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LAST RITES FOR THE VILLAGE VOICE, A BOHEMIAN WHO STAYED ON TOO LONG

By Tricia Romano - Opinon – September 5, 2018



The death last week of The Village Voice, the storied alt-weekly, was in some ways to be expected. When its latest owner, Peter D. Barbey, who bought it in 2015 to restore it to its early glory, stopped print publication almost a year ago, it seemed that it would be only a matter of time before its online presence ceased as well. The Voice didn't appear to have a strong sense of identity anymore, in part because the New York that it covered — downtown, the underground, bohemia and its ephemera — didn't exist anymore, neither in a physical sense nor as a state of mind.

SoHo, once the stomping ground of artists and punk rockers, is a high-end shopping mall. CBGB, which The Voice covered religiously when Blondie and Television were at their apex, has been turned into a John Varvatos store and lives on as a T-shirt. The East Village is ... I don't know what it is anymore. At least Spike Lee is still in Brooklyn.

The death of The Voice isn't just about the end of a newspaper. To some of us at least, it's about the end of New York as a cultural and political center, as the place that the world turned to for art, for music, for leadership in new and uncomfortable ideas, often perceived by the mainstream to be dangerous or weird. Fred McDarrah, the paper's

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photographer for the much of its first three decades, and who remained a part of the paper until his death in 2007, liked to affectionately call it “the commie, hippie, pinko rag.”

The Voice was started in 1955 by Ed Fancher, Dan Wolf and Norman Mailer as an alternative to The Villager, a weekly that covered mainly Greenwich Village. Over time, it established the alternative-weekly template: a mix of opinionated, first-person screeds; advocacy journalism; rock criticism; experimental writing; and political comic art. It introduced the short, thumb-size review, and it allowed writers like Jill Johnston, who didn't use punctuation, to run wild. Later, The Voice Literary Supplement provided early exposure to coming stars like Jonathan Lethem, Alice Sebold and Colson Whitehead. Its art critics — including Peter Schjeldahl, John Perreault and Roberta Smith — had front-row seats to Warhol, Basquiat, Koons and Haring, and themselves became towering figures in the art world.

To read The Voice was to read the progenitor of Craigslist and blogging, and of America's underground cultural and political landscape in the second half of the last century and into this one. It was America's story, but it was also New York's: Donald Trump, the Obies and Off Broadway theater, rap and hip-hop, break dancing, civil rights, gay rights, Andy Warhol, post-punk, new wave, the Worst Landlords list, weird sports writing, outsider art, foodie culture, performance art, jazz, techno, the mob, Rudy Giuliani — all of it was covered by The Voice.

When I interned there for Frank Owen, who covered the underbelly of New York night life, in 1997, I didn't understand I was working with living legends at 36 Cooper Square, like the investigative reporter Wayne Barrett, who did the first in-depth exposé on Mr. Trump's businesses in the '70s, and Nat Hentoff, the civil-libertarian columnist, both of whom died last year.

The paper was populated with eccentric geniuses and people who had changed journalism, including people who had worked on the first stories about the Stonewall Riots and the gay rights movement, and a number of cultural writers and icons. There was J. Hoberman, the film critic who had inherited the section from Andrew Sarris and Jonas Mekas, the two critics who helped put auteur theory and indie and experimental film on the map; there was Greg Tate and Nelson George, two of the pre-eminent voices on black music and hip-hop culture; and Richard Goldstein, the executive editor, who had been with the paper for more than 25 years and had been credited with the invention of rock criticism. And then there was Robert Christgau, the self-proclaimed dean of rock critics, who had perfected the capsule review through his Consumer Guides, which gave records shrewd grades.

The place was filled with characters, and I loved every one of them, even as I was terrified of them.

I spent eight years at The Voice. After I interned, I started as a fact checker and became a columnist, writing “Fly Life” and “Club Crawl,” two weekly columns about New York night life. It was a dream job — I had an amount of creative freedom and a filing schedule (weekly) that now seems extravagant and luxurious.

But with every passing year, the New York I knew and loved was changing, and eventually, like many others, I left. The city had ceased to be affordable — and more important, interesting. The night life I had come there to partake in became sanitized by bottle service and Wall Street money. There are now pockets of creativity in parts of the city, mainly in Brooklyn, but even that borough has become more and more gentrified.

Before the internet, and before the commercialization of New York, many of The Voice's writers and editors would talk about how they subscribed to the paper in their faraway towns: Lucian K. Truscott IV would get it at West Point, where he was a cadet, before becoming one of the paper's staff writers. Doug Simmons would get it at the newsstand in Omaha,

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when he was in high school, long before becoming its music editor and rising to be its managing editor, then, briefly, its acting executive editor. The Voice — and New York — was a beacon for misfits, and I was one of them. The internet flattened “alternative culture” — first Napster, and now Spotify, allowed obscure music to bypass the critics; Netflix and Amazon made experimental film accessible without your needing to read about it in a Hoberman review. The Voice was once a lodestar to freaks and geeks everywhere. Now the lodestar is both nowhere and everywhere.

Tricia Romano is working on a book about The Village Voice titled “Commies, Pinkos, Hippies, Queers!: An Uncensored Oral History of the Village Voice — the News Weekly That Changed the World.”