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[An Interview With Joe Biel, Film Maker And Zine Wizard](#)

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by [Simon Barrett](#) in [Interview](#)

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To many, the planet Earth is a huge place, and yet only a few days ago I met someone that had never ventured more than a 100 miles from his birth place here in Alberta. To me though, the world is a very small place, and it is amazing just how small it has become through the Internet. I recently reviewed a great DVD of indie shorts [Cantankerous Titles & Obscure Ephemera](#), that I found just superb, was in hog heaven! I decided that I wanted to interview the creator Joe Biel. I was contemplating the best route to Joe, and generally that is through either the PR or Distribution company repping the DVD. Thirty seconds of 'Googling' Mr. Biel had me wondering if I already knew him. Sure enough, in the cavern that I call my inbox was Joe's email address. He is Mr. Zine!

Joe, firstly let me say thank you for agreeing to talk to us. Can you tell us a little about who Joe Biel is?

Well, to some the name is familiar as a fine artist sculptor and painter. To others, it's a professor of arts, who teaches some experimental classes. A different set may have seen me give a lecture at their college or a presentation about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. at their local infoshop or punk club on tour. At different points I've appeared on people's radar as an author of conspiracy theory tract pamphlets or research about zines or uncomfortable descriptive narratives about vasectomies. Perhaps people are familiar with the name as the co-founder of the Portland Zine Symposium, one of the world's largest zine conferences. Most recently, it would be a name that people would be familiar with because they saw one of a dozen short talk-umentaries. Probably though, if you ask Google or Wikipedia, I am most notable as the founder of Microcosm Publishing, a small press book and zine publisher, who doubles as the world's largest distribution house for zines. I feel like the latter is less notable than the former or at least certainly relied on quite a few more people's hard work than just my own. Some people may wonder how it's possible for one person to have so many legs in so many different fields and vastly varying reports on where they live or even what year

they are born. The simple answer is cloning.

I may be just as strange as you 😊 I love eclectic things, and I have been accused many times of being eccentric. I suspect that you are similar. How did you get started with the Zine and indie movie world?

I am accused of being eccentric much less than you might think. I have an acute ability of communicating with the mentally unhinged and have suffered from Graves Disease for about 15 years, so most things that come out of my mouth are literal nonsense that I cannot articulate properly, if not conspiracy. So of course zines and documentary were the natural vehicles for establishing coherent thoughts.

In 1994 I went to see the pre-Christian Smoking Popes perform at the Euclid Tavern in Cleveland, OH. Jake Kelly was walking around and selling his zine, Summer, from his backpack for \$1. I picked it up as an impulse and it was the best reading I had encountered. It rekindled an interest in reading that I had developed as a child and lost in high school. I instantly perused all zines that I could find and was publishing my own zine Stink in Public within the year.



Movies were a similar pursuit that was also born as an extension of my interest in punk and art. I started shooting bands in 1993, when I realized it would be a better time capsule than a cassette recording. Does that make me a vertie filmmaker? By 2001 I was working on a collaborative feature narrative movie, Do You Copy? about a group of absent minded copy shop employees who escape to an intersecting fantasy world where they battle cat like space aliens. From there, it was just a simple hop, skip, and a jump to develop enough confidence, equipment, and skill to switch to documentary...which is where I've been ever since. I had a shared studio in Portland with a few people who had a few years of experience on me. They taught me what I needed to know to start doing amateur style documentaries with no budget.

Can you tell us a little about Microcosim?

In 1996, I lived in Cleveland and all of my roommates worked during the day while I delivered pizza at night. At first this seemed ideal as I was a raging drinker at the time, but over time it's depressing to be the only one home in a big house. I started Microcosm as a hobby to keep me entertained during the day while everyone I knew was in school or at work. The idea was to serve as a distribution agent for things that you couldn't find elsewhere. This was before the graphic internet and the catalog was a single ledger sheet of paper folded many times. It grew gradually over the next five years until it was at a point that it was employing people, including myself. Over twelve years the focus sharpened and refined, now focusing pretty tightly around self-published zines, zine anthology books, and related materials. The organization's decision making process is now setup as a collective, where all employees are responsible to each other to self manage instead of a top-down structure. This is partly to allow the organization to outlast my own involvement, helps my stress level relax, but also to empower a workplace in ways beyond the wages it can afford to pay.

