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# SWEET SYNCOPATION

CARICATURE AS CULTURAL INTRATEXT IN *THE WILD PARTY*

W. SCOTT HOWARD INTERVIEWS ART SPIEGELMAN

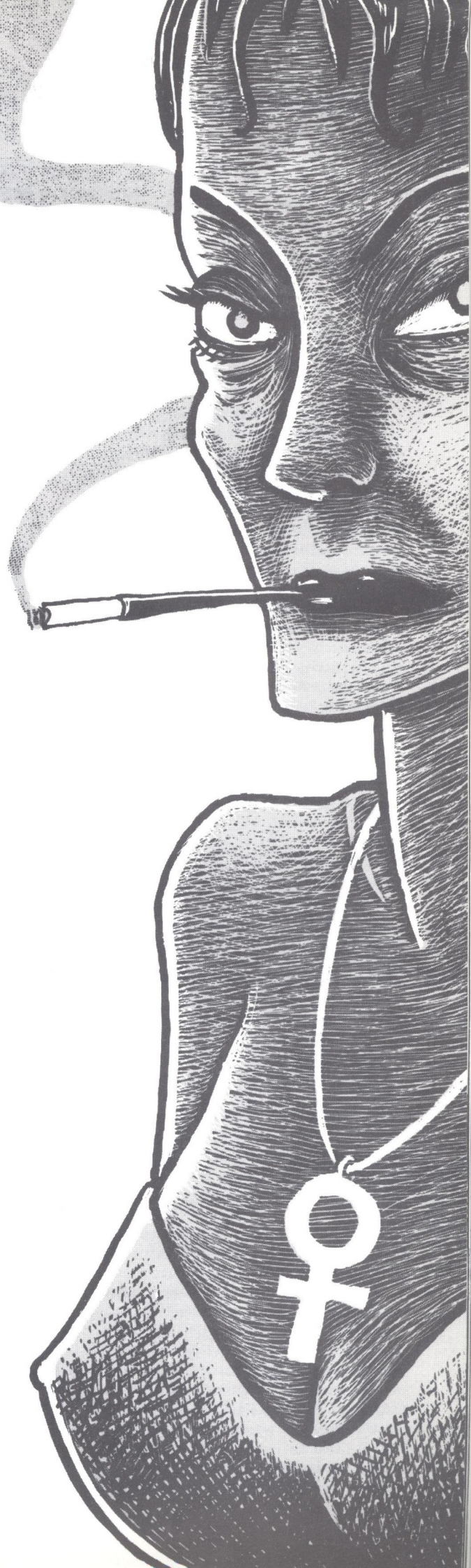
**"I usually  
don't smoke;  
but since  
this  
is a  
wild  
party,  
I thought  
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ambiance," Spiegelman said surreptitiously to the gathering crowd, while pointing to one projected image from his portfolio of over 75 illustrations for *The Wild Party*, Joseph Moncure March's scandalous jazz-age novel-in-verse. With *Raw* indefinitely "on ice," and with his 1992 Pulitzer Prize winning oeuvre, *Maus, A Survivor's Tale*, now complete, Art Spiegelman has recently indulged his talents in what he affectionately calls "a pursuit of the pleasure principle."

Spiegelman's *Wild Party*, published by Pantheon Books, is the fourth incarnation of March's "lost classic." *The Wild Party* was originally considered too hot to publish until 1928, when Pascal Covici released a limited edition of 750 copies. The book was subsequently banned and, of course, quickly became an underground success. In 1968 March published a self-censored edition in an attempt to avoid public offense. More recently, in 1975, Ismail Merchant and James Ivory made the poem into a film, starring Raquel Welch & James Coco. Spiegelman chose to follow March's original text, and considers it "a perfect picture of its time."

Although March's "hard-boiled" style evokes the unsavory and brutally passionate 1920s sensibility of the lost generation, *The Wild Party* also speaks strongly to today's millennial discontents. As Spiegelman writes in his introduction to the text: "March's perfectly pitched tone of bewildered innocence curdled into worldly cynicism resonates so well in our nineties."

After a recent Seattle reading, we discussed the relationships between American cultural conditions in the 20s and the 90s, between *The Wild Party* and *Maus*, as well as between March's verse technique and his own philosophical practice of illustration.



