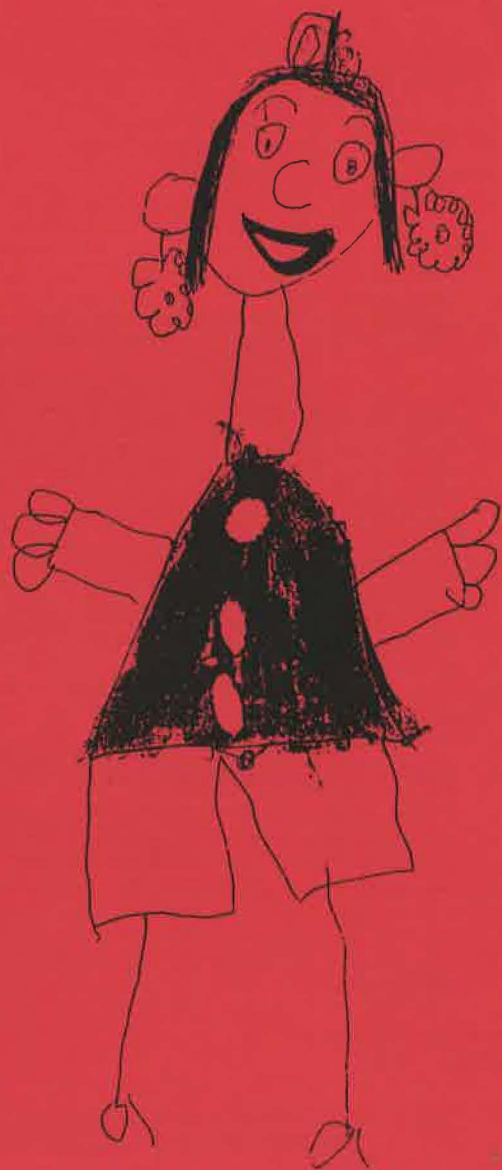


# POP STOCK

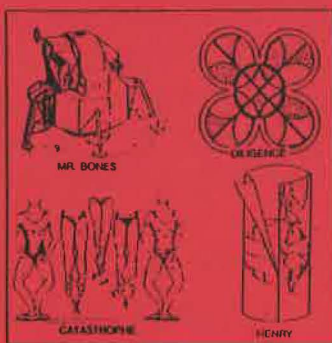
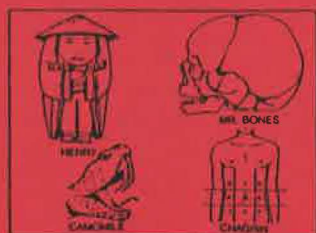
NUMBER THREE  
JULY 1993  
IT'S FREE

*p h a i r / w a r e*

*7<sup>th</sup> wonders of the world*



cover art by  
Bianca Aarons



# HENRY V.

## I. the sneetches-and i'm thinking b/w i think it's alright

(the bus stop label)  
I can't decide if the opening chords of "and i'm thinking" remind me of the theme song to the christian radio show "powerline" (remember that one-sunday nights on WLS) or 70's top forty radio. man, I had to live through listening to that crap once. just stop.

## II. spent-keeping secrets b/w corvette summer and postage due

(ringers lactate)  
this jersey city 4 piece strums out just enough distortion for posturing but relies mostly on nicely understated pop jangles. the drumming is perfectly messy, splashy, and minimal. but what makes this spent record so great is the amount of space still left in the songs. I really like this one!

