

SIDDHARTHA

3.3

Why do we like the things we do?



So, why do we like the things that we do?

Because we just like it, that's all.

Because it fits in with our self image.

Because it's cool/hip/whatever.

Because people we like/respect like it so we think we should too.

Because we just think we should like it, that's all.

Because everybody else likes it so it must be good.

And, conversely, we don't like something because-

Everybody else likes it so it must be crap.

It isn't cool/hip/whatever.

These are all questions I ask myself from time to time and sometimes I don't like my answers.

Siddhartha: the illustrated journal of popular culture (yeah, right) has been published and written erratically since the early 1970's, and in every decade since (though he only managed one in the 90's), by Ian Williams whose details are as follows:

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Ian, who has an annoying habit of sometimes referring to himself in the third person, regularly writes reviews for Amazon UK (as **lanW**, **not ianw700** as he said in 3,1) because he likes writing reviews and also because he's a member of the Amazon Vine program (he gets advance freebies in return for a review. Good, innit?) As of this minute, he's 971st in the top 1,000 reviewers with 417 helpful votes. This issue is dated 9th February 2009.

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I think that covers me.

Here's an incomplete list, in no particular order, of DVDs, books, graphic novels, and CDs I've acquired (or occasionally borrowed) over the last several months.

An asterisk indicates I've reviewed it on Amazon UK.

DVDs.

Dr. Who seasons 1-3 box sets. Torchwood season 1. The L Word season 5*. Battlestar Galactica season 4. The Comic Strip Presents box set. The Invaders season 1. Babylon 5 the complete box set -5 seasons plus all spin-offs. Doomsday*. Kill Bill 1 & 2. Female Prisoner 701 box set. Hatchet. Prom Night 3/Prom Night 4. The Dark Knight. Wall-E. Planet Terror. Beowulf. Stardust. Son of Frankenstein/Ghost of Frankenstein. Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman/House of Frankenstein. 10 Things I Hate About You*. Black Sheep. Hancock. Iron Man. The Incredible Hulk. Justice League: The New Frontier. Martin Scorsese Presents The Blues box set. Juno. Hollywoodland. Bladerunner 5-disc tin box set. Star Trek DS9 seasons 1-5. My Name Is Bruce*. The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*. Triangle*. Strait Jacket*. Icons of Adventure. Icons of Horror. The Notorious Bettie Page. American Splendor. The Mist. Feast. Forbidden Planet.

I confess I am somewhat behind in watching many of these titles.

BOOKS.

Harkaway: The Gone-away World*. Obama: Dreams from my Father. Pratchett: Nation*. Penner: Horror Cinema. Richardson: Poltergeist. Fingeroth: Rough Guide to Graphic Novels*. Kannenberg: 500 Essential Graphic Novels*. Lovecraft: Necronomicon. Howard: Complete Chronicles of Conan*. Rankin: Rebus (the first 3 novels). Crais: several. Coben: several. Hall: The Coroner*. Sayles: Thinking in Pictures. Bell: Stranger & Stranger -The World of Steve Ditko. McLeod: Scent of Blood. Wilce: Flora Segunda (books 1 & 2)*

And many more, but they aren't all to hand to jog my memory.

GRAPHIC NOVELS.

Robinson: Box Office Poison. Robinson: Tricked. McCloud: Zot the complete black and white collection*. Medley: Castle Waiting. Yang: American-born Chinese. Cruse: Stuck Rubber Baby. Simone: Wonder Woman -The Circle/Birds of Prey -Dead of Winter.* Rucka: The Question -the Books of Blood*. (A different) Robinson: Starman Omnibus vol1. Sheldon: The Complete Furry Freak Brothers*. Smith: Rasl. Whedon: Runaways -Dead End Kids*. Morrison: All-Star Superman/Batman -The Black Glove. Miller: All-Star Batman. Whedon et al: Buffy Season 8 vols 1-3. Hill: Locke & Key. Cooke: The New Frontier (Ultimate edition). Way: The Umbrella Academy. Willingham: Fables 11. Vaughan: Y the Last Man 10. Bendis: Ultimate Spiderman 19 & 20. Kirkman: Invincible 9. Plus various superhero titles such as Teen Titans, Blue Beetle (3rd version), The Atom (3rd version), Legion of Superheroes, Superman & the Legion of Superheroes, Booster Gold.

Again, there are more but enough is enough and I've still got to list the-

CDs.

U2: Best of 1980-90/How to dismantle an atomic bomb/All that you can't leave behind/The Joshua Tree (extended 2-disc set). Mahavishnu Orchestra: Original album classics. Fleet Foxes: Fleet Foxes. Lou Reed: NYC Man (the ultimate collection)/Rock n Roll Animal. Girls Aloud: The Sound of Girls Aloud. The Grateful Dead: Egypt 78. Dylan: Tell Tale Signs. Fotheringay:2*. R.E.M.: Live. Fela: Live in Amsterdam/Open & Close + Afrodisiac/The Underground Spiritual Game. Luther Allison: Live in Paris. BB King: Live at the BBC. Zappa: Strictly Commercial. Various Artists: Red Hot & Riot (Tribute to Fela)/Nigeria Rock Special/Nigeria Special -Modern highlife, Afro-sounds & Nigeria Blues (yes, that is the title)/Cries from the Midnight Circus -Ladbroke Grove 1967-78/Best of Ska (3-disc set).

MP3s (full albums).

Leona Lewis: Spirit, the Deluxe Edition. Katie Perry: One of the Boys. The Simpsons: Sing the Blues. Velvet Underground: The Velvet Underground & Nico. Barry Myers Presents Scratchy Sounds (ska, dub, roots & reggae nuggets) -(again, full title). U2: Under a Blood Red Sky. Prefab Sprout: A Life of Surprises. Amadou & Mariam: Welcome to Mali.



Ellen Page Michael Cera Jennifer Garner Jason Bateman Allison Janney J.K. Simmons

A Fresh, Unusually Intelligent Comedy With Dialogue So Quick And Funny You Feel The Actors Are Performing It On A High-Wire.

