Not Holding Out for a Hero
A comics artist tries his hand at a new story.
by SOPHIA NGUYEN

CLIFF CHIANG ’96 can still name the first four comics he ever read—Uncanny X-Men, Alpha Flight, Cloak & Dagger, and Fantastic Four—the adventures of caped crusaders and mutant teens which, in the summer of 1983, he pored over in the back seat on a family road trip to Florida. Back then, he could get his hands on only a few issues at a time, even at 60 cents apiece; the nine-year-old was “on a limited budget,” and distribution was spotty.

“The hunt to find the next one made you really savor each issue when you got it,” he recalls. The wait, he adds, “made it this very mysterious thing that you could never have all at once. You only got a piece of it at a time, which just made you a bigger addict.”

As a comic-book artist—drawing for DC Comics for more than a decade, before going freelance—Chiang is now the dealer, at a time when everything about con-
sumption has changed. Readership has expanded and intensified: fans can get new issues and entire back catalogs digitally, without ever leaving the couch; the books are studied in the ivory tower, and the movies crash through the multiplexes nonstop (and in IMAX-3D). It was during this cultural moment, in 2011, that he and writer Brian Azzarello took on the series for which Chiang is best known: Wonder Woman.

Their 35-issue run largely skirted the comic’s historic gender politics (rooted in twentieth-century American feminism, and kinkily fascinated with strength and submission, as recounted by Kemper professor of American history Jill Lepore in her 2014 book on creator William Moulton Marston ‘15, LL.B. ’18, Ph.D. ’21). The reboot gave the iconic character a new origin, as the daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta, and a new mission, protecting a single mother and her infant. Surrounded by allies and foes from Greek myths, Wonder Woman became the new God of War.

The Princess of Amazons still went without pants. But Chiang worked to avoid what he calls a “cheesecake” aesthetic. He drew her as thick-limbed and broad-shouldered, with olive skin and a strong jaw. Although her outfit was cut like a bathing suit, it had the hard gleam of body armor. Where past cover images tended to depict the character in the grip of the monster of the month, Chiang liked to show Wonder Woman in action, not imperiled. She stood at least a head taller than everyone around her. She had the solidity of a refrigerator.

Working in a studio in Brooklyn, which he shares with two other artists and his wife, Jenny Lee, a film editor and producer, Chiang drafts digitally and inks by hand. His style is strikingly crisp and open. “A lot of comics art looks too precious,” he says—as if it’s been fussed over by “someone with a pen, hunched over a page, putting more lines down without any regard to whether they mean anything.” Even in his early jobs, as one of several artists with a hand in Brian K. Vaughan’s Swamp Thing, his work stood out for its sleek lines and clarity, its subtle confidence.

“Comics is such a weird artform,” Chiang muses. “It can’t be as wordy as prose.” In his view, there’s a poetry to the independence of words and pictures in comics, and to how panel breaks govern the emotional beats; they can feel lea-den and predictable when transferred to the silver screen. “There are times when rhythm and pacing are such a part of it, but at the same time it’s so—still,” he explains. “And you lose that in the cinema, because of the rush forward into the next frame.”

Chiang and Vaughan have reunited for a new series called Paper Girls, at the publisher Image, where creators own the books and characters they work on (unlike at DC and Marvel). Drawing a wholly original comic is new territory for Chiang, who admits, “It was a challenge to rethink a lot of the habits I’d gained from doing superhero stuff over the years.” World-building and character design are unconstrained by fan expectation. The work feels intensely personal. Set in 1988 outside Cleveland, Paper Girls stars a quartet of everyday 12-year-olds who deliver the news each morning, and stumble on a supernatural mystery. “A lot of us are maybe a little embarrassed of who we were when we were 12,” reflects Chiang. But kids—whatever their fears or insecurities—are uninhibited. “In a way, at that age you’re a much purer character.
than you are as an adult. And in drawing them, it’s a little bit of wish fulfillment. I want to draw these characters the way they think they are.”

