

the beat

Alternative Arts & Culture

'A revolutionary little paper'

60s-era newspaper paved the way for local alternative media

by Lori Canada

Long-haired, pot-smoking bohemians twirling in the buff. Beatnik leftovers dressed in black, scruffy things from their grandpa's attic. Young women cutting the shackles of their grandma's patriarchy in ways that sexually benefited their male comrades. Afrocentrists who preferred Malcolm X over MLK.

A critical mass of libertines, hippies, fledgling feminists and black militants alike united in their opposition to the Vietnam War and antiquated paradigms of all sorts. All with a garish, psychedelic palette as the visual backdrop, and a hodgepodge of subversive rock, folk and R&B as the soundtrack.

In contrast with these and other wildly exaggerated images of the 1960s, most Americans in that decade, including those in urban pockets and college towns, were middle-of-the-road politically and ideologically.

This was the case in Bloomington, a town distinguished from the small, southern-settled, provincial communities surrounding it almost exclusively because of IU.

Indeed, at that time university types – especially the radicals – rarely ventured to the Square, let alone the West Side. The “levy” – the railroad tracks by the Crazy Horse – in effect served as a line of demarcation between town and gown.

Still, a thriving, multifaceted counter-culture did exist here that had been seeded decades before, and, from February 1966 to December 1970, enjoyed a reciprocally influential relationship with Bloomington's first successful underground newspaper, *The Spectator*.

The Spectator was started as an IU-based project by a robust group of literary, politically astute students who sought to shatter the traditional meek, establishment-endorsed college paper template in favor of a ballsy one that was run entirely for and by the students.

The Spectator celebrated its 40th anniversary earlier this year. And a few of those most involved with the publication offered up their own dusty, sometimes clashing, narratives of the paper's colorful history and the turbulent sociopolitical context from which it was spawned.



Photocopy courtesy of IU Archives

IU officials physically destroyed the office and equipment of *The Spectator* in 1967. Editor James Retherford was charged with draft evasion, charges that were eventually dismissed.

Tenacious, audacious and simply hellacious, Austin transplant James Retherford served as the paper's editor for two years, replacing now deceased Robb Baker in fall 1966. Retherford, who later ghost-authored Chicago 7 defendant Jerry Rubin's seminal book *Do It!*, helped propel the paper to an entirely new level of in-your-face irreverence.

Not a one-trick-pony by any means, Retherford wrote frequently and knowledgeably about opera and other cultural events. Of his tenure and of *The Spectator*'s fuck-the-man ethos in general, Retherford

has this to say:

“Change was incremental and dialectical. Imagine a brightly flashing button with a sign saying: ‘You are forbidden to push this button. Signed – the Indiana University administration.’”

“As the young, inquisitive, though politically still naive new editor of *The Spectator*, I wanted to know why we were not supposed to push that button. So, I pushed it and discovered the secret about how the university maintains order and conducts its business. The university

maintains order and conducts its business by forbidding students to push buttons.”

With its perfectly seasoned blend of acerbic wit, sophisticated literary reviews and radical challenges to all things status quo, *The Spectator* pushed enough IU buttons to find itself homeless and without a printer in mid-December 1967.

In *The Spectator*'s highly publicized falling out with IU, Retherford says the university partnered with the Department of Justice to deliver a “one-two-three punch.”

The first and most potent blow involved federal felony indictments against Retherford himself for draft law violations, which were later overturned.

Punch two came when an axe-wielding IU dean of faculties raided *Spectator* headquarters and destroyed all the equipment and files he could find.

Punch three arrived when IU administration stealthily coerced *The Spectator*'s printer into dropping the paper's account.

Retherford now characterizes the whole dark chapter as part of a larger government effort to muzzle insurgent media and broader dissent.

“Such was my early education in what Herbert Marcuse described as ‘repressive tolerance,’” he says.

After finding a printer willing to do the business, *The Spectator* resettled in the basement of artist Wendel Field's off-campus apartment.

Field, who splits his time these days between Bloomington and India, punctuated the paper with his no-holds-barred art – art described by Retherford as “nuanced pencil drawings that exploded off the page like hand grenades.”