# "THE WILD PARTY IS ABOUT AS NON-MAUS AS POSSIBLE!"

**I REALLY WANTED A HOLIDAY FROM MAUS, PARTLY IN ORDER TO FORESTALL THE PUBLIC'S EXPECTATIONS FOR A MAUS 3. ... THE WILD PARTY, CHEERFULLY, HAS NO REDEEMING SOCIAL VALUE. YOU DIG IT 'CAUSE YOU CAN DANCE TO IT. IT AIN'T SENTIMENTAL POETRY. IN FACT, THE WILD PARTY IS ABOUT AS POLITICALLY INCORRECT AS A POEM COULD BE TODAY." —ART SPIEGELMAN**

**W.SCOTT:** How is the book tour going? How has your edition of March's *The Wild Party* been received by a diverse audience that probably knows you best as the author and illustrator of *Maus*? Last night at the reading, I noticed that, for at least the first half, most people in the audience weren't at all ready for March's subject matter. The crowd was almost nervous: tense, hesitant to engage with the book's sardonic demeanor.

**ART SPIEGELMAN:** Well, this is the thing about a project that just doesn't fulfill one's *a priori* expectations. I try to introduce this lecture by saying how necessary it was for me to explore the pleasure principle. *The Wild Party* is about as non-*Maus* as possible! I really wanted a holiday from *Maus*, partly in order to forestall the public's expectations for a *Maus 3*. But I'm interested in other things too which are probably common denominators between the two works, although they're not that obvious. *The Wild Party*, cheerfully, has no redeeming social value. You dig it 'cause you can dance to it. It ain't sentimental poetry. In fact, *The Wild Party* is about as politically incorrect as a poem could be today. But March was writing within a very particular social context—1920s cynicism before the Holocaust—and with a unique method. Almost single handedly, through his "hard-boiled" style, March helped shape a very apt portrait of the "lost generation." I took on this project because I wanted to give March his due credit for unflinchingly representing the ethos of his time.

Maybe one place where there's a genuine meeting point between *Maus* and *The Wild Party* is that dancing couple on the front cover. The contents page of the first volume of *Maus*—which, by the way, was originally a large drawing for the *Maus* booklet as it appeared in *Raw* magazine—is a rather decorative picture of two elegant mice dancing. That picture was meant to conjure up the world before the deluge. But this connection wasn't entirely conscious on my part when I was drawing the image of Queenie & Black dancing. Somewhere inside I probably have a limited landscape of key objects, figures, and images. To me, that dancing couple conjures up the world before the shit hit the fan—or just before the seven tons of shit hit the fan and after the one ton of shit had hit the fan—that world between the wars. That's probably the place where the images (and the two books) meet. In hindsight I was also surprised to find that, as I said last night, the 1920s that I was drawing was heavily influenced by German expressionism, Weimar 1920s graphics—at



least as much as by any American 20s visual styles—and this probably has to do with the world that lost its innocence.

**WS:** In this respect, I was hoping we could talk about the social conditions which inform (and to some extent determine) this book's reappearance. In your introduction to *The Wild Party* you draw some parallels between the "lost generation" and the cultural predicament of "Generation X" in which a "tone of bewildered innocence curdled into worldly cynicism" recapitulates a 1920s hard-boiled, jazz-age sensibility. What parallel social conditions, if any, make it possible for this book to reappear today? And why today? Why not five years ago, or five years from now?

**AS:** Well, you know, at any given moment there's a lot of dominant and minor notes all

making up that white buzz of noise that we call culture. Presumably, had this book appeared ten years ago, one could make the case that it belonged out ten years ago; similar justifications could be made for its appearance ten years from now. That's really what makes March's poem a classic, I think. In fact, *The Wild Party* does belong in that chorus of sound because it hits a certain cultural note so well.

Now, at this particular moment in time, I would say that there's good reason for a book to come out as a beautiful book-object, insisting on the place in the world for a beautiful book-object as people start turning, with either fear or pleasure, toward the computer screen for more and more of their reading time. For the people who still read and who probably did not vote Republican in the last election, there's room



enough now for a book that's a beautiful object in itself. Not only can you enjoy this book for the illustrations, but you can also feel it up as you read! (I mean the red velvet end papers, of course). Only something like 30 percent of the electorate voted in the last election. That means that there's still a very large minority of people who wouldn't be designated as "normal Americans" by Newt Gingrich. This is a book for, about, and by someone who is not normal. It's moving toward that sensibility, and that sensibility is everywhere.

