

rock writing

creem

critics are taking shots at the revived rock magazine edited by Buffalo's Robert Seidenberg

A comparison of the old and new Creem, right, published by Marvin Scott Jarrett and editor Robert Seidenberg, left and right below.



BY ELMER PLOETZ
News Staff Reporter

RAVE NEW WAVE OR FRANKENSTEIN CREATURE?

Is the new monster-size Creem magazine really a new way of looking at rock 'n' roll in print, or is it the literary equivalent of exhuming John Lennon's bones and propping a guitar across his ribs?

Those are the questions posed by publisher Marvin Scott Jarrett and executive editor Robert Seidenberg with their resurrection of rock's most storied magazine.

Jarrett defends his magazine, saying he wanted to "create something that would be very visually appealing. The way that music has gotten so visual, with MTV and so forth, I just felt it was time that a music magazine take a more visual approach."

But the rock literati in general, and writers and editors of the old Creem in particular, are having none of it.

"Soulless tripe" and "offensive" are descriptions of the new magazine from Dave Marsh, the nation's most visible rock critic and an editor with the original Creem. Former Creem editors David Sprague and Billy Altman also have voiced their doubts about the magazine, and Village Voice critic Robert Christgau, whose consumer's guide appeared in the old Creem, calls it "an attempt at a biz magazine."

In some ways, the criticisms are understandable. The original Creem, published from 1969 through early 1989, played the scruffy, pot-smoking little brother to Rolling Stone as that publication grew pompous and serious to the point that it was no longer really a rock 'n' roll magazine (and it was one only briefly). Creem had no such pretensions, popping bubbles where it found them with a wisecracking style and some of the best writers around.

For its readers, the old Creem was the only rock magazine you could find on the newsstand to speak for the outsiders, smart enough not to insult their intelligence and hip enough to embrace punk rock early on.

But now it's as if Creem has returned after a term at the clinic, wearing gold chains instead of rags, steroids its pharmaceutical of choice.

As resurrected by Jarrett, who purchased the rights to the name and the logo, and by editor Seidenberg, a Buffalo native and a graduate of the Nichols School, the magazine is huge.



see creem, page H-4

i don't get it

When writing rocked Buffalo

Buffalo a hotbed of rock 'n' roll criticism?

Yes, there was a time in the 1970s when Buffalo may have led the nation in rock literacy, and part of the credit goes to Jeff Nesin.

Nesin, then a graduate student and professor at the University at Buffalo, taught the university's first courses on the effects of popular culture in America.

"At first it was regarded as a poisonous avocation that people wished I would take somewhere else, or at least be quiet about," says Nesin. "Now there are branches of cultural studies that are devoted to particular aspects of popular culture."

In his classes, Nesin, himself a music writer, encountered and encouraged Billy Altman and Joe Fernbacher, two writers who went on to help define rock criticism at Creem magazine in the '70s.

Altman's style was mainstream, focusing frequently on putting the music into a social and historical framework (in recent years he has produced the RCA Heritage series of pre-1950 blues and country releases, as well as writing for Rolling Stone, Esquire and Connoisseur).

Fernbacher, on the other hand, was more likely to write stream-of-consciousness prose embracing the trashier side of things.

The result was two issues of Punk, a magazine associated with UB's Spectrum newspaper that predated the punk-new wave music movement by three years. But it was the attitude that counted.

Around the same time, Nesin, Fernbacher and Altman were involved in the Institute of Rock 'n'

Roll Studies, which drew together like-minded souls such as disc jockey Jim Santella and a teen-age Gary Sperrazza, now the owner of Buffalo's Apollo Records store.

The results were a bit like a long-term chain reaction. While Altman returned to write from New York, Fernbacher started working for Creem out of Buffalo and with Sperrazza started Shakin' Street Gazette, a publication out of Buffalo State College. Greg Shaw, publisher of the '70s journal Bomp!, labeled it "America's best local rock magazine."

Sperrazza and Fernbacher also shook loose \$3,000 from the college's student activities fund for a rock writers symposium in 1974 that brought in, among others, writers Lester Bangs, Nick Tosches, Shaw, Richard Meltzer and two writers on their way to becoming rock stars, Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye.

Later in the '70s, Buffalo State generated such magazines as Fox Trot and Bernie Kugel's Big Star. The line halted at the end of the decade with Rockers (Andrew Elias and Bill Poczik from that magazine would eventually start New York Talk with Robert Seidenberg). Then the writers, for the most part, scattered. College radio — not music writing — became Buffalo's new-music medium.

And what became of Nesin? He moved into college administration. In July, he will leave the School of Visual Arts in New York to become president of the Memphis (Tenn.) College of Art.

