

Aaron Cometbus
Last Gasp (\$14.95)



Just after Ronald Reagan's first inauguration, Aaron Cometbus and his friend Jesse decided to start a fanzine. They were thirteen years old. A year later Jesse moved away but Cometbus kept going and has now been regularly self-published for twenty years, garnering a widespread following that falls outside of any conventional demographic. The new anthology *Despite Everything* collects selections from the "ultra-rare and embarrassing early issues" (with names like *Impending Doom*) to the current, mature *Cometbus*. It covers the arc of a hitchhiking, dumpster diving, sleeping under garages and waking up covered by ants existence through an unorthodox voice that is just as concerned with all things punk as it is with appreciating the splendors of the wider world.

At the same time Aaron started the zine he was in his first band. Sample lyrics: "Feudal aristocracy was not the only class, ruined by bourgeoisie, shove it Marx, up your ass." Cometbus's roots are the exciting and unprecedented burgeoning of American hardcore music in the early '80s and a fantasy land called Berkeley, where six levels of Swahili were on the curriculum at the high school and bands like Fish of Death played exclusively in parking garages. The handwritten text and poor-quality photocopying of the early issues communicate the raw sense of possibility that punk promised then with a visceral punch. Over time the band news fell away and *Cometbus* became a much more personal project, turning to sharp and witty observations of the punk scene and America's hidden nooks and crannies. These autobiographical stories are full of a literary talent not usually associated with scrappy zines featuring reviews of greasy spoons in Asheville, North Carolina and tales about finding graffiti under bridges and meeting up with macrobiotic-diet bomb throwing fanzine editor skaters in Las Vegas.

In the introduction the author perfectly describes the cornerstones of *Despite Everything's* appeal and value. *Cometbus*, he writes, is "About the desire to look and see. To fully engage and explore, to document, challenge, demand or maybe just appreciate," and its mission is "Making your own fun . . . taking the lifestyle, perspective, and attitude of punk and applying it to real life." While these may not seem like goals that would produce compelling writing, they are manifested with a virtuosity that has produced a serial novel of distinction. It is one that takes the punk program to heart and applies it to a changing and complicated world in which things aren't as simple as they were when Aaron's friend Kevin really stood out at his Bar Mitzvah because no one else in the synagogue had a mohawk.

Much of the content follows a wandering path through the back alleys and squats of an America unknown to most. Along the way Cometbus often works the graveyard shift at copy shops, when "wingnuts come in to Xerox tinfoil." Aaron's metier is an acute observation of and interaction with the unseen, nighttime side of humanity. It's being at Dan's Donut Bar in Arcata, California after a midnight walk and playing chess until "Greasy-eyed glazed dude" on four hits of acid demands his chessboard back. It's going through forty states in six months using a Greyhound ticket scam. Throughout (with the blocky handwriting and comics and Xerox graphics intact) is an appreciation of life's small pleasures--drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, finding worthless antique bottles in the trash and having great hopes of romance for the beautiful young girl wearing a Ramones shirt in some small town, only to watch her get on a different bus. He is willing to put himself out there with hardly any money and not enough food, displaying a kind of asceticism that is partially a badge of honor but makes for a good life lived to its fullest. Cometbus captures the everyday combination of hope, desire and depression and has an exquisite sensitivity to the "small pleasures that quench your thirst for life, and wash down those big disappointments."

One of the main themes of the anthology is punk's communal ethos. At one point while living in a Berkeley house, Aaron and his friends share what little they have: "Plus, I had a friend who worked at the bakery and kicked down the leftovers." In that house he writes by candlelight because they don't have power, and even if that seems like a parody it is exactly how you imagine the bard of punk toiling on his samizdat masterpieces. He states "Well, I'm not opposed to working. I suppose I'd work if we had a two day work week, workers owned the means of production, wealth was distributed equally, etc." That might come across as laughable, but Cometbus has made a functioning life out of refusal and there is something admirable and enviable about his success at not capitulating and staying free.

"Maybe punk rock is a religion. I know I'm indebted to it for saving me." Punk rock is the guiding light of redemption through an uncaring and incomprehensible society. It has morals, a collective consciousness, a code to live by--and Cometbus strives to keep that spirit alive. His religion is based on "people in bands who worked hard, had guts and humor, and set an example by the way they talked and moved and sang." He is a purist and believes fanzines have been instrumental in shaping identity and making connections and forming the movement. *Cometbus* consistently refers to the heady inception of punk culture and continues to be a fitting tribute and continuation of those beginnings.

The collective nature of the enterprise demands the inclusion of artwork and stories from many different contributors over the years. They are integral parts of the whole, but the real strength is Aaron's straightforward and spare articulation of the pull between traveling and experience and staying home and putting down roots. A less criminally-minded Jack Black for the end of the twentieth century, he tells of getting off the bus in Missoula just after the sun comes up and walking through piles of leaves while worrying about packs of rabid dogs, then going to the library to read all day. In Billings someone calls his name and it's twins he knows from Seattle who save the day. He sees the clowns getting off work and walking their dogs, and has a horrible Thanksgiving in Cleveland where he ends up at the church having dinner with the other lost people with nowhere else to go. There is plenty of solitude but it is often counterbalanced by the rewards of genuine engagement and friendship. And always there is that singularly evocative voice, describing "the Central Valley with its dry heat and smells of orchids and olives" and summing up Portland succinctly: "It started out as a bad mood and slowly grew into a city."

Cometbus is often nostalgic in the sense of acknowledging the sadness of the past passing without proclaiming that it was better. It is a celebration of places full of hopeful and noble suffering, as when Aaron tells a gathering in Pacific Grove about the great punk scene there in the mid-'80s that the new guard know nothing about. "In a way it was depressing, but in a way it was funny and profound. Anyway, it was time to get beer." In a manner that "we" can relate to and enjoy, Cometbus has written about that common striving toward worthy goals while ruefully suspecting that they are probably doomed to failure.

A culmination of this romantic mixture of hope for the future and longing for the past comes in an account of going on tour with his old friends in the band Green Day, just as they were becoming successful to an extent no thirteen year-old hardcore kid in the Reagan era would have ever imagined. It is a sentimental education, coming to terms with "How growing up punk, you have all these rigid ideas about how to live, the way the world works, then experience comes along to make mincemeat out of your morals." That bittersweet observation isn't just about what happened with Green Day. It's about the compromises that come with leaving adolescence, the fundamental dilemma and challenge of "growing up punk," and youthful idealism in general. What do you do later? Even those who are not punk at all can appreciate how as an adult Aaron Cometbus wrestles with that question, while drinking in *Despite Everything's* unique and important sensibility.