

THE SPIRIT OF '85

SPIN founder Bob Guccione, Jr. looks back at the magazine's pivotal early years



THE BOOK OF DAVID Reviewing a never-published test issue, featuring Bowie on the cover

It is a trick of the light to see the times of one's importance as an important time. So I remember 1985, when I started SPIN, as pivotal, as a historic border between an era of relative innocence melting into shapeless dusk and a rising dawn lighting a hard landscape of cynicism and avarice. That is both true and untrue. The country had just re-upped Ronald Reagan as president, once again buying his snake-oil vision of America as a curative for all that ailed us. It was a time of bland plenty and artistic stagnation, and also of crippling need and artistic promise. The Cold War was raging and dying.

UNTO THIS DROPPED SPIN, like a little naked, pink baby, not by any grand design but by happenstance. One day I thought it would be a great idea to produce a magazine that did for its generation what *Rolling Stone* had done so well for baby boomers a little older than me a generation earlier. I imagined a magazine that would cover the music and artists that I was listening to, and report on serious issues in a way that the readership would trust because it would be undistorted by the corporate agendas of mainstream media. I got the inspiration from a Cyndi Lauper song. That probably says more about 1985 than anything.

In 1985, Foreigner topped the charts (with, to be honest, the hauntingly beautiful “I Want to Know What Love Is”). Rap blossomed in the Bronx and occasionally spat its flames in a few small clubs around New York City, although more commonly in the boroughs, while Springsteen played arenas and stadiums and maybe even airports, I don’t remember, and seemed to own a time-share of the cover of *Rolling Stone*, along with other safe entertainers like Billy Joel, Hall & Oates, Santana, and Paul McCartney, a man who made milquetoast look edgy. There were two musical nations, but this was not yet an even-sided civil war.

At the time, there was a radio station on Long Island with a weak signal, called WLIR, which played new music, the kind you couldn’t hear anywhere else on the dial, but which was all my friends and I were listening to—relying on records and tapes we found and told each other about, a handful of clubs, and those restaurants hip enough to play it. Reception was tough in Manhattan and only possible to get in my apartment at night. When I left the city, I would drive up the east side of Manhattan rather than the much closer west side, in order to pick up the signal. This is where we heard, like magic seepage from an alternate universe, the Smiths, R.E.M., Nick Cave, the Replacements, Hüsker Dü, the Cult, Tears for Fears, and U2, before any of them had a hit.

That music was vital. It spoke to us. It didn’t comfort us in elevators. And it was created by people more or less our age, pretending, like us, that they knew more than they did, were more confident and not as lost as they were. They whispered in our ears through our Walkman cassette players and wailed at us in our homes on our turntables—CDs were just starting to appear but were rare. Occasionally some of these artists gate-crashed MTV, itself revolutionary and thinly available.

If it was difficult to find places to hear this music, it was virtually impossible to read about it. There were treasured imports such as *Melody Maker* and *The New Musical Express* (known more commonly, and I never knew whether the



TURNER BROADCASTED With staffers and story subject Ike (second from right)

irony was intended, as *NME*). These were English. As was *The Face*, a brilliant pop-culture and fashion magazine that, from 3,000 miles away, told us about hip-hop being created less than ten miles from where I lived. We were sucking at a distant teat for the milk of information about who and what was shaping our lives.

From the beginning, SPIN was both partly clueless and part evangelically self-assured. In retrospect, I think the clueless part served us better. We didn’t know what we couldn’t do, or weren’t doing, so we wound up doing what we wanted, and this created a fresh, if professionally naive, magazine. At the start, small amounts of people took to us with fervor, but I must stress the accent on small. We did not immediately set the world on fire. If we hadn’t been originally funded and supported by my father’s company, *Penthouse*, we wouldn’t have survived.

Immediately, we established that we had good ears, and although the magazine was never intended to be a tip sheet, picking future hit artists, we essentially did that by identifying so many of the most interesting musicians and groups so early on. Our first issue featured then-underground acts the Replacements, U2, Run-DMC, Red Hot Chili Peppers, and had cresting star Madonna on the cover. We also wrote about such bizarre subcultures as death rock (where are those folks today!) and a lunatic cable-show host, Wally George, whose cartoonish, exaggerated conservatism made Dick Cheney look like Obama Girl. And we profiled a wonderful band with a haunting sound—a hybrid of electronic pop, disco, jazz, and rock—called

Bronski Beat, who, unbeknownst to us, had broken up by the time the issue came out, but the article’s author convinced them to keep it quiet so he’d get paid.