ROGER EBERT, CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

From the Director of "THANK YOU FOR SMOKING"

JUNO

A comedy about growing up ...and the bumps along the way.

In select theatres December

FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES PRESENTS A FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/FOX HOME ENTERTAINMENT PRODUCTION A JASON WITKIN FILM "JUNO" ELLEN PAGE MICHAEL CERA JENNIFER GARNER JASON BATEMAN ALLISON JANNEY J.K. SIMMONS "JUNO" CASTING BY LINDA MORTON "JUNO" COSTUME DESIGNER MICHAEL TAYLOR "JUNO" HAIR AND MAKEUP DESIGNER JESSICA WILSON "JUNO" PRODUCTION DESIGNER JAMES HARRIS "JUNO" EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEFFREY KATZ AND JASON WITKIN "JUNO" PRODUCED BY JASON WITKIN "JUNO" WRITTEN BY DIANE BARTEN "JUNO" DIRECTED BY JASON WITKIN "JUNO" CASTING BY LINDA MORTON "JUNO" COSTUME DESIGNER MICHAEL TAYLOR "JUNO" HAIR AND MAKEUP DESIGNER JESSICA WILSON "JUNO" PRODUCTION DESIGNER JAMES HARRIS "JUNO" EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS JEFFREY KATZ AND JASON WITKIN "JUNO" PRODUCED BY JASON WITKIN "JUNO" WRITTEN BY DIANE BARTEN "JUNO" DIRECTED BY JASON WITKIN

The Whys and the Wherefores: or, giving the game away before we even get started.

Whatever that might tell you about my taste, it is only a partial snapshot of what I've read, watched, and listened to over the last 6-12 months (with an emphasis on more recent material). What I'm really attempting here is thematically similar to Siddhartha:3.1 where I looked at how my political views have evolved over the years. Some of the content is relevant here so a quick refresher might be useful as I don't want to repeat myself. But this is basically a reflection and assessment about me and my taste in popular culture with the emphasis on books, graphic novels, movies, and music. Hopefully it will strike a chord with you.

Roots.

I've always been, in one form or another, a science fiction fan, whether its in comics, books, movies or on tv. I'm using SF as convenience to mean the wider context of fantastic fiction to take in SF itself, fantasy (read: anything supernatural), and plain horror (though the horror I prefer usually, though not exclusively, has one of those two elements involved. So I'm using SF as shorthand otherwise I'll spend half my time qualifying myself.

Music is the exception and I'm not remotely interested in any music which has SF elements (in other words, the lyrics) unless I happen to actually like the music itself. Mostly I find sf lyrics to be excruciatingly awful. Love Jefferson Airplane, hate Wooden Ships. Zager & Evans 'In the Year 2525' -destroy, burn all copies, purge it from your memory, it is a hate-crime against humanity. Or maybe it's just a lousy pop song. As an sf fan I do take these things to heart. I do, however, believe that anyone who is interested in sf lyrics is a tunnel-visioned cretin in danger of vanishing up their own back passage and who should be gently discouraged; or locked up.

Ooo-kay, got that off my chest. I won't refer to it again.

“It's only rock and roll but I like it.”

So do I.

“Do you like soul music? Dan-cin!”

Um, sometimes.

“I got the blues and it won't let go!”

I hear you, sir.

“Let me hear you say Yeah!”

Yeah!

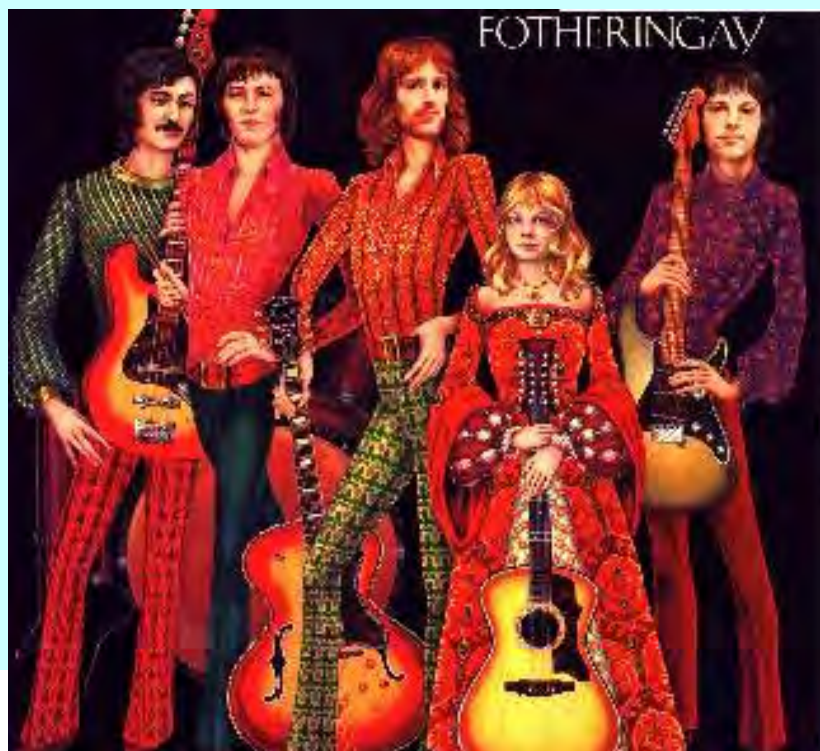
Unlike my taste in written and visual art forms, my taste in music was not remotely formed during my childhood in the 1950's partly because little was played on either of the two TV channels available and the radio was shared in a multi-generational household and you can guess who was bottom of the totem pole for that, so my access was extremely limited and didn't begin to expand until I got my own tinny little tranny (as in *transistor radio*, not *transsexual*) in 1961. The seeds were, however, definitely planted during the 1960's which, as far as I'm concerned, was in popular music terms the most creative decade of the 20th century and set the precedents for almost every musical development to date. It's an enormously complicated subject which I don't have space, or the qualifications, to get into here. You will take my word for it, won't you?

