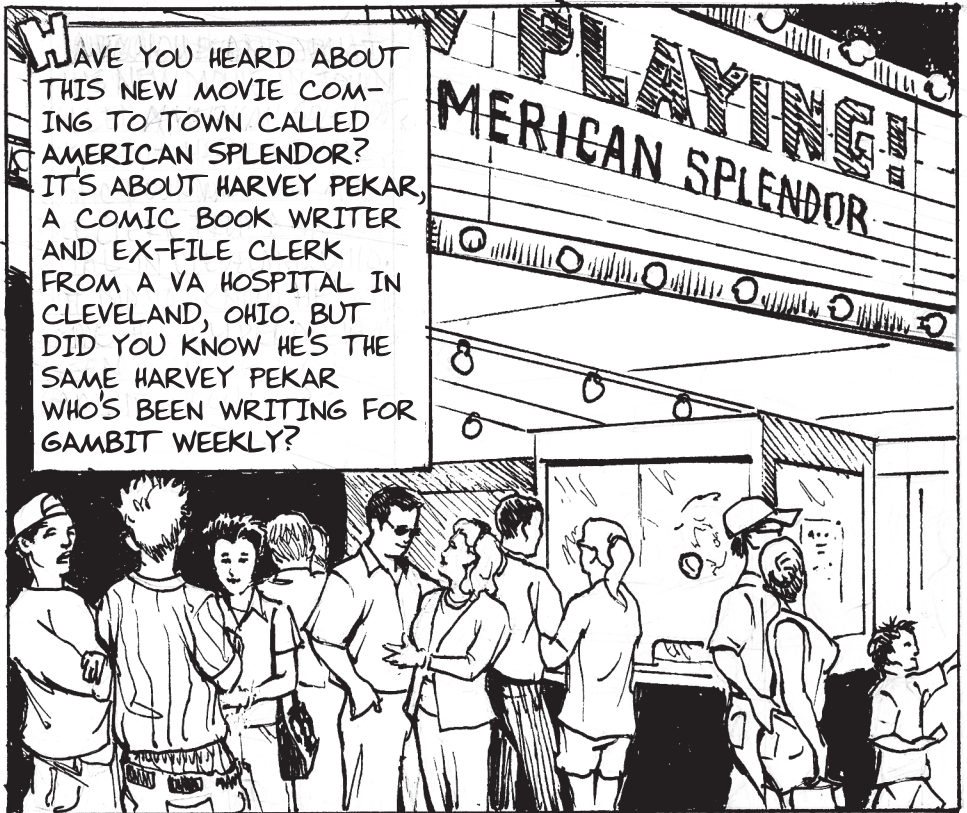


SPLENDOR -IFEROUS

Story: MICHAEL TISSERAND
(WITH APOLOGIES TO H. PEKAR)

Art: RHETT THIEL © 2003



HAVE YOU HEARD ABOUT THIS NEW MOVIE COMING TO TOWN CALLED AMERICAN SPLENDOR? IT'S ABOUT HARVEY PEKAR, A COMIC BOOK WRITER AND EX-FILE CLERK FROM A VA HOSPITAL IN CLEVELAND, OHIO. BUT DID YOU KNOW HE'S THE SAME HARVEY PEKAR WHO'S BEEN WRITING FOR GAMBIT WEEKLY?

I'D READ HARVEY'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL COMIC BOOK FOR YEARS.



WHEN I STARTED WORKING AT GAMBIT, I WROTE HIM A FAN LETTER. HE CALLED BACK RIGHT AWAY. IT WAS A THRILL TO TALK WITH SOMEONE WHOSE WORK I'D LONG ADMIRER.

HARVEY ALSO WRITES WONDERFUL COMIC-BOOK BIOGRAPHIES OF MUSICIANS. SO I ASK HIM IF HE WANTS TO DO ONE ABOUT A NEW ORLEANS PLAYER. HE STARTS RATTLING OFF ALL THESE NAMES I DON'T KNOW. AS HE TALKS, I SECRETLY FLIP THROUGH A MUSIC REFERENCE BOOK SO I CAN KEEP UP MY END OF THE CONVERSATION.

HOW ABOUT LONNIE JOHNSON?