Also, part of the reason for the book's reissue at this moment, I think, has to do with a need for self-defense. The hard-boiled style arose in the 1920s in response to a vicious and accelerated movement in the world—in some ways an end of civilization which was more effectively ended after WWII (and which keeps looking like it's going to end even more efficiently in the near future). So, in order to defend oneself against a world of pernicious ideologues, people ended up developing a strict attitude to keep the world at arm's length. The thing that I really embrace and love about the earlier generations of hard-boiled writers, including Hemingway and Chandler, is that these are people with a very highly developed ethical and moral sense. If you take, for instance, Philip Marlowe—the detective in Raymond Chandler's novels—he's sort of like an Arthurian knight, except he's developed his own code. You could also come at it from a different decade, like—oh, a line from a Bob Dylan song is going through my head: "to live outside the law you must be honest." Well, what that's all about is the Chandler hero-world that is also conjured up by Joseph Moncure March. In such a threatening world, you have a sense of what is appropriate and inappropriate; but your own ethical activity involves looking at things as they really are rather than as you would wish them to be, and then functioning from that place. That's part of being hard-boiled: not getting sucked in. However, that hard-boiled exterior also covers up something that would otherwise be too vulnerable.

**WS: What about differences between the two generations?**

**AS:** The loss of innocence is an ongoing theme, and so is the need to protect oneself from the cynical world. In talking about Philip Marlowe, I'm describing somebody who has a strong ethical sense and who isn't lost in the world of cynicism, but who adopts a cynical demeanor in order to work through the bullshit. On the other hand, I think that the caricature

of Generation X has to do with not having a sense of self.

**WS: Who emerges as the hero or heroine in *The Wild Party*?**

**AS:** That's a good question because there is no hero, as such. The real hero is Joseph Moncure March, in so far as there is one. Black, for example, who could be the hero, becomes a tragic figure because he's an innocent and he's not clearly seeing things. He's easily duped by Queenie, who, in a way, is the heroine. In fact she's a goddess; she's able to wrap Black around her finger. He sees exactly what she tells him to see, and that's what causes his fall at the end. So, it's not a matter of admiring any of these people; it's a matter, on March's part, of accepting them as they are and of admitting that the people who are going to suffer are the ones who don't know where they are. Nadine suffers,

for example. She's almost raped. She doesn't have a good sense of where she is. But March emerges as the real hero here, for me anyway, because of his ability to accept these characters for who they are, for all of their weaknesses.

**WS: Which aspects of your technique differ from a 1928 sensibility, or from the artistic methods that would have been current in the 20s and 30s?**

**AS:** For *The Wild Party*, one of the things I was interested in was the way that illustrators make choices. Take a look at this situation, for example, on pages six and seven. March's text reads: "Burrs beat her / with the heel of a shoe / Till her lips went blue." As an illustrator, I asked myself: "OK. Heel of a shoe? And which heel?" In order to respect the materials of the time period, I had to do a bit of research and then make a choice between either a Cuban or a spike heel. (Actually, as you can see, I left the choice up to the "consumer.") The advertisement acknowledges this process of working through the root sources. And that's a very contemporary way of understanding rather than taking a lot of things as givens. You can see me working this kind of concept throughout the book.

However, the surface style (ie: scratch board) is definitely a borrowing from another period in order to evoke a 1920s feeling. That's what happens on the surface: styles evoke—nothing more. If you use a photographic style, it evokes something that's authoritative even though in 1995 a photograph is no more authoritative than a crayon drawing. Each style just evokes. And these "woodcuts" in *The Wild Party* evoke a 1920s world.

In terms of methods, the page layouts per se just couldn't have been done without a computer. Although I am interested in making a book-object, I couldn't have laid the book out if I didn't have a computer because no artist would have been able to get all of this material to justify without setting the type five or six times, cutting apart the galleys, pasting them up line by line, breaking up the lines, etc. Part of the project was to make a book where all of the pictures were thoroughly intertwined into the text so that, for example, March's lines describing Madelaine True appear beside my illustration of her. His lines, "Her mouth was cruel: / A scar / In red, / That had recently opened and bled," appear at the same height on the page as her mouth, to the right. This kind of thinking was only possible with the fluidity that a computer makes available.

