

# Dr Sprocket's Column

## THE TWO WHEELED 'UNDERGROUND' ARTISTS



*I'm sitting at my early 1900s wooden desk in my basement listening to KZAP, an original sixties FM radio station that's still going here in Sacramento, looking up at a poster made – and signed – by Dave Mann.*

It's one of his rare non-biker ones showing an early rider on a pre-

sixteen rider crossing an old wooden bridge in a forest. It was given to me by an old friend, a motorcycle rider – and an exceptional artist in his own right – called Bob Wise. He does a lot of motorcycle and old car art.

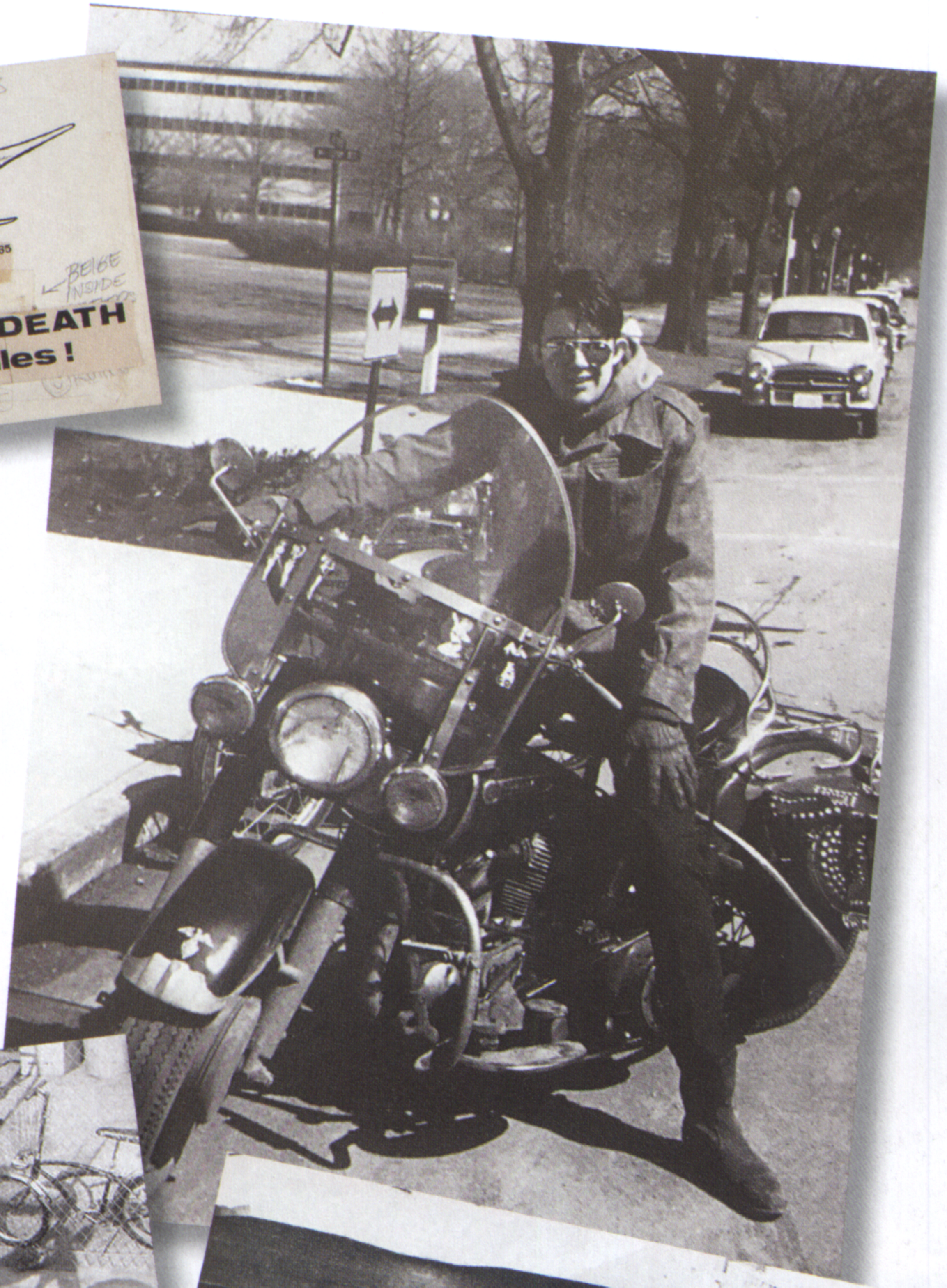
My good friend Chuck Wesholski – owner and operator of the original Kick Start Motorcycle Parts and provider of a lot of my reference material – wanted me to write this piece on the late '50s to early '70s 'underground' artists as they relate to motorcycles. Perhaps you've not heard all these names or read their back stories.

