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the village VOICE

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

By Robert Baker, February 2, 2018

When it was officially announced this week that the Village Voice would be moving from its current offices near Wall Street back to its old digs in the East Village, I dug through a box under my desk that hadn't been opened in years. Beneath the pica rulers, bladeless X-acto knives, and a skull-headed Pez dispenser, I found one of my old business cards:

Robert Baker
Quality Control Supervisor
The Village Voice
36 Cooper Square, New York, NY 10003

You see, this will be my second time moving into the seven-story building at 36 Cooper Square. I started my career at the Voice in 1987, proofreading ads, and in those days the offices were located at 842 Broadway. But the paper had recently been sold by Rupert Murdoch to Leonard Stern, and sometime in 1989 the production staff moved a few blocks south, into a partially finished space at 36 Cooper, which was owned by the Stern family. In 1991, the editorial and sales staff followed.

Within a few years I started writing for the paper, and while researching the cartoonist Charles Addams, I came across a fascinating article in a December 1952 issue of the New Yorker. Underneath an Addams cartoon of a woman with a mustache drawing mustaches on subway posters, I discovered an unsigned "Talk of the Town" item about the building I was then working in. The piece's author, using the reportorial "we" as was the New Yorker's wont back then, had trudged down to 36 Cooper to get the lowdown on the difference between male and female canaries. The building housed the Hartz Mountain Product company, which, in addition to importing and distributing more than 300,000 canaries a year, also sold "birdseed, bird-conditioning food, bird-song food, bird tonic, bird biscuit, and bird cuttlebone, and it cleans up." The reporter was led around the building by the firm's sales manager, Edgar Stern, who explained how difficult it is to determine if a young canary is a valuable singing male or a quieter female. "Sex," Mr. We wrote, "is the main trouble down there, as it is everywhere else in town."

Well, that made sense — the part about the bird food, anyway. Once the full Voice staff arrived at 36 Cooper, occupying multiple floors, we discovered that although the songbirds were long gone, decades of birdseed had been worked into the floorboards. If someone in the art or production departments above walked with a particularly heavy gait across the floor, birdseed would drift down onto an editor's or sales rep's head.

Still, the new offices were much better than the rodent-infested, paint-peeling warrens we'd vacated. (A gussied-up stand-in for 842 Broadway can be seen at the end of The Devil Wears Prada, when, as described in a review by the New York Times, Anne Hathaway's character, Andy, applies for a journalism job at "a publication that resembles the Village Voice, circa 1990.... Andy could have been Diana Vreeland, but she is going to be Nat Hentoff — or Nat Hentoff with better boots.") Longtime music critic and First Amendment crusader Hentoff was among the major-league Voicers who made that first move to Cooper, along with a roster of other heavy hitters that included Wayne Barrett, J. Hoberman, Greg Tate, Robert Christgau, Julie Lobbia, Michael Musto, Lynn Yaeger, and far too many other wild and wooly writers to list here.

Prior to its first arrival at 36 Cooper, the Voice, like most New Yorkers, had a peripatetic real estate history. The nation's first alternative weekly initially set up shop in 1955, at 22 Greenwich Avenue, quarters the paper itself described as "battered." Five years later, in 1960, the "Weekly Newspaper Designed to Be Read" (as the tagline on the masthead touted in the early years) moved to 61 Christopher Street, "on the northeast triangular corner of Sheridan Square, in the heart of the Village," announcing, "The address will be, simply: The Village Voice, Sheridan Square, New York 14. The main trunk phone line will remain the same as heretofore: WA 4-4669."

Hentoff was around for that earlier move, too. So was Fred McDarrah, who started out in ad sales and ended up becoming the Voice's first picture editor and chief photographer, capturing a constellation of cultural luminaries from Ginsburg to Ali to Brando to John and Yoko for the paper over a span of five decades. The Voice spent the tumultuous Sixties at Sheridan Square and then decamped to 80 University Place for the 1970s, before moving to Broadway in 1980. McDarrah and Hentoff were joined in those latter moves by such political and cultural muckrakers as Jack Newfield, Andrew Sarris, Jill Johnston, and Richard Goldstein.

The offices at 36 Cooper, where the Voice resided for more than two decades, held their own kind of institutional history. It was there, in 1996, that Leonard Stern (son of Max, a cousin of the aforementioned Edgar) decided to turn the Voice — always ahead of the curve — into a free publication. The cover of that first free edition was drawn by cartoonist Mark Alan Stamaty, who would come in on a Monday night, when the issue was in the throes of closing, with his latest Washingtoon strip laid out on a board. Wearing a denim apron printed with the slogan "Discover the Voice," Stamaty would use ink and Wite-Out to make last-minute corrections — the strip was often the final piece pasted up and shot, as the camera-room supervisor pulled it from Mark's hand. (Stamaty would also perform an occasional dead-on Elvis impersonation.)

The Monday night close would take place in a large room on the fourth floor occupied by tall, banked counters, where the editorial, art, and production teams (and a separate group dedicated to the classified pages) converged to finalize the issue. All day Monday and into the wee hours of Tuesday, Voice staffers stood before the boards: editors proofing final copy; designers checking halftones and line art; production artists cutting and pasting up rolls of type, laying down border rules, and placing ads as thick as Scrabble tiles with accumulated hot wax. There were the usual arguments over word choices in a headline, and there were shouting matches over what music was to be played on the boom box. Rap? Jazz? Punk? Grunge? Classic rock? Madonna?

In 1993, as President Bill Clinton was giving a speech across the street at Cooper Union's Great Hall, a nameless disrupter in the production department propped a blow-up Munch Scream figure in an open window. Within minutes, a humorless Secret Service agent — his opaque shades making him a ringer for Agent Smith in The Matrix, released six years later — instructed us to "remove the dummy and close the window. Now." In another incident, an irate construction company, perhaps upset about Mr. Stern's real estate dealings, showed up with steamrollers, which they used to run over a selection of Hartz Mountain pet products. Anyone who heard the squeaky toys' plaintive squeals never forgot it.

As the Voice's current owner, Peter Barbey, has noted, the Village, whether East or West, is the Voice's "spiritual home." Plus, the big steel letters spelling out VILLAGE VOICE on the front of 36 Cooper have never come down. (Which, over the past five years, has occasionally led harried editors from other news outlets to include photos of the Cooper facade in stories about the Voice). But while the Voice drew much from the Village, it also helped define it. Contemplate McDarrah's great photo of Kerouac, seemingly crucified, as he reads at the Artist's Studio on East 3rd Street in 1959. Then consider the pages of coverage devoted to Lou Reed and Andy Warhol at the Dom on St. Marks Place in the Sixties, stories about cheap Bowery studios for the likes of Christopher Wool in the DIY Seventies, and reports of the battles of Tompkins Square Park in the Eighties, along with celebrations of the downtown club scene of the Nineties and the LES gallery renaissance in the Aughts, and the Voice returning to 36 Cooper Square just seems right.

It's great karma. After all, who cares about a little birdseed in your hair?