**WS: Who were some of your influences for this kind of approach?**

**AS:** Well, way up there on the list would be people like Lynd Ward. (See: this is a period that I really love. I mean, it's not like I had to discover it from "scratch," so to speak. These are artists that I've always liked.) Lynd Ward was an important illustrator and artist in the late 20s and then through the 30s and 40s. Among other things, he did these woodcut novels, which are also worthy of being rediscovered. Then I would also say, for this particular project, a lot of the German expressionists were important to me, as they have been for a long time—artists like George Grosz and Max Beckmann. Otto Dix also. But then also pop culture expressionists like Chester Gould, the guy who did Dick Tracy. (In fact, in the last picture in *The Wild Party*—when "The door [springs] open / And the cops [rush] in"—there's a little cop who looks kind of like Dick Tracy because Dick Tracy actually started about two or three years after *The Wild Party* was first published. I wanted to acknowledge that in some way.) Oh, there's a real cocktail of artists that I care about and look at; but what I did do when I started this book was I just pulled out every thing I could from the 20s and surrounded myself with it. I looked at a lot of silent films, got a lot of movie magazines and illustrated books and Sears Roebuck catalogues from the 20s, and just steeped myself in all of it.

I also listened to a lot of 20s jazz while I was working; this is what really infuses the book as a poem. I was totally inspired by syncopated rhythms, and I tried to make my illustrations syncopated so that, throughout the book, the page layout would develop as it moves. I listened to a lot of really great jazz-bands like Bix Beiderbecke and The Revelers. In fact, during this period of immersion, William Burroughs mentioned a jazz lyric I had never heard of before, but it's one of the better evocations of how inspirational 20s jazz lyrics were capable of being for March: "when you hear sweet syncopation / and the music softly moans / t'ain't no sin to take off

your skin / and dance around in your bones." You know: that's 20s music.

**WS:** Last night, when you were reading from the text, several lines resonated for me in a curious way which, I think, speaks to your relationship with March's narrative: "The rest were simply repetitions / Of the more notorious. Slim editions: / Less practiced; less hardened; / Less vicious; less strong; / Just a nice crowd trying to get along." Do you see March here, or anywhere else in the poem for that matter, making an oblique, yet insightful comment upon the flat predictability of popular literature during his time? It seems to me that March was quite deliberately engaged in crafting characters that could stand out from a crowd of stock literary figures—characters of rough-hewn energy. Yet, paradoxically, he achieves this through a refined use of caricature. His protagonists (Black, Queenie, & Burrs) are really nothing more than caricatures; but they each have a startling depth in their surface features. Does this aspect of March's narrative technique inform your collaboration with him?

**AS:** Yes. You're right. What I guess he's saying is that the rest of the characters in the party crowd are more like the people from which he built his caricatures—that a caricature is a high definition portrait. If you have a caricature like Queenie, for example, who is a hard-boiled goddess...well, she's a more formed version of the "flappers" (the more independent women) who actually lived in March's world. This is why I keep thinking of March as a very good journalist, although he's trained as a poet. You know, he's really describing a world here, even though he's doing it through a kind of verbal caricature. Take another example from the poem: this punch strung boxer, Eddie. March tells us that "Away from the ring, he was easy-going; / Good-natured—if sober— / And given to blowing. / But after he'd had his tenth Scotch, / A man to be careful of / And watch: / And when he was

mixing gin and rum— / A man to keep well away from." Well, I've been stuck in bars with people who are probably OK until they mix gin and rum, you know, or the equivalent of whatever powders they're using. So March's technique is really a compressed way of acknowledging a broader universe.

What I did was I took it all quite literally, as you've noticed. In the pictures, there's often moments when I was willfully and stupidly literal so that, on pages 32 and 33 for example, if you have "Sally, / With Butter and Eggs in tow—" then you have a slim edition over here—very literally, again, because of the reference to "Slim editions" in March's text. Here also I was very sensitive to this technique with respect to the lines: "And the usual two / Loud Jew / Theatrical managers [who] stood engrossed / Bewailing high production cost." Well, I have a heightened sensitivity to that particular set of caricature notions; so I had to acknowledge and play with that somehow. The way that I did this was to foreshadow these two characters in such a way that you wouldn't notice who they were when they first appear on pages 30 and 31 in the background behind Dolores. Then, when you see them more clearly with the rest of the crowd, when the lines call for the stereotype of "the usual two / Loud Jew / Theatrical managers," I chose to interrogate that stereotype. What exactly is this stereotype? Well, the figure on the left fulfills it, in a way, and the figure on the right looks like, I don't know: Robert Redford. You know, it's by gesture and by dramatic placement that they represent the stereotype—nothing more than that. One performs within the stereotype; the other indicates that such a stereotype is really meaningless. Ultimately, the illustration must weigh what it means to use these images.

**WS:** That's ingenious.

**AS:** Thank you. But, really, it was just part of the project of insinuating myself into the text throughout the book.



**WS:** How do caricatures work? Last night, you addressed this in your discussion of the graphic image and of the ways in which a caricature can deliver a vital and very intimate message that's quite different from the kind of information conveyed through film. How do you explain this?

