

LOOK MA, NO HANDS!

By Michael Ventura

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When did we stop calling it "the underground press"? When did the more polite "alternative" usurp the usage? That's one of those little landmarks lost to history, even by we who were making (or dancing to?) that history. I've asked others who were there, and they can't remember either. Looking back, it was *the* turning point. At some unmarked moment we all sort of forgot that we'd been trying to bring down the American system and dedicated ourselves to a task both more possible and more complicated: We engaged in a commercial venture that would make money and support us while standing for anti-commercial values -- true children of our generation, we determined to have our cake and, while critically discussing its contents, eat it too. That we've managed to do this while still being of some use, even of some occasional real value, is a tribute to the very system we once tried to subvert! Which is a bit like mustard on the cake, but ... that's the way it's been.

When I walked into the chaotic offices of *The Austin Sun* in October of 1974, I was more aware than most that such newspapers had an honorable, ragged history in the American saga -- because my mother, Clelia Scandurra Ventura, often spoke of her glory days during the Second World War when she edited and wrote the English-language page of *L'Unita*, a Communist weekly in Italian East Harlem. (Everyone else was rebelling against their parents; I was following in the footsteps of mine.) So I'd read great rebel writers like Randolph Bourne and John Reed, and their struggling little magazines of circa 1912-1918. I knew the 1940s work of America's first important film critic, James Agee, published in the tiny *Nation*. Growing up in New York City in the Fifties and Sixties, I read Paul Krassner's *Realist*; *The Village Voice* when it was not only really good but the only paper of its kind in the country; and an uncompromising, unkempt, truly revolutionary sheet called *Rat*.

But I didn't know that the editor of *Rat*, an SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) organizer named Jeff Shero, was the very same man who approved of the essay I showed him and offered me work on the *Sun*. Thirty-three years old, he was calling himself Jeff Nightbyrd. With Michael Eakin (a former *Daily Texan* editor) he was instituting in *The Austin Sun* one of the first transits from "underground" (which *Rat* had certainly been) to "alternative" -- though none of us thought of it that way at the time. Nightbyrd, Eakin, and our soon-to-be managing editor, J. David Moriaty, had publishing experience; the rest of us were green. Big Boy Medlin, Bill Bentley, Carlene Brady, Eric "Enrique Pasa" Rosenblum, Margaret Moser, Ginger Varney, myself, among others -- we'd never published before. We had no résumés. Some of us (like Nightbyrd and me) had no college degrees. Nobody except Moriaty even half-knew how to run a business. Inundated with so many novice wordsmiths, J. David put a sign over his desk: "Never Teach a Pig to Sing. It Wastes Your Time and Annoys the Pig."

At first we didn't even have a receptionist; phones would ring and ring until finally somebody, anybody, answered -- or the caller gave up. Trying gamely to bring some sanity to the proceedings were Sara Clark (who died this summer, deeply mourned), Frances Barton, and Marty McKenzie, among others. I believe it was Marty's idea to actually re-read the layout before it went to the printer, trying to ensure that we'd

written in English and spelled correctly. Her title on the *Sun's* masthead wasn't "Copy Editor," as it would be now, but "Word Captain." None of us were sure if this was a serious job, an experiment to see how long a human being could go without sleep, or an attempt at lifelong truancy.

Some, like Big Boy, were Vietnam vets. Some, like me, were just drifting around the country and wound up at the *Sun's* door. All had, in some way or other, been part of the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement -- the operable word was "movement." The point of our lives had been to move: move ourselves, move others, move the country, move and shove and pull the culture down or out, if need be, to get closer to the anarchy of impulses we called (and might still call) "the truth."

Some terrible things happened: Michael Eakin was shot dead, and to my knowledge his murder is still unsolved. Messy things: More than once the staff almost quit Jeff en masse, and they had good reasons. Unbelievable things: parties so rife with life-changing energies that if I didn't sometimes compare notes with those who were there I'd think I was telling stories to myself. Damning things: We were an all-white staff for whom East Austin was virtually invisible. Marvelous things: the *Sun* was the first to tell the world of Stevie Vaughan, Joe Ely, Marcia Ball, Butch Hancock -- and covered events like the first American performances of Elvis Costello (at the Armadillo World Headquarters) and the Sex Pistols (in San Antonio); our pages were graced with art by Micael Priest, Ken Featherston, Dan Hubig, and Jim Franklin; and, helped by Jeff's superb editing, some of us who'd only dreamed of being writers truly became writers.

We were wild, we were silly, we were possessed of some brilliance, we were fiercely partisan. Looking back, I am surprised and humbled by the courage we shared and took for granted. We were in our late 20s and early 30s, making about \$60 a week, no benefits, no health insurance, no back-up at all. We got into the clubs free, so if we could pay the rent and fix the car we figured the rest would take care of itself -- and rents were easy then. (I had a garage apartment on gorgeous Sharon Lane for \$75 a month.) Don't mistake us: We really did want to bring the system down around our -- and your -- sweet ears. Some of us still do. But we preferred the tactics of Joshua to those of Lenin. If we blew our horns loud and pretty, the walls would surely fall. Well, the walls didn't fall -- but neither did we. I think the question we were asking, the question we're still living, is put best in a Butch Hancock song: "Where do you go when you're already gone?"

The Austin Sun published my first article on my 29th birthday. I received for that work the sum of \$35 -- more than 15 times the money I'd had in my pocket the day before. I was too excited by this good fortune to be more than dimly aware that we were part of something larger. In Minneapolis, San Francisco, Boston, New Orleans, Memphis, Los Angeles, Phoenix, Chicago, San Diego, and many another town ... people much like us were doing much the same thing. A new voice, a new tone, had come into American journalism, and its effect has yet to be fairly measured. Read the culture sections of the great dailies -- *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and their imitators -- and you see a range of sensibilities, expressions, and concerns that were not part of mainstream dialogue before the alternative press movement took root. Before the alternative press, the dailies covered rock and pop poorly or not at all; and *The New York Times* did not support essayists as thoughtful as Margo Jefferson, or criticism as intellectually rigorous as Elvis Mitchell's -- to give just two examples. Many who still don't approve of us can't help but echo us.

As for the *Sun*, we were a mite too flighty. We lasted not quite three years, then scattered ... some remaining in Austin, some going who knows where, some migrating to Los Angeles, where Medlin, Varney, and I were on the founding staff of *The L.A. Weekly*. A few years after the *Sun* self-destructed, Nick Barbaro and Louis Black started *The Austin Chronicle*. I like to think they learned a little from our mistakes. They were certainly better businessmen and had a firmer grasp of what Austin was about and where it was headed. As for me -- this is the 199th column I've written for them, with zero interference, and with the occasional raise that I didn't even ask for. Freedom of the press, baby.

I think of what William Carlos Williams wrote in *In the American Grain*: "In spite of size [America's] genius is shy and wild and frail, the loveliest, to be cherished only by the most keen, courageous, and sensitive. It may die." Our bravado was for real, but we were also shy and wild and frail; lovely; keen; courageous and sensitive. Fucked-up too -- who ain't? But most of us have stood our ground. We knew the values we cherished would always be in danger, and we've defended them as best we could.

Let me here thank the advertising staffs for my livelihood, and the livelihoods of my colleagues; they, and the readers who keep coming back, and the publishers like Nick and Louis who take upon themselves the burden of the quotidian (a favorite word of Sara Clark's, back in the day). Thanks to you, and to the vitality of our writing (even when it stinks it's usually lively), what we've lived and stood for -- compromised sometimes, full of paradox always -- has not died. We answer to no one. We say our say. It's an alternative.

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