

# THE FACTSHEET FIVE STORY

## Or... Zines are My Life

By R. Seth Friedman

**B**ack in the late '70s and early '80s I was a precocious teenager living in the suburbs of New York City. This was a vital time and New York City was certainly a vital place to be. Punk rock had spawned in a tiny club in lower Manhattan called CBGBs. Soon after, many clubs opened up around town, bringing new music to thousands of enthusiastic club-goers.

Even though I was still just a suburban teen, I spent nearly every weekend night going to shows and dance clubs and every weekend day visiting shops and art galleries. While I was totally into punk rock, I was also interested in the burgeoning New York art scene — and in many ways the two overlapped. There were so many exciting things going on — experimental music, performance art, installations, graffiti, underground cinema, video art, and lots and lots of self-published fanzines.

I spent Saturday afternoons wandering the streets of New York's East Village and Soho. This was years before the real estate interests moved in, and these neighborhoods were teeming with music, art, and culture. Wandering in and out of art galleries in Soho, I eventually drifted into a strange little shop called Sohozat (an obvious pun on the word samizdat). This place was like an eclectic, decaying department store for fringe culture. They sold rubber stamps, T-shirts, and an incredible array of self-published fanzines and underground comix. Hidden in the back was Manny and his unique array of hard-to-find CDs. He later went on to start his own record store, Lunch for Your Ears, but that story's gonna hafta wait for another time.

Sohozat featured a sort of twisted underground newsstand. Instead of your typical ho-hum newspapers and magazines, they sold the most unusual publications you could ever imagine. It wasn't like I never saw a fanzine or underground comic before, it was just that Sohozat had so many of them. I can't recall exactly what I bought there, but it was at Sohozat that I first discovered such publications as Art Spiegelman's *Raw*, Paul Krassner's *The Realist*, and the seminal underground music fanzine *OP*. Every time I went into Sohozat they had completely changed things around, but there were always plenty of things to read.

I never did come across a copy of *Factsheet Five* there. That didn't happen until I discovered this tiny shop on East 7th Street that sold nothing but music fanzines — See Hear. The tagline for the store was "Everything But Records," meaning, the shop sold music fanzines, music-oriented books, underground comics, and even the occasional music video. It was here that I first came across the legendary *Maximumrockroll* and an incredible publication called *Factsheet Five*.

I've always been interested in the underground press, but like many folks I had no idea just how many of these publications existed until I checked out a copy of *Factsheet Five*. Reading *Factsheet Five* was truly mind boggling. Here was a seemingly complete list of all these incredible publications — music fanzines, political newsletters, literary journals, but with

most nearly defying description and categorization.

I might be getting a little ahead of myself here. You see, I'm not the founder of *Factsheet Five*. It was back in 1988 when I first discovered the wondrous bounty that is *Factsheet Five*, but the magazine traces its roots back to 1982.

It was May 4th, 1982. Mike Gunderloy was living in Hyde Park, Massachusetts. As an avid letter-writer and fan of the underground press he decided to print up a short summary of some of the more unusual publications he had come across. He printed up 50 copies of this two-page list using an old-style mimeograph machine.

There were only eight listings in this first issue. Not particularly overwhelming, nor intended to be. Included was a listing for The Church of SubGenius which said "At least they are a scam of good quality. Excremediation, Jehova-1, SLACK!, they've got it all, and most of it is for sale." Mike's description of *Master Monograph* read, "This zine is of interest mainly to Discordians and FBI agents; the latter are cordially invited to convert to the former." It sounds like Mulder and Scully would want to get their hands on this one.

One of the more well-known zines that predated *Factsheet Five* was Elayne Wechsler's *Inside Joke*. As a big fan of the Uncle Floyd show and Firesign Theatre, Elayne was inspired by their madness and produced her own brand of madness in this publication. Mike listed its contents as "Prose, poetry, reviews, madness, punk rock, Bob & Doug MacKenzie, Firesign Theatre, drugs, Discordia, New York Subway Jokes... whatever." Started back in October 1980, *Inside Joke* continued publishing on a nearly monthly schedule up until 1989.

