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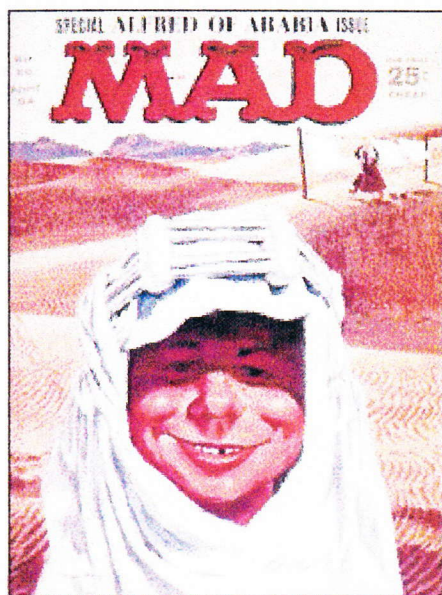
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Courtesy MAD

The landmark April 1964 cover was the first to parody a film. Today, half the issues feature showbiz satire

MAD Genius

With a new collection of all 400 of the magazine's covers, the editors of MAD offer a peek back in time and a few thoughts on pop culture's evolution

By B. J. Sigismund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Dec. 14 — The drawing was vintage MAD magazine. The response was not.

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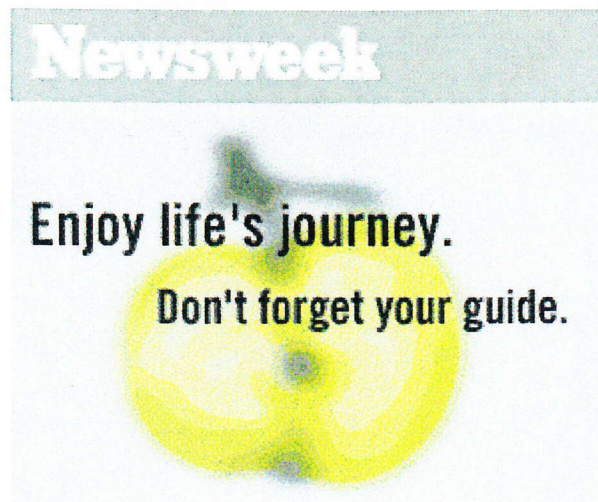
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IN AN ILLUSTRATION on the back cover of a 1998 issue, NRA president Charlton Heston was pictured cleaning his rifle. Over the mantelpiece in Heston's living room hung a trophy head from a recent kill: Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. "Seasons Greetings from the NRA," the drawing read at the bottom.

MAD has poked fun at public figures since 1952. But a funny thing has happened over the years: the establishment started getting the joke. "When that issue came out," says co-editor Nick Meglin, "instead of getting an irate letter from the NRA like we used to, we got a handwritten note from Charlton Heston asking for extra issues."

The magazine once pushed the boundaries of bad taste. But American popular culture today—with its Jerry Springers, Farrelly brothers and Oval Office high jinks—has increasingly become a mirror of MAD's sixth-grade-style satire.



Newsweek
B.J. Sigismund
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

MAD publisher Bill Gaines insisted that this artwork, originally created as a gift for him, be used on the cover of the April 1965 issue



Courtesy MAD

That lesson is clear in a new book, "MAD: Cover to Cover," which surveys all 400 issues, with behind-the-scenes stories from some of the magazine's highest—or lowest, depending on how you look at it—moments.

MAD debuted as a comic book in 1952 with a distinctly underground flair. In July 1955, facing burnout, the editors

transformed it into a slick-style humor magazine. On the cover of that issue, the "What, Me Worry?" kid appeared for the first time—though he was originally called Alfred L. Neuman. Official mascot Alfred E. Neuman made his debut in the December 1956 issue—and has appeared on almost every single issue since. (The magazine's art director thought the *E.* added "a certain panache," according to the book.)

