



ROGER HAYES (1994)

## A VOICE RENEWED

FROM PAGE 11

him out his newspaper. From the moment of its last issue in 1976, its new publisher hiding out in another state with the money he stole that might have given the paper a few more months of life, I felt the *Times Eagle* had perished like a gifted and precocious child killed too early.

I chopped wood, cleaned motel rooms, hauled garbage and borrowed money from skeptical friends to get the first issue of the *Born Again Bird* out of the crypt and off the press, and I have kept it barely afloat the last quarter of a century on dirty dishwasher in local restaurants, as a frycook burning burgers for the masses, pouring beer and wine in shoreside taverns, selling tickets at a museum and a movie theater, swabbing floors and cleaning toilets. A journalist's life.

(Publishing the *Times Eagle* has been a truly cottage industry this past quarter century. I developed a labor intensive method of producing each issue, copysetting and camera-ready pasteup for photo-offset printing at tables and desks where other furniture would normally be in a house. While print technology erupted into incredible new forms in pace with the information revolution, I engineered an antiquated, almost craftlike form of newspaper production, emerging as a specialist in obsolescence as well as an esthetic masochist.)

The *Times Eagle* has flown on improvident wings since its resurrection, yet it has a tangible readership and most of its advertisers have stayed with it despite small evidence of making a nickel. It has sought to display or publish the works of artists, poets and writers who live on the coast and inland, and its readers submit a large portion of its articles. It is a newspaper

## A LITTLE OFF THE TOP

BY CHRIS MEHLIG

A newspaper has to be a living thing, born like people and birds and other somewhat free creatures. It has to speak and to teach and to learn, the way all living things must. A newspaper must become those who write it, print it and read it, the anthropomorphic extension of our own minds, our thinking souls, talking, arguing, agreeing. A newspaper like that, once born, lives forever. Such a paper was born in the first half of this decade (1971), under the care and feeding of a dedicated crew of ambitious, if naïve journalists who believed that excellence alone would make their efforts prevail. But, the one unfortunate similarity between us and our newspaper was the need to earn a living. One can quickly starve in this business. It was unbearable to watch the *North Coast Times Eagle* perish in a struggling agony; many of us walked away unable to watch it die. But we'd forgotten the big difference that makes a newspaper immortal; newspapers, unlike writers, can be given life again, to rise like the phoenix, to fulfill the legend at its masthead: She flies on her own wings. The *Eagle* has risen.

When I was first invited to contribute to the *Times Eagle* back in 1972 or so, I felt a little like the guest speaker at the park bench social club. No one got paid, the circulation was so small I could have autographed my byline on every copy, and a double-truck ad for Fred May's Rockaway Market sold for less than a sack of groceries and six-pack of beer.

But to a writer, being published is tantamount to a Nobel medal, even if you don't get paid. It's impossible to resist. I was established with a "standing head," a regular column with a dash of artwork and maybe a caricature, like Art Buchwald's. The title was 'A Little Off The Top', an obsolete phrase one used in the barber chair before we stopped needing that kind of haircut. The column usually ran from Buchwaldian whimsy to Socratic dialogue, treating everything from political gimcrackery to the lasting effects of tourism on local monuments. The political treatments, however, drew irate and threatening postures from that same Fred May, the heaviest advertiser in the paper, the only double-truck ad (centerfold) we ever carried. My somewhat left-handed political satire, which advocated inclusion of Independent candidates in the Oregon primary, among other things, and a tourist-go-home attitude about sharing Oregon with alien beings, struck a vital spot in Fred.

The editor-in-chief, Robert Stanley Need, reluctantly informed me that I was nipping our golden brownbag in the bud, but that I had only to find someone who would write as a foil

against me. I found no one, so I created another column, and Fred May never knew who he was talking to when he'd ask me, "Hey, did you read Stewart Christian in the last edition? I guess he told you what's what!" Fred, the "Wide World Of Stewart Christian" was far wider than you ever knew.

There was nothing oblique in that; many writers have more than one view of an issue, but few editors will publish them on both sides. The effect was to broaden the paper somewhat, and occasionally to balance the horrendously verbose editorials with which Need assailed everything. But then, with exception of an occasional story on Aunt Maudie's Tea & Biscuit Social, or a report covering the most recent barn burning, the bulk of the paper was editorial, and that, we were convinced, was the great attraction it had. People would buy the paper and read it, then scream and tear it to shreds, beating themselves over the head with it, delighted with their own involvement. Some, bless them, liked what we wrote and told us so. Did I say no one got paid?

