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From "The Paper
Revolutionaries
By Laurence
Leamer, 1972

... these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people.

—NORMAN MAILER, *The White Negro*

When the *Village Voice* arrived in Greenwich Village in October 1955, that stench of fear still hung in the air. The first issue contained a banal mélange of community news, art features and movie reviews, but the paper did chance to have a cover story on folk singers in Washington Square. Folk singers were suspect. "The day the *Voice* hit the street everyone said, 'It's a Communist paper,'" says John Wilcock, the first news editor and later editor of several underground papers. "It was absurd, but because of the deep fears in American life after the McCarthy period, the *Voice* got the reputation for being a far-out, freaky paper. Almost despite itself the paper ended up the grandfather of the underground press."

The *Voice* never pretended to be

a radical paper. Instead, the paper focused on what Ed Fancher, the publisher, called the "revolt of the urbs"—the struggle to preserve parks, playgrounds, the precious character of the Village, against city planners and real-estate interests.¹ There was a delicious melancholy in these futile fire fights against the steel-and-concrete monsters of modernity. Indeed, from early on nostalgia seemed to sink into the very paper on which the *Voice* was printed, a nostalgia symbolized by the Christopher Street office, a quaint wooden structure that might have been built for the archetypal crusading nineteenth-century newspaper.

The paper's founders had no inkling of the cultural and political upheaval that was shortly to engulf the United States. After all, in the mid-fifties the cultural and political Left were in disarray, garbed in sack-

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cloth. C. Wright Mills stood largely ignored, an almost desperate figure. The few thousand Beats of the cultural Left appeared no less desperate and isolated; antipolitical, they did not traffic with the old Left. Gary Snyder—poet, Beat, hippie, Zen master—recalls the “sense of antagonism, hostility and paranoia which went through the fifties with an accompanying self-destructiveness, a tendency toward alcoholism or heroin addiction, suicide, and a kind of romantic mystery of self-destruction, so that it was tragically beautiful to see someone go down through drug addiction.”² There were no exits. “Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defense, the creative act,”³ wrote Kenneth Rexroth.

The few politically radical publications of the time certainly did not inspire particular enthusiasm. The *National Guardian*, begun in 1948 as a spokesman for Henry Wallace's Presidential campaign, plugged along, supported largely by scattered Communists and fellow travelers. *Dis-sent*, started in 1956 by Social Democrats, addressed an aging, predominantly New York City audience. *I.F. Stone's Weekly* and A.J. Muste's *Liberation* were small and largely unnoticed.

Of course, no “serious” radical paid any attention to the scores of little magazines that about this time began appearing, disappearing, reappearing in Bohemian districts across America—*Beatitude* in San Francisco; *Combustion* in Toronto; *Big Table*; *Kulchur*; *Intercourse*; *C*; *My Own Magazine*.

The contributors to these magazines were “knights of the human spirit” who would wage “a sort of guerrilla warfare . . . against the

organized forces of befuddlement,” wrote *Beatitude*. “The brave commandos, Ginsberg Kerouac Rexroth & al versus the Hearse Press, the Loose Enterprises, and so forth, who have all but succeeded in stifling the human spirit.”⁴ Few in those Eisenhower years cared to join in such an irreverent, full-scale attack on American life. But by the early 1960's the whole tenor of the magazines was changing. The minuscule circulations still suggested that they were little more than the “ethnic” journals of a small Bohemian sect, but the writers and artists themselves could feel the first tremors of a broad political and cultural upheaval. Many of the magazines grew optimistic, even cocky. They began to deal openly with political issues. Ed Sanders' *Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts*, declared itself dedicated to “pacifism, national defense through nonviolent resistance, unilateral disarmament, multilateral indiscriminate apertural conjugation, anarchism, world federalism, civil disobedience, obstructors and submarine boarders, peace eye, the gleaming crotch lake of the universe, the witness of the flaming ra-cock . . . mystical bands of peace-work stompers, total-assault guerrilla ejaculators, the Lower East Side *meshuganas*, vaginal zapping, the LSD comunarium, God through cannabis, hashish forever, and all those groped by J. Edgar Hoover in the silent halls of Congress.”⁵

The *Voice* could hardly ignore this fledgling movement, and slowly the paper turned away from such typical early articles as “What Men Think of the Greenwich Village Female” and “What Women Think of the Greenwich Village Male” toward

accounts of off-Broadway theater, eigen and underground films, Kerouac and the Beats, Allen Ginsberg, Lenny Bruce, new pop, dope, folk music—the first rumble of a radical-youth culture.

