

## Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2

By Ken Wachsberger (ed). (East Lansing, MI:  
Michigan State University Press, 2012).

Reviewed by Matthew Ducmanas

When the protests of the Occupy Wall Street movement began just over a year ago in New York's Zuccotti Park, the widespread use of digital media and information and communication technologies was a familiar sight. The protesters and their sympathetic supporters were building websites, posting Facebook updates, and maintaining robust Twitter feeds. In no time they were setting up makeshift Wi-Fi networks, sharing live video feeds online, and utilizing their mobile phones to communicate, organize, and record events.

Amidst all these modern technologies, just weeks after the protests began, a significantly older communication tool was also employed when the first issue of the *Occupied Wall Street Journal* hit the streets. The four page, color broadsheet was written and printed by journalists sympathetic to the cause. The first edition numbered 50,000 copies. Within days, an additional 20,000 had to be printed.<sup>1</sup> The demand for the paper by protesters and spectators alike demonstrated that there is still room amongst the blogs and text messages for a physical, tangible form of communication.

Ken Wachsberger's edited volume, *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2*, shines light on the allure of the alternative newspaper format. This third volume in the *Voices from the Underground* series aims to document the history the American underground press and present "the gay, lesbian, feminist, Black, Puerto Rican, Native American, socialist, Southern consciousness, psychedelic, prisoners' rights, military, New Age, rank-and-file,

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and other independent voices of what was known in the sixties and seventies as the counterculture.”<sup>22</sup>

A teacher, political organizer, and writer, Wachsberger himself was active in Michigan’s underground press and has compiled an important companion to the first volume of the series *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 1. Insider Histories... Part 2* is also composed of detailed, first-hand accounts from those intimately involved in the alternative and independent publications that grew out of the anti-war and counterculture movement. These varied and largely entertaining narratives provide fascinating glimpses into the challenges, aspirations, and continued importance of these publications in our country’s history as well as to the future of progressive and radical movements.

Steve Abbott’s chapter on his time with Ohio’s *Columbus Free Press* mentions the opportunities he has to deliver talks on the Vietnam-era underground press to students and young people. He values the chance to “move their awareness beyond visual images and simple stereotypes into the complexities of the personal and political conflicts then that have molded our politics today.”<sup>23</sup> As a younger reader with no direct experience of the cultural and political struggles of the sixties and seventies, my general knowledge of this significant time is mostly bolstered by impressions derived from various media depictions and half-remembered episodes of *The Wonder Years*. One of the values of collections like *Insider Histories... Part 2* is that they provide an alternative to the distortions of mass media and the official histories that often ignore or underplay the role of dissident speech. *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2* preserves a part of this important history while effectively contextualizing these efforts.

*Insider Histories... Part 2* delves deeply into the challenges the underground press faced from the state and those defending the status quo. The accounts given in this volume are startling evidence of the degree to which violence and legal intimidation were used against these individuals who had the audacity to try to communicate their own content through their own outlets. Though the zeal and the vivacity of the anti-war and counterculture movement are often acknowledged, the courage and perseverance of those individuals on display in this volume deserve recognition.

While unwarranted arrests and harassment by police were commonplace for many of the participants in the underground press, David Doggett’s account of Jackson, Mississippi’s underground newspaper *The Kudzu* presents an especially egregious case. Formed in 1968, *The Kudzu*’s staff and supporters sustained forty-two arrests within its first three years of operation. The paper had to endure its street vendors being arrested and police raids on its office. A staff member was evicted from her apartment after police visited her landlady, and Doggett himself was aggressively arrested, beaten, and held for over a day

and a half without being allowed to make a phone call- all for just photographing a separate police arrest. These are just cases attributable to the police and do not include the anonymous threatening phone calls, bomb threats, and shots fired through the paper's office windows.

*The Kudzu* and the other underground papers were not just under pressure from state law enforcement and local opponents, but had a surprising amount of federal attention lavished upon them as well. Another strength of *Insider Histories... Part 2* is the way that it documents an especially troubling period in the federal government's activities. These papers, often staffed by a handful of people and producing a limited number of issues, had captured the attention of COINTELPRO, the FBI's covert counterintelligence program aimed at investigating, repressing, and discrediting domestic political organizations. The authors in *Insider Histories... Part 2* recount numerous examples of undercover informants planted to report on everything from the papers' finances to the staff members' sexual relationships. While these efforts rarely resulted in directly terminating publication, they contributed substantially to the financial stress, staffing issues, and burnout that weakened the underground press over time.