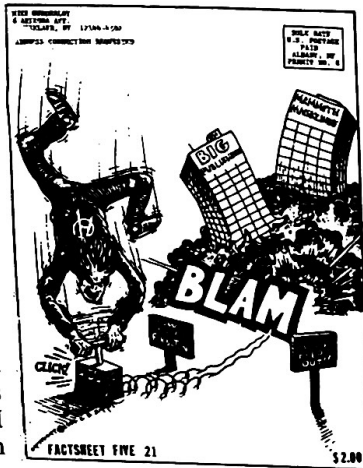
Gunderloy included copies of his *Factsheet Five* in with his regular correspondence. He also sent out copies to people he thought would find it useful. The entire endeavor was a simple time-saving device. While today people might compile a list of interesting URLs and email it to friends, Mike compiled this list of interesting publications and included it with his letters. He figured it would be faster and easier to print up these two pages instead of typing the same two pages every time he wrote a letter.

*Factsheet Five* was never intended to be regularly published nor even last more than a handful of issues. In the first one he said "If you want any publicity in the next issue (if there is one) let me know." By the time the fifth issue rolled around, he'd switched from the standard-sized mimeograph to an offset-printed, folded, stapled digest size publication. While things looked a bit better, Mike still dubbed it "the not-dead-yet zine of crosspollination & crosscurrents."

Things started to firm up with his next issue. With 150 copies printed, Mike finally settled in on a quarterly publishing schedule and a set of options on how one might have expected to receive this (or future) issues, "You sent stamps. You sent money. We're trading zines. You're in an apa with me." Published in March '83, it ran 14 pages long and featured *Factsheet Five*'s first (and best known) columnist, Anni Ackner.

Three months later the zine exploded to the point where it's been ever since — overwhelming. Thirty-six digest-sized, offset-printed pages, filled with zine reviews, book reviews, letters, essays, resources, cartoons, newsclips, and even paid advertisements. Not surprisingly the first paid advertisement was from the Church of SubGenius — and the first cartoonist, John Crawford, of course. Also debuting in this issue, a brand new way of earning a copy of *Factsheet Five*, "You sent me something new to review."

The year 1986 brought a lot of changes for Mike Gunderloy and *Factsheet Five*. Mike outgrew his old residence in Massachusetts, moving to the now legendary 6 Arizona Street address — and *Factsheet Five* outgrew its old printer and old format. By the end of the year it took on its familiar full-sized, web printed design. Pumping out 2,000 copies, satisfying



nearly everyone who wanted information about this bizarre underground world. With special sections on "Hate Literature," "Minicomics," "Catalogs," "Pagan," "Literary," "Poetry," "Libertarian," and "Publisher's Choice" zines, it wasn't for the primitive computer typography one could hardly tell the difference between 1986's issue #22 and 1998's issue #64.

Things grew by leaps and bounds. Soon Mike was printing thousands upon thousands of copies of thick 100+ page issues, all sporting bright, colorful colors. The mainstream media started swarming in, writing up perplexing articles about *Factsheet Five* in the *Utne Reader* and *Whole Earth Review*. Word about *Factsheet Five* spread throughout the country and around the world. Publishing six times a year, the magazine took over Mike's entire life. *Factsheet Five* was Mike Gunderloy, and Mike Gunderloy was...

Pretty soon things grew to become too big for one person to handle. In 1990 Jacob Robinowitz and Cari Goldberg-Janice started helping out with lots of the day-to-day publishing tasks and zine reviews. They added a bit of diversity to Mike's singular voice, and over time, Cari grew to become co-editor of the magazine.

As *Factsheet Five* grew in popularity, Ted Gottfried began selling *hundreds* of copies at his New York zine shop, See Hear. It was probably some time around 1990 that I picked up my first copy of *Factsheet Five*. I had heard rumors of the existence of this legendary magazine, but never picked up a copy until I found it on one fateful day at Ted's shop.

