

ZAP! No More Underground Press

By Ross K. Baker

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IT GAVE ADVICE for problems not likely to confront readers of the "straight" press. You could learn what to do when your dog ate marijuana: "Induce the dog to vomit . . . feed the dog lawn grass with garlic salt, or something sweet like honey or maple syrup . . . Most of all talk to the animal in a low, soothing voice." You could find out where to buy grass at a discount, how to get a ride to a rock festival, how to beat the draft.

Its classified ads reflected the desires and desperation of some of America's young: "Will the guy who kept kissing the cheek of the girl with the squirt gun in Old Town on Saturday, April 10, please contact Laura Suzanne, 101 N. California Street." Or, more typically: "Mary Kerasiotis, or anyone knowing her whereabouts, please call her mother at home. She was last seen wearing a white blouse, plum pants, navy pea coat, and black and white purse. Her parents only want to talk to her."

And its "society" pages published the social notices of dissent — schedules for marches on Washington, warnings of undercover narcotics agents lurking in the enclaves of the young — and dealt with matters of etiquette unfamiliar to readers of Amy Vanderbilt: "Everyone smoking should be responsible for their roaches (butts). Roaches left in ashtrays or just laid around are extremely uncool."

But it is almost entirely gone now, those hundreds of little papers we called the underground press, the passing as little noticed as the birth. Dead is the Oracle, which chronicled the rise of the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco as a capital of the 1960s counterculture. Departed are the Tribe in Berkeley and the Quicksilver Times and the Washington Free Press in the District of Columbia and the Rat and the East Village Other and the New York Free Press in Manhattan. A few still remain, but not many, and mostly they are in serious trouble.

Probably few persons mourn the passing of this brief spasm in U.S. journalism. But it did reflect a piece of Americana, however distasteful to some, and it did let some share their desperation and loneliness, and perhaps, in some small way, it did help push the conventional press into more venturesome coverage of what was happening among many of the young across the country.

THE UNDERGROUND PRESS, to be sure, was no monolith. More often than not underground papers were edited and produced by collectives of young men and women who used the papers as the organizing concept around which a way of life was built. It flourished in barren lofts in the East Village or North Beach or in dark basements on Telegraph Avenue, amidst cast-off furniture and wall posters. Unlike the toilers in city rooms of the establishment press, some journalists of the alternative media literally picked their way through dog droppings and old mattresses to meet their haphazard deadlines.

They borrowed little from their distant establishment cousins. There were no articles on how to invest wisely in tax-free municipals, no letters to "Dear Abby," no garden columns. Instead, there were headlines like "Do-It-Yourself Hash Pipes," "Blows Against the Empire," and "Non-Specific Vaginitis."

"Peanuts" and "Dennis the Menace" yielded to the unlovable "Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers," three consummate no'er-do-wells and their mangy pot-smoking cat, or to Robert Crumb's bearded curmudgeon, Mr. Natural, a wayward holy man whose sexual appetite was all but insatiable.

Big-footed yokels in palazzo pants urged the reader to "keep on truckin'." Greasy motorcycle gangs drank Tree-Frog Beer and engaged in sadistic orgies of rape and mayhem. Lenore Goldberg and her Girl Commandos, an interracial flying squad of aggressive feminists, sallied forth to crush male chauvinism. Sweetstuff, the pubescent runaway, sustained her street existence by shoplifting and entertained herself by making obscene gestures on the street to the well-dressed and middle-aged.

Advertising revenues, which provided most of the working capital for the papers, tended to come from the marginal enterprises that served the youth community. The most important industry contributing income from advertising were record companies, but more typically the advertisers were small firms that sold pot-smoking accessories or clothing or visits by Missionaries of the Truth who, for \$10, would ordain people for their ministry — a calling which would allegedly permit the buyer to perform marriages or seek exemptions from the draft and from income and property taxes.

THE ORIGINS of contemporary "alternative journalism" in America can probably be traced to the establishment of New York's Village Voice in 1953. With a current weekly circulation of almost 150,000, the Voice now better reflects the liberal politics of the Upper West Side than the radical politics of the East Village. Until the mid-1960s, though, it was a voice in the wilderness.