The master behind the visual arsenal, whom many now refer to as an ascetic of sorts, remembers his time with *The Spectator* as a tumultuous yet exhilarating period.

“I don't remember how I got involved at *The Spectator*,” he writes in an e-mail

from India. “I was still a student, although not for long. The paper was assembled in a hut on the campus near Lindley Hall. It was ‘cut and paste,’ so after the cover was done and any other art to be included, the layout would be done and art added where needed to balance the design. I would do whatever I wanted, but sometimes it would be to suit a particular feature article.”

Field also recalls the specific role *The Spectator* played in promoting the PRP's (Progressive Reform Party's) campaign when it ran a candidate for student body president, who ultimately won in a landslide.

“Until that time,” he explains, “the student body president was a fraternity boy popularity contest with nothing resembling a platform.”

Mike King, who assumed editorship not long after Retherford's legal travails took him to New York, suggests that *The Spectator*'s influence reached even farther than the confines of campus.

The current news editor of *The Austin Chronicle*, King says the paper played an especially crucial role in defining local opinion toward the Vietnam War.

“Already a national battleground when I arrived to Bloomington, it became the

dominant issue of *The Spectator* years,” he says. “Anywhere the war touched campus – the draft, university research involvement, the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, the endless bombing runs – all of these things involved student activists and grew to involve much of the campus.”

“*The Spectator* was both a catalyst and a bulletin board in those

activist years, and we saw our role as reporting on campus activism, serving as a broadcaster for campus debates and networking with national news sources to keep people apprised of the larger history.

“The same people putting out the paper were actively involved, in various ways, in campus/Bloomington activism, in a town and media that looked backwards rather than forwards. So perhaps we did our small part, over a few years, to change that atmosphere.”



Photocopy courtesy of IU Archives

Wendel Field's artwork “exploded off the page like hand grenades.”

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'A revolutionary little paper'

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Both King and Retherford acknowledge that the paper was bigger than either of them, a labor of love made possible by a brilliant, steadfast band of writers and artists.

Sherry DeYoung Mutch dropped caustic pen-and-ink A-bombs all over the pages. Bob Johnson transcended polemics with his sharp, insightful discussions of race. David Cahill, Retherford says, was "the best investigative writer since Upton Sinclair."

Social essayist Jerry Bovim, film critic Robert Paul Somma and theater commentator Charles Kleinhans. Jim Dorr, who wrote brilliant serial novels under various pseudonyms.

And Bob Klawitter, a writer/poet

who served as *Spectator* literary editor and eventually became a revered environmental activist – early president of Protect Our Woods – before a car accident took his life in 1996.

Forty years ago, these and countless others involved with *The Spectator* paved new ground in Bloomington print media, making it easier for later publications like *The Primo Times*, *The Bloomington Voice/Independent* and *The*



Photocopy courtesy of IU Archives

The Spectator tackled the burning issues of the day, especially race and the Vietnam War.

Bloomington Alternative to thrive, publications whose mission it is to seek and print uncomfortable truths and to fiercely and unyieldingly push the proverbial buttons Jim Retherford speaks of.

An excerpt from a *Spectator* editorial, written in response to the Dec. 26, 1968, fire bombing of the Black Market – a Kirkwood Avenue African-American-owned business – perhaps best captures the spirit of the revolutionary little paper

whose influence extends far beyond its then readership of 1,500 and the mere four years it existed:

"As a gesture of your good faith we encourage all Bloomingtonians concerned by the mindless arson to acknowledge by way of a signed statement in the newspaper of their choice, an expression of dismay offering what form of support may be rendered under such circumstances.

"At least a bare statement of community goodwill, convincing our black brothers that YOU will not tolerate such racist and anti-Christian behavior such as the firebombing in YOUR city."

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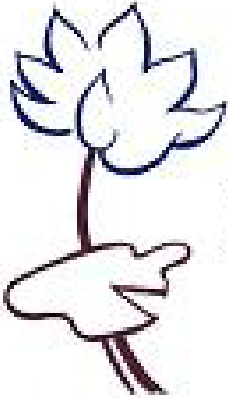
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