You listen to the radio, read the music press, hear friends vinyl albums or singles, and some stuff you like and some you don't and some you change your mind about. I hated **Neil Young** when I first heard his voice -whiny and horrible- but within a few months, hungover in someone else's flat and putting on **Harvest** over and over again. Or late at night and pleasantly drunk at Harry Bell's pleading with him to put on a certain album by yelling, "Fe-la! Fe-la!" over and over again until Harry gives in and Highlife rhythms fill the room lifting an already jovial mood.

And then there's-



And



And-

Well I could print album covers till the cows come home, but the artists cited above give some idea of the parameters of the 70's, but only an idea. I've already written about my musical roots in the solitary issue of Sid in the 90's and that was mainly about my rediscovery of the Blues.

Money can't buy you love, however, it is very useful if you'd like to buy books, CDs, graphic novels, and DVDs.

As I mentioned in 3.1, I got married in August 1988. What happened then was I moved into Susan's small flat and immediately had to cut back drastically on stuff like red wine, books, comics, and CDs. Susan started a full time degree course a month after our wedding which reduced our finances somewhat. Initially I left my collection (sans red wine which never lasted the evening) at home. Then my Gran, who still lived there, was taken ill, had to move into a residential home, and the house sold. And I, of course, sold most of my books (my large collection of science fiction books), comics (pretty big itself), and vinyl albums, paring them down to around ten per cent of what they used to be. I still bought stuff but for a few years it was few and far between. Buying a house which needed substantial renovating and with the addition of a mortgage didn't help. But, eventually, things picked up and I was able to start buying stuff again.

By this time I'd pretty much mostly given up on SF and had been preferring crime fiction for some years and the reading material I did tend to buy were comics and the just getting popular graphic novels (i.e short runs of a title bound into book form). This also coincided with my peak as a lover of the Blues. By the time that waned I was buying graphic novels almost exclusively rather than comics (now you can omit 'almost') and rediscovering my roots as a lover of rock music. And not long after that, DVDs became affordable, especially when I discovered the joys and cheap prices of Amazon.

Apart from the relatively short-lived obsession with the Blues, I'd pretty much given up the collecting bug, I had not, however, given up hoarding what I'd bought.

By the time my retirement came round last year (see Sid: 3.1 for details), I had boxes of books, CDs, comics, DVDs, graphic novels piled up in the garage. At this point, Susan put her foot down. My pension being about half my take-home salary, it was time to supplement it by selling stuff.

I prevaricated of course. I must have held out for nearly 60 days before I gave in and sorted out an initial pile of about 50 items. They occupied two boxes which I put on the spare bed in my, ahem, study -a small room containing said bed, 3 units of shelving, a computer desk and chair (with computer). I stocked up with three different sizes of padded envelopes.

I'd decided to opt for Amazon Marketplace simply because it was easier to use than Ebay. In Ebay you had to fanny around scanning stuff and crap like that. Me being me, I always want to opt for the easiest option. To add an item to Marketplace you just type in the ISBN for books and the equivalent for CDs and DVDs, then click the condition which ranges from 'New', 'Like New' down to 'Poor' and 'Why the hell are you wasting your time trying to foist this shoddy crap on people?' Then, optional, write a brief note about the condition ('small bend on back cover'). Set your price (high and low are indicated) and away you go.

Takes less than a minute. (I will eventually use Ebay when I get round to selling my comics and other items that can't be listed on Amazon.)

I had no idea how it would go. I told Susan I'd be pleased if I sold one item in a week. In fact it took little over 24 hours for a modern fantasy paperback on which, after Amazon took its cut and the VAT on postage, left me with a profit of about 75p. Still it was a start. I hurriedly added more stuff from the garage to my stock and added another box to bed, now able to keep it in categories. Less than a day later I sold something else, another modern fantasy paperback.

Lift off!

At the time of writing, my most recent and 365th sale was on 1st February, an average of 91 sales a month and, after postage and packing, I've been earning around £350.00 each month, the equivalent of a part-time job which, with the rent from a flat (apartment in American) I own, is almost up to my take home pay when I was working. The feedback I've been getting is excellent with only one negative and I dispute that one. Spoiled my 100% positive rating. When I first started I deliberately made sure my items were the cheapest, but now I've built up a substantial positive feedback I still keep my prices low but not the lowest, thinking that my ratings will have people spend a few pence more for proven reliability and so far it seems to be working.



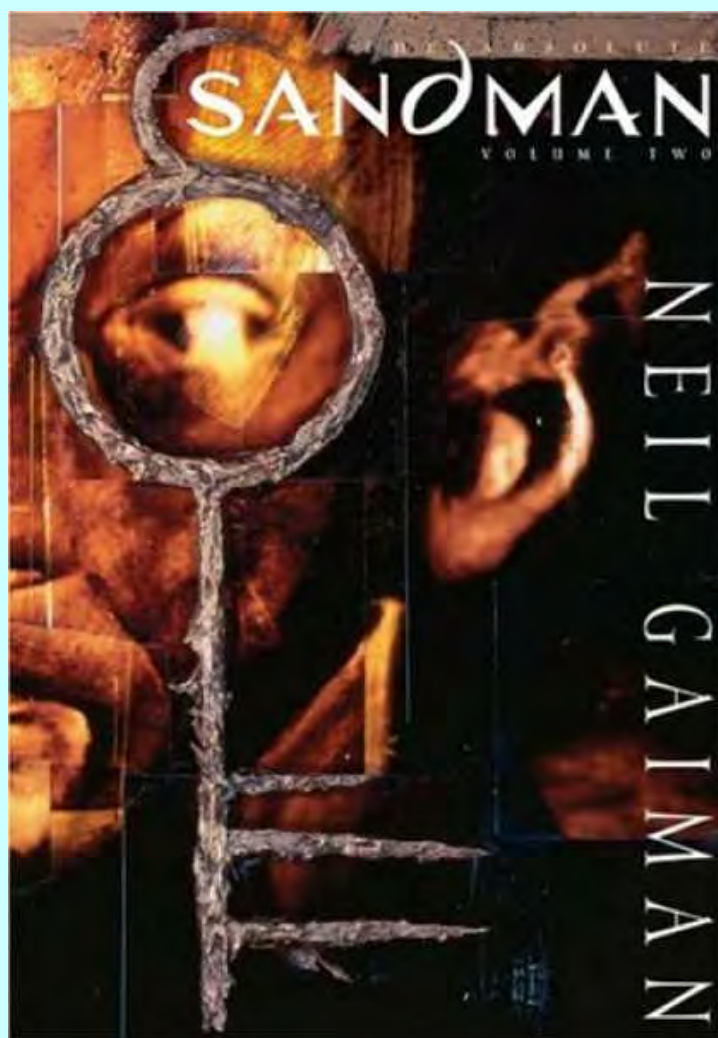
As a left wing libertarian socialist (see Sid: 3.1), I've managed to reconcile my beliefs with my apparent conversion to Capitalism (Hack! Spit!) as follows -