A more humorous account of the extent of the COINTELPRO efforts is given in Elihu Edelson's chapter on *Both Sides Now*. Based in Jacksonville, Florida, *Both Sides Now* existed on a smaller scale and within a much smaller progressive community than many of the other papers described in the book. Nevertheless, the FBI deemed it dangerous enough to go through the trouble of setting up a rival underground paper for the purpose of poaching staff away from *Both Sides Now* with the promise of paid positions. The FBI funded paper produced two full issues of radical news and commentary before publication stopped, perhaps realizing that by that point Edelson was the sole remaining staff member and was producing the paper himself.

That the staff of these papers chose to exercise their right to free speech in the first place is commendable, and that they continued to do so in the face of threats, arrests, and beatings is impressive. Their efforts are even more remarkable considering the internal struggles they faced as well. *Insider Histories... Part 2* makes apparent that many of these papers didn't just try to communicate the activities and aspirations of the movement, but that they also aspired to operate in a way that supported and perpetuated those causes. In line with their revolutionary aims, many of the underground papers operated, or at least aspired to operate, collectively and democratically. Competing visions struggled over what to print and how to go about printing it. This effort was often less than tranquil. The book is filled with accounts of tense staff meetings, heated arguments, inter-paper coups, and organizational splits.

Often the major disagreements were over content and the difficulty of covering all aspects of the countercultural movement in one publication and through a non-hierarchical organizational structure. Bob Hippler's chapter on

Detroit's *Fifth Estate* provides an especially riveting account of the internal struggles between the feminist, socialist, anarchist and gay factions of the paper's staff. The heated arguments and staff upheavals resulting from the number of articles devoted to each cause is recounted by Hippler with the good humor of hindsight, but also with the very real understanding of the challenge it is to communally produce a publication, let alone a movement.

The diversity of cultural and political concerns that brought such disparate groups together to produce these underground papers also provided the fundamental differences that in many cases caused these publications to self-destruct. In addition to documenting the successful cooperative efforts, *Insider Histories... Part 2* does not shy away from showing the sometimes-unrecognized biases of the movement and the individuals as well. Ginny Berson's account of *The Furies* and Bonnie Eisenberg's chapter on *It Aint Me Babe* both call warranted attention to the backseat role that the women's liberation movement took within the larger leftist movement of the sixties and seventies. They describe how feminism and, even more so, lesbian consciousness were largely considered issues to be dealt with after the war was halted and the larger revolution had commenced. These voices had to work even harder within the underground press to be heard and resulted in having to take a separatist stance and publish their own papers to be heard.

This separatist mentality also became increasingly prevalent within the gay community. Though the counterculture movement represented an unprecedented shifting of attitudes and cultural openness, it was slow to fully embrace gay culture. Many of the authors included in *Insider Histories... Part 2* recognize belatedly the way non-heterosexual staff members were given less attention and their issues sidelined. In the book's chapter on Boston's *Fag Rag*, Charley Shively explains: "Separation came both from hostility found in self-styled comrades, and from frustration in developing a self-consciousness. Profound contradictions around race, gender and class could not just be glossed over with well-meaning but otherwise meaningless professions of a common struggle."<sup>4</sup> Despite the internal contradictions of the Left, it wouldn't have been difficult for the narrators of *Insider Histories... Part 2* to present an idealized image of the past, play up the dramatic aspects of oppositional journalism, and look back with self-righteousness. Without exceptions, all of the accounts read as clear-eyed assessments of these sometimes amateurish, sometimes revolutionary publications. Recounted alongside the standoffs with police are the monotonous evenings of tedious layout work, and though the authors recall the revolutionary spirit of their efforts, they also appreciate how counterproductive their "own youthfully superficial political polemics"<sup>5</sup> proved to be. The narratives are told with humor, often with self-deprecation, but also with an eye to the future. The authors recognize there is still work to be done, and though the underground press may be an imperfect vehicle, its role remains vital.

The true worth of this collection goes beyond just preserving these stories and contributing to the history of free speech and independent journalism in our country. Reading it, I felt not just the demand to remember, but also an unspoken appeal to act. *Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press, Part 2* reminds the reader that our right to dissident speech, whether through the printed page or a tweet, is too necessary to be left unexercised.

## NOTES

1. David Carr, "A Protest's Ink-Stained Fingers," *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/10/business/media/wall-street-protesters-have-ink-stained-fingers-media-equation.html>
2. Azenphony Press, "Voices From the Underground – Home," 2010. <http://www.voicesfromtheunderground.com/index.htm>
3. Steve Abbott, "Karl and Groucho's Marxist Dance: The *Columbus Free Press* and Its Predecessors in the Columbus Underground," in *Insider Histories of the Underground Press, Part 2*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 331.
4. Charley Shively, "*Fag Rag*: The Most Loathsome Publication in the English Language," in *Insider Histories of the Underground Press, Part 2*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 101.
5. David Doggett, "*The Kudzu*: Birth and Death in Underground Mississippi," in *Insider Histories of the Underground Press, Part 2*, ed. Ken Wachsberger (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 151.