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Sale Raises Hopes for Reviving The Village Voice

OCT. 16, 2015

Big City

By **GINIA BELLAFANTE**

Over the past century, ever since Dorothy Payne Whitney provided the financial backing to create The New Republic in 1914, some of the country's most distinctive left-leaning journalism — intellectually ambitious, literary, highly opinionated — has been dependent on the generosity of the legacy class, heirs and heiresses who were often immune to the crude impositions placed by the hunger for profit. This has been true of subsequent (albeit not current) iterations of The New Republic, The Nation (owned in part by Katrina vanden Heuvel, the granddaughter of Jules Stein, a founder of MCA Inc.) and Harper's, which exists today because of the support provided by John R. MacArthur, through his family's foundation, for more than 30 years.

Given these investments, it was welcome news to learn this week that Peter D. Barbey, a Pennsylvanian with an inherited fortune derived from clothing and textile businesses, had bought The Village Voice with the goal of returning the newspaper to its central position, long since vanished, in the city's cultural firmament. When the purchase was announced, many New Yorkers may have found it a revelation to hear that The Voice still existed at all. Founded by Norman Mailer and others in 1955, the paper was, to Mr. Mailer's mind, meant to stand as

an outrage rather than a success, to “give a little speed to that sexual and moral revolution which is yet to come upon us.” Mr. Mailer quit early on in a tirade over a copy-editing mistake in one of his pieces — “nuance” had become “nuisance” — but The Voice went on to enjoy a protracted reign of excellence stretching into the late 1990s.

The digital revolution, changes in ownership, mismanagement and round after round of layoffs rendered the predictable tragedies. During later years, the business model, essentially reliant on lewd classifieds, could no longer sustain itself; sex and sexual provocation were readily available all over the Internet. In this way the demise of The Voice has much in common with the fall of Playboy, which announced recently that beginning next year it would no longer feature pictures of naked women — there was little point.

The question of whether The Voice can reclaim its earlier importance lends itself to a negative answer. There is too much media now, too much commentary and criticism, which along with the paper’s reporting on the city at the hands of icons like Wayne Barrett supplied the great joys of reading The Voice. What could possibly stand out now?

The Voice was born, and survived for a very long time, during a period in which downtown was a demographically distinct designation. Now comparisons between Greenwich Street and Park Avenue are like comparisons between one kind of \$8,000 refrigerator and another. The passion for argument that animated so much of intellectual life in New York, especially in the pages of The Voice, during the mid- to late 20th century — over abstraction in art and poetry, over postmodernism — was long ago replaced by a taste for pugnacity that too often has lacked any semblance of authenticity (witness the political trajectory of Donald J. Trump).

We might step back further and ask what remains of any currency attached to intellectual life in the city. The cult of money increasingly threatens to obscure the cult of anything else. The glory years of The Voice correlated with a period in which status had many variations beyond what was manifest in acquisition. By the early

1980s, the eminent investment banker Felix Rohatyn was a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books*, which was born within eight years of *The Voice*. It is hard to imagine a young Wharton graduate headed to Wall Street today with the same extracurricular agenda.

Mr. Barbey has said little about his plans other than that he is committed to great writing. While that might sound hopelessly naïve, it was what made *The Voice* so essential at a time when New Yorkers still had many more newspapers at their disposal. *The Voice* had an institutional sensibility (though not without its inconsistencies), but it did not deploy the tone and language of a collective mind. Writers stood out for the singularity of their prose, for their particular offenses and defenses, obsessions and hatreds, and as veterans are eager to tell you, they were given license to express themselves as they saw fit.

Blanche McCrary Boyd, who wrote for *The Voice* beginning in the late 1970s, recalled in an interview that she had once turned in a piece about stock car racing in South Carolina that was quite long. Her editor called, she continued, and told her, “‘I think you wrote something really remarkable but we’ll have to cut it by 30 percent.’ Later, she said, ‘We’ll have to cut it by 10 percent.’ And then, in the end, she cut 5.” When Ms. Boyd was offered a chance to write for *The Atlantic*, she said, and was told that she couldn’t use some of the verbiage she had used in *The Voice*, she told them she had no interest.

In a sense, *The Voice* championed the personal brand long before personal branding, however vulgar the term, began to seem crucial to one’s success as a writer. *The Voice* set careers on courses that could not be mistaken for one another, at a time when bylines in many conventional publications were virtually interchangeable.

If it can recreate the formula of turning lively, brilliant, chaotic minds upon the subjects that fascinate them, and give those writers the time to produce pieces that the dictates of web journalism can’t provide, then it may be well suited to a digital-era renaissance. As Leslie Savan, the longtime advertising critic at *The Voice* put it to me: “*The Voice* was my best voice as a writer. I never found that

voice again.”

Correction: October 16, 2015

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article referred incorrectly to the building at 36 Cooper Square. It is no longer the headquarters for The Village Voice.

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A version of this article appears in print on October 18, 2015, on page MB1 of the New York edition with the headline: Reviving The Voice.

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