Every Monday morning was a circus of screaming arguments among the staff, and every Tuesday night was a hair-raising deadline, but on Thursday morning, the *Eagle* flew, and it flew to places most of us will never see. It flew to Bangkok, Thailand; Hong Kong; Sydney, Australia; Johannesburg, South Africa; West Berlin; London; Rome; and to some place near Belfast, Ireland. It flew to many perches large and small around our own country, too, from border to border, coast to coast. And yet circulation never exceeded 5,000 copies. People passing through picked up the *North Coast Times Eagle* as a souvenir. Then they read it. Then they subscribed to it. We were scintillated by the thought of being read in so vast an arena, but Fred May wasn't. People don't come from Bangkok for the 69¢ special hamburger. Zagata's Chevron didn't get many customers from Sydney, not even at 35¢ a gallon. In fact, we didn't have a thousand circulation in an area we so urgently wanted to make our market in. We were "required reading" on the table of the Oregon Congress, but not on the table of the North Coast consumer. When the *Eagle* died, people wondered why.

Today, the *Times Eagle* spreads its mighty wings and with a scream of "Now or Never," lunges into the air, born anew. How far it will fly depends on you. How skillfully it flies depends on us.

~JULY 20, 1979

Chris Mehlig rejuvenated his column in the *Born Again Bird* for a few years. He lives now in Astoria.

some people think is necessary, though they do not always regard it with rapture. It is a polemical publication laden with doom and gloom, which prompted one reader to ask if any purpose is served if its readers are in such despair after reading an issue they consider suicide.

I only know second-hand the effect the *Times Eagle* has on people who read it. It flowers into a separate life outside my presence or knowledge after it is printed. My role is finished after the press run of each issue except for distributing to small cities, towns and villages on the Oregon coast; to bars, cafes and restaurants, markets, motels and bookstores where it is sold over the counter; by UPS to towns up or down the coast or to inland cities; anyone going anywhere who knows a good place to sell it or give it away; and to friends. Once in a while someone tells me the newspaper means something to them or might describe a complex circulation of each issue among family and friends. Teachers say they use the paper in their classes. Its articles are read on radio stations (obviously *KMUN*) or reprinted in other publications. One issue is iceberged in an underground time capsule, sent toward the center of earth for half a century to be unsealed at Clatsop County's bicentennial in 2044.

"The *Times Eagle* serves as an important forum for many members of the North Coast Community who have kept faith with their less settled pasts," David Harlan wrote in the *Daily Astorian* in 1989, commemorating the *Born Again Bird*'s tenth year out of the crypt. "Social injustice and environmental responsibility are recurring themes... Democracy and capitalism — two decidedly different concepts in (editor McCusker's) point of view — have become indistinguishable in American society, he argues."

John McClelland wrote in the *Long View Daily News* in 1988 that "regardless of its leftist political leanings, the (*Times Eagle*) is not like the underground papers of the 1960s, which were long on rhetoric and short on facts. It could be called underground only because it stands apart from the mainstream press."

Small impoverished newspapers like the *Times Eagle* dwell in local obscurity. They are often in stormy opposition to the bland or autocratic community rule and standards of their circulation areas. The fringe is most normally their habitat; they defy the momentum toward megabig as they incubate ideas or ideologies that captivate or hold them captive. Controversy, flirtation with original ideas or any other form of media experimentation (aside from the purely technical) is anathema to megamedia, which consolidates immense energy and talent to hype the salacious, mendacious and indigestible. Commercial media exists to make money. Micromedia is always looking for a buck so it can publish or (like *KMUN* and *KBOO*) broadcast.

A writer for *The Oregonian* once criticized a rightwing newspaper for leaving the mainstream to preach to its own choir, in this case a publication by the odious OCA to rouse intemperance among the ignorant and intolerant, and though the target was worthy of severe criticism, it is somewhat myopic to suggest that only mainstream approaches to issues that critically affect society should be considered. The common ground (which is not represented by the mainstream media) is certainly a forum at which extremes meet and seek rapprochement, but the more specific audience ought not to be ignored. It is just such esoteric publications, left or right, shrill or reasonable, that keep the self-styled mainstream media on a somewhat honest course and not entirely blown about by commercial interests and its own hubris.

The information highway is plastic, fluid, still unpredictable despite corporate and government invasion of its wide open cyberspaces. But the pervasive ambitions of monopoly are felt and reverberate through electronics networks. The concentration of ownership of the media is ominous and significant cause for paranoia. Huge conglomerates own and manipulate information that is increasingly vital for personal survival (info breeds info) while simultaneously producing mediocrity. Power in the new world capitalist order is shifting to control and manipulation of the immense flow of information, up until recently a vital resource but now a post-Orwellian system of indoctrination, propaganda and sensationalism.

Printed independent media such as the *Times Eagle* and the recently resurrected *Hipfish* (a common trait among periphery press is to either revive from a few deaths or succumb forever) must keep popping up because they are not simply fringe publications but are more cogently the incubation of American journalism — and the more castrated and monopolized the mainstream media becomes (a painfully long and insipid form of oblivion), the more necessary for small self-reliant (noncentralized) publications and media to flower.

Mainstream media focuses on its own self-made celebrities — and the smarmy notion that when the camera is not on you in the USA, you disappear as though you don't exist. On the other hand, an independent radio station like Astoria's *KMUN* draws a wideranging pool of very intelligent and creative members of the surrounding community — non-celebrities who



FARZAHN KAMALI, 'PORTRAIT OF THE PUBLISHER' (1982)