

ARTSDESK

Meet a Local Cartoonist: A Chat With Mike Flugennock

Posted by **Mike Rhode** on Jan. 10, 2011 at 9:44 am

Mike Flugennock is a born-and-raised D.C. cartoonist who works in a field that was just labeled extinct by Civil War cartoon historians at the Newseum on Thursday. Flugennock does political poster cartoons. You may have already seen his work around town—our local anarchist cartoonist provides his work for free to be carried by demonstrators or be pasted up around the city. Flugennock also does newspaper cartoons and illustration work, and years ago did some work for the *WCP*. He was the subject of an exhibit at Provisions Library (then on Dupont Circle) in 2006, but he's largely worked under the radar. His style is distinctive and instantly recognizable, although he cites many influences.

I've thoroughly enjoyed seeing his work stuck on traffic light control boxes and his 2006 exhibit, and I'm especially glad to present this long and thoughtful interview with him.

Washington City Paper: What type of comic work or cartooning do you do?

Mike Flugennock: Radical political cartoons—really, really radical leftie cartoons, so left they even piss off the liberals.

When I first started out in the late '60s, when I was about 11 or 12, I was taking a crack at regular newspaper-style comic strips. My aspiration at the time was to do a syndicated strip for the dailies. I started doing editorial and political stuff as a young teenager when I first started drawing for my high-school paper. About that time, the *Watergate* scandals were really hot, and I was following the work of **Herblock** and **Pat Oliphant**, and started becoming more interested in doing political work. Also about that time, I started doing an underground-style strip, somewhat inspired by the *Furry Freak Brothers*; it was picked up by *Relix*, a Deadhead fanzine published in New York, in the mid-'80s, and continued publishing the strip there through the mid-'90s. I'd also started reading the *National Lampoon* when I was about 16 and was inspired by its edgy and outrageous satire; they also had an excellent comics section in the back of the magazine where I was introduced to **Vaughn Bodé**, **Frank Frazetta** and **Berni Wrightson**. By the time I hit college, I'd become active in the anti-nuclear movement and other Left politics and my political cartoons had started becoming edgier as I was getting deeply into **Robert Crumb**, Bodé, and **Gilbert Shelton's** underground stuff, **Ralph Steadman's** work in *Rolling Stone*, and the work of



Moebius in *Heavy Metal* magazine. I'd also started doing cartoons for the old *Yipster Times* paper, and posters for the July 4th Smoke-Ins in D.C. The rest, as they say, is history—or all downhill from there, depending on who you ask.

WCP: How do you do it? Are you working with pen and ink, or electronically, or a mixture?

MF: Like pretty much all cartoonists my age, I started out working in a mix of pencil, India ink, Speedball nibs, design markers, and Sharpies. Nowadays I do my drawings in soft pencil and a graphite stick on medium-weight sketch paper, scan them into Photoshop to clean them up and autotrace them into vector images, then do the final production, color and layout in Illustrator. After that, the final art is exported into either EPS, TIF, or JPEG depending on reproduction requirements.

WCP: When (within a decade is fine) and where were you born?

MF: March of 1957, down at Fort Belvoir Hospital.

WCP: Why are you in Washington now? What neighborhood or area do you live in?

MF: Work, marriage, and family. My mother is originally from D.C.; her family lived in DC while she was very young, but later moved down to North Arlington. Washington's got to be the most boring city on Earth, but it's my home town, and my family and friends are all here, so I just gotta love it. Since I got married in '91, I've been living on Capitol Hill, close enough that I can see the dome from our third-floor bathroom window. I can actually look out and see the light that indicates that Congress is in session while I'm sitting there grunting one out.



WCP: What is your training and/or education in cartooning?

