

The New York Times

Nick Meglin, 82, a Mad Magazine Mainstay, Is Dead

By **Richard Sandomir**

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Nick Meglin, a top editor at Mad magazine who for many years was the chief barometer of whether the publication's silly and satirical humor had gone too far — or not far enough — died on June 2 at his home in Durham, N.C. He was 82.

His daughter, Diane Meglin, said the cause was a heart attack.

Mr. Meglin spent nearly a half-century at Mad, from its early heyday as an outrageous force in American culture to an era when it struggled for relevance amid the rise of increasingly daring humor outlets, like National Lampoon, “Saturday Night Live” and The Onion, many of whose writers had been influenced by Mad.

To Mr. Meglin, though, Mad's mission had remained the same over the years, regardless of its competition.

“Mad has always been a reflecting pond,” he told The New York Times in 2001. “We help society look at itself. We don't create, we respond to.”

As Mad's editor from 1985 to 2004 — a position he shared with John Ficarra — Mr. Meglin became a major figure in the magazine's long history, along with Harvey Kurtzman, who founded it as a comic book; William M. Gaines, its Falstaffian publisher; and Al Feldstein, who ran Mad from 1956 to 1985.

“Feldstein was a smart editor, but he was a hard taskmaster,” Al Jaffee, the cartoonist who, at 97, still devises Mad's back-page fold-ins, said in a telephone interview. “Nick, on the other hand, was simpatico to the contributors, which made us all want to be better.”



Mr. Meglin, far right, in Manhattan in 1974 with some of his Mad colleagues. From left: the assistant art director Len Brenner, the publisher William M. Gaines, and the artists Antonio Prohias and Angelo Torres. MAD Magazine

Mr. Gaines scribbled a note to Mr. Meglin in 1989 calling him “the soul and conscience” of Mad.

Although his byline rarely appeared, Mr. Meglin refined Mad’s cover ideas, added puns and gags to stories, frequently ghostwrote Dave Berg’s cartoon feature “The Lighter Side Of ... ” and checked to make sure the lyrics of the magazine’s song spoofs had the right meter.

And, because movie parodies were one of Mad’s signature features, he took staffers to movie theaters to watch films. There, in the dark, they giggled at the lines and scenes they would mock in future issues.

When Mad parodied “The Sting,” the Academy Award winner for best picture in 1974, Mr. Meglin suggested that the cover illustration replace the faces of the film’s stars, Robert Redford and Paul Newman, with those of former President Richard M. Nixon and former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, both of whom had recently resigned.

“That was ahead of its time,” Mr. Ficarra said. “No one was really mashing up movies and politics.”

At Mad's ramshackle offices in Manhattan, where he presided over "the usual gang of idiots," as the magazine referred to its writers and editors, Mr. Meglin was a gregarious and nurturing presence. He could hurl insults at employees — appropriate for a magazine that for many years featured Mr. Jaffee's "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions" — but more often he was self-deprecating.

He sent fans pictures of Mad's gapped-toothed mascot, Alfred E. Neuman, which he signed as Neuman in the script of "a sixth grader trying to forge his parents' signature on a bad report card while riding in a careening school bus," Mr. Ficarra said.

Mr. Meglin's ability to spot new talent was evident almost from the beginning of his tenure at Mad.

In 1957, he was sifting through responses to a classified ad that the magazine had placed in The Times asking for new contributors. Mort Drucker, who would become one of Mad's master caricaturists, had sent in samples of his work. Impressed by Mr. Drucker's drawing of Hopalong Cassidy, Mr. Meglin brought him to Mr. Gaines's attention.

Mr. Meglin, left, with his fellow Mad editor John Ficarra, right, and William M. Gaines, the magazine's publisher, as depicted by the Mad artist Mort Drucker in 1991. Mort Drucker

“I didn’t spot how great he was at caricatures,” Mr. Meglin was quoted as saying in “Mad Art: A Visual Celebration of the Art of Mad Magazine and the Idiots Who Create It” (2002), by Mark Evanier. “Not at first. But he wasn’t that great then. ... He hadn’t done a lot of them. At best, you could see the potential.”