But he has continued writing about music, and teaching his courses on popular music in American culture. In a recent interview, he said he had just found himself in class quoting Fernbacher in trying to put the American Music Awards into context.

"There's good taste and bad taste, but no taste is the best taste of all."

Creem: A feeling that critics missed point

Continued from Page H1

It's almost twice the size of the old Creem. At 11 by 14 1/2 inches, it's a coffee table rock mag — and is being marketed to advertisers as such. Inside, the size of the type has been doubled, the pictures are poster-size, and there are — gulp! — not one, but sometimes two fashion spreads.

Amid the criticism, the magazine's early print runs of 150,000 seemed to be selling well at newsstands in New York, Los Angeles and Boston, and doing well elsewhere. The fourth run, currently on the stands, has a press run of 160,000, Jarrett says.

In a recent interview, Seidenberg said he wasn't surprised by the criticism, but he said the critics missed the point.

"I've got to admit, I find them pretty humorous," Seidenberg said. "I knew it was going to happen. I knew that a lot of people held Creem sacred, and it's unbelievable how seriously they take it... and (it's) ridiculous."

"I hope this doesn't sound wrong, but it is just a music magazine. It is not going to change the world... Give us a little time and read the thing before you jump on us."

Marsh, known for his biographies of Bruce Springsteen and several other books on music, isn't inclined to be charitable.

"I've given it what it's worth. I find it especially offensive," he says. "They are trafficking with something... That's me up there."

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All of this uproar about a rock 'n' roll magazine? Particularly one that had been defunct for almost two years?

Rock magazines have long been a publishing ghetto. In times of old (say, 15 years ago), buying rock magazines was held in similar esteem to dealing in comic books or baseball cards, neither of which drew the attention they do today. If you were old enough to drive and went to purchase a copy of Creem, the man behind the counter might look over his glasses as if he was about to say, "Shouldn't you be trying to buy Playboy, son?"

Rolling Stone and the now-defunct Crawdaddy were OK. They were deemed subversive, but they were adult. They were... political.

Creem wasn't overtly political. Outwardly, in fact, it resembled the other music magazines like Circus, a glorified publicity vehicle that still exists as a heavy metal mag.

But inside, it was different. A whole generation of rock critics grew up on its pages. Marsh, the most visible critic of the '80s (and defender of Elvis Presley's memory against Albert Goldman), was its editor from 1969 to 1973. The Buffalo connection of Jeff Nesin, Billy Altman and Joe Fernbacher (a University at Buffalo professor and his two brightest students, respectively) wrote thousands of lines in its pages from the mid-'70s until the old magazine folded. And foremost was the late Lester Bangs, who set the tone for the magazine.

In the introduction to the collection "Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung," social critic (and sometime rock writer) Greil Marcus suggests that Bangs' writing demands "a willingness to accept that the best writer in America could write almost nothing but record reviews."

Bangs was capable of turning a 500-word record review of a Captain Beefheart album into a stream-of-consciousness journey through the American psyche, and making the reader want to go with him. With a vicious wit to match, Bangs was capable of writing with emotion and energy to match the vitality of the music... rock 'n' roll for the printed page, not for vinyl.

In a 1975 Creem piece, for example, Bangs would describe Lou Reed as "a completely depraved pervert and pathetic death dwarf and everything else you want to think he is. On top of that he's a liar, a wasted talent, an artist continually in flux, and a huckster selling pounds of his own flesh. A panderer living off the dumbbell nihilism of a '70s generation that doesn't have the energy to commit suicide."

And then Bangs explained why Reed was his hero.

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Jarrett worked at the old Creem. He was the advertising manager in the months before it went under, and he says he had a new vision for the magazine. With backing from private investors, he was able to buy the Creem name and its various trademarks.

"The time that I was there, I just had a different vision for the way it could be, based on the history of the magazine, and there's a tremendous history of the magazine," he said. "I guess I didn't expect such harsh criticism. We've gotten some criticism in the press, but it doesn't compare to the amount of people that are buying the magazine."

Jarrett says he didn't want to re-create the old magazine's attitude.

"I felt like the old Creem in the '70s was great, but the editorial content of the late '80s was not at all what we wanted to do," he said.

"Do you like sarcasm? Do you like it used toward you? So I don't see why a rock musician would like sarcasm used toward him," said Jarrett, who has himself signed a Sire/Warner Bros. development deal as a performer.

"What I'm trying to do is be a part of the music business, and help cover the music business."

That may be precisely the problem, according to the survivors of the old magazine.

Though Altman doesn't entirely write off the new magazine, he says there's no resemblance between it and the original Creem.

