartoon feature syndicated worldwide, "In the Shadow of No Towers") felt challenged to address the new political/cultural climate. I felt that the focus of *Musical Legends* had become myopic overnight. I wrote a farewell letter to the entire *Pulse!* staff. Much to my surprise, they asked me to stay and gave me some latitude in changing the direction of the strip. "*Pulse! Readers Sound Experience*" was my solution. Now the action of each strip could have more expressive potential for the cartoon medium. Instead of having to be overly conscious of historical accuracy, I could be more playful. Events could occur in real time instead of as slow slide show. Many readers responded to my call with wonderful scripts and ideas.

The demise of *Pulse!* was swift. There had been talk of Tower's debt restructuring, the selling of Japanese properties and a new board of directors. Nobody anticipated the clean stockyard cut of extinction that was to come in late '02. The combined strikes of a dwindling economy along with the massive MP3 siphoning of industry revenues forced the company to make draconian cuts. I heard that Tower founder Russ Solomon made a last minute plea to the new Board of Directors to save our publication, but they still summarily hacked off the main branch of Tower's print media: the high quality, daringly designed, chock-full-of-great content, monthly *Pulse!* magazine. At this writing, Tower is still fighting for its life and I have the complete freedom I claimed that I've always wanted.

Last time I hit up my publisher Ron Turner for more front money, he was just starting to get his sea-legs after a hip replacement surgery. I followed him toward the accounting department down the corridors of his factory warehouse past the many informal cubicles bustling with a dedicated staff. He strode in dignity with long white beard flowing like the Ancient of Days, obviously feeling pain, but negotiating with it, now preoccupied with a dozen more deals yet to come that workday. I wanted to express my appreciation, though it may have sounded a bit patronizing when I asked, "How do you do it, Ron?"

"Don't you mean WHY do I do it" he countered, without missing a step.

That's my current koan, which is a gift from a guy who owns a place called Last Gasp.

Justin Green
2003



P.S. The book ends with a return to straight biography -- a two pager I did in late '02 for *The Ukulele Occasional*. I was motivated by a song that Clancy Hayes used to sing: "Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gives to Me." I discovered that the original Dixieland version had been chirped by none other than Cliff Edwards, the voice of Jimmy Cricket. After the self imposed hiatus from straight biography, I returned to that genre, hoping that the Sound Experience pages had brought me closer to spontaneous cartooning. Shedding light on past and present musicians -- and there are countless possibilities -- is a real challenge. But when it works, the comic vision can change the listening experience.