## III. working holiday-march

(simple machines)  
**side a: the coctalls-working holiday**  
these guys are jingly (not jangly) pop song savants. there's a whistle solo. a whistle solo. a whistle solo! and just when i'm starting to believe how great this song is, mark says "yeah, but did you listen to the solo with headphones?" and howl  
**side b: codelne-ides**  
I knew these guys were pretty sedate, but geez.

get 'em...  
II. ringers lactate po box 5012 long island city ny 11105-9998  
III. simple machines po box 10290 arlington va 22210-1290

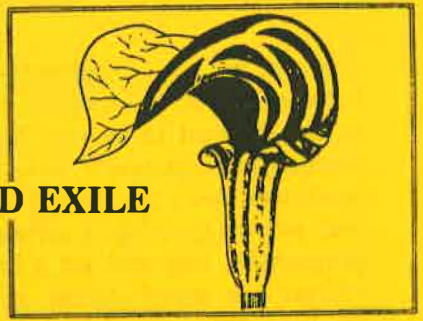
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-all the international pop underground 7"s

7"11  
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of  
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## POP STOCK

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## LIZ PHAIR'S SELF-IMPOSED EXILE

It sure is hard to be objective about Liz Phair. There are so many factors conspiring to form my opinion for me. There's the press she's getting--and, jeez, is she getting it! (Spin, The Reader, Interview, Billboard, et. al.), there's all the fact and fiction floating around about her (reliable sources, close to Ms. Phair during her college days at Oberlin, say that in four years of hanging out with her, they never even heard her talk about playing music, more or less actually play it), there's my dealings, as organizer of the recent Cardigan Festival at Lounge Ax, with her mercurial, obfuscating, and plotingly genius-to-be self, and her association with and the apparent loyalty she has inspired in producer/collaborator Brad Wood (a man of estimable talent and even more estimable reputation, who, himself, inspires Koresh-like loyalty in musicians who have worked with him at his Idful Recording studios.) Additionally, her association with the Big Goddesses at Metro and the socio-critiquing of some reviewers have painted her as a feminist artist (or, in the case of Bill Wyman, a post-post-feminist--as if feminism as a movement and as a necessity was over two posts ago) a tag which, judging from her debut CD and her recent performances, is debatable.

So...how to approach "Exile in Guyville" by the nascent Ms. Phair? The difficulty in reconciling the various aspects of the "Liz Phair Experience" is a direct result of an equal difficulty in reconciling Phair's own inconsistencies. For instance, the socio-political approach to her work--categorizing her as feminist, etc.--is untenable precisely because "Exile in Guyville" provides no basis for such a reading. In fact it supplies a healthy dose of evidence to damn such an argument. The more accurate reading, it seems to me, is that "E. In G.'s" content is political only as an implication of its personal brand of resistance-by-confession.

I realize that, by trying to understand/explain, the territory of Liz's revolt; by analyzing her reclamation of responsibility for and control of her sexuality and her power, I risk, as a man, coming off as an apologist for my gender. So, as a caveat, let it be known that, as far as I'm concerned, men deserve no forgiveness. Our role as subjugators and objectifiers for time immemorial, unchanged and unrepented through this very moment, is the primary cause of ill on this planet. Succinctly: testosterone, not money, is the root of all evil. cont'd



However, women, in confronting us with our sins, should realize that male behavior and attitudes toward women are so deeply buried and systemic that to sing "I want to be your blow-job queen," does not inspire a political reaction in most (any?) men. The pavlovian male response is more like "cool, now that's the kind of chick I want." And even if some men realize that she is asserting a certain level of political independence with her proposition, they still get a hard-on. That's not to say a woman can't express her sexual desires or be "sexual"--humanness depends on both genders' displaying the whole range of output (emotional, intellectual, attitudinal, political, sexual, etc.)--but, in hopes of affecting change, women should take measure of the male mind-set and what we, as a gender, are prepared for, before they devise a strategy.

We've all seen the male dog forcefully mount the unwilling female. Male humans, I hate to admit, are not without the urge I would call the "procreative imperative" that inspires this kind of assault. Hopefully, we are able, as a species, to learn to understand it, not blindly succumb to it.



That said, I'll now get to the record.