Soon after, Mr. Meglin was looking at a comic strip submitted by Mr. Jaffee and was struck by both the artwork and the writing. But Mr. Feldstein had already told Mr. Jaffee that he would give the script to another artist to illustrate.

“Feldstein said, ‘Artists I have galore, but I don’t have material to give them to work on,’ ” Mr. Jaffee recalled. “But Nick walked into Bill Gaines’s office and said: ‘I’m reading Jaffee’s scripts and they’re very funny. If we give the scripts to another artist, they’ll lose something.’ So I was hired to do the script and the artwork.”

Mr. Meglin was born Nick Megliola in Brooklyn on July 30, 1935. His father, Anthony, was a mason, and his mother, Elizabeth (Laganigro) Megliola, was a seamstress.

Mr. Meglin graduated from Brooklyn College and earned a certificate from the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. While in art school, he wrote several stories for Panic, a satirical comic book in EC Comics’ stable of publications, along with Mad, Tales From the Crypt and other titles. Mad offered him a full-time job in 1956, which he kept until he was drafted into the Army. He returned to Mad after his discharge.

“I figured it be a two-year hiatus, at most,” Mr. Meglin said in an interview in 2016. “I ended up staying at Mad for the next 40-plus years.”

Mad's co-editors Mr. Meglin, left, and Mr. Ficarra in 1997 beside a wall of Alfred E. Neumans.
Edward Keating/The New York Times

Comedy underwent a transformation in those years. By the time Mr. Meglin and Mr. Ficarra became Mad's editors, taboos had been broken and Mad's audience had eroded as the alternatives to its satire multiplied.

"We took over when people like Howard Stern were ramping up what could be said, and Mad was looking a bit staid," Mr. Ficarra said. "It was part of our challenge to increase the latitude of what Mad could say, and how it could be said."

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Meglin is survived by his partner, Linda Maloof; his son, Christopher; three grandchildren; a sister, Joyce Wessel; and a brother, Albert. His marriage to Lucille Guerriero ended in divorce.

Mad was Mr. Meglin's only full-time job, but it was not his sole pursuit. He wrote "The Art of Humorous Illustration" (1981) and, with his daughter, "Drawing From Within" (2008). He played tennis passionately (his Mad business card read "Tennis Editor"), and his love of opera had an outlet in the sketches he drew for Opera News.

He also collaborated on two musicals. He wrote the lyrics for "Grumpy Old Men: The Musical," based on the 1993 film, with music by Neil Berg and a book by Dan Remmes. (It was produced in 2011 at the Royal Manitoba Theater in Winnipeg.) And he wrote the book and lyrics for "Tim and Scrooge," a musical sequel to Dickens's "A Christmas Carol," with music by Mr. Berg. (It was staged in 2015 at the Westchester Broadway Theater in Elmsford, N.Y.)

Mr. Meglin's sincere approach to musicals contrasted with his mirthful oversight of parodies at Mad, such as his early collaboration with Mr. Drucker on a spoof of the Broadway musical "My Fair Lady." In "My Fair Ad-Man," published in 1960, two Madison Avenue executives (drawn to resemble Cary Grant and Charles Laughton) wager that they can turn a beatnik (who looks like Frank Sinatra) into an ad writer.

While trying to explain why he doesn't want to write ad copy, the beatnik sings (to the tune of "Wouldn't It Be Loverly"):

All I want is a pad somewhere

Way downtown near the Village Square

Without a phone or care ...

Oh, wouldn't it be Kerouac?

Correction: June 13, 2018

An earlier version of this obituary omitted the name of a survivor. In addition to those named, Mr. Meglin is survived by his brother, Albert. The earlier version also referred incorrectly to "My Fair Ad-Man," a 1960 Mad feature written by Mr. Meglin. It was a spoof of the Broadway musical "My Fair Lady," not the movie version, which had not yet been made.

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