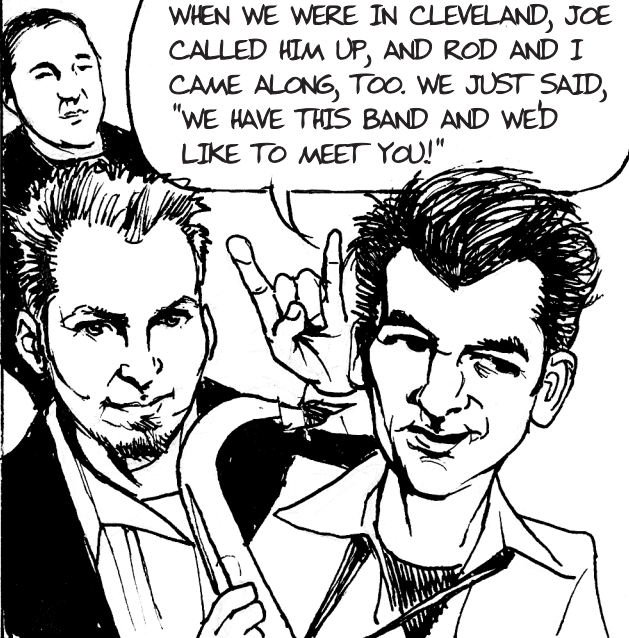
YEAH MAN, HE WAS A GREAT - ER - GUITAR PLAYER!



WE'VE RUN A BUNCH OF THESE COMICS. LONNIE JOHNSON, DENNIS MCGEE, SIDNEY BECHET, KING OLIVER IN EACH PERFECTLY NUANCED BIOGRAPHY, HARVEY SPELLS OUT WHY HE LOVES THESE ARTISTS. AND WHY YOU SHOULD, TOO.

SOON, I WAS HEARING FROM OTHER PEKAR FANS, LIKE THE GUYS IN THE IGUANAS:

WHEN WE WERE IN CLEVELAND, JOE CALLED HIM UP, AND ROD AND I CAME ALONG, TOO. WE JUST SAID, "WE HAVE THIS BAND AND WE'D LIKE TO MEET YOU!"



HIS WAS THE ONLY HOUSE ON THE BLOCK WHERE THE LAWN WAS NOT CUT. HE CAME OUT, HE HAD AN EAR OF CORN IN ONE HAND, AND HE HAD JAZZ RECORDS ALL OVER THE PLACE. WE BASICALLY TALKED ABOUT MUSIC AND LISTENED TO RECORDS, WHICH IS WHAT WE WERE HOPING TO DO.



HE PLAYED A COLEMAN HAWKINS SOLO PIECE CALLED PICASSO THAT I'D NEVER HEARD BEFORE, AND IT BLEW MY MIND, AND I RUSHED OUT TO BUY IT. I HAVE TO SAY AT THE END OF THE DAY, THAT'S WHAT HARVEY GAVE ME.

WELL, HARVEY'S IN ALL THE PAPERS NOW, AND I HAVEN'T TALKED WITH HIM FOR A FEW MONTHS. I MISS IT. HE'S SUCH A CRANK, IT'S FUN TO GOAD HIM IN CONVERSATION.

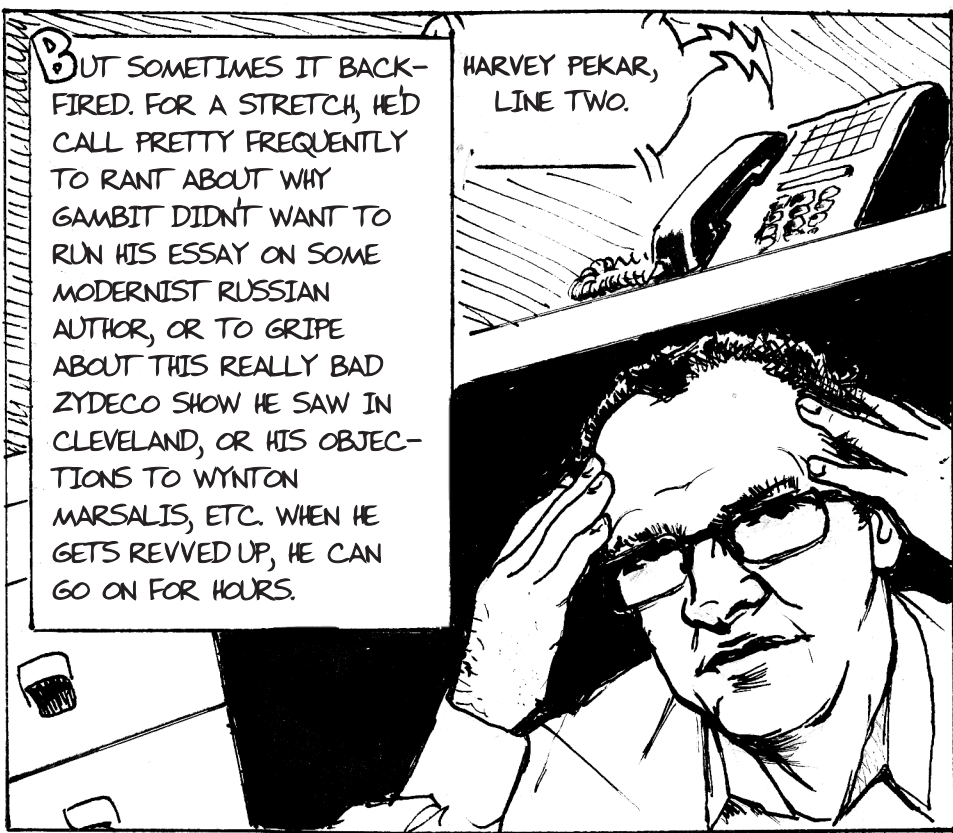
YOU SHOULD COME TO MARDI GRAS SOMETIME.

