

Vas ist das SoHoZat?

One person called it “one of those amazing, independent, retail shops that sold almost everything one could think of connected to underground culture.”¹ Another reminisced the place was “this freaky comic and magazine space that had all sorts of bizarre stuff. I used to procure underground comics, zines and British music periodicals there, along with weird strains of other, anything-goes type of crap.”² Even a one-time employee proclaimed that the establishment was “probably the hippest store in the history of the world. Everybody went there.”³

That celebrated establishment was Lower Manhattan’s SoHoZat, based in — you guessed it! — the SoHo neighborhood, at 307 West Broadway. “The store’s location in the heart of New York’s artists’ district,” wrote Jennifer Hambrick, “made it a go-to place for an up-and-coming artistic elite.”⁴

Neil Martinson, the aforementioned one-time employee, was first a customer at the eclectic store (one just about to enter his teen years), “drawn to it,” he said, “because of all the underground comics, which I was by then obsessed with, but I also got introduced to various counter-culture publications and punk ‘zines, which they sold.”⁵

Soon enough, Martinson began working at the Bohemian shop, first helping out on Saturday nights by putting together the Sunday sections of *The New York Times* in SoHoZat’s back room and then making his way to manning the cash register. “Art Spiegelman was a regular customer,” he recalled, “and would bring down the early publications from his new press, which I think was called Raw. I remember an early Mark Beyer book... So one day he brings in his new magazine, *RAW* #1. I was working at the counter and naturally very interested, so I bought one directly from him. I’m pretty sure this was before the magazine had acquired any real distribution, which is why I can brag about being the first person ever to buy it. (Not like it’s my claim to fame, but it is pretty funny...)”⁶

SoHoZat co-owner Darryl Mendelson concurred with his former employee that SoHoZat was the premier retail outlet to offer Spiegelman’s new magazine. “Yes, we were the first store to sell *RAW*,” he said, adding, “We also had a distribution company based in Columbus, Ohio, and we sold *RAW* to many stores, including several in the British Isles. We were very committed to publishers of underground/alternative comics and other fringe publications.”⁷

Indeed, Mendelson and SoHoZat’s co-founder, the late Stan Bobrof, were avid supporters of a tremendous array of outré publications. “We sold mini-comics and cartoon-related ‘zines, and much more,” Mendelson said. “We had a big newsstand and sold every magazine and newspaper available, including foreign publications. Some of the European publications were comics-related. (*L’Echo des Savanes*; *Hara-Kiri*, the precursor to *Charlie Hebdo*; *Oz*; *Viper*; *Métal Hurlant*; *Actuel*; and others). We sold literary chapbooks, and many different non-comics ‘zines. We were also a bookstore. We didn’t carry best-sellers and any books you would find in other bookstores. We were an alternative bookstore, specializing in books on comics, fantasy, horror and science fiction, health/healing arts, tattooing and piercing, Eastern philosophy, martial arts consciousness expansion, beat literature, erotica, weird art and photography, and other madness.”⁸

Plus — no surprise — SoHoZat also sold *Weirdo*. “We had two stores [the other in Columbus, Ohio, Monkeys Retreat] that were selling underground comix,” Mendelson said, “so *Weirdo* #1 was shipped to us as soon as it came out. I was excited that Crumb would be publishing new material on a regular basis. His comix presented a unique commentary on society



and what was happening at the moment. In addition he was featuring other artists including introducing new ones.”⁹

As a SoHoZat clerk during those days, Martinson remembered, “I became aware of *Weirdo* magazine, which, although clearly indebted to Harvey Kurtzman’s publications of the ‘50s and ‘60s, also seemed in some ways like a reaction to *RAW*. It always featured some really good stuff and some stuff I didn’t care for, which varied under the different editorships. I seem to recall the Peter Bagge contingent including J.D. King and others seemed to be somewhat anti-*RAW*, inasmuch as they felt it was elitist and were probably rejected by it. Art had a very particular ideas about comics, and I don’t think he really dug their lowbrow humor.”¹⁰

Asked about the type of SoHoZat patron who would pick up the magazine, Martinson said, “I don’t have any particular impression of who bought *Weirdo*. All sorts of people, I suppose. The Crumb covers certainly guaranteed a comix readership, although I seem to recall a general sense of vexation about its editorial slant. I generally picked it up, even though I was often disappointed by at least 50% of the material, which seemed deliberately crude or corny. But I have a complete collection, and overall I find it enjoyable to reread.”¹¹

Curiously, SoHoZat itself delved into the publishing business during that era. “In 1984,” Mendelson shared, “Stan started publishing *Zat* magazine, which ran for five issues... Included in the magazine were many of the *RAW* artists as well as other art, articles, and interviews about graffiti, music, and much more.”¹² (The mag was also the first to print work by the late Anthony Bourdain, who even served as cover model for an issue.)

Mendelson also revealed that his partner hoped to produce a bona fide comic book. “Stan had this idea to publish a comic featuring *RAW* artists and other artists he had worked with on *Zat* and in the store.” Titled *Go Naked*, Gary Panter was the editor and among the *Weirdos* in the one-shot were J.D. King, Kaz, Savage Pencil, Mark Newgarden, Georganne Deen, Art Spiegelman, Jay Cotton, and Robert Williams. “Stan was never able to get the money to print it.” Mendelson explained. “One day, when Ron Turner from Last Gasp was visiting, Stan gave it to him and Ron finally published it in 1994.”¹³

SoHoZat closed its doors in 1992 and today the site is host to Best Friends, an animal adoption center.



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Top right: SohoZat co-owners Stan Bobrof and Darryl Mendelson pose in front of their eclectic magazine/book store. **Inset center:** SohoZat ad from the East Village Eye [Aug. 1984]. **Right:** Go Naked [1993], the “almost” SoHoZat comic book..