We wrote about African music. Regularly. Let that just sit for a second. That was about as commercially astute as running record reviews in Sanskrit. But we loved African music! In that first issue, we reported on Fela Kuti, the creator of Afrobeat, husband of 27 wives (at once), and such an outspoken pain in Nigeria’s ass that the ruling dictatorship killed his mother, beat him, and threw him in jail, where he was languishing when we brought his story to widespread attention. Amnesty International eventually achieved his release. When their historic Conspiracy of Hope concert tour came to the States, Fela was not on the bill. I called Bill Graham, the promoter, and asked him why. Too unknown an artist, he answered, wasn’t going to sell tickets. I told him if Fela of all people wasn’t involved with a tour dedicated to the holy work of trying to free political prisoners, then it was all bullshit. Graham, to his great credit, agreed and put him on the show, and Fela was a big hit.

We loved good stories. In our first year, we found Ike Turner, Tina’s much-villainized ex-husband, virtually homeless in L.A. He admitted beating her (famously saying, by way of perspective, “I hit her, but I didn’t hit her more than the average guy beats his wife”). We published a two-part, 12,000-word profile of Miles Davis. Stephen King wrote about Rick Nelson. Henry Rollins wrote about 7-Eleven. It all made sense.

In late 1985, a friend mentioned to me that Ethiopia was in the midst of a civil war, which wasn’t being generally reported. By this time, Live Aid, which had helped raise about a billion dollars for Ethiopian famine relief, had been mythologized as the greatest event in history

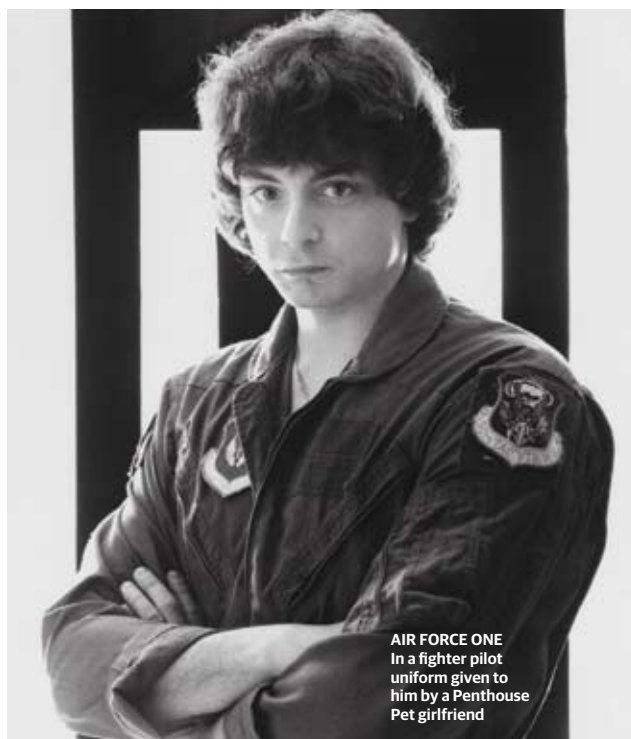
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since the defeat of the Nazis, and its organizer, Bob Geldof—largely due to his tireless self-promotion—spoken of as a living saint. Since it would be very hard to get aid effectively to people in a war, I asked my sister Nina, an editorial assistant at the magazine, to research where the money was going. She discovered the money was being used to buy weapons from the Soviets and tilt the war in favor of the country's dictator, Mengistu, whom Geldof had made a very public display of horsing around with as he turned over hundreds of millions of dollars.

We assigned investigative reporter (and future executive editor) Bob Keating to do the story. One month before the first anniversary of the concerts, we published his scathing exposé of Live Aid, detailing how the organization and its egotistical figurehead had, despite multiple warnings, inadvertently funded the continuing devastation of the population seeking independence from Ethiopia. A hundred thousand people died on “re-settlement” marches alone. Even the famine mostly had been man-made, the rebels’ farms scorched by military planes. According to dozens of reports gathered for our piece, Geldof refused to listen to relief agencies, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, operating in the country, who told him bluntly what was really going on and begged him not to give the money to the government but to channel it through neutral organizations actually helping victims.