A Zine is not usually a moneymaking prospect, neither is an indie movie. Yet somehow independent souls like yourself continue to push forward. How tough is it to finance, and even harder to make money in these endeavors.

If you strip it down to motivation, money was never my driving factor. At different points, I was needing to express myself, attempting to help people get published, trying to challenge myself, learning new mediums, and trying to learn new skills and story telling abilities. At the point that it is no longer creatively fulfilling, I will quit.

In the 90s these projects were funded by working at a pizza shop – I would take out \$200 from each paycheck and put it into Microcosm. I estimate that I put in around \$20,000 over years. It seemed like a better

investment than a car. More recently I started to read business books and have gone to college for business.

I like to hope that it's obvious - selling DVDs for \$10 and zines for \$1 - that it's not about the money. It is however quite possible to rotate money around in a shell game at this point to have wages to pay everyone and enough money to publish 6-10 new titles per year as well as keep the back catalog in print.

We have no outside funding and have never had extensive private donations. A few times people have donated \$100 or so, but the group has decided that it is not interested in presenting itself as a nonprofit or asking for outside funding.

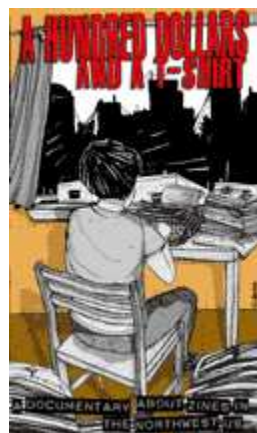
Joe, I have to tell my readers that you are about to embark on a three day rail journey, now last time I looked at prices, rail is far more expensive than air travel. I think your quote in one of your shorts is "Traveling should be part of the experience". I'd love to find out more about your thoughts.

I do believe that traveling is a very important part of the experience and not an unpleasant to get past in your trip. However, I have also been flagged as some kind of dangerous person post-9/11 and am routinely searched and detained every time that I fly. So I decided to stop. It was simply too much hassle and it made me feel terrible every time.

People claim that the rail industry is too subsidized, but the interstate system and airline industry is far more subsidized, taking a majority of the public transportation budget while rail takes about 1%.

Before you go on thinking that this is solely some kind of moral or political decision, you must realize two or three days on a train is a godsend in my work productivity. On this trip in particular I plan to finish a book I am co-authoring, watch all of our current DVD submissions, listen to 4 audiobooks, and finish editing a new academic book. I could never do this with the same amount of hours in any office. The environment is beautifully focused as well as pleasant and beautiful.

On top of all of this, Amtrak (and probably Via-rail) offers a credit card option that accumulates points towards free travel in the same way that airlines offer. The difference with Amtrak is that it's absolutely free with no strings attached, no annual fee, and it works out that I have 3 or 4 free trips per year.



Many would quote the line from the song "Video killed the radio star". And you could argue that the internet is killing other media. Maybe I could even say that "the blog has killed the Zine". Yet the Zine continues. Whats the joy of the Zine?

The truth is that chain stores killed print media long before the internet was dominant. This is well documented in the book Rebel Bookseller by Andrew Laties. Borders and Barnes and Nobles bought up Walden and B. Dalton and created big box variants of bookstores in the late 1980s. They vastly over-ordered books, created their own distribution companies, and demanded huge discounts from publishers. Many of these oversaturated titles were remaindered, pulped, or cover-returned. This literally doubled the retail prices of paperbacks over the next ten years and at some point consumers became unwilling to pay doubled prices for the same book.

Somehow the story got broadcast wrong that the internet killed reading.

More importantly, blogs don't have shit on zines. Zines are all about raw emotion, textural printing techniques, and reading on the toilet. The things that make zines warm and engaging cannot be replicated on blogs or on a computer.