MF: I'm formally college-trained—I studied illustration and design at Radford College, Va., and my degree is in commercial art. I'm entirely self-taught in cartooning, though; I learned by reading the comics in the daily paper and comic books, stealing any chops I could find that would help me along. In fact, before going to art school, I learned most of what I knew about gesture, anatomy, and composition by reading *Silver Surfer* when I was a kid; I was totally into *Silver Surfer* while all the other kids were reading stuff like *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four*. I especially dug *Silver Surfer* because of the clean, elegant character design—no complex costuming or capes, just a pair of briefs, and silver all over, so nothing got in the way of learning basic figure anatomy and gesture. Four years of studio drawing classes really helped sharpen up my technique a lot, but I already knew how to draw when I got to art school—and had already been drawing professionally for two years, doing the editorial-page cartoon for the *Reston Times* out in the 'burbs. In fact, between the weekly editorial cartoon and an illustration or two for their lifestyle section, the *Reston Times* saved me from having to work at McDonald's in high school.

WCP: Who are your influences?



"Uh Oh, It's Herblock Channeling Time Again" was the caption for this cartoon blog post.

MF: Wow, there's a buttload of them, and they vary depending on what stage of my life and career I look at. When I first started, it was **Charles Schulz** (*Peanuts*), **Reg Smythe** (*Andy Capp*), **Jack Kirby's** work for **Marvel Comics**, and **Chuck Jones**. In high school, when I started doing political cartoons, I followed Herblock and Oliphant closely; in fact, my big dream in high school was to take Herblock's job at the *Post*. In college, it was Gilbert Shelton, Moebius, Vaughn Bodé, and **Rick Griffin**—especially Bodé and Griffin. I learned a lot of what I

know about how to use linearity to convey depth, mass and volume from them. I stole more chops from them in college than I care to think about. In fact, even now, there's a little bit of Vaughn Bodé and Rick Griffin in everything I do. I was also inspired in art school by **Honore Daumier**, the French painter and satirical cartoonist, not so much for technique as for politics; in 1830, Daumier was sentenced to six months' imprisonment for his cartoons about **King Louis Philippe** in the French weekly *Le Caricature*.

Hell, I still steal chops from time to time. Recently, I stole some chops from **Van Gogh**, of all people. Ten or 12 years ago, while visiting Paris, I was hanging out in the Louvre studying how Van Gogh used line weight to break up a composition into foreground, middleground, and background, and I was especially impressed at how he rendered his highlights and shadows to punch up a painting. After I got home, I started figuring out a way to incorporate that into my cartoons; I hit on a method involving hatching in highlights and deep shadow on a separate sheet of tracing paper which I scan into a separate vector image which I then use as an overlay layer in Illustrator, adjusting the transparency of objects to accentuate highlights and shadows. "Monkeywrench Grrr", my parody of the famous World War II "We Can Do It" poster that I created as part of my poster series for the '01 IMF/World Bank mobilization, was the first piece I did that way.

In the early '90s, during the run-up to Iraq War I, I was inspired by the posters of **Robbie Conal**, not so much for his style—which is made of awesome—but by his method of delivery, which consisted of his putting together a posse to hit the streets and "flypaste" the art on every possible flat surface. During the initial Iraq War Fever outbreak, I realized very early that my point of view would be nearly impossible to get into mainstream media, and decided the only way to get it out was to mix up a bucket of wheatpaste and take it to the streets.



WCP: I seem to recall your posters as being contemporary in the Reagan years with Robbie Conal's anti-administration work, but it sounds as if I'm not remembering accurately?

MF: My cartoons were contemporary with Conal's work back then, but instead of being on street posters, they were published regularly in the *Yipster Times* from 1978-85. I didn't start "flypasting" myself until late '90-early '91, right around the time Iraq War v1.0 started.

WCP: If you could, what in your career would you do-over or change?

