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## **DON MARTIN DIES, MADDEST OF MAD MAGAZINE CARTOONISTS**

**BY DANIEL de VISE AND JASMINE KRIPALANI**

Don Martin was the man who put the Mad in Mad magazine. He drew edgy cartoons about hapless goofs with anvil jaws and hinged feet who usually met violent fates, sometimes with a nerve-shredding SHTOINK!

His absurdist vignettes inspired two or three generations of rebellious teenage boys to hoard dog-eared Mads in closets and beneath beds. He was their secret.

Martin died Thursday at Baptist Hospital after battling cancer at his South Dade home. He was 68.

Colleagues considered him a genius in the same rank as Robert Crumb (Keep on Truckin') and Gary Larson (The Far Side). But adults seldom saw his work. And Don Martin's slack-jawed goofballs weren't about to pop up on calendars or mugs.

The son of a New Jersey school supply salesman, Martin joined the fledgling Mad magazine in 1956 and stayed with the irreverent publication for 31 years. Editors billed him as "Mad's Maddest Cartoonist."

"He was a hard-edged Charles Schulz," said Nick Meglin, co-editor of Mad. "It's no surprise that Snoopy got to the moon. And it's no surprise that Don Martin characters would wind up on the wall in some coffeehouse in San Francisco."

COUNTERCULTURE HERO

If Peanuts was the cartoon of mainstream America - embraced even by Apollo astronauts - then Martin's crazy-haired, oval-nosed boobs were heroes of the counterculture.

Gilbert Shelton, an underground cartoonist who penned the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers, said Martin was the reason he first picked up the pencil.

"I was a teenager when I started reading Don Martin," Shelton said. "His drawings were very funny. Occasionally I draw and I think, 'Gosh, this looks like Don Martin.' "

Martin celebrated the violent and the grotesque, much to the delight of his predominantly adolescent audience.

"Is it funny? That's the only test I know when it comes to cartooning," Martin said once. "Not whether it's sick, or whether it's going to ruin people's values or morals. You only have to ask a simple question: Is it funny?"

For a collection of his cartoons titled Mad's Don Martin Digs Deeper, he drew a cover illustration of a man feverishly picking his nose. Another strip asked, What is the source of the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile? The answer, revealed several panels later, is that she is sitting on a toilet.

"He was a master of the absurd. Extreme humor," said Sergio Aragones, another Mad cartoonist, whose own oft-brilliant doodlings appear in the margins of the magazine's pages. "He invented it with all those crazy noises he made."

Martin was the first prominent cartoonist to use sounds as part of his gags. His world was filled with onomatopoeia. SHKLIP was the sound of construction workers tossing concrete at each other. SPLOP was a surgeon throwing body parts into a doggie bag. FAGROON was a collapsing skyscraper. Martin's license plate read SHTOINK.

MILD-MANNERED GUY

But Martin kept that brash universe deep inside.

"He was the living antithesis of what he drew," said Meglin, Martin's editor for three decades. "In real life, he was a real mild-mannered man, real quiet. He'd sit in the corner and chuckle, but he wouldn't say 10 words in three hours."

Born in Clifton, N.J., Martin took up drawing at age 3 after watching older brother Ralph doodle on blue-lined tablets culled from his father's business.

Like many of his future characters, young Don was accident-prone, always stubbing a toe or skinning a knee. He had a degenerative eye condition that would force him to undergo one of the world's first cornea transplants. In later life, Martin could draw only while wearing an uncomfortable contact lense that covered the entire eye and using a special magnifying glass.

Martin earned a degree from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He worked briefly as a bellhop - an experience that must have fueled a few subsequent elevator gags - before joining Mad. He moved to Miami in 1957 with his first wife, Rosemary Troetschel.

Much of his material presumably came from the bohemian Coconut Grove scene of the 1950s and '60s. Fellow Mad staffers drew suburban New Yorkers. Martin drew cone-headed Floridians with bulbous elbows and eyelids as big as palmetto bugs.

"He worked out of his house and pretty much stayed around the house, because we had only one car," said his son Max Martin, a private investigator. "They used to go to Nick's [a now-defunct bar] in the Grove. Some of his friends were there, other artists, musicians."

Martin never earned more than \$25,000 a year from Mad, whose editors retained ownership of his drawings and all proceeds from them. Martin left Mad, which had shrunk in stature and circulation, in 1987 after a falling-out with Mad publisher and founder William Gaines and went to work at Cracked, a pale imitation of Mad.

Then the cartoonist retreated from public life. Always a quiet man, Martin would plow deep into the Everglades to camp and canoe and contemplate.

"We were both nature lovers," said brother Ralph Martin. "When we would go off on canoe trips, we wouldn't even talk much. We would just sit and enjoy the silence."

Martin is survived by his second wife, Norma; his brother and son; and grandson Max Spencer Martin.