Though parodies of movies and TV programs make up almost half of today's MAD covers, the first example didn't appear until April 1964. Until then, it was always just general goofiness—such as Alfred E. Neuman chiseled into Mount Rushmore (February 1957). But in the spring of 1964, MAD's illustrators dressed up their gap-toothed figurehead as Lawrence of Arabia. "It set the tone for all the others," recalls Frank Jacobs, a longtime MAD contributor and the editor of "MAD: Cover to Cover." Later in the 1960s, the TV show "Batman" got the same treatment, as did "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Rosemary's Baby."

The December 1974 issue featured possibly the finest of all 400 covers, with Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon holding subpoenas and cash in a send-up of the famous poster from "The Sting."



Jacobs sees the December 1974 issue as "probably MAD's greatest cover."

Mocking the poster of "The Sting," it featured Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew in the Robert Redford and Paul Newman roles. "The combination was perfect," says Jacobs. "'The Sting' was a big movie. Nixon and Agnew were having legal problems. And the

famous poster, done Saturday Evening Post-style, was known to everyone."

Issues featuring the "Star Wars" films, such as the January 1981 magazine with Alfred E. Neuman as Yoda from "The Empire Strikes Back," were blockbusters

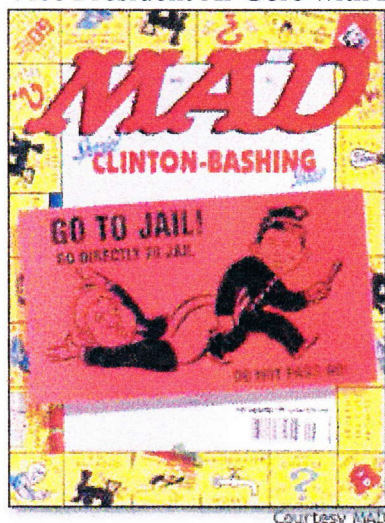


The late 1970s and 1980s, when popular culture first became a major force in America, were MAD's heyday. The final episode of "M*A*S*H" made TV history. Sylvester Stallone ruled the box office, Michael Jackson filled the airwaves and Ronald Reagan ran the country. All were frequent MAD

targets. The “Star Wars” and “Star Trek” movies—for which the core demographic was preteen boys—proved to be “a gold mine for covers,” says Jacobs.

The pop landscape shifted, however, in the 1990s. “The taboos, one by one, fell by the wayside,” says Jacobs. “Language became freer and points of view more liberal. The culture became trashier, grosser, more profane, much more anti-establishment.” In those years, MAD featured President George Bush holding up “Barf Bag One,” ran a cover with a vagrant Alfred E. Neuman living in a box with a placard “Homeless, Sweet Homeless” and once equated President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore with Beavis and Butt-Head.

The September 1997 cover, which reflected MAD's editors' concerted effort to get edgier, may have been the magazine's strongest-ever political statement



Courtesy MAD

Before Clinton, Nixon had been on the most MAD covers. (Gerald Ford was the only modern president never to appear on MAD.) But Clinton was on his way to breaking that record even before the Monica Lewinsky affair. Perhaps the hardest-hitting MAD cover ever graced the September 1997 issue, which was done in the

style of a Monopoly board. In its center was a card reading “Go to Jail! Go Directly to Jail” that had a police officer (Alfred E. Neuman) dragging Clinton away to prison by his feet. Other spaces on the board: Whitewater Works, the Democratic National Committee Community Chest. “It was a very strong critique of Clinton,” says Jacobs. “Nothing that Bush or Reagan did compared with him.”

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Around that time, MAD's editors decided to get edgier once and for all. “We had always reflected the times, but the times grew coarser,” says MAD co-editor John Ficarra. Covers since then have included Alfred E. Neuman, face overrun with exploding

pimples, wearing a “Zit Happens” T-shirt. The October

1999 issue asked "How Should We Kill This Pokémon?". Another cover read "The 20th Century—Why It Sucked," making use of a word that would never have been featured on MAD ten years prior.

The magazine's current incarnation tackles even more controversial topics on the inside. Recently, they've spoofed same-sex marriage, gun control—even the Moral Majority. The latter parody read, "We believe life begins the moment a man unhooks a woman's brassiere."

Times may change, but breast jokes, apparently, never go out of style.

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