There is a new digital paper technology that solves all cited problems for why people don't read books on

computers. Once this hits a price point that is agreeable for mass market consumers, paper books will slowly die in the way that record sales have. Zines are relatively impervious to this, as letterpress, screen printing, scents, and fold out pockets cannot be duplicated by computers.

Similarly, those who are drawn to zines as a medium will continue to publish them, as blogs cannot replace that same motivation. It's more like thinning the herd and decreasing the proportion of zines published to awesome zines being published.

I have a theory about this next question, I am pretty sure that I know the answer, but I can not resist. Do you love life? Are you a happy guy?

It's like this – 2007 was a pretty rough year for me. I got divorced, lost my house, my town, my dad died, three other friends died, my friend's son died, my house was robbed three times and I went severely into debt replacing things, my girlfriend was inexplicably weak and sick all year with undiagnosed IC, Microcosm hit its first real problem with debt, and my own health and confidence were at an all time low. So it's been a process of rebuilding lately. Oddly enough, it hit my professional life the hardest and I feel like I'm just now starting to get out of my slump. The worst part is that problems like this make it seem reasonable to consider things that you never would – out of desperation.

So my final answer is that I hope to be happy again in the future.

When I watched Cantankerous I have to admit that [Bill Brown's](#) name leapt into my mind. Completely different subjects, but a very similar style, high quality and great camera use, and a superb voice over. Are you friends, ex classmates?

This is very flattering and hilarious as Bill is obviously far more skilled than I am and shoots on real film (and has been doing it for much longer). The only time that I really see the comparison is in my short "Tennessee State Prison", which is almost entirely voice over narration like Bill's style. I don't really see the comparison in other things. Can you elaborate? I obviously am familiar with and respect his work. We released his second DVD collection through Microcosm.

My other filmmaker friend Marc Moscato has a theory that when you watch a film you can tell when it's made by a zinester. The real cause of similarity of style (if not approach) is that we are both long-time zine makers turned film-makers.

I never studied filmmaking, other than watching films and reading books. Bill does classroom work now, teaching. I'm not sure if he ever went to school for filmmaking though.

What is next for Joe?

Well, I used to joke that I was past my prime and I had hit my creative peak around '99-04. Since then my co-workers have been trying to convince me otherwise. Honestly, the Cantankerous DVD did not get nearly the reviews that \$100 & A T-Shirt did when it was released in 2004.

I had mostly given up on writing and filmmaking by 2006 when I was tricked into attending a filmmaking workshop where the end result was creating a feature documentary of Plan-it X Fest. Of course the principal organizers of the workshop left town within hours and suddenly I was in the pilot's seat. My personal work ethic and social responsibility is far too great and I've now been working on this new feature for about two years now. I am striving to create my best work yet.

It was a collaborative shooting project to tell the story of this 12 year old record label and cultural epicenter through the lens of this festival, bands, workshops, and activities. We are expecting to finish it this summer

and release it in the fall. No final title yet but we have a trailer -

After that I'm planning on doing another 11 minute short about Jared of Subway fame, who cut his teeth in Bloomington, and whose real story is much different from the household myth of weight loss. I have 3 unreleased shorts that I plan to eventually release on a new DVD.

I co-authored the chapter on zine publishing for Routledge's new book, *Alternative Media Handbook*.

The opportunity then came up to co-author a new edition of the classic books *Notes from Underground* and *Make A Zine*, which are the theoretical and practical components of zine publishing, respectively. In both cases the original publishers are not willing/able to republish them so I am re-writing and re-editing them and then *Microcosm* is republishing them. This has been a huge resurgence in personal confidence and ability. I have been wanting to write "my book" for many years now and the book that I wrote half of the content for, *Stolen Sharpie Revolution* just went out of print.

Of course. To me a big point of being involved in projects like these is being available and willing to discuss means, methods, and madness.

Thanks so much for spending some time with BNN, and I am sure that our readers will join me in wishing you the very best in your projects.

Editors note: The link for *Microcosm Publishing* is <http://www.microcosmpublishing.com> and well worth a visit.

Simon Barrett

<http://zsimonb.blogspot.com>

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