- By selling second hand goods I am recycling them which is environmentally sound.
- Because they are second hand, no monies are being paid to wealthy record companies. They have already received their cut.
- By generating additional spendable income for myself I am doing something to reduce the effects of the recession which has been caused by corrupt capitalist bankers who sought to line their pockets and those of their wealthy clients without thought for the effects on the economy.
- Did you know that 'banker' is British rhyming slang for 'wanker' (i.e. a compulsive masturbator) as in 'you stupid banker'. This phrase has never been more appropriate.

And I find that this has become like a new and rather enjoyable little hobby. And, more importantly, it has changed my attitude to my possessions, well specifically my books, graphic novels, CDs and DVDs.

With the exception of a limited number of items (see below for one example) which will be parted from me by either death, dementia or bankruptcy, if I can get a good enough price then I'm willing to sell almost anything from my collection. About a year ago I managed to get my hands on a CD which of a live recording by Albert King which had previously only been available on vinyl (though I'd had an edited version for years). It cost me about £20.00 but the going rate now is around £50.00 so I've put my copy up for sale.

Mind you, the pain of parting with this is lessened by the fact that I've copied it to my Ipod and is also on my PC's hard disk and I could always make a backup CD if I wanted. It's the music not the medium.



I love my Ipod, my Ipod loves me, happy to-gether.

Truth be told, I'm gradually putting most of my CDs up for sale as everything I have (bar a boxful buried in the garage somewhere which I can't currently find) is on my Ipod and the only time I listen to CDs is in the car when I'm on my own, usually doing cat rescue stuff. The capacity of my Ipod is 160GB and I've used up just over a quarter of its memory so far

with music which, at 31.5 days continuous play is a fair bit music and though it's probably small potatoes for some of you out there it's enough for me and continually increasing as buy more/find them in boxes. The Ipod is also partly responsible for this change in attitude towards my stuff, for music at least.

Get to the bloody point, Williams.

Succinctly, it's this. If I buy a book, DVD, graphic novel or CD and I don't think I'm likely to read, watch or listen to it again, it goes up for sale on Amazon Marketplace. I did this for **Hellboy 2** (okay but not great) and the last Neil Young CD, a live concert from 1968 (Neil does irritating humorous raps): listened to it Monday afternoon in the car, copied it in the evening, put it up for sale on Tuesday, sold and posted it by Wednesday morning. And I've done this with a number of items I've bought either 'new' or 'like new'.

I used to think that it would be a sacrifice but it isn't, it's the opposite. I feel like a weight has been lifted off me. I don't need to keep stuff any more. Wow! Susan was right all along (and hear her voice in my mind, "I'm always right. You should know that by now." Well, maybe not when she's turning a corner at 10mph while in 4th gear or doing 40mph in 2nd and the gears are screaming like souls in agony, but we'll draw a veil over that). But it does, it feels liberating, like casting off chains.

Try it yourself. Don't take my word for it. Go ahead.

On second thoughts, **do** take my word for it. I can do without the competition.

Hey! What the fuck is **this** CD doing here? And why isn't there a cleavage exposing photo on the cover?



Why have I been buying what I've been buying?

Case in point, that CD above. It's a girl band. It's a girl pop band. It's a Simon Cowell manufactured female girl pop band from a Pop Idol type competition for Christ's sake. Simon fucking Cowell, the person whom some people would rather eat dog faeces than say a good word about. Good god, life's too short to listen to manufactured shit like that. Except, as I realised recently, it's extremely accomplished pop/rock music from a manufactured female girl pop band which is great to listen to in the car which is more than I can say about **Fela Live in Amsterdam**. Nothing wrong with the music, in itself it's great. However the CD lasts 78mins and there are only 3 tracks on it and the first is 37 minutes long which makes it difficult to fully appreciate on an average 5 to 10 minute journey I make around town taking cats to vets. A four minute **Girls Aloud** song or two is just right. On the other hand, when waiting for a Metro train to arrive and then travelling through to Newcastle, Fela is fine.



In December Amazon UK launched their DRM free MP3 download department and put up hundreds of items for around £3.00 as a promotional gimmick and a very good one too. GA weren't part of these cheapies though, very strangely, the CD itself was half the price of the download. Anyway, one of these £3.00 album downloads was **Katie Perry's One of the Boys** (see earlier list of MP3s and above -now **that's** a cover, witty too given the title. And am I the only one to think it has echoes of the movie **Blue Velvet**?). While in Lazarote recently I caught Perry live in concert late one night on tv and, revising my opinion, realised she wasn't a Britney Spears knockoff but a rock chick in the Pat Benatar mould, only updated. Good enough.

Another download I bought was the **Leona Lewis** album **Spirit**. What the hell, she does have a great voice and a little bit soul is good for you. Besides, she's a vocally passionate vegetarian and animal lover. She's earned my support for that alone.

I confess that, a year ago, I wouldn't have paid any attention to any of those three on the grounds that it was modern pop crap and not worthy of my attention. Now while I still wouldn't want to listen to a lot of it, it is a nice contrast to some of the heavier more intense stuff I listen -freshly squeezed orange juice before a glass of full bodied Shiraz.

So the answer is **yes, I didn't like it because-**

**Everybody else likes it so it must be crap.
It isn't cool/hip/whatever.**

On the other hand-

-there's this.