### R. Seth discovers Factsheet Five

My entire life was transformed virtually overnight (remember this was *years* before I even *considered* taking it over myself). First came the postage stamps and envelopes. Then I started meticulously saving all the single dollar bills I received in change. Soon my desk was set up with stacks of one-dollar bills, stamps, envelopes, form letters, and of course a big box of all the zines I got.

One doesn't stay a lurker forever, but my foray into zine *participation* came about almost accidentally. Since my early college days I had been assembling humorous photo-collages, much in the style of James Koehnline or Freddie Baer (for a sample of my work see *F5* #46). I ran off copies of these collages and made a habit of including some of these xeroxes in with my requests for zines. It was simply a way of sharing my work and showing my appreciation to these very generous zine publishers.

Then one day I received a very shocking package in the mail. It was a copy of one of my favorite zines, Ken Wagner's *Blue Ryder*. What was most shocking was its cover — it was

one of my collages! While I never intended any of these collages to be *submissions*, I guess Ken was so impressed by one of my pieces that he decided to use it for one of his covers. Seeing my work in print really grabbed me by the balls. I knew right then and there — this kicks ass!

I took a more active role in sending out my collages to zines, and I was quickly rewarded by finding my work reprinted in lots of places. I soon tried my hand at the written word, writing up political screeds and sending those off to my favorite zines. Soon I became a "contributor" to such short-lived publications as *Madworld Survival Guide* and *Dumpster Times*.

My writing skills slowly started to improve, and I soon developed my own literary "voice." I really liked the personal writing I found in zines and enjoyed writing about my own mundane life. After dissecting several issues of *Factsheet Five* and reading scores of zines, an idea finally hit me. I would do a zine about food, but also a zine about politics, and also a zine about my personal life. By blending the personal with the political, and throwing in some bits about food (as it is the spice of life) I came up with the makings of my first zine, *Food for Thought*.

I really enjoyed cooking, and after a while I developed quite a reputation among my friends for my acumen in the kitchen. Like many folks, I also loved writing political rants. *Food for Thought* became the perfect outlet for all my literary passions — and besides, each issue had a bunch of vegetarian recipes for you to try out at home.

After meticulously writing, designing, constructing and printing my first issue, I proudly sent it off to Mike for his scrutiny. Knowing full well about his left-leaning politics and vegetarian lifestyle, I felt fully confident that he would give it the thumbs up.

Mike didn't disappoint. He gave my first issue a very favorable review and I was on my way to fame and fortune (zine style). I got lots of orders, lots of zine trades, and thoroughly enjoyed my participation in the world of zines.

I finished up my second issue just barely in time to make the deadline for *Factsheet Five* #44. Just another one of Mike and Cari's massive 132-page issues. In the editorial for #44 Mike mentioned that he and Cari will be working on a book on zines.

Unfortunately the stress of putting out six issues a year and writing a book about zines got to be too much. In a surprise decision that rocked the zine community, after 44 issues, Mike decided to call it quits. He announced the sad news on the WELL, a computer bulletin board system.

### Mike calls it quits

Hudson Luce had been a strong supporter of *Factsheet Five* for many years. He too was an active participant on the WELL conferences, and he was very disappointed with the news. After trying to encourage others to continue the tradition he found nearly everyone was too busy (or too sensible). After a short series of discussion, a deal was struck, and Hudson Luce agreed to take over the ill-fated publication himself.

Unfortunately Hudson seemed to bite off more than he could chew. Hudson only produced one issue of *Factsheet Five*, issue #45. This poorly designed issue was a big disappointment. The cover was a confusing Tuli Kupferberg cartoon, the zine reviews were strangely sorted by geographic region, and for the most part, it was nearly impossible to find anything in the jumble.

Publishing *Factsheet Five* is a tough job. It's takes a well-organized, thick-skinned, generous, tireless individual. Besides being not quite up for the job, Hudson moved soon after publishing his first issue. Changing address is certain death for a magazine like *Factsheet Five* which relies so heavily on maintaining consistent contact with people. Hudson then moved again, and moved a total of three or four times before finally settling in Prairie Village, Missouri.