In the preview for Paper Girls #1, it’s Halloween, and a pre-dawn glow washes the town in blue. Nothing’s out of the ordinary but a comet, slashing pink through the sky. Pedaling through the suburbs, a girl is stopped by a group of teenage guys, masked for a night of no good. They close in menacingly—their ringleader has a claw, à la Nightmare on Elm Street—when who comes to the rescue but a trio of girls? “Cool costume,” one of them taunts. They wear leg warmers, Doc Martens, and steely expressions, but there’s not a cape in sight.

Growing up, O’Connor was exposed early to Americana stars from Dolly Parton to mandolinist Chris Thile, who collaborated with his father, the virtuosic violinist and fiddler Mark O’Connor. He started teaching himself the mandolin at age 13, and at 23 pursued singing through a regimen of vocal exercises gleaned from books—seeking partly, he says, to differentiate his career from his father’s. O’Connor, his bandmates agree, is naturally “intense,” a trait that dovetails with his entrepreneurial streak: after graduation he co-founded Concert Window, an online platform that enables bands to livestream their shows, and considered attending Harvard Business School. Much of the managerial work involved with promoting Wisewater comes naturally to him, and he often drives the group’s recording and video projects.

Shirey, in contrast, loved writing and performing music—he sang in church choirs growing up, and joined the Kuumba Singers at Harvard—but pursued teaching after college. He was about to start a master’s in education when he got the call asking if he would join Wisewater, in August 2014. Though he asked for 48 hours to decide, “I thought about it for about six minutes and called back and said I’d do it.” He bought a one-way ticket to Nashville, and the trio rehearsed for four days (in what a friend later described as “a musical cage match”) before hitting the road in Lee’s Dodge Caravan.

Though all of them play instruments, sing, and compose, each has a strong sense of what they bring to its sound: Lee’s supple voice, Shirey’s songwriting, O’Connor’s intricate mandolin and Greek bouzouki. At some point, each entertained the idea of pursuing a solo career, but that’s a lonely life, and Wisewater’s music feels fuller than the sum of its parts. Some of their songs, like “Old Black Creek,” have what bluegrass pio-

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**Lonesome No Longer**

*A Nashville folk trio with Harvard roots*

SWEET-TALKING THE CROWD, the musicians of the contemporary folk trio Wisewater bought time, tuning up for their next song. Fiddle ready, Kate Lee turned to Forrest O’Connor ’10, who was intently focused on his mandolin; Jim Shirey ’11 stood by, on guitar. “Forrest, do you have the story about—”

“So I have the story?” O’Connor repeated good-naturedly, eyes and ears on his task.

“Sorry, that was really awkward…” Lee started again, her delivery jokingly stagey: “Forrest, tell us the story about the creeks we saw in Alabama!”

During their performance in late April and Club Passim (the historic venue that once hosted Joan Baez and Bob Dylan), the group seemed winningly unaccustomed to canned concert banter—earnest about their craft, easy with each other—as their set swung from an aching ballad to a blazing, breakneck cover of “Johnny B. Goode.” In the past few years, Wisewater’s members have made their living by playing gigs around the country—at local breweries, coffee houses, clubs, and music festivals, but also at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry and Station Inn. Surprisingly in the age of Spotify, half their income comes from in-person CD sales of their five-song EP, titled, fittingly, The Demonstration.

“All the Pacific Northwest crowds are really great,” O’Connor reports. “The Midwest is tough. The Northeast can be pretty hit or miss. We’ve really liked playing in the South a lot—it’s been great, really receptive.” But in their home city of Nashville—country music’s company town—where O’Connor and Lee first connected in 2013, it’s hard to be heard, he says: “Everybody and their mother is playing.”

Uniting the couple of O’Connor and Lee with the duo of O’Connor and Shirey, Wisewater can also trace its roots to Cambridge: the two men befriended each other on Shirey’s first day of freshman year. Two longhaired undergrads sharing a deep love of American roots music, they wrote songs and performed together at campus events and open mics, sometimes sneaking into Holden Chapel at night to jam. (“Oh, you boys were so bad, sneaking into the chapel,” Lee ribbed, when they told the story at Club Passim. “It’s a great dynamic,” Shirey says of the group, “because nobody has to be the third wheel for very long.”)

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