"(The old Creem) took chances. It had a sense of humor," he says. "It was the only rock magazine in history that had a sense of irrever-



Sting on a recent cover of Creem.

ence, especially toward the business... It was never afraid to go out on a limb, to call a spade a spade... all of those things that you usually do not have in a magazine dealing with entertainment."

David Sprague, the old magazine's final editor, is astounded that Jarrett has brought back the magazine.

"The current publisher was an ad rep for the magazine... Like Dracula, he came back," said Sprague, laughing. "When he worked for the magazine for the last few months, he displayed to me absolutely no cognizance of what the magazine was about. He asked why there had to be a negativity in the magazine, why non-mainstream things were covered. We tried to explain, but it didn't work."

Jarrett seems to draw most of the flak directed at the magazine,

while Seidenberg has built up respect in the magazine field for his work as an editor with New York Talk and Music & Sound Out and as a free-lance writer with publications ranging from the New York Times to the Village Voice and USA Today. He's also currently a contributing editor to American Film.

Seidenberg, who spent most of the 1980s working in New York after graduating from Brown University, seems to have more definite ideas than Jarrett about what the old magazine was about and where he'd like to take the new one.

"What we're aiming for is to get to a certain point where there's a certain looseness, a certain style that encourages writers to be free to write how they want to write," said the editor. "A certain honesty, I think."

Putting a little Spin on best of the rest

By ELMER PLOETZ
News Staff Writer

What makes a great rock magazine?

Probably much the same as any other magazine, a great rock mag must have a point of view, an attitude or a cohesive personality. There must be a sense of passion and a sense of style in its writing; humor, but also a nose for the social and political issues surrounding the music.

And, because radio doesn't begin (or even want) to cover all the music being released today, it should have intelligently written reviews. The profiles should be fair but skeptical (too many end up being written off press releases).

In fact, no such magazine exists today, and few ever have (which is one of the things that made the original Creem great for a while). But a few come close. Here is one critic's Top 10 list out of the approximately 200 or so pop music magazines available today.

1. Spin: Bob Guccione Jr.'s magazine has a clear-cut point of view — his. With that in mind, it's not afraid to take on issues like racism and AIDS. It also has a great breadth of coverage (starting somewhere left of country and going all the way to hip-hop forms), a reasonably large number of reviews and a sense of humor. The writing is erratic, sometimes bordering on incomprehensible, but what other magazine would invite (and could get) Spike Lee to edit an entire issue?

2. Rock 'n' Roll Confidential: Dave Marsh's newsletter is slim, but carries no advertising and has the freedom that that entails. RRC serves as a political watchdog on music, particularly regarding censorship, and its reviews ("Home Taping Tips") are few but usually right on the mark. Marsh says he started the newsletter "out of disgust at the newsstand. I thought there were a lot of issues that weren't being attacked, or even addressed." Although there are other writers, like most of Marsh's material RRC can be a bit strident in its earnestness.

3. The Source: This magazine bills itself as the voice of the hip-hop nation, and it truly is. Independent in ownership (it's not part of a publishing conglomerate) and with a staff immersed in the music, it takes on both the music and the issues around it ("The Gangsta Rapper: Violent Hero or Negative Role Model," "Crime and the Hip-Hop Nation"). Held back in the overall ranking only by the fact that it's a specialty magazine.

4. Musician: For more mainstream, rock-oriented coverage, this is simply the best-written, most down-to-earth magazine on the racks.

5. Options: Reviews, reviews and more reviews, and the more obscure the better. Readers will find things they didn't even know existed.

6. Goldmine and DISCoveries: The most professionally done collector's publication. Goldmine magazine features strong special issues and a firm point of view via editor Jeff Tamarkin. DISCoveries feels more as if it's written by and for fans.

7. CD Review: Again, slick presentation with tons of reviews. More mainstream than Sonic Options.

8. Alternative Press: A fanzine turned real magazine, this one covers the alternative rock scene comprehensively.

9. Sound Choice: This quarterly is a quirky mixture of eclectic music reviews with new age politics (interviews with Timothy Leary and stories on how to take over the airwaves). Billed as an "All-Original Music Networking Magazine," it covers its bases both politically and musically.

10. Flipside, Forced Exposure, Maximum Rock 'n' Roll, the Bob, others: The writing in these fanzines can be downright incomprehensible, but they're perhaps the most authentic voices of the fan. Oriented toward punk-hardcore-thrash, the fanzines have wide-open letters pages, tons of reviews (although whether they're particularly reliable is debatable), and they frequently pick up on local phenomena earlier than the major mags.

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