Then Hudson broke his arm in a bicycle accident — and a resolution was made. Hudson could not continue publishing *Factsheet Five*, nor did he care to. Like Mike's announcement, just eight months earlier, Hudson's announcement to discontinue publishing *Factsheet Five* sent shock waves thought the community.

Like many people, I was crushed. *Factsheet Five* disappeared just as things were getting interesting.

Then I met Jerod Pore and things started to get interesting again. You see, all these discussions about *Factsheet Five*'s demise and resur-

rection took place on the Internet, or on the WELL to be more specific. Jerod had an idea of creating an online, Internet version of *Factsheet Five*. Remember, this was back in 1991, eons before the World Wide Web was even *invented*. What Jerod was proposing was essentially the world's first Internet-based magazine. People would submit their zines (or zine reviews) and Jerod would

then compile the reviews and distribute them to "subscribers."

Of course the only people who could get *Factsheet Five* were those with email account (a comparatively rare thing in those days). As word spread, so did the complaints. No one really liked the idea, but no one had a better one. While I wasn't *thrilled* with the idea



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either, I figured what the hey? I liked zines, I wanted to see *Factsheet Five* continue, so I signed up.

Jerod had gotten a bunch of zines sent to him from Hudson. He had separated them into various thematic categories. I took on Food, Anarchy, and Travel zines. I wrote up a bunch of reviews, submitted them to Jerod, and we were off and running.

Unfortunately this on-line version of *Factsheet Five* had only minor success. Because *Factsheet Five* reviewed printed zines — in order for it to be successful, it must also be available in a printed format. I thought that *Factsheet Five* was too important to see it die. And when no one stepped forward I figured that if *Factsheet Five* was to continue as a printed magazine, I was going to have to do it myself.

You see, for the past five years or so I had been working as a computer system manager for several different New York financial institutions. I had gotten laid off during the post '80s cutbacks, and had been living off unemployment for nearly a year. I had recently moved from New York to San Francisco and was desperately trying to avoid getting a job. Publishing *Factsheet Five* seemed like the perfect way of postponing the inevitable once again.

I had saved up a bit of money from those high-flying New York days and poured all my saving into restarting *Factsheet Five*. I knew *nothing* about publishing a magazine (but I knew quite a bit about computers). I immediately went to work designing a magazine publishing system. It was a system that would allow lots of different people, living in different places, all to write reviews for the same magazine. Reviews that were flexible, easily formatable, and customizable by the magazine's designer. I created what is now known as database publishing system, and created one of the first database-published magazines.

After brief correspondence with Mike (and exasperated dealings with Hudson) I became *Factsheet Five*'s third publisher/editor. Like Mike, nearly ten years earlier, I never thought that I would publish more than one issue of *Factsheet Five*. I figured that either a) it would be a financial and editorial disaster and would quickly die after just one issue, or b) someone with more money and publishing know-how would quickly step in and relieve me of my burden. Neither happened.

While I can look back on my first issue and think how poorly written and designed it was, at the time it was surprisingly successful, selling out its meager press run of 8,000 copies, and getting notices all over the map.

I published a second issue, then a third, and soon zines were the hot topic once again. First came the *Village Voice* ("It's not your father's *Factsheet Five*" said Pagan Kennedy). Then came a big write-up in *Details*. Before long, my phone was ringing off the hook with queries

from clueless reporters who heard about this hot new trend called zines.

I had created a monster. I was working 60, 70 hours a week. I couldn't take a break. I was publishing five issues a year. I had no life. *Factsheet Five* was R. Seth Friedman, and R. Seth Friedman was...

Thankfully someone came to the rescue. Michelle Rau was my first office assistant/staff editor/zine reviewer. She had published several zines and was very interested in the underground press. Check out her lengthy dissertation on zines that was published in the third issue of *Alternative Press Review*. She came in a few days a week, to help out with stuffing envelopes, writing zine reviews, picking cartoons, and such.

Unfortunately the wind was blowing south for her and before long she had moved on to Arizona.

I first heard about Christopher Becker when someone sent me a newspaper article about an off-the-wall café in Michigan that had put on some sort of a zine show. Several years later Chris sent me his Seattle-based zine which primarily reviewed other Seattle-based zines. I was so impressed by his writing that I asked him to write reviews for *Factsheet Five*.