The most outrageous of them was probably S. Clay Wilson (though Robert Williams came a close second!). He was born in '41 and moved to San Francisco in '68. A lot of his 'Checkered Demon' biker characters happened to be influenced by people he knew in Kansas, although he hung out with many of the drinkers at Dick's Bar, "At the Beach" – a favourite haunt of the Frisco Hells Angels, Gypsy Jokers and Satan's Slaves in the late sixties.

A year or two down the road he teamed up with R. Crumb, Robert Williams, Rick Griffin, Gilbert Shelton and a couple of other artists to create the infamous 'Zap Comix'. His Checkered Demon, The Hog Riding Fool, The Gypsy Bandits and other classic works are laced through and through with outlaw motorcycle-related story lines and characters. S. Clay suffered a major head injury in 2008 but is still with us, albeit in a diminished capacity. He still gets his mail at Dick's Bar. R. Crumb said of him, "He blew the doors off of the church!".

You may have read about Robert Williams in my piece about Ed Roth a couple of issues ago. He was hired by Ed to produce the magazine ads that sold his biker-related products and Weirido shirts. Born in 1943, Robert was riding Indian Chiefs and Scouts

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**Clockwise from top left:** 1) Original Robert Williams artwork for Ed Roth. 2) S. Clay Wilson on his dresser in Kansas, early '60s, before he moved to San Francisco. 3) The Frisco Angels outside Dick's Bar, Wilson's favourite hangout, mid-'60s. 4) Robert Williams on Ed Roth's Panhead, 'Oink'.

by the time he was 14. He was, by his own admission, a delinquent youth and though he still loves motorcycles a series of nasty accidents early on convinced him that he'd be killed if he kept riding.

Williams showed his artistic talent very early on; after his time as an art director with Roth, he moved to San Francisco in 1970 and joined the other artists on Zap Comix. It wasn't until the fourth issue that they were charged with obscenity. Zap was a reflection of the San Francisco culture in the late '60s with drugs, free love, hippies, resistance to the Viet Nam war... you get the picture. It ran hard up against the morals and virtue of the fifties, like a bug against a windshield.

Robert is still quite active today; some of his art has had an abstract bent and a lot of it has been labelled 'Feral Art' or 'Lowbrow'. In the '80s he even joined the punk rock movement.

Rick Griffin was born in Palos Verdes in 1944 and spent his youth surfing the South Bay area, Redondo Beach, Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach. He created his iconic 'Murphy' for Surfer magazine in the early sixties. In 1966 he moved north to San Francisco where and when the revolution was being televised. There he joined Stanley 'Mouse' Miller who had been a heavy influence on Rick's artistic endeavours. Along with Alton Kelly they created some of the best psychedelic rock posters for bands playing at the Avalon Ballroom and the Filmore West.