Phil Ochs was a political songwriter; so was Woody Guthrie; so is Billy Bragg. They qualify by writing about issues from a social (or societal) standpoint. And, while personal stories are often used to illustrate their points, these writers do not primarily interest themselves with the exorcising of personal demons, regardless of whether or not the demons are of society's making. Liz Phair does not write about the Women's Movement as Ochs wrote about the Peace Movement or Guthrie did about the Labor Movement. She writes about her own movement from passive to...well, to something else. Phair has more in common with confessional writers like Nick Drake and Chris Bell, and other females dubbed 'feminist' by the male press such as Joan Armatrading and Joni Mitchell. Now, don't get me wrong, I don't consider 'feminist' a dirty word--on the contrary--but, relative to writing that is, at once, as specifically, intensely personal and as generally, expansively emotional as Phair's, the term is reductive.

"Exile in Guyville's" manifesto lies in its second track, "Help Me Mary." I'm not much for citing lyrics out of context and without the attitude and inflection of their delivery. (As with the aforementioned and oft-quoted "blow-job queen" line, this practice too often leads to manipulative misinterpretations by critics with mediocre postulates to prove). But I think the following lyrics from "Help Me Mary" work pretty well as stand-alones:

cont'd

Help me Mary, please/I've lost my home to thieves  
They bully the stereo and drink  
They leave suspicious things in the sink  
They make rude remarks about me  
They wonder just how wild I would be  
As they egg me on

Phair's house, like the houses of so many women, has been overrun by men who have displayed their empowerment in a number of ways. They have forced their music on her (a point Phair reiterates in the recent Interview magazine), they've drunk freely and behaved (or misbehaved) accordingly--a liberty not acceptably granted to women, and they've called her a slut while trying to get into her pants.

But Phair's solution does not come through the "Movement" nor through widespread societal gains. Her's is a personal solution. She wants to decide what the music sounds like. She wants to freely misbehave. She wants to act on her sexual impulses, not react to men's. It's no coincidence that Phair's plea is to Mary. Ultimately what Liz wants is redemption; to be redeemed. By recasting her redemption (and Mary) in secular terms, Phair redefines salvation as success; success as power.

Temper my hatred with peace/ Breed my disgust into fame  
And watch how fast they run to the flame

Already, Phair's formula seems to be working. As major magazines and record companies court her, Phair's 3-point plan is being put into effect: 1) "Exile in Guyville" asserts Liz's musical authority; 2) her unrepentant bratty/bitchy reputation precedes her; 3) her intention to reclaim her sexual will has been declared. It seems ironic (but maybe it's not) that her plea for independence may be the very apparatus by which that independence is achieved.

Undoubtedly, Phair is a victim of the triple-pronged cocktail fork of publicity. One tine, created by critics, reviewers, and the like, makes Phair out to be a darling-genius; who is beyond liberation, between seduction and indifference, in a place known as the "fuck me zone." Phair can not be held responsible for this "self." It is purely a product of the lingering adolescence of so many male writers trapped in the guitar/pen/penis phallic vortex of their desperate desire to define and debilitate women. To them I say this: limber up, fellas, and learn to suck your own dicks.

The second "self" in this prickly triad is the "spontaneous" Liz who talks between songs on stage; frustrates friends and colleagues with her non-committal semi-commitments to shows, appointments, and arrangements;

and who tactically crops her record cover photo straight through her nipple. The messages communicated by this Liz, though probably pre-meditated to some extent, do not count as a facet of her "art;" their content is sporadic and inconsistent and can not be subjected to the same scrutiny as her songs. Which brings us to Ms. Phair #3: the record.

The Liz Phair of "Exile in Guyville" is the best Liz Phair. Of the three personas, she is the most articulate, the most open, the most honest (I'm guessing, but if she's suckered me, bully for her--that's what art is all about), and the most likeable. On songs like "Glory"--a haunting and ambiguous piece, whose chords alone are seeped with more description than most writers' overwrought lyrics--Liz is vulnerable and susceptible and appropriately indirect. In "Fuck And Run" she confesses to misjudgment and longing with perfect sincerity. In "Flower," the song containing the infamous "blow-job" line, Phair's delivery is deliberately and overstatedly machine-like. The effect is to mock the male fantasy of the wanton, seducing, succubus slut. If they were smart enough to get it, all those men with hard-ons would be flaccid as lox.