The old forms and formulas of the newspaper craft could not begin to capture the subtlety and complexity of this new world in making, and by the early 1960's *Voice* had forged a new literary style: personal yet detached, discerned yet cynical, detailed yet selective—a style that has affected a generation of journalists and writers. Sometimes the style didn't rise above cocktail-party chitchat, treating politics as nothing more than an erudite parade of personalities, and turning culture into narrow cult. At its best, though, a *Voice* article could capture the essence of an event in a few subtle images and descriptions. For instance, in the late 1950's, Harold Smith, now a *Voice* columnist, wrote about an evening when Jack Kerouac, the then newly famous author of *The Road*, read his poetry in the Village Vanguard:

. . . He reads fast with his eyes totally glued to the little pad, rapidly and on as if he wants to get it over. “I'll read a junky poem.” He slurps the beautiful passages as if not expecting the crowd to dig them, even if he slows. “It's like kissing my kisser on the belly . . .” He begins to loosen up ad lib, and the audience is with him fast 15 minutes and he's done. The applause is like a thunderstorm on a July night. He smiles and goes on among the wheels and the agents pulls a relaxed drag on his cigarette. The prince of the hips being accepted at the court of the rich kings, who months ago, would have nudged him closer to the bar, if he wandered

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The old forms and formulas of the newspaper craft could not begin to capture the subtlety and complexity of this new world in the making, and by the early 1960's the *Voice* had forged a new literary journalism, personal yet detached, concerned yet cynical, detailed yet selective—a style that has affected a generation of journalists and writers. Sometimes the style didn't rise above cocktail-party chitchat, treating politics as nothing more than an endless parade of personalities, and turning culture into narrow cult. At its best, though, a *Voice* article could capture the essence of an event in a few subtle images and descriptions. For instance, in the late 1950's, Howard Smith, now a *Voice* columnist, wrote about an evening when Jack Kerouac, the then newly famous author of *On the Road*, read his poetry in the Village Vanguard:

... He reads fast with his eyes theatrically glued to the little pad, rapidly, on and on as if he wants to get it over with. "I'll read a junky poem." He slurs over the beautiful passages as if not expecting the crowd to dig them, even if he went slower. "It's like kissing my kitten's belly . . ." He begins to loosen up and ad lib, and the audience is with him. A fast 15 minutes and he's done. The applause is like a thunderstorm on a hot July night. He smiles and goes to sit among the wheels and the agents, and pulls a relaxed drag on his cigarette. He is prince of the hips being accepted in the court of the rich kings, who, six months ago, would have nudged him closer to the bar, if he wandered in to

watch the show. He must have hated himself in the morning—not for the drinks he had, but because he ate it all up the way he really never wanted to. As I was leaving, some guy in an old Army shirt, standing close to the bar, remarked: "Well, Kerouac came off the road in high gear. . . . I hope he has a good set of snow tires." ⁶

The *Voice* had only just become a moderate success when, in 1958, twenty-six-year-old Paul Krassner began publishing the *Realist*, the other 1950's publication, whose style and content foreshadowed the underground press. The six hundred original subscribers thought they were getting a magazine of high-minded atheism and anticlericalism. But Krassner, who had been a minor comedian patterning his routines on the dark, ironic humor of Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl, soon changed all that. Even the first (June-July) issue displayed the sense of irreverence, iconoclasm and (for that era) just plain bad taste, for which Krassner and the *Realist* would soon be notorious. Most of the articles were couched in the quasi-academic style that had long afflicted "magazines of thought." However, Krassner couldn't resist injecting satire into the headlines—"Sodomy in Kilts" over a serious piece on the liberalization of Scottish laws against homosexuality; "Is He a Good Guy or a Bad Guy? Or What Makes Wyatt Urp" above an article attacking Thomas Wyatt, a prominent faith healer. Even more significantly Krassner contributed a "Diabolical Dialogue" between John Foster Dulles and Bertrand Russell, the first of many imaginary discussions between famous people that would appear in the *Realist*, blurring the distinction

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between fact and fiction:

DULLES: . . . and so in the interest of maintaining friendly Anglo-American relations, I've come to ask you to stop harping about H-bomb tests. You're only aiding the Communist cause.