After Michelle left I knew I needed to hire someone to replace her. The workload had grown to become way too much for me to handle on my own. Christopher's reviews were top-notch, he seemed to really care about zines, and he lived close by (well, close enough). Without ever meeting face-to-face I asked Chris if he would consider moving down to San Francisco and working on *Factsheet Five*. How could he say no?

When publishers are asked why they do zines, the main reason is of course for the fun of it. For me the fun of doing *Factsheet Five* faded many years ago. I restarted *Factsheet Five* because I thought it was too important to see it die. I keep it going all these years for the exact same reason. The burn-out factor got to be way too high for me, and I eventually offered Christopher the full-time job as editor of *Factsheet Five*. Not exactly an easy task, and soon Christopher burned out too.

Like zines as a whole, *Factsheet Five* will most likely continue forever. Now it's time for a fourth person to take on the burden. It's an often thankless task, but one that offers so many rewards. So much has happened in the past six years. My teeth have rotted away, my hair has fallen out, my eyes are so blurry I can't read my own magazine, and my brain has been nearly crushed by the screams of 20,000 angry zine publishers — but I've gained so much. I'm the proud member of a very exclusive club — Mike, Hudson, myself, and now... I've learned so much from reading 50,000 zines. I feel so close to so many people — so many people who I know I'll never meet. But that just means I feel close to humanity as a whole. And that what it's all about.

(RSF - June '98)

# BOMB ENCLOSED

By Julee Peezlee

For the last 10 years, I've toggled between the identities of mail artist and zine person. During this time, it has come to my attention that the U.S. Post Office doesn't always cooperate with the sending and receiving of artistically packaged boxes and letters.

Because I encountered many difficulties at the postal counter due to my inclination for decoration, I decided to collect similar stories from other mail artists. I compiled them into a one-shot publication called *Mail Art Postal Hassle Stories (and other Ephemera in Relation to Strange Mail)*. Two parts humor and one part anger, this 17-item zine investigated those who pushed the limits of the postal system.

I found out that the postal inspector has NO sense of humor when it comes to teenage scrawlings of "bomb enclosed" on the outside of a package containing a cassette or ¼-inch thick plastic postcards jamming the sorting machines. Many times the postal workers would frown and sigh and pull out their little rulers to tell my friends and I that our hot pink triangle-shaped postcards to Belgium just weren't allowed. You see, if it's out of the country and over a certain size, it must be in an envelope. So I would nod in agreement, offer my apologies, snatch the offending mail art and assure them I'd take care of it later. Then I'd go home, place the triangle on my \$8 postal scale, affix the appropriate stamps and drop it in one of those thousands of convenient blue boxes you see on almost every street corner. It always worked. I figured we're both happy — I save the disgruntled postal workers the grief of dealing with my mail art and I get to send it, too. As far as I know, all items made the journey successfully.

So when they tell you, "You can't send this ..." just quietly agree, put the item back in your bag and nonchalantly drop it into a mailbox. Lack of a return address might keep it from bouncing back to you and the worst that could happen is it doesn't make it or the recipient will have to pay postage due — not such a horrible punishment when receiving a styrofoam mannequin head covered in postage stamps with a run-on sentence written across the face.

At the Boulder, post office I developed a friendly relationship with the employees who came to know me as the-person-who-always-got-the-weird-mail. So if something came in with no name but included an address spelled out in alphabet soup letters taped to a plastic toy, they'd give it to me. Even if it wasn't intended for me, they figured I'd appreciate it.

Challenging the postal system is nothing new; the Fluxus artists were doing it 30 years ago. One famous mail art prank was called "Postman's Choice," in which a postcard was mailed with two different addresses and sufficient postage on both sides. Since it's not apparent which is the "to" and which is the "from," the postman ultimately makes the decision where it ends up. Similarly, I tried mailing a postcard with a dollar bill taped to the front to test the honesty of the postal workers. They passed. But I suspect a fiver wouldn't make it. Anybody care to try?