All in all, "Exile in Guyville" is a self portrait of impressive depth and breadth. Phair's ability to artfully present a startling variety of versions and visions of her person and personality is an accomplishment worthy of my greatest envy.

Elvis Costello once said: "writing about music is like dancing about architecture." In this write-up I have successfully avoided dancing that dance by dealing only with the lyrical and conceptual concerns of "Exile in Guyville." Suffice it to say that "E. in G." sounds like it means; like one mind with many voices. The music is uniformly strong and imaginative, leaning on influences without losing its balance. The instrumentation is primarily bass-drums-guitar or drums-guitar or simply guitar with occasional keyboard and harmonica. Co-producer/engineer, Brad Wood, handles the bass and drums with characteristic restraint and specificity. Additionally, Wood's paw prints are all over the "sound" of this record. If you're familiar with his recordings of Shrimpsboat (think "Small Wonder") you will recognize the overwhelming understatement that is Brad's signature.

I wanted to dislike this record. I had taken to referring to Liz as "Savoir" Phair (the cartoon mouse who "is everywhere.") I found her live performances underwhelming and her demeanor grating. I thought the record cover was ugly and exploitative (I still do). I figured if Bill Wyman liked her, she must suck. I was wrong. Oh, well.





## of mice and men: talking with chris ware



*Mr. Ware and I sat down. We called the day muggy because it "seemed right." In Wicker Park, cafes like this are a dime a dozen, elsewhere they're a dime a half-dozen. I ordered a lemonade because it, too, seemed right. Mr. Ware had iced coffee, though I can't speak to his reasons.*

*Earlier that day I'd waited for the 72 North Avenue bus with an elderly hispanic woman. She spoke no English, nor I Spanish. We had only the word "bus" in common. She was confused and frustrated by our inability to communicate and she broke down crying. She leaned on a light pole, seemingly on the verge of a variety of collapses. That particular stretch of North Avenue—crossing the river, between Kingsbury and Elston—is a desolate industrial graveyard; there is nowhere to sit, nothing from which one might take comfort. I gave her my hand and, once clutching it, she would not relinquish me. "Bus driver habla español," I told her hopefully.*

*When, finally, the bus arrived, the driver smiled at me half-sympathetically, half-knowingly. It turns out the woman had ridden the 72 bus back and forth on North Avenue all day. She told the other Spanish-speaking riders that she was trying to get to Italy. She couldn't say where she lived nor where she was. When the bus reached Damen, she thanked me in English and I walked off to meet Mr. Ware.*

*Mr. Chris Ware (who had arrived on a shiny, chrome mountain bike which lacked only a Tony the Tiger decal) entered the cafe, saddle in hand. Ware's Acme Novelty Co. introduced the "Quimby the Mouse" and "Jimmy Corrigan, Smartest Kid on Earth," comics three years ago. Both now run regularly in New City, the free arts and news weekly. At 25, Ware has just taken down his MFA show at the Art Institute and hung another at Ten in One Gallery at 1510 West Ohio. His dual identities (artist and captain of industry) keep him perpetually unnerved. Currently, his nimble pen and mind have been in the employ of Tina Brown's new New Yorker magazine. But the prospect of reaching an infinitely larger audience doesn't come without angst. Mr. Ware has been asked to draw an ice cream carton. "I can't step into the national consciousness with a picture of an ice cream carton," he says.*