WHAT! THOSE STUPID LITTLE NECKLACES? THAT SOUNDS HORRIBLE!



BUT SOMETIMES IT BACKFIRED. FOR A STRETCH, HE'D CALL PRETTY FREQUENTLY TO RANT ABOUT WHY GAMBIT DIDN'T WANT TO RUN HIS ESSAY ON SOME MODERNIST RUSSIAN AUTHOR, OR TO GRIPE ABOUT THIS REALLY BAD ZYDECO SHOW HE SAW IN CLEVELAND, OR HIS OBJECTIONS TO WYNTON MARSALIS, ETC. WHEN HE GETS REVVED UP, HE CAN GO ON FOR HOURS.

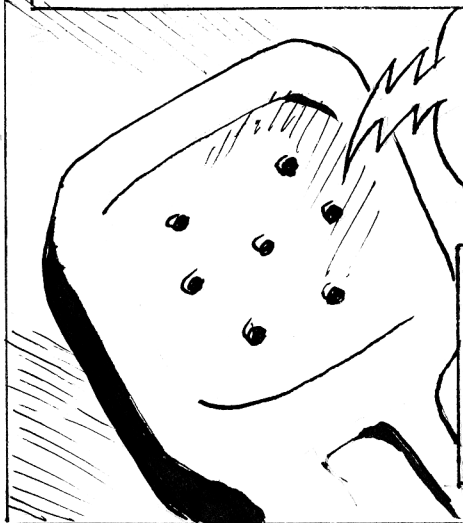
HARVEY PEKAR, LINE TWO.



ONE TIME, AND IT WAS RIGHT ABOUT WHEN THIS MOVIE WAS STARTING TO WIN MAJOR INTERNATIONAL AWARDS, I HEARD SOMETHING DARKER IN HARVEY'S VOICE. HE SOUNDED DEPRESSED. HIS WIFE, JOYCE, CAME IN ON THE OTHER LINE:

THIS MAN WANTS TO GIVE YOU WORK, HE DOESN'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR TROUBLES.

IT WAS UNCOMFORTABLE, TO SAY THE LEAST. I FOUND OUT LATER HE QUIT HIS JOB AT THE HOSPITAL BECAUSE HE WAS HAVING PANIC ATTACKS.



LOOK, IN FIVE YEARS, MAYBE THE BEST THING THAT HARVEY DID FOR GAMBIT WAS AN ESSAY ON THE AUTHOR ELEANOR ESTES, WHO WROTE A SERIES OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS ABOUT A FAMILY CALLED THE MOFFATS. HARVEY WROTE:

After reading the moffat books, I wondered why other children's authors didn't write like Estes. Maybe because they have forgotten the stuff of their childhood and think elementary school kids just want to read about cowboys and talking animals instead of children like themselves. They could be right; probably adults and kids are alike in that they just dig escapist crap. Still, there ought to be more room for authors who notice little boys like Rufus, who have pudgy hands and who print too large to fit their names in the little spaces provided in applications. . .

HARVEY IS THAT KIND OF WRITER, TOO. WHETHER IT'S ABOUT HIS CO-WORKERS AT THE VA HOSPITAL, OR ABOUT HIS BOUT WITH CANCER, OR BEING ON DAVID LETTERMAN'S TV SHOW, OR ADOPTING A FOSTER DAUGHTER, HIS "MICRO-REALIST" COMICS HAVE MORE HEART THAN JUST ABOUT ANYTHING OUT THERE. SO BEFORE YOU PLUNK DOWN YOUR SEVEN-AND-A-QUARTER TO SEE AMERICAN SPLENDOR, HOW ABOUT STOPPING BY ONE OF THE FEW COMIC BOOK STORES IN TOWN AND ASKING FOR ONE OF HARVEY'S BOOKS. GET A BACK ISSUE, TOO. AND IF THEY DON'T HAVE IT IN STOCK, ASK WHY THE HELL NOT?!



BECAUSE THESE FILM CRITICS WHO SAY THE TITLE AMERICAN SPLENDOR IS "IRONIC" ARE JUST WRONG. HARVEY PEKAR IS AS SPLENDID AS THEY COME.

END.