We were savaged in the media for this article. Nobody wanted to believe that the Live Aid fairy tale was in reality a mortal cock-up that caused far more loss of life than it saved. Geldof attacked us in the press and said we had made up the article because he wouldn’t give us an interview. The music industry, which had been lavishing us with love, recoiled in horror, and several record companies canceled their advertising with us.

That could have put us out of business, but as I told my editors, I’d rather go out of business for the right reasons than stay in business for the wrong ones. I knew our story was correct, and we went on the offensive, reporting two follow-up articles, and I did hundreds of interviews with every radio and TV station and newspaper in the country that would talk to me. Each time I said, “You’re a news organization, look into it for yourself, ask people.” And many did. The tide turned. *The Wall Street Journal* came out in our defense. *Nightline* booked Geldof and me to debate the story, but he chickened out at the last minute. The same happened with CNN and a number of other news outlets. SPIN was vindicated and the spigot of money financing Mengistu’s genocide was turned off and remaining donations directed to legitimate relief efforts.



AIR FORCE ONE
In a fighter pilot
uniform given to
him by a Penthouse
Pet girlfriend

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In 1987, my father and I ended our professional relationship, and for about six weeks SPIN was out of business. Wonderfully, I was introduced to David Horowitz, the visionary executive at Warner Communications, who oversaw the creation of MTV. He believed in the magazine and invested enough to return us to the newsstands. Our resurrection was so quick many of our readers didn’t know we’d gone away (I’m not sure that’s a compliment). Relieved to have SPIN alive again, I said to David that many parents give birth to more than one child, but few parents give birth to the same child more than once.

Over the next ten years, SPIN became the dominant magazine for young Americans. That’s not just my biased recollection; it’s statistically true. We struggled for several of those years and would not have made it if not for Stephen Swid, a brilliant, self-made entrepreneur, who also invested and helped us become a real business.

Not everyone loved us. Axl Rose didn’t love us, and took a particular dislike to me. At the height of their popularity, Guns N’ Roses circulated a contract for journalists giving the band ownership and control of any interview. Rather than editorialize about this, we published the contract, and for fun, invited readers to submit it if

they wanted to get an interview themselves. Thousands did. Pissed off (I guess), Axl wrote “Get in the Ring,” in which he challenged me and a couple of other editors to a fight. I took him at his word and called Geffen Records, and said I was delighted to accept and asked when would Mr. Rose like to do this. Mr. Rose, it turned out, after a month of being harangued about my willingness to meet him in the ring, did not want to do this.

We dedicated one issue to the search for the soul of rock’n’roll, in which we sent writers across America, without their knowing where they were going until the day they left. And we put a reporter, Rory Nugent, inside the IRA in Northern Ireland. For that, the British government put out an arrest warrant on me, under the antiterrorism act, seemingly irritated that after decades and billions of pounds spent trying to find the IRA, we had done so quite easily.

For ten years we ran an AIDS column that dared to question the conventional wisdom that the U.S. health agencies had all the answers. To begin with, we were mostly vilified for suggesting things now universally accepted—that AZT killed faster than AIDS; that there wasn’t a heterosexual epidemic; that AIDS deaths were declining, not accelerating—but we were also applauded for addressing the topic. It became the most-read part of the magazine. To make a three-

dimensional editorial statement about safe sex, we put a condom in every newsstand copy of our November 1989 issue. We were not applauded for that: SPIN was banned in 90 percent of the stores that usually carried us.

It’s trite to say we defined a generation, but not entirely untrue. We were exploring and writing about ourselves. There was no more magic to the formula than that. We immersed ourselves in the music and occasionally in the lives of the musicians. We drank with them. Too much for some, apparently: R.E.M. and the Chili Peppers were forbidden by their managers to socialize with us after a couple of late-night binges. (How bad do you have to be when the Chili Peppers are told they can’t hang out with you?)

We were their friends, critics, and even lovers. Somehow we remained mostly objective. But I’m not sure always being objective is so important—being honest is essential, of course, but I think the politically correct obsession of worshipping objectivity is a bit of a false piety, often perpetrated by people afraid to show excitement, perhaps for fear of being judged on what they got excited about. We weren’t afraid of that. We got excited. We cared passionately about music and the world around us. And our readers related to us, and trusted us, precisely because we did. ☛