

# The Children's Media Project

## Zine Workshops, the Actual Zines, and a Short Look At Educational Standards

by Franny Olsen

I love the Children's Media Project in Poughkeepsie, NY. I recently had the friendly opportunity to interview Mary Iatrououlos, the Administrative/Exhibitions Assistant and Media Educator (and past contributor to Read It Now) there. Iatrououlos is responsible for creating and teaching the Children's Media Project zine workshops, which teach kids from middle and high school (and sometimes, curious adults) how to produce publications the DIY way.

Obviously, this is an issue close to the heart of Read It Now. When you can learn on your own that words empower, and that a lack of restrictions on your creation empower even further, and that you can be the head of your own organization if you take the steps to form it, you join the sacred order of DIY and your life is changed forever. Using zines to teach kids to take their own words seriously is not only important cognitively, it's important in a space and time where an oppressive media and advertising industry has a stranglehold on professional content.

Inbetween running around to answer phones, making me coffee (an interview is much better with coffee), thinking of titles for various projects being worked on at the office (located in the old Poughkeepsie fire house on Academy Street – "later I'll let you slide down the pole," Mary says to me right away), and printing out and gathering tons of information and plenty of youth-created zines for me to take home, Mary and I had a candid and heartfelt conversation about the good work she's been doing with renegade media. When I ask her about the best experience she's had with these workshops, she pauses. "I'm trying to think of something altruistic, but it's really when I'm holding a stack of (finished) zines!"

While in the graduate program for teaching at SUNY New Paltz, Mary was disillusioned with the subject matter of great importance to teachers in America today: teaching for the standard-

ized test. Teachers today are presented with the fabled, dreamlike option of instilling a love of learning in their students, but the reality is more in breaking their spirits by forcing them to regurgitate information that is the deciding factor in passing the test. Mary got the idea to have zine workshops – since they empower youth and teach important skills at the same time (cogency, photo-shop, page layout programs). She got in contact with CMP, who loved the idea but couldn't pay her.

So she volunteered (now she has a paid position)!

The zines the kids make run the gamut of zine writing style. A summer 2007 workshop produced *RAWR: Raising Awareness With Respect*, where a cartoon on the first pages defines the workshop's mission: "we don't want to relinquish control over who hears our voices. We want to take the control back. We want the option to make art with our ideas and compare our daily lives in Poughkeepsie to not just Poughkeepsie but the whole world." Kids deconstruct advertisements and write sophisticated media critiques and learn about culture jamming, and some examples are heavy and unforgettable.

*Youth Kingdom* is a collection of perspectives from kids who live in the Power Kingdom. One youth writes: "I'm not really scared of anybody, but I still listen. I don't want to be disrespectful to someone if they have something to say. When you respect somebody, you listen to what they have to say. Most teachers don't respect the children." Another writes "It was hard for me to agree that I have the same chance at education at other kids my age. Sometimes, it's gonna be harder for me because the color of my skin causes different expectations from many people about my abilities. Sometimes they expect that before I turn 17 I'm already gonna be in prison. By them, I mean my second grade teacher."

These words and these perspectives are what we overlook when education turns into drilling rhetoric and teaching kids to think critically and to assert their

voices over their learning material is becoming an afterthought. Mary is teaching kids how to be critical of a world of constant stimuli; teaching them that you can't believe everything you read, that you have to check sources. These are lessons some adults have yet to learn! This is armor in

a world of media attack. These kids are discovering that their words and thoughts have deep meaning – the most important realization of a young life, the make or break variable.

For more information about the Children's Media Project zine workshops, go to [www.childrensmediaproject.org](http://www.childrensmediaproject.org).

## The Color Wheels

s/t

by Jeff Paggi

This self-titled 2007 debut from The Color Wheels might just redefine your ideas about "cute." There is something about "cute" that does well for indie pop acts. Sure, aesthetic concepts of "cute" can result in many diverse sounds: the let's-be-our-own-pop-stars lo-fi of the C86 tape, the literate-but-sensitive gentle pop of Belle & Sebastian, even the adolescent sweet-as-syrup rock of early Saves The Day. There are almost as many varieties of "cute" as there are bands that practice it. The Color Wheels are Jon Sebastian (who also has performed and recorded solo, with Paper the Operator, and with The Mirror Age) and his wife Psalm. Jon wrote the songs because his wife wanted to learn how to play the drums. But forget about that for now. If you didn't, you might think you could predict exactly what this album will sound like: straightforward, simple rock tunes with quasi-romantic and nostalgic lyrics. Chock full of "cute." Well, you wouldn't be wrong in that assumption, but nevertheless, try to approach this record with an open mind, and its charm will doubtlessly win you over by the first chorus.

*Rock My World*, the first song, opens with some spare, jangly guitar chords until a sudden lo-fi beat starts to pound a simple rhythm. "We could get on great," sings Jon Sebastian over the homespun instrumentation, and weaves a deceptively simple melody. The last line, "Can I come to your family game night? The games we play don't feel all right. We could get on fine if you'd be on time. Do you want to rock my world?" is punctuated by some gorgeous drum fills, and acts a very climactic chorus. It's a triumphant opening song, and "Do you want to rock my world," a line repeated a few times, becomes a proposal the band delivers to its audience: just as intimate and romantic as it is public, friendly, and inviting.

The Promise Ring's *Very Emergency* might be an acceptable starting point for thinking about describing sound of The Color Wheels, in terms of song construction, but this record has an overall cleaner, springier guitar sound. *Plain Jane*, the third song, might be about a girl, but it's also about the band's sound. The singer wants to know Plain Jane's middle name, and The Color Wheels themselves are very much a search for the hidden beauty of simple pop rock. *Hot For Teacher* is an age-old story: the boy falls for his teacher, a love that must, of course, go unrequited. "When she calls on you / will you have the answer / to the question / you've been wrestling / with so long?" is the song's last line, a last line that becomes laden with new meanings when the listener considers that the song was written as a teaching tool.

The album has plenty more pop-rock gems, like *Don't Hit On Me*, a song about having to gently inform someone of the same sex who is interested in you that you are straight, and *Let's Play House*. An impressive debut to be sure, and one that you can stream on the Viper Bite Records website, ([www.viperbiterecords.com](http://www.viperbiterecords.com)). Jon Sebastian's other band, Paper The Operator, also has an EP coming out in April on Viper Bite called *Solemn Bouz*.