Is that cool enough for you?

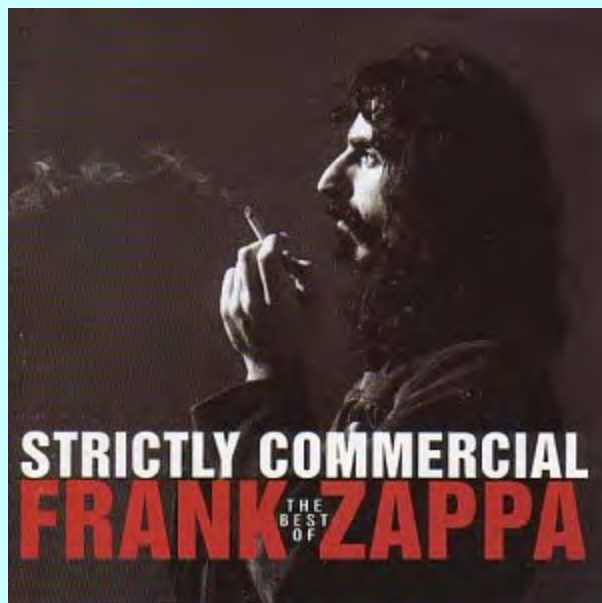
After playing the Velvets mp3 I thought I'd check out Lou Reed and looked over some of his albums on Amazon, reading reviews and listening to 30 second excerpts. Obviously I was familiar with 'Waiting for the Man' and 'Walk on the Wild Side' but hadn't gone further than that. Anyway, I settled for the CD above and it was pretty damn good -the New York art rock crowd equivalent of Neil Young & Crazy Horse- and encouraged me to go for



a 31-track best of, or as it was modestly subtitled, **The Ultimate Collection 1967-2003.**

AMG's reviewer didn't like it for its thematic rather than chronological arrangement. Me, I love it -not all of it, as one reviewer noted 'not even a rabid Lou Reed fan likes everything [because of the sheer diversity of his music]'- and it repays frequent repeated listenings. I may not get anything else by him but this is a terrific addition to my 'keepers'.

Reed isn't a genius, however, though he is a highly intelligent artist. I can only think of one person to operate in the field of rock music who can legitimately be called a genius -and it isn't Bob Dylan either. I'd first heard his stuff, and didn't like it much, back in 1968 and still didn't care for it until he came up with maybe his best album ever and still one of my favourites -**Hot Rats**. That's right, it's Uncle Frank and one recent purchase of mine is a compilation.



I made the mistake of listening to '**Bobby Brown Goes Down**' on my Ipod while walking along a busy Sunderland High Street and, even though I'd heard it several times, bursting out laughing. To say I was the recipient of concerned stares would be an understatement. Great fun. Apart from the humour, there is still room on the CD for guitar solos.

In case I didn't mention before (which I didn't) I love electric blues and rock guitar solos and many of my favourite artists are accomplished guitarists -Neil Young, Albert & BB King, Jerry Garcia, Luther Allison, Peter Green, Michael Hill, Chris Rea, Roy Buchanan, Ry Cooder, Rory Gallagher, to name but a few.

Strictly Commercial reminded me what a brilliant guitarist Zappa is and so, after a little research, I'm currently eagerly awaiting the arrival of '**Guitar**', a 2-disc compilation of guitar solos extracted from live performances, and also '**Roxy & Elsewhere**'.

You might have noticed four **U2** albums in the list back there. When I was slowly emerging from my Blues obsession I started getting back to my rock roots like **Jefferson Airplane**



and the **Grateful Dead**. Of the latter I eventually accrued the two massive box set collections of their albums from major labels which included out-takes and live cuts of a similar vintage, plus an embarrassing number of live sets on their own label like the one above, often buying the related t-shirt, like the one above. I'm tempted to think I've got enough Dead now, though I still feel my credit card twitching every time a new one is released, especially if I like the t-shirt like this one.



When I got married back in 1988 I started selling off my vinyl albums (which later led me to replacing a number of them) including just recently U2's **The Joshua Tree** (expanded version) as it's probably their best album, and a collection of their 80's best as, much as I'd like the remastered extended versions of their early albums, even a spendthrift like me has to draw the line somewhere.

I've noticed that people tend to be more opinionated and more defensive about their taste in music than over books and movies. With the latter two there is more of an open-mindedness whereas it seems that one's musical taste is almost bound up with one's character and that criticism over what one likes can engender a reaction out of all proportion. I only realised that with hindsight some years after unintentionally upsetting British fan Rog Peyton (for who I've always had a great deal of affection) when teasing him, in an apa we were both members of, over his liking for 50's music. This is ironic as my favourite Blues artist, if I really had to name only one whose CDs I'd never be parted with, is **Lightnin' Slim**. Lightnin' was not a major talent: his electric guitar playing was rudimentary, his songs were often rip-offs of other peoples, his voice had a narrow range. I just found his limitations part of his charm and I just love that world-weary voice that somehow conveys Lightnin' is singing with a knowing wink in his eye.

Anyway, sorry Rog.

Talking of crap taste, I'd sooner watch a bad gory B-movie horror than an average anything else. Like this one for example-



which rips off Roger Corman's **The Wasp Woman**, and-



-which doesn't.

Dawn of the Deadly

And, boy, are those two movies crap, though not totally devoid of entertainment value, particularly the second. I just love horror movies, especially if they have a sense of humour and an element of the fantastic. My most recent favourite in that line is **Neil Marshall's Doomsday** (though, despite the gore -one of the characters is roasted alive and then eaten- most would consider it action/sf. Director Marshall's previous movies were the terrific werewolves vs soldiers thriller **Dog Soldiers** and the claustrophobic women cavers vs degenerate humans **The Descent**. **Doomsday** is his tribute to Mad Max 2, The Warriors, and Escape From New York, and it is the most violent action-packed piece of rubbish which never fails to entertain from start to finish and sod anyone who says otherwise. I would like to note that at one early point, the narrator mentions that a wall was built across the country 18 miles long. A local lad, Marshall surely knows full well that the numbers should be reversed if you want to completely cut Scotland off from England and, to be honest, I've heard worse ideas though I would start the wall at South Shields (local joke).