RUSSELL: Nonsense. I'm opposed to all forms of totalitarianism.

DULLES: But suppose that the Communists come out in favor of deep breathing . . .

By the early 1960's Krassner had completely jettisoned the *Realist's* fundamentalist atheism and turned the magazine into a meld of often "unprintable," inevitably unpredictable articles and satire. Nowhere else could one read a piece by a seventeen-year-old boy on why he was a Nazi (or was it satire?); a fake letter from Billy Graham (it *did seem* real); satirical accounts of Luci Johnson's wedding night and John F. Kennedy's first wife (but there's a ring of truth to it). Krassner made no attempt to label what was "real" and what wasn't, and that uncertainty made the *Realist* even more outrageous and irritating.

"I wanted to blow peoples' minds," Krassner says, "and it's really a mind blower if you can't tell if something is real or not. Moreover, if a satire's possible it says something about the way things are. Several years ago, I had a serious article by a student at Berkeley about the violent peace movement. But people thought it was satire, and dangerous

satire at that. Then we had a cartoon that showed a soldier with a bayonet saying to a pregnant Vietnamese woman, 'Is there a Viet Cong in there?' It was a prediction of the Song My massacre. Then, too, it was true. *She was hiding a Viet Cong in there!*

"Then I began to mix and play with satire and fact. When I described Tim Leary's psychedelic center at Millbrook, I described actuality. There was a psychedelic Burma Shave sign outside that said 'What is, is within.' Inside there was a copy of *Scientific American* on the table right next to the Bible. Upstairs I described how there was a bulletin board with a list of all the guides with stars pasted next to their names according to how far they had transcended their ego. Now that last bit about the stars I made up, but it was a way—a vehicle—to make an observation that those people were hung up on that. And because it was believed it said something."

Here in the early 1960's the high-school-civics-textbook image of American life was disintegrating before the very eyes of the young, and the tools of conventional journalism just were not calibrated closely enough to capture the subtlety, irony and pathos of that process. In 1946 George Orwell had already noted how politicians and political writers were debasing language to avoid dealing with the realities of the modern world:

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which

are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets; this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population or rectification of frontiers*.⁷

Today the aboveground journalist is often merely a scribe. He copies verbatim the government's most dubious proclamations, and crops them down into neat, palatable news stories or one-minute TV spots. And he peddles this to the American public as "objective journalism." He is a willing dupe, too, for the forms of conventional journalism cannot begin to capture the "objective" realities of modern American life. After all, conventional journalism is the craft of accurately transmitting what frequently is only half understood or ultimately unintelligible. There is no room for irony, satire, black humor or sheer disbelief. There is no room for any of Krassner's crude, inelegant, irreverent, outrageous techniques—techniques that are a part of what would be needed in a journalism that could understand this new world.

The *Realist*, itself, represents no full vision of an alternative medium. Krassner—publisher, editor, top banana—is the *Realist*, and the magazine rests as much in the older tradition of one-man iconoclastic journalism (George Seldes' *In Fact*; Lyle Stuart's *The Independent*) as in the newer patterns of underground

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journalism. The *Realist* has remained limited by the borders of Krassner's mind—a wickedly original mind at that, zipping recklessly across the boundaries of the acceptable and the conventionally sane—but nevertheless the mind of one lone man. Krassner himself has become very much a part of the Movement, but by the last half of the 1960's, with the United States engaged in Indochina in what the left-liberal community considered a monstrous and immoral effort, and which, as the months and the excuses and the casualties mounted, appeared less a temporary aberration than a logical culmination, his satire in the *Realist* was having no more impact than a water pistol.

The *Village Voice*, for its part, never tried to bedeck itself with love beads and psychedelic drawings, or clenched fists and militant art, and has stayed very much an observer of the cultural and political revolt. The paper has stayed unashamedly a commercial enterprise as well, and an extremely lucrative one at that. It has no pretensions to being a part of the Movement and inhabits a no-man's land between the Establishment and radical media. Because of this the *Voice's* writers often sound estranged from the world they observe, writing with "intimate" detachment or else turning out highly personal, rambling essays that suggest that they and the universe are equals. Some of the paper's coverage—say, a Newfield piece on prisons or a Hentoff story on the meaning of the Chicago conspiracy trial—still has a vigor and energy found nowhere else in New York journalism, but the *Voice* as a whole has grown further and further removed from the hot and turbulent centers of the Movement.