MF: This may sound frivolous, but I would've started smoking marijuana a couple of years earlier than I did. I didn't start smoking until I was 18, turned on by a cartoonist friend of mine in my senior-year journalism class. In fact, my decision was motivated not so much by a pleasure-seeking desire or a desire to be "cool" as it was by my desire for an aid to creativity. At the time, doing the drawings was a snap, but coming up with decent gags was like pulling teeth. The *National Lampoon* magazine was becoming popular while I was in high school, along with the original *Monty Python's Flying Circus* series, and I followed them both religiously—along with listening to a lot of *Firesign Theatre*—and I was racking my brain trying to get into that space where I could come up with that kind of outrageous, absurdist, almost Dadaesque kind of humor. Marijuana—and, later, LSD—really helped me to kick in the doors to that space and find a new way to think about what's funny.

Even today, my creative routine still often consists of sitting down with my sketch pad, the A section of the *Post*, my tape of that week's *Meet The Press*, and a loaded bowl.

MOBILIZE for GLOBAL JUSTICE!



WCP: What work are you best-known for?

MF: There's no one single piece, really; in the interest of brevity, though, I'll keep it to three:

1. The 2000 "A16" IMF/World Bank mobilization posters: What made the anti-globalization movement successful in those early days was a solidarity that reached across many walks of life and factions of the left—the peace movement, the environmental movement, organized labor, students, and others; you might remember the media discussing the "Turtles and Teamsters" in Seattle at the '99 WTO mobilization. You probably saw the posters and stickers all over

town; it was a series of posters depicting all the various facets of the antiglob movement in a parody of DaVinci's famous "Vitruvian Man" drawing (I have a terrible weakness for parodying iconic art and images). The use of the DaVinci drawing wasn't that original in itself—it's been done to death—but it wasn't so much the parody of the image itself as it was the context I used it in.

2. The 2001 IMF/World Bank mobilization poster series: This was a series of five posters which illustrated some of the major aims of the movement at that year's mobilization. You remember that one—the one that never happened, the one that was going to be the biggest mobe in town since Vietnam, except some other shit happened. While not part of the overall motif of this series, the "Monkeywrench Grrl" poster was also created about the same time as these, and hit the streets at the same time.

3. "What Has Ariel Sharon Learned From The Holocaust," published in February of 2002 and entered in the famous Holocaust-themed cartoon contest sponsored by the Iranian daily *Hamshahri* in 2006. Out of maybe a couple of hundred cartoonists who entered, I was one of six Americans. The right-wing and pro-Israel bloggers crapped their drawers over this. I was even interviewed by a couple of right-wing talk-radio howlers in Philadelphia and Seattle (man, was that ever a hoot). I arrived at the idea innocuously enough, by observing the pummelling of Ramallah and Jenin by the Israeli military and the attitude of then-Prime Minister **Ariel Sharon** and asking myself what his generation of Israeli leadership had learned from the Holocaust. The answer promptly came to me: the *wrong* things. This cartoon was probably more widely reproduced than anything else I've done; it was picked up by AP for an article about the contest—playing up the American entrants angle—and ended up being blasted around the world. I was finding that cartoon on newspaper websites in Scotland, the U.K., India, even Russia.



WCP: What work are you most proud of?

MF: Once again, that's a tough one, because I have a lot of personal favorites; I feel like a parent being asked which of her children she loves the most. Once again, though, I'll keep it brief.

1. The 2000 IMF/World Bank "A16" series: My "breakout" work. I'd been doing radical political cartoons since around '78—taking a few years' break in the mid '80s to go back to "happy stoned freak" comics after burning out on the Reagan Years. After simmering through most of the '90s, the U.S. anti-globalization movement finally "came out" in Seattle in '99, followed up by "A16" in DC, and after all those years of toiling and struggling to get my work seen, I was suddenly all over the place.

2. The 2001 IMF/World Bank poster series: To this day, this series is one of my all-time personal favorites, both conceptually and technically.