**AS:** Drawings have an advantage over photographs in that you get to eliminate the extraneous much more readily. A great photographer can do this; but it's hard. You have to throw away lots of photographs to get there. The way the brain works is in high definition imagery. I don't think that one has—at least not in my brain—maybe I'm damaged!—but, I don't think that you get a hologram in your head of what you've seen and lived through. What you do get is a stripped down version—a telegram, of sorts, in your head. You don't have full paragraphs in your head until you start talking or writing; you have blasts of words, or word clusters. And I'm talking not even metaphorically. I think that this is how the brain functions. When you have an image of somebody when you're walking away from that person, it's a caricature. Like if...uh—say we meet, walk away from each other, and then I remember: you're occupying a certain volume of space; you have a beard; the way you're dressed conjures up images of class.... I'll have those concepts in my head as very rough notions. If you were to shave off your beard and wear a tuxedo the next time we met, I would have a hard time recognizing you because I would already have you categorized through a certain kind of iconography. Well, caricatures are that iconography. Without any resistance, they move directly into the head and are very effective.

**WS:** That's fascinating. Most people, myself included, tend to think of caricatures as abstractions. But you're talking about them in such a way that they become primary and quite substantive.

**AS:** Yeah. I think what happens is that the

way you get subtle information is by juxtaposing caricatures. You know, if you have enough high definition images that don't quite correlate, then the spaces in between are where the complexity and reality ultimately lie. But the only way to locate that reality is through these simple elements. In other words, even language works this way: each word is a locator of something much more complex than that mere word. Take "chair," for example. Well, there's 200,000 things which could all be called "chair," including a rock (under certain circumstances); but if you start clustering words together, then you can conjure up a certain style. Like: "an art deco easy chair." As you accumulate more and more simple nuggets of thought, then you begin to build a mountainous landscape that has a lot of texture and meaning and specificity.

**WS:** Last night you also said that "comics create an existential experience that is more internal than the experience of film," and that this intimacy is very important to you. Ultimately, as you also explained, your respect for this experiential quality keeps you from making *Maus* into a film. Could we talk a bit more about this?

**AS:** Sure. Maybe I'm just suspicious of group activities. You know, somebody recently asked me: "if you could call all of the shots, how would you do a film based on *Maus*?" And I said: "I'd do it with real mice."

One thing is just the fact that comics are more directly an "I/thou" interaction: I make a mark; you see the mark. There's far less mediation than in cinema. You have to develop an *auteur* theory to figure out who is doing what to whom in film. Sure, the director ostensibly makes his mark; but he has to work with full-fledged personalities, with somebody else's narrative, with a real world that he's photographing, with a cast of thousands—everybody from producers to light technicians—and it doesn't have the directness of one person being able to be in contact with another. Obviously, in prose, one

can do that. But, since I have a stronger interest in visual information, the most effective means for me to create that particular meeting point is through drawn narrative.

**WS:** I'd like to close now by pursuing a side issue, a biographical interstice, of sorts. Joseph Moncure March was the first managing editor for *The New Yorker*. (He began writing *The Wild Party* after leaving the magazine in 1926 when, as you note, "he decided to make his way as a poet—a career choice underwritten by an indulgent father.") You're currently functioning as both an illustrator and an editor for *The New Yorker*. Is there a certain pleasure for you in the serendipity of this? In a way, your role at *The New Yorker* brings March's work full circle.

**AS:** Well, it's certainly a nice coincidence. If anything, I would say that my interest in *The New Yorker* would go back to that earlier version of the magazine, *The New Yorker* that was actually around when I would have been more likely to have been a subscriber. The original *New Yorker* was very much meant not for the little old lady from Dubuque, as Harold Ross said. You know, it was a brash magazine that actually was kind of an edgier and more interesting place. So those early *New Yorker* cartoonists, people like Peter Arno, and, a few years later, Charles Addams, were much less domesticated than the kind of cartoonists who were more recently drawing middle-aged business men in suits drinking cocktails in bars and discussing the latest news events. That kind of gag-cartoon sensibility came much later. Joseph Moncure March is part of a world that was connected to the post-Ross version of *The New Yorker*. The magazine was a more exciting place in its earliest incarnation, and hopefully, at least visually, it is again. Of course, I have reservations about the new *New Yorker* as well.

**WS:** Do you feel that you're carrying on March's work in any way?

**AS:** No, no. He's a very different animal than I am. ★



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