But as dissent from the Vietnam war grew on college campuses and few conventional sources of journalistic opinion reflected this viewpoint, the need for an alternative arose. The first effort that could truly be called an underground press began in 1964 with the establishment of the Los Angeles Free Press. Not surprisingly, that inveterate haunt of radical politics, Berkeley, Calif., spawned the second major underground enterprise, the Berkeley Barb, in 1965. Its first appearance coincided directly with one of the first active manifestations of antiwar dissent, the attempt to halt a troop train at the Santa Fe railroad station in Berkeley. The Barb supplemented its diet of radical politics and community service coverage with a healthy dose of sexually oriented advertising directed largely at the homosexual community, but also at consumers of pornographic movies, group sex, and bizarre sexual accessories. This undoubtedly helped the Barb to reach a weekly circulation of almost 100,000 four years after its inception.

Dissent from the Barb's compulsive pandering to prurient interests led to a schism which saw a large proportion of its staff affiliate with the Berkeley Tribe, whose political interest was the Tribe, like so many later efforts, was operated by a collective, the Red Mountain Tribe.

The growth of national radical organizations such as SDS resulted in a surge of underground publications of varying quality. The journal of SDS, New Left Notes, was underground in format and style but explicitly political, with none of the countercultural characteristics of the more generalized papers. Local SDS chapters published their own papers, such as New York's Radical America and Ohio's Notes From Maggie's Farm. These papers competed with such publications of the traditional Left as the Guardian, which were relentlessly ideological and unconcerned with cultural and community reporting.

Each new radical group that emerged went into print with its own paper. The Black Panthers put out the Black Panther, the Young Lords published Palante, and the Progressive Labor Party circulated Challenge.

AS THE NUMBER of issues and causes expanded and the successes of the left were supplanted by sectarianism, an effect very much akin to growth of specialized publications arose. For every radicalized group, a newspaper would be a predictable concomitant, and as the importance of the overarching radical groups diminished, the sects which followed in their wake would go to press. Indeed, the organizational rivalries which afflicted the left in the late 1960s translated themselves into publishing wars and struggles for the control of existing journals.

Women's collectives offended by the putative machismo of male-dominated radical groups started journals such as Rat and Off Our Backs! Homosexual groups concerned about the movement's insensitivity to their problems launched Come Out!, Advocate, and Gay Rag. Hastily edited underground papers appeared on military bases and in high schools, and even in prisons a kind of samizdat press arose. A Weatherman faction seized control of the Left Guardian in New York and came out with the Liberated Guardian. When SDS split into factions in 1969, New Left Notes became the subject of a custody struggle between the Weatherman and Progressive Labor groups. The former faction changed the name of the paper to New Left Notes—The Fire Next Time and finally to Flare. When the Edridge Cleaver faction of the Black Panthers seceded from the Huey Newton faction, it predictably started its own newspaper, Right On.

Typical of the problems the papers had to confront were those that affected New Jersey's most enduring underground paper, All You Can Eat. Operating out of a loft over a sandwich shop in New Brunswick, AYCE began publication in 1969 as a political and cultural paper distributed free of charge. It evolved into a collective composed of people who were not of a single mind as to what the role of the paper should be.

Most members felt that the paper should be radical in an ecumenical sense, representing a broad range of dissenting opinion, literary criticism, music, and other cultural features. But as the factionalism of the left intensified during 1970 and 1971, some staff members argued that the paper was "irrelevant" unless it explicitly served the needs of the working class. The dissident group defined this obligation in terms of supporting the goals of an organization called The National Council of Labor Committees, an offshoot of the largely defunct SDS. The majority of the collective resisted this and ousted the Labor Committee group.

At roughly the same time the New Brunswick Police Department attempted legal action to halt the distribution of the paper after AYCE had published a list of license plate numbers of undercover narcotics agents assigned to the area. The combination of these two factors virtually brought a halt to publication, but the paper has managed to cling to a precarious existence as a monthly.