3. Taking over the front page of the *Post Style* section in September 2002: In the runup to the '02 IMF/World Bank mobilization, the Style section ran a series of profiles on prominent progressive activists involved in the antiglob movement involved in organizing the protests. This was especially satisfying to me because while in college, I could see the direction my work was taking and had pretty much given up on any chance of breaking into a publication like *The Washington Post*. Turns out I had quite a few fans there, including reporter **David Montgomery**, who wrote the article (and columnist/cultural critic **Henry Allen**, of all people), and in a twist of happy irony, I found myself and my work "writ large"

in a big-city daily for doing the kind of cartoons that your average U.S. daily normally wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole. As if that wasn't enough, I also ended up being interviewed by Swedish Public TV, who sent a camera crew out with our posse one night as we were posterizing for an antiwar event. Talk about your "Elvis Year"; I even got top billing over Robert Duvall in the *Post*.

4. Mounting a solo show as part of the "Drawing Back" cartoon exhibit at Provisions Gallery in the summer of 2006. Once again, this was highly satisfying, though it felt kind of weird seeing work originally photocopied in black and white and pasted on lampposts printed in high-res color, framed and hanging in a gallery, with little clumps of people standing around sipping zinfandel and gazing at them thoughtfully.

WCP: What would you like to do or work on in the future?

MF: Along with continuing with the political stuff, I'd also like to get into doing some graphic novel-type work; for the past few years, I've been working on and off on a science-fiction story with a Swedish writer I met online after the STV piece aired. It's strictly "on spec" right now as he's still shopping it around and we both have paying projects going on, so we kind of have to fit in our work on the sci-fi piece when we can. We have a large chunk of a proposed script already written, and I've finished a sample chapter, so it just remains for my writer pal **Pongo** and his agent to pull a proposal together and start pitching it.

I've also been toying with the idea of reviving the cast of characters from my old "freak comix" to use as the vehicle for a satirical Metrorail commuting story. I've got a few scenes written, but haven't really been able to hack together a coherent plot yet, much less do any drawing.

I've already been doing a lot of video work since "A16", in the form of what I like to call "samizdat newsreels"—short journalistic / documentary pieces reporting on mass protests in D.C. and New York City which I've posted on YouTube and, up until last April, at the D.C. Independent Media Center. The best way I can describe most of them is as 10-minute **D.A. Pennebaker** movies. I've always been sort of a frustrated filmmaker ever since high school, but was never able to do anything about it until ten or twelve years ago, when digital video resources became more widely available and less expensive. I'm pretty much self-taught there, too; my total education in filmmaking consists of a single semester in my senior year of high school.

Also, I'm available for gigs with any leftie/progressive-type publications or organizations that need illustration or design work, because, you know, you just can't have enough gigs these days.

WCP: What do you do when you're in a rut or have writer's block?

MF: There's really no single thing I do in this situation. Generally, what helps—at least for me—is to just kick back, let go, and not agonize too much. Smoking a bowl and watching *Meet The Press* (or something like it) also helps; there's nothing quite being pleasantly blazed while watching a bunch of self-important Washington "insiders" taking themselves far too seriously to break down my writer's block.

Actually, though, I've always been very lucky in that I've never had a huge staring-at-a-blank-page problem.

WCP: What do you think will be the future of your field?

MF: Y'know, I've been a serious cartoonist since the mid '70s, and it seems as if once every generation, someone has asked that question, and it's an easy one to answer: As long as there are smart-assed social misfits who can draw anywhere on Earth, the future of cartooning and comics will be assured.



If anything, the future of cartooning has been made even brighter by the Internet, as it allows any cartoonists out there with enough confidence in their work to take it straight to the people and achieve a measure of popularity—and even earn a half-decent living—without having to go through the newspaper and feature syndicate gatekeepers.

If it wasn't for the Internet, I'd have never found out about **Carlos Latuff**, **JT Wilkins** (*Kid Sunday*), **Scott Meyer** (*Basic Instructions*), **Zach Weiner** (*Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal*), **Brian McFadden** (*Big Fat Whale*), **Daryl Cunningham**, **Sara Mayhew**, or

Randall Munroe (*xkcd*). For that matter, my own work wouldn't have become anywhere near as widespread and popular as it is without the Internet.