Another heavily criticised movie I enjoyed much more than I expected was **Hancock**, where Will Smith does his alcoholic screw-up superhero. Where I suspect most people got it wrong was in expecting it -as the trailer indicated it- to be a comedy. It isn't. There is humour but it isn't a comedy and is all the better for it. If anything, it's more like a variant of Bendis's series **Powers**. It isn't a very good movie but it certainly isn't a bad one either.

And sometimes it's nice to settle for something low key, something beautifully played by its young leads, something wittily and perceptively scripted, with direction that serves the story rather than detracts from it. Yes, that is **Juno** I'm referring to; an absolute delight from start to finish. Ellen Page surely has a great future as a character actor.

As for **The Dark Knight**, does anyone like Christian Bale's grating Batman voice which nearly ruins the movie for me? Heath Ledger's Joker is, however, sheer unparalleled brilliance which I honestly believe will go down in movie history. Compared to that devastating performance, Hannibal Lecter is a cuddly soft toy.

Keeping up with the superheroes, **Iron Man** came as a pleasant surprise, raised several notches by Robert Downey Jnr's wonderful playboy Tony Stark. **The Incredible Hulk** wasn't very incredible at all, lacking both a charismatic hero (Bruce Banner is never very interesting) and villain (Tim Roth, good character actor, not credible on the menace side). Watched it once, put it up on Amazon Marketplace five minutes later.

And, lastly for this section, there's the movie which takes pride of place on this issue's cover -**Horror of the Blood Monsters**. Information about the movie & dvd comes from Shane Dallman's extended essay **The Blood Collection** in issue 95 of the excellent magazine **Video Watchdog**, itself highly recommended to lovers of cult movies.

The DVD cover is by (and to anyone remotely familiar with comics I'm stating the obvious) comics legend Neil Adams who, and I wouldn't have believed it until I actually watched it) accurately depicts what happens in the movie. All those elements are in it. Unfortunately in nowhere near as interesting a form as Adams' artwork. Three different elements compose it: extracts from a monochrome Philippino movie called **Tagani**, cheaply shot

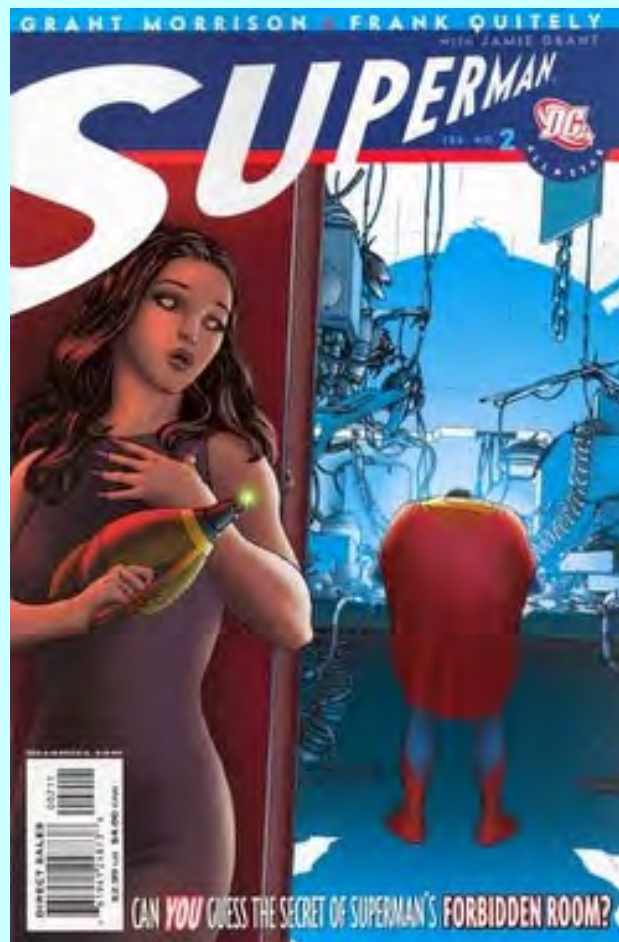
American inserts (John Carradine 'stars') made to tie in with it, and lastly a vampire prologue which Dallman says links into the rest of the movie and I'm sure he's right but I didn't notice at the time of viewing, I thought it was either a fragment from a different unfinished film or something just done to pad out the running time. Either way, there has been a great deal of effort made to tie in the main American shot sequences with 'Tagani' including the use of tinting and employing an actress who looks like the Philippino lead so she can interact with the American cast and make it seem like the same film. Effort, but sadly not much talent or money. This really isn't a very good film at all but does fall into the *so bad it's good* category which is enhanced by the effort just cited. Once seen, never forgotten.

Graphically novel.

I'd recommend most of the graphic novels I've listed as they are on the whole a pretty good selection for anyone interested in the form. Some of the latter titles listed are generic, but good, superhero stuff if you like that kind of thing (which I do) but not if you don't.

