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The French *Mad*, 1965-1966

By Jean-Paul Gabilliet

A French version of *Mad* appeared in France from November 1965 thru April 1966 (with two more issues announced but never released). It was edited by the then not-yet-famous African-American writer and filmmaker Melvin van Peebles for Editions Francélia, the publisher of *Hara-Kiri*, the country's leading satirical monthly.

Van Peebles had settled in Paris in 1960 after learning of France's subsidy system for creators. He soon became friends with the men behind *Hara-Kiri*, publisher Georges Bernier (aka Professeur Choron) and editor François Cavanna, who asked him to become a regular contributor of the magazine. One of his most memorable achievements was a comic adaptation of Chester Himes' novel *Rage in Harlem* drawn by Wolinski.

The French *Mad* was a short-lived venture that met with little success for a number of reasons.

It was a straightforward translation of the contents of US issues. Only the fake ads appearing on the back covers were French-made material. Every single page inside was a (too) faithful translation of texts and comics that had appeared in Bill Gaines' magazine. But the humorous quality material that the *Hara-Kiri* crew found so hilarious (because they had been familiar with it for a decade) did not travel well. Unlike nowadays *Mad* was then largely unknown in France. The broad readership of *Hara-Kiri* were used to biting satire about everyday life, whereas *Mad* offered spoofs of mass media (mostly movies and magazine columns) with a marked US flavor that may have been disconcerting to many readers in the mid-1960s. One should not forget that *Mad* magazine's brand of humor (based on focused satires of news and entertainment media) was popularized in France by the weekly *Pilote* only after 1968. In this respect Van Peebles' *Mad* was a little too much ahead of its time.

Second most of the print run (reportedly 100,000 copies) was hawked in and around Paris (for a then whopping 2.20 French francs). Only a limited number of copies were available from newsstands. By the mid-1960s, when street vendors were gradually disappearing in French cities, it was a doubly hazardous commercial venture and its failure was not really a surprise.

Fifty years later, it is quite difficult for collectors to gather issues, let alone a complete 6-issue run, of the short-lived, de Gaulle-era *Mad*.

A digitized copy of Francélia's *Mad* #1 can be read here: <http://collections.citebd.org/ark:/12345/FAp00005/1965/v0001.simple.selectedTab=tumbnail>.