



## A Hundred Dollars and a T-Shirt

**Director:** Joe Biel, Rev. Phil Sano

**Cast:** Franco Ortega, Greig Means, Moe Bowstern, Ayleen Crotty, and Keith Rosson

(2008) Rated: Unrated

US DVD release date: 19 February 2008 (Microcosm)

by [Shaun Huston](#)

Like the best of the zines it celebrates, *A Hundred Dollars and a T-Shirt* (AKA "A Documentary about Zines in the Northwest U.S.") is, at turns, rough and elegant, but always sincere and passionate. The collective of people who created the film, which includes Joe Biel, Rev. Phil Sano, Basil Shadid, Steev Hise, Peter Green, and Shawn Granton, are fans and insiders to the zine world, and to Portland, Oregon's zine culture in particular, but that doesn't keep the film from being accessible to non-insiders or those new to zines.

*A Hundred Dollars* is divided into seven major sections: "What is a zine?", "Where do zines come from (history of zines)?", "Why do people make zines?"; "How do you make a zine?", "Being part of a zine community," "Zines in the Northwest," and "Where have zines taken us and where will they go next (future of zines)?". Each section includes interviews with a variety of zine readers/ fans/ makers. The documentary also includes footage of the 2003 Portland Zine Symposium, Reading Frenzy, a bookstore in downtown Portland that specializes in zines and independent media, and the Portland-based Independent Publishing Resource Center where zine makers can find advice, inspiration, education, and work space.

As emphasized in the film's opening section, zines tend to be individual, or at least idiosyncratic, productions. By contrast, *A Hundred Dollars* is a collective work. This is partly reflected in the widely varying quality of audio and video on the DVD. Some interviews are marred by static, while others are clean and perfectly audible. Some video is washed out and grainy, while other sections are more vibrant and clear. These kinds of "imperfections" may turn off certain audiences, but they do give the film a subject-matching cut-and-paste aesthetic.

Even though video and audio quality varies, a certain unity is created by what appears to have been a common set of questions for interview subjects. Interviews were also consistently shot at medium-wide angles and with a static camera. As the talking head has come to dominate documentary filmmaking, audiences have become accustomed to seeing interviewees from different angles, particularly in close-up or head shots. The approach taken for *A Hundred Dollars* literally holds its subjects at a distance, but in return viewers get to see zine makers and fellow travelers in their larger contexts of, mostly, work and home. Eventually, as the people become familiar, don't be surprised if your eye starts wandering to walls, worktables, and the like, all of which offer some additional insight into the world of the film.

One reason that talking head documentaries often show their interview subjects from different angles is to create visual interest from shots of people who are basically still, and usually seated. *A Hundred Dollars* accomplishes this same end by building its narratives from a larger than usual pool of informants. This strategy not only succeeds in keeping the film moving, but also underscores that zine culture is made by interactive communities of readers and creators, all of whom bring distinctive sets of purposes, interests, and passions to their work, reading, and sharing.

Less successful in this regard are the occasional, and seemingly random, "reenactments" of certain stories and anecdotes. Individually, some of these work well enough to add interest and humor to the film, but on the whole, the effort is undercut by the casualness with which it is used and produced and by less than clear transitions that distract from the points being made.

In addressing the question of zine communities, and Portland's in particular, the documentary does an excellent job of showing the diversity in interests and motivations among creators, readers, and advocates. A critical discussion of gender that takes note of sexism, and even misogyny and violence towards women, adds to the film's complexity, but it also opens a door to questions of difference and conflict that, aside from gender, the filmmakers choose not to walk through.

The interview subjects in *A Hundred Dollars* are overwhelming white. The film also points to zines and zine makers interested not only in gender, but also sexuality, and yet there is no discussion of that issue within the

community. It might be reasonable to assume that people who spend their time producing countercultural media, and who embrace marginality, would not be subject to the same social norms regarding race, ethnicity, and sexuality as the dominant culture in which they are located, but the film includes an explicit admonition not to make this assumption when it comes to gender. It is hard not to ask questions about other forms of identity and whether there is racism and homophobia at work in the zine community just as there is sexism and a certain degree of male dominance.

While Portland has become more ethnically and racially diverse over the past 20 years or so, it not only remains a largely white city, but white to the point where it is easy for those in the majority to believe that race is not an issue without being called on it very often. Maybe things are different in the zine community and maybe they aren't. Maybe the filmmakers simply went where their subjects took them or maybe they consciously chose not to ask about race (or sexuality). In the end, for whatever reason, *A Hundred Dollars* does not address these questions. Indeed, at one point, the community's perceived demographics are described as "young and middle class", while the seemingly obvious third term, "white", is left out.

A second issue that is broached but not substantively addressed is the influence of personal computers and the internet on zine making and zine culture. There is one minor discussion of desktop publishing and zine design, and another of how online communication is distinct from handwritten, or typed, communication, but how these different media interact is left to the side. It's easy to think, and *A Hundred Dollars* implies, that social networking sites, blogging, online photo and videosharing, the read/write web in other words, has had an impact on the number, quality, and incidence of zines and zine makers. These various media can be and are used for similar kinds of personal expression, but all have different points of entry and appeal to different tastes and personalities. At the same time, the zine world and the online world are hardly separate. This is an area ripe for close examination, but not in *A Hundred Dollars*.

To be fair, these criticisms should be kept in perspective. I mention issues of difference and other media mostly because the filmmakers also chose to address them. Seen from a different perspective, these aren't so much criticisms as testaments to how effective *A Hundred Dollars* is at sparking interest in its subject.

I received "Version 2.0" of the documentary to review (there's already a version 3.0). This iteration of the DVD includes two commentary tracks, additional material, and a production information page, including contact information.

The first commentary track features co-director Joe Biel and Alex Wreck, who helped with the production. Biel and Wreck share their personal reflections on the making of the documentary and on some of the people and events it features, as well as a few notes on the differences between the first and second editions. On my copy, the second commentary was mostly garbled, muffled by the primary soundtrack, which was itself distorted by reverb.

The "additional material" consists of scenes that did not make it into at least the version of the film under discussion here. One of the selections, "camera breaking" is notable for how it seems to account for why one of the documentary's more prominently featured subjects mostly appears only in voice over.

It should also be noted that the documentary includes original artwork by Cristy Road and music by J Church and Defiance, OH!

*A Hundred Dollars* is replete with stories of people who became part of the zine world because they, or someone they know, happened to stumble across someone's publication and it helped them through a rough time or motivated them to start their own project. The documentary seems made to promote its subject in a similar way and for that reason I would recommend it most strongly to those who can place it into a group or organizational setting; librarians, teachers, and community organizers, for example. Those are the kinds of environments where people are most likely to "stumble across" the film and be subsequently moved or inspired to read or create.

People already involved with zines will enjoy the film for the chance to see and hear from authors and as another way of connecting with their comrades in independent media. Above all, *A Hundred Dollars and a T-Shirt* is a good example of an insider story told well and in an open and inviting way.

RATING:   
EXTRAS: 

— 3 March 2008

[advertising](#) | [about](#) | [contributors](#) | [submissions](#)  
© 1999-2008 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved.  
PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks of PopMatters Media, Inc. and PopMatters Magazine.