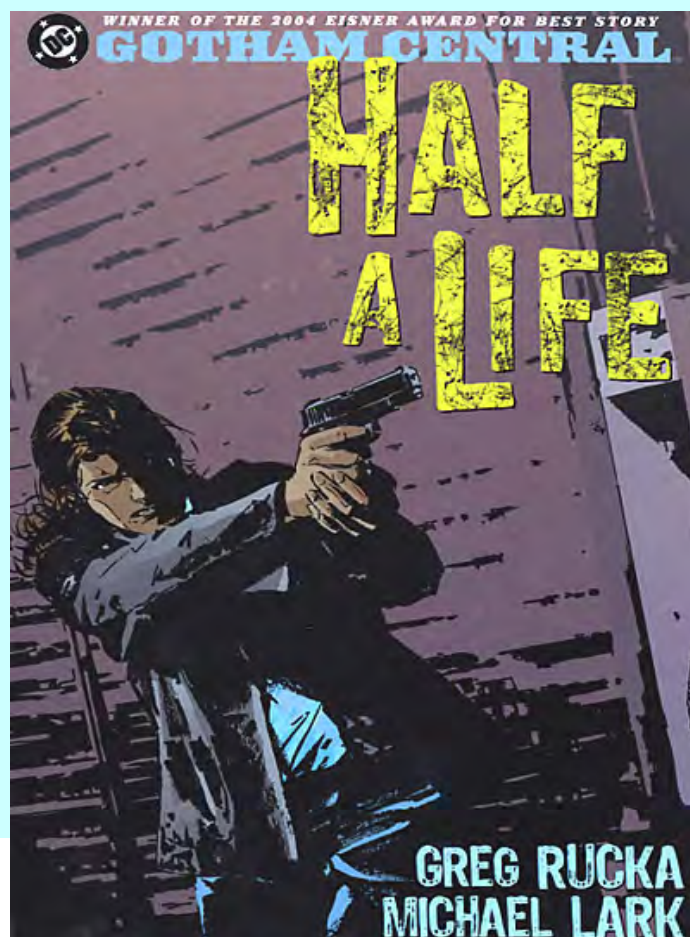
Frank Miller's All-Star Batman (illustrated by Jim Lee) is recommended with reservations as I think it's a comedy, a satire with fetishistic artwork and lots of brutality. Widely hated by comic fans, I think it's hilarious, though I'm not sure that's what Miller intended. Catchphrase, in Christian Bale's voice: "I'm the goddam Batman!"

Grant Morrison & Frank Quitely's All-Star Superman is simply an iconic masterpiece which synthesises the Superman mythos into something absolutely glorious that is simultaneously sophisticated, charming and naïve.





Genuinely interesting and sensitive work can, however, occur in the quieter corners of the mainstream superhero universes and the best example is the ongoing story of Renee Montoya.



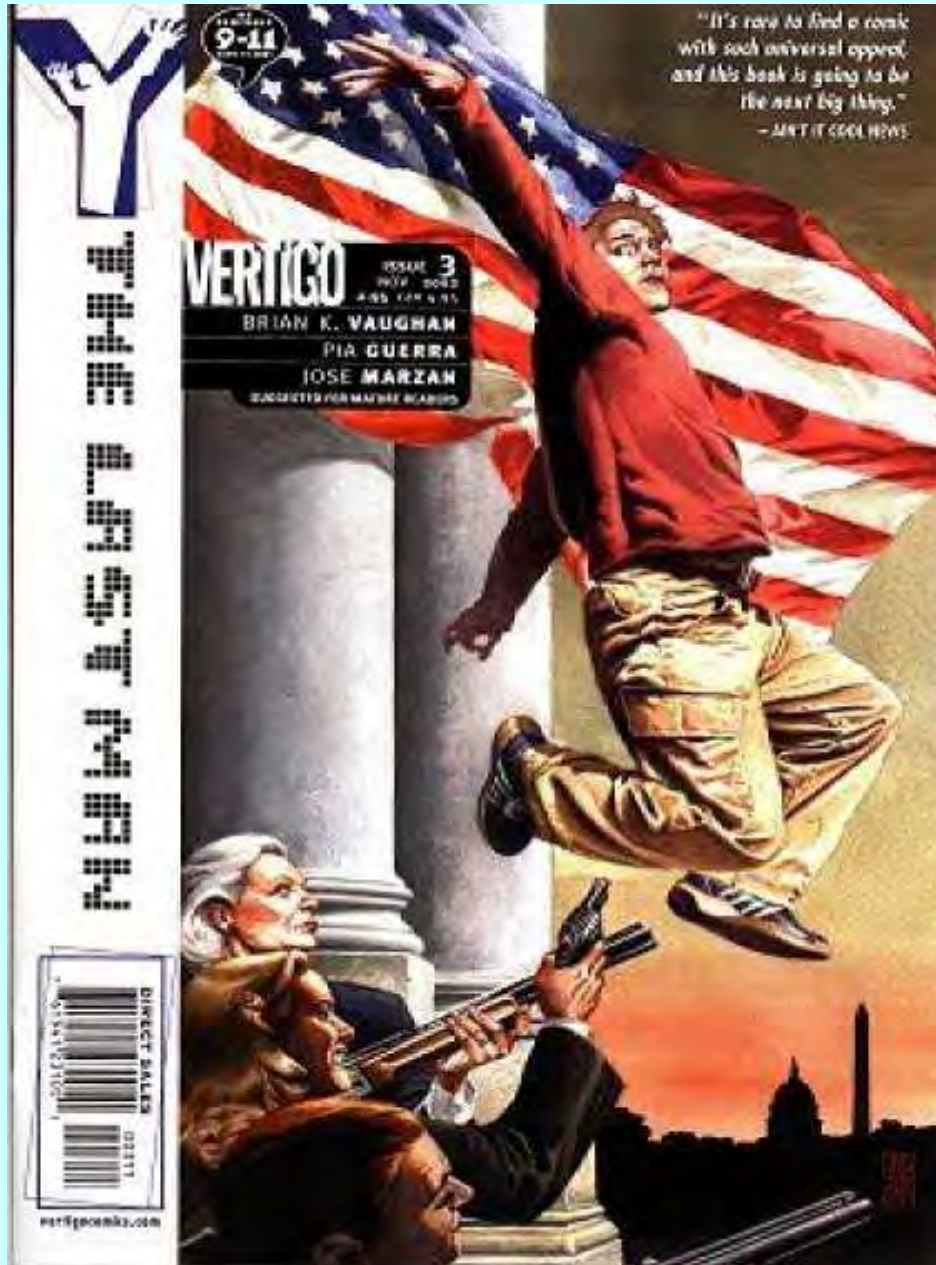
Montoya, a young Hispanic woman, started out as a Gotham beat cop who gradually became a part of the extended Batman family and at one point becomes the love-object obsession of Two-Face. Promoted to detective (and from this point on her character is only written by Greg Rucka) she becomes one of the key characters in the series **Gotham Central** (think Hill City Blues meets Batman). Her life falls apart when she's outed as a lesbian by a criminal she's investigating. At the beginning of **52**, DC's year long series where the major heroes are missing, she's become a bitter chain-smoking drunk and unlicensed P.I. who's alienated everyone around her. Over the course of this surprisingly good maxi-series, she's rehabilitated by a dying Vic Sage (aka The Question) who wants her to be his replacement. In this series we also learn that she used to be the lover of Kathy Kane (below left, duh), introduced in 52 as the new Batwoman.