*Mr. Ware and I were both born in the heart of the heartland; he in Omaha, Nebraska, and I in the state's capital, Lincoln. We were each raised, by and large, by our mothers. Mr. Ware's mother did his laundry through much of his childhood and he recalled, with amazement at his own youthful indulgence, the thumping of the washing machine when his mom washed the rugs. He would be up on the third floor of the house, reading some super hero comic, probably, or drawing the exaggerated face of a friend, when the thumping would start. His mother would frantically charge down the stairs in a desperate race against time. The young Mr. Ware listened to her descend the staircase, counting the steps, picturing the W.C. Fields poster that hung above the washer, and hoping against hope that she would make it to the machine before the entire house, and he along with it, was blown into millions of tiny domestic particles and scattered into the fresh till of the Nebraskan landscape.*

*"I wanted to be a super hero—I really did—up until I was about 13 or so," avers Mr. Ware. And he's not kidding. Sure, every kid tied a towel around their neck, stuck out their arms, and yelled "The Purple Rocket to the rescue!" but you get the impression, talking to Mr. Ware, that, for him, "Super Hero" was a sensible career goal.*

cont'd

What happened at 13 is anybody's guess; perhaps puberty's lilting loins began their plaintive aria. But Mr. Ware resigned himself to creating super heroes, rather than being one, and he started drawing what he describes as "white men in tights."

Mr. Ware's current show at Ten In One Gallery includes, not only cartoons, but an assortment of sundry ephemera and knick-knacks, as well. For instance, for the price of a spare household key, properly inserted into a wooden, hand-operated vending machine of Mr. Ware's design and construct, one may purchase the miniature (2" x 1 & 3/8") collection "Jimmy Gets Out of the House." There is a display case containing a variety of small-scale Acme Novelty merchandise; a large painting which interpolates frames of Jimmy Corrigan and a giant rendering of the looming masked character who makes occasional appearances in and around the frames of the "Smartest Kid on Earth" strip; and a hand-cranked, kinetic Quimby the Mouse sculpture. The Quimby piece resembles an enlarged version of a turn-of-the-century toy. Atop a wooden pedestal, two primitive Quimby puppets fitfully gesticulate. The effect resembles the animated film work of the Brothers Quay, whose figures display an eerie robotic nature that seems to concern itself as much with perception, memory, and time as it does with recreating life-like movement.

The similarity of much of Mr. Ware's work to toys and other childhood recreations speaks to the essential difference between it and the kind of work professors, gallery patrons, and, in fact, most people, expect when promised "art." Mr. Ware's work, like a toy, is self-justified. Unlike "art proper," no one questions a toy's meaning or function.

And, yet, Mr. Ware's art means and functions; though it is forced to do so in a medium not designed for such pursuits. "Comic strips are perfectly set up to tell jokes," he says, "You've got little, tiny boxes, with little, tiny people, doing little dumb things. It's a staccato little thing—like jazz or something—it doesn't hurt you. But it's hard to do something in that structure that's not that way."

He openly admits that almost all of his work is autobiographical. When asked about the frequency of episodes of decapitation and dismemberment in his strips, he says "I found myself thinking about it a lot and it made me feel better when I drew it...if it's done the right way it might have some emotional significance."

Mr. Ware agrees with Linda Barry's theory that the trick of comic-making is learning to lie well. Like Barry, the lies he tells serve to decorate the truth at the center of his little world.

One of the truths Mr. Ware confronts regularly is the simultaneous attraction and repulsion children often feel toward their parents. In his strips the drama is played out in the relationship between Jimmy Corrigan and his mother, who in some strips is still alive and in others is already dead.

"It's a double-edged thing," divulges Mr. Ware, "you suddenly feel this guilt if you haven't talked to your parents in a while or you feel a really strong impulse where you think 'I wish I never had to speak to them again.'"

And, then in a truly impressive display of guilt and self-doubt, he confesses, "Maybe other people don't think about this...but I can't help it, it's all I think about."

Mr. Ware's art (along with that of Archer Prewitt) is on display at Ten In One Gallery, 1510 W. Ohio, through July 3. His Acme Cartoons appear weekly in New City.