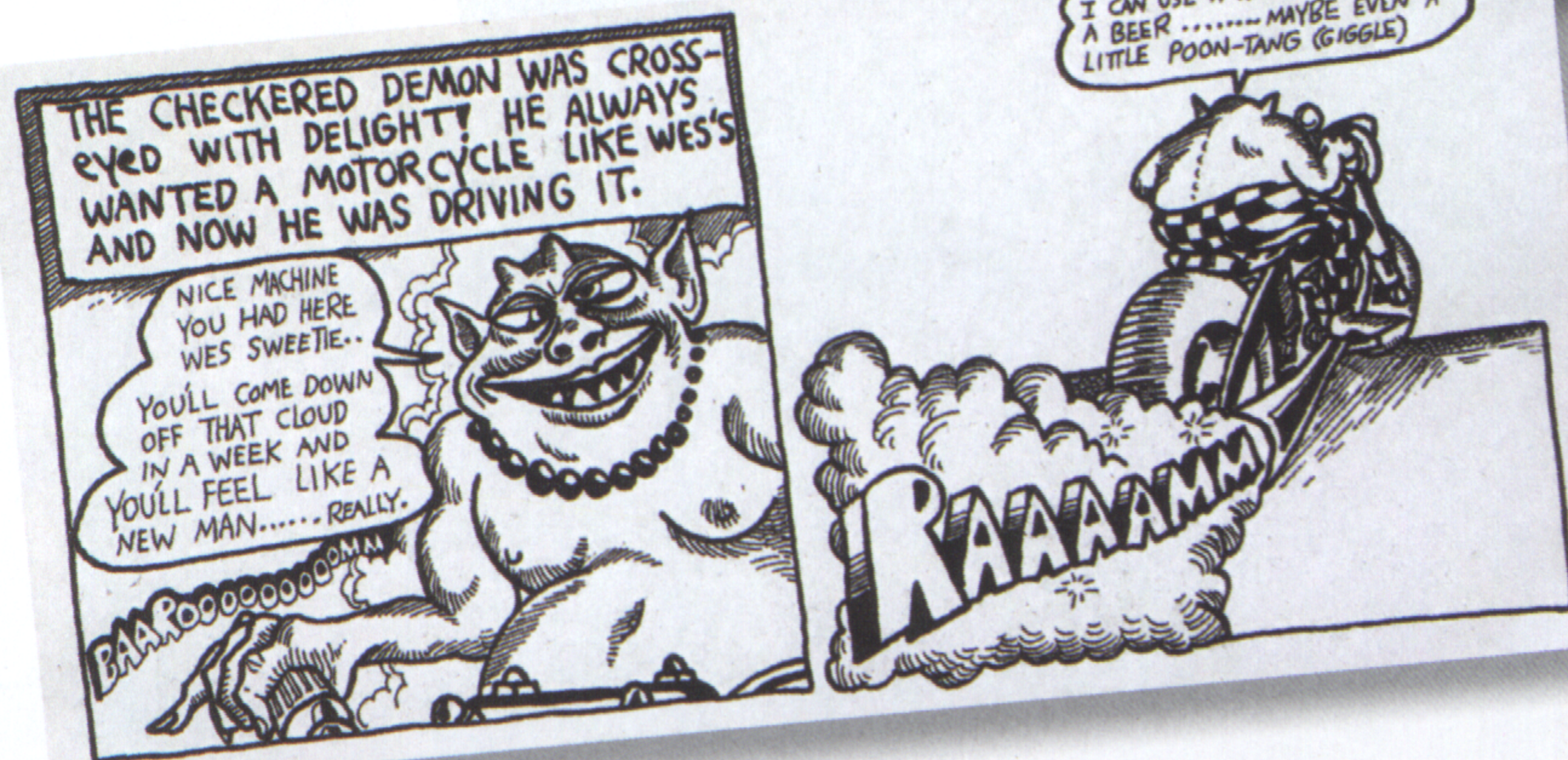
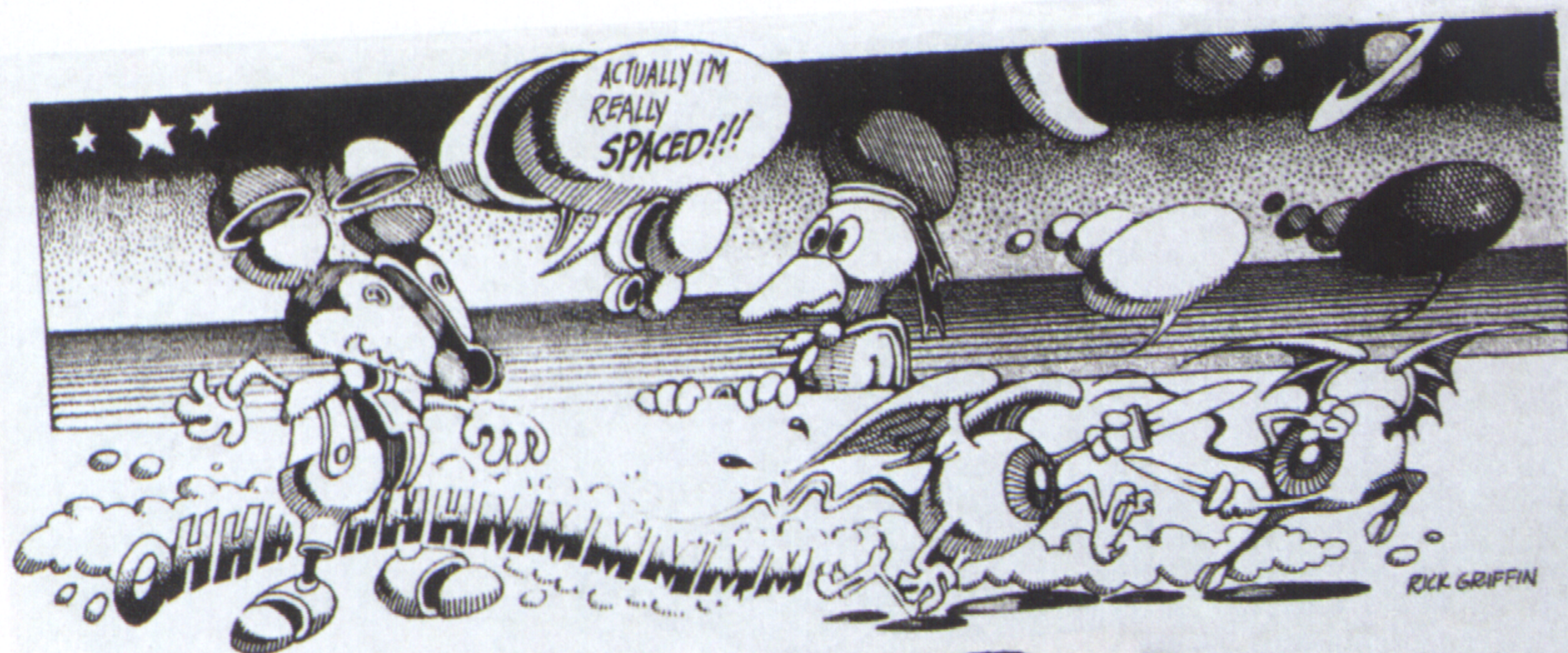
Stanley Mouse, as he liked to be called, was one of the first to mass market weirdo characters on shirts, starting around 1958 – a couple of years before Ed Roth.

Rick joined Zap Comix about 1970; soon after that he became a born again Christian and his art took on a whole different slant. In 1991

while riding his Harley just west of Petaluma and north of San Francisco a van cut him off and he passed at the young age of 47. A huge talent lost.

If you haven't heard of any of these artists – or Zap Comix – I wouldn't be surprised. Not your generation. I do strongly suggest you Google them though. The work may surprise you; but you had to be there to fully realise what an impact they all had on the changing culture of the late sixties and early seventies – and on my generation.

Till next time.



Work from 1970 by Rick Griffin, top, and 'The Checkered Demon' in 'Hog Riding Fools' by S. Clay Wilson, below.