Montoya's story continues in **The Question: The Five Books of Blood**, which includes one chapter featuring The Batwoman. Up soon is a tie-in title related to DC's current **Final Crisis**. I'll be there.

What's good about the character, as written by Greg Rucka and doing his best work, is that Montoya is a complicated, tough but vulnerable and not always likeable person having to deal with personal adult problems (particularly of identity, though not her sexuality as that's a fundamental part of who she is) as well those of being a hero.

Getting away from heroes and superheroes, it would be remiss of me if I didn't mention two excellent Vertigo titles, one concluded and one ongoing. The former is science fiction, the latter is modern fantasy.



Mike Carey's Y: The Last Man tells the story of Yorick who has to survive when all the males of every mammalian species, except for him and his pet monkey, die at exactly the same time. What you get is not what you expect. What propels the narrative is Yorick's attempt to reach his girlfriend in Australia while various people and groups attempt to protect, capture, or kill him as he is, it appears, the key to the survival of the species. The

art by **Pia Guerra** (a woman) is clear and unaffected allowing the story to be told without stylistic quirks getting in the way. The twists and turns of the story continually surprise and its conclusion is not only not obvious but also manages to be poignant and satisfying. This is a genuinely rare achievement and is SF of the highest order which, had it not been published over five years, would have easily deserved a Hugo nomination.

Bill Willingham's Fables is fun, albeit not for all the family. The many lands of the Fables have been conquered by the Adversary and the refugees have made their home in an enclave in New York City. The non-human Fables (like the 3 blind mice) live on a farm upstate. Old King Cole is the mayor, Snow White his overworked assistant, and Bigby Wolf (as in Big Bad) is the chief law enforcement officer. Other people who live there include Pinocchio, Little Boy Blue, Prince Charming, Bluebeard, and just about anyone else from out of copyright fantasy, nursery rhyme, fairy tales, etc that you can think of. And they are all motivated by a variety of past sins, political scheming, sexual politics, selfishness, altruism, and more, just like people really. It's currently up to 11 volumes and still going strong; not always perfect, but usually pretty damn good.



I could write and talk about comics and movies indefinitely which is why I've chosen to be relatively brief here. So it's time to move on to-

The Word and nothing but the Word.

I'm an eclectic reader and always have been. As a collector and hoarder, that's a different matter and to list items I own would give a grossly distorted idea of the material I actually do read, so I'll start with a book I've just finished (which I put up on marketplace yesterday and sold within a couple of hours) that made a great impression on me even though I don't think I'll ever feel the need to read it again.

It's Barack Obama's **Dreams from my Father**. Now even reading eclectically as I do, a politician's autobiography is heading for the bottom of the list of books I wouldn't touch with a bargepole. However, and you know this as well if not better than I, anyone who hears Obama speak for the first time cannot help but be impressed. He is an articulate interesting and spellbinding orator who does not appeal to the lowest common denominator. The more I read about him last year and saw him on TV, the more impressed I became. His book, if you haven't read it and you should, is just as impressive with its tale of a young man's quest for identity. It does go on too long as he admits in the new(ish) introduction, and I did start skimming after a while, but...

I just hope the system doesn't frustrate his vision.

Terry Pratchett's **Nation** is his best book yet. Read it.

Nick Harkaway's **The Gone-Away World** is an ingenious piece of SF with literary appeal. Puzzling, inventive, infuriating.

Reviewing For Amazon.

Like most of us, I suspect, I enjoy sharing my opinions with other people (what else have been doing here?) Reviewing for Amazon gives me access to an entirely new audience and the chance to share my enthusiasms with them. I also like the limitations of the form which provides a structure to my reviews. And it's fun.

It's different than say reviewing sf for an audience of sf fans. The review should be easily comprehensible by anyone, it should be clear, and, I think, relatively concise. If I'm the first person to review an item, I'll try and add to the information provided by Amazon, possibly paraphrasing, but trying not to repeat. Then I'll generally given an assessment of where I think it went right or wrong and finish with a single sentence summary/judgment. Equally obviously, I sometimes break my own rules if I feel like it.

Writing a humorous review isn't usually a good idea for several reasons, though there's nothing wrong with using humour as part of the review. Most of my least popular reviews are when I trying to be funny and all of them are reviews of books by Warren Ellis. There's just something about his stuff which makes me react that way.

Generally though, my reviews get overwhelmingly 'helpful' votes to unhelpful.

Often I can't understand why some people give certain reviews an unhelpful vote, particularly those which are balanced and reasonably favourable. I can understand why people don't like critical reviews of something they expect to like. My most disliked review (7/18) is of **The Mammoth Book of Best New Manga**. That said, I think it's a good review in that I state exactly why I don't think it's a good book. My most popular review is of **Stephenie Meyer's The Host** (37/39, i.e. 37 out of 39 people found it helpful), possibly

because I was the only reviewer to approach it as an sf fan rather than one of her teen vamp romances and gave it an enthusiastic review. **Wing Chung** (one of my favourite movies) gets 25/26. Bryan Talbot's **Alice in Sunderland** (one of my longer and better reviews) gets 24/26.

And I'm heading towards the end. Time for the wrap-up.

A few last words from my special guest, Jerry Springer.

Well, folks, what we've learned here today is not to be too judgemental about other people's taste in books, movies, and especially music. It's cool to like what you like because you like it and it's just as cool if someone else likes something different. Express your opinions, yes, but don't be too hard on the other guy. Listen, and you may learn something.

Be good to yourself, and to your neighbour. Goodbye for now.

Ian says: See you next time (when I'll print letters). In the meantime, try this.