Even those papers with general readerships both nationally and locally felt the strains of the sectarianism afflicting the left. The hope that the underground press would persist as an alternative system of journalism gave way to frustration and failure.

LACK OF MONEY, not surprisingly, is high on the list of problems that have decimated the underground papers. Although distribution costs are minimal due to the common practice of paying sellers a percentage of the price, it is difficult to find people to sell them. Even shoestring operations must confront printing costs, rents and other expenses. Also, staffs tend to be unstable, with people constantly coming and going.

But financial problems and staff turnover are probably less important than changing times and conditions. The vitality of the alternative press was directly proportional to the health of the radical movement in general. The underground press arose from the ferment of the times and the abatement of that ferment undercut its strength. As opposition to the Vietnam war sustained the movement, the movement sustained the press. But well before the war began to wane as the issue against which the radicals could mobilize, differences within the movement took their toll in the underground press.

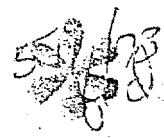
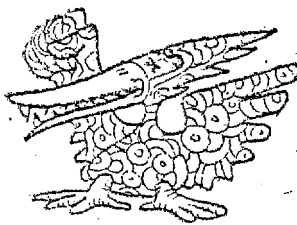
Bonds of friendship rather than corporate ties held the staffs together. Personal or political disputes were translated into organizational crises.

Many of the advertisers were as marginal as the papers themselves and were often unreliable in their payments. Official harassment, largely based upon allegedly pornographic content, forced the papers into legal battles to survive. Many municipalities banned street sales of the papers on these grounds. Many young journalists, moreover, shrank from becoming what they themselves deplored in the conventional press—institutionalized, bureaucratized, and uncontroversial. As avowed foes of corporations, they would not take corporate advertisements; to do so was to betray their purpose. They angered powerful foes without the requisite resources to defend themselves.

But more than even these difficulties as factors in their decline was their mobile and unstable readership and the fickleness of political trends. The underground papers could not transcend the depoliticization of the generation that they served and now face extinction. Those for whom the underground papers served as the journals of record for their youths are seeking ways to accommodate themselves to the demands of age and responsibility. They cannot shed tears for Hard Times or Leviathan. Those days are over.

NOTICE: Army, Linda Baby, Big Wally and other Brother
and Sisters looking for Rat, Tribe and similar wonder
of alternative journalism, cease thy search: They hav
mostly gone to the Great Hereafter, victims of all th
damn lowered voices and that favorite capitalist tool
—money. And, for heaven's sake, stop corresponding
with me—I've got a wife, two kids and a job at the 1
supermarket now.

REJOICE!



The BIRD flies on.

Rejoice! The BIRD still flies!

Many of you probably saw the announcement in the last issue of the BIRD (Jan. 15) that the BIRD was ceasing publication. There were a variety of reasons for this, but primarily it was a lack of people to take over the paper after the current rotation was over. The announcement came as a great shock to the community of people who have been readers of and workers of THE GREAT SPECKLED BIRD in the years since its founding. It forced us to get together and to act.

A new staff for the BIRD has been formed. We include former BIRD staffers, one from the current staff, as well as people brand new to the BIRD. We have been meeting and trying to devise ways to make the BIRD a more relevant force in Atlanta, the South, and the nation. The first issue

Early in the movement, there was a real sense of reaching out to the people (not in the abstract, but concrete, real people) but as we became more "radical" we seemed to become more afraid of people, to turn more into ourselves, our own petty bickerings and quarrels. Personally and organizationally, we shut ourselves off from other people and the society around us. Now is the time to reach out again. There are so many all around that are beginning to question their lives, their jobs, their society; beginning to be open to change—men, women, white, black, gay, straight, young and not so young, housewives, workers (clerical, service and industrial), every day people.

We believe that the BIRD can be a paper that speaks to many of these people; a paper which presents information—NEWS—ideas, suggestions, help—cultural insights, understandings of what is happening around us.

Atlanta's Great Speckled Bird announced its demise in January but then decided to cling to life.