WCP: What's your favorite thing about D.C.?

MF: All that history—the **Bonus Marchers**, **Martin Luther King's** 1963 mass march, the Vietnam Moratorium, the IMF/World Bank actions, the mass actions against the Iraq Wars—especially the IMF/World Bank and Iraq mobilizations, because they were some history I actually had a hand in.

WCP: Least favorite?

MF: Jeez, where do I start? First of all, there's the fact that there's pretty much no real solid dissident activist community here. Almost all the activists and organizers seem to be as big a bunch of shallow careerists as their establishment counterparts, except that their "power suits" consist of rag sweaters, blue jeans, and Birkenstocks instead of Brooks Brothers outfits. Lots of big-dollar NGOs and "progressive" outfits astroturfing for the Democratic Party, but no real viable peoples' movements.

There's also never been much of an arts community that I could see. There's lots of galleries and lots of museums, but little or no actual tangible support for local artists. The last neighborhood here that came close to being an actual arts district was cleared out so that everything could be converted into condos, dippy boutiques, overpriced restaurants, and galleries containing art that says nothing—and then officially christened the "arts district" after the developers finished running all the artists out.

Washington also always seemed to have a sense of self-importance entirely out of proportion to its real importance. This is especially evident when you watch the Sunday morning news interview programs—your *Meet The Press*, your *Face The Nation*, your *This Week*, your *Washington Week In Review*—and check out all the politicians and pundits talking over our heads. The daily papers' op-ed

columnists are like that, too; you can tell from the language they use that not only are they not talking so us regular folks can understand them, but are going out of their way to keep from being understood by anyone except fellow members of the chattering class.

I'm also more than a little embarrassed by Washington's desperate attempts to be like New York City—pushing the use of the contraction "NoMa" to refer to the neighborhoods north of Massachusetts Avenue (analogous to NYC's "SoHo"), and the downtown BID's insistence on referring to downtown D.C. as "Midtown". Dream on, D.C.; you'll never be New York City.

And don't get me started on all that wretched architecture. I know this won't be a popular opinion, but I think the stretch between Capitol Hill and the Kennedy Center contains some of the most conceited and ugly architecture I've ever seen. I've been to a lot of cities—New York City, San Diego, Caracas, Mexico City, Barcelona, Berlin, Paris—and Washington, D.C., takes the prize as far as awful architecture goes. If I never had to look at another pompous, overwrought faux Classical Roman revivalist heap of marble again in my life, I'd be the happiest guy alive. Those grim-assed fascistic Roosevelt-era government buildings along Pennsylvania and Constitution sure as hell don't do me any good, either.

The World War II Memorial's got to be the worst, though. That goddamn pile looks as if its architect was channeling **Albert Speer**. I can't be the only person in this city who views that memorial from a distance and mistakenly thinks that the Germans won the war.

WCP: What monument or museum do you take most out-of-town guests to?

MF: My first stop is usually the Air And Space Museum, because I'm an old spaceflight geek—when I was a young kid in the late '60s, I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up—like about 99 percent of young American boys back then. Next up would be the East Building of the National Gallery, because I'm such a hardcore modernista. Then, if time permitted, I'd take them to the spot where **Fanne Foxe** escaped from **Wilbur Mills'** car and jumped into the Reflecting Pool, followed by a quick drive by the Vista Hotel ("the bitch set me up!").



WCP: Do you have a website or blog?

MF: I've been publishing cartoons on the Web since 1993; you can find my cartoons and commentary at <http://www.sinkers.org>.

WCP: One last question: Flugennock? Is that Dutch?

MF: German, sort of. It's actually entirely made up, a nom de guerre, originally a name I used for a character I drew back in school. I started using it around the mid '90s when I decided I needed to keep my radical cartoonist life separate from my professional designer life.