

January 29, 1999

1935 words.



B Feature

They May Need to Amputate

Now that it belongs to Seagram, will Interscope Records cut off local rockers the Dismemberment Plan?

By Colin Bane

For reasons that go beyond underground integrity and ethics, D.C.'s independent music scene has always, by definition, eschewed the major-label music industry. The do-it-yourself rhetoric of punk rock invariably warns that money corrupts music, that corporate promises are unreliable, that the industry is a capitalist machine bent on commodifying artistic expression. In practice, the indie-vs.-sellout argument has as much to do with real economic pitfalls as it does with the obscurantism of a few idealist rockers.

The members of the Dismemberment Plan have always believed that the argument misses the point; if they could play music their way and make a living at it, then that's what they were determined to do. Early last year, the quirky pop-punk quartet broke with local DIY tradition, leaving DeSoto Records for a two-record contract with Interscope. Even corporate rock's staunchest critics couldn't have predicted the fate that would await the group—less than one year after signing on the dotted line, it is finding that the risks of going corporate are at least as great as the potential riches.

"Making records for DeSoto and playing in underground venues has been a fabulous experience," says Dismemberment Plan singer-guitarist Travis Morrison. "But there are always the basics about wanting to pay rent with your music, and wanting to get out of the swamp of debt that being in a band usually brings."

The band, he says, never expected a major label to show interest in its music. "We kind of figured our music was a little too wacky and left-field, but they kept after us and eventually wore us down," Morrison says. "We saw it as an opportunity to relax the financial burden of our

band, and also to try our music out on different audiences."

In May of 1998, just as the band was putting the finishing post-production touches on its debut Interscope EP, *The Ice of Boston*, executives at Interscope's parent company were buzzing away in a boardroom, working out kinks in the biggest corporate acquisition in the history of the music business. The Dismemberment Plan's full-length album is ready to go, but the band now ranks among the least of the label's new concerns.

Interscope—along with Universal, MCA, Impulse!, Geffen/DGC, Def Jam, and other labels—falls under the umbrella of Universal Music Group (UMG), a global music conglomerate owned by the Seagram Co. UMG owns half of Interscope and is finalizing a deal for full ownership. Until last year, UMG was one of only six major music contenders in the worldwide landscape of media empires, a number that shrank to five in December, when Seagram shelled out \$10.4 billion for the massive music holdings of PolyGram, which includes Motown, Island, A&M, Mercury, Verve, Deutsche Grammophon, Philips, and London.

The deal makes UMG the single biggest music company in the world—UMG will now account for roughly one out of every five albums sold in the U.S. and 23 percent of the global music industry market share—upping Seagram's annual revenue to about \$17.4 billion. The acquisition represents precisely the sort of corporate maneuverings that Dismemberment Plan's indie-rock colleagues might have warned them about.

Here's why: When UMG refers to its "combined musical assets," it means its artists, labels, and back catalogs, but also its CD manufacturing plants, distribution companies, music publishing rights, mail-order music clubs—even concert venues. Seagram owns it all, from the artistic product to the booze it pours at its clubs and concert halls.

In the lexicon of corporate acquisitions, the ugliest part is "restructuring"—when one giant company eats another giant company, a lot of people tend to get fired. The restructuring plan at UMG calls for \$300 million in cuts to the annual operating budget, with a loss of about 20 percent of its combined workforce, effective this month. The individual labels are being grouped together, and the cuts will eventually hit the artists: Interscope, which is absorbing key PolyGram "workforce personnel" such as U2, plans to level its talent roster at 100 bands.

As yet, nobody knows who will and will not make the cut. "There's so much speculation out there that we really don't want to make a comment about what will happen with regard to individual bands," says Bob Bernstein, publicity director for UMG.

When the acquisition was first announced, Bernstein wrote the press release touting UMG's new and improved stable of artists: new additions like Hanson, LL Cool J, Luciano Pavarotti, Elton John, Public Enemy, Boyz II Men, and Blues Traveler. When asked about the future of the Dismemberment Plan, Bernstein claims not to recognize the name; even if he did, his lips are sealed. The media, it seems, like big juicy stories about media takeovers—after an initial surge of bad press about the deal, Bernstein's orders are to keep quiet. "Record companies rarely even release their rosters in the first place, because things are always changing," he says.

The Dismemberment Plan, like other bands of its stature, isn't sure where it will stand in the new regime.

"They don't like anybody to know anything until it's a done deal," says Morrison. Meanwhile, the band's new album, *Emergency & I*, stands in an almost ludicrous limbo. The Dismemberment Plan's music is nothing if not good-humored, and Morrison and his bandmates are trying to remain good-humored as well, as they wait to see what happens.

"There's actually still a pretty good chance for us. Either we'll survive because we're so small, or we'll get cut because we're so small," says Morrison. "Either way, we're just a blip. They don't even know when the new U2 record is coming out. When you get to this level of corporate activity, and you are who we are, it's just kind of an exercise in absurdity. Virtually everybody we knew at the company has been fired."

The future Interscope roster will be a list of superstars: Beck, No Doubt, Nine Inch Nails, Blackstreet, Sheryl Crow, U2, and...the Dismemberment Plan?

Morrison isn't convinced, but he hasn't given up yet.

"I think the label people are smart enough to know that you have to have the little freaky bands, too, to make it work," he says. "It's probably not going to be a McMusic kind of thing, like a lot of people

seem to think. Still, you can always overestimate a business guy in the throes of success."

Part of the Dismemberment Plan's challenge will be to see how its music holds up to a new set of standards in the global marketplace. With two full-length records on DeSoto, a handful of singles and compilation tracks, and a history of extensive touring, the band has developed a strong reputation and done fairly well for itself in the underground music scene. But the major-label music industry has much clearer ways for measuring success: strictly by the numbers.

"I'll never forget, I was out there at Interscope once when we first signed, and on someone's desk there was a stack of those Soundscan reports," Morrison recalls. "You'd look at one page and it would be, like, 'Wallflowers sales in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas: 6,500,' and then you'd turn the page and it's like, 'Clawhammer sales in Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas: 4.' I would love to see a printout of one of those, just for sheer perversity. You know: 'Here's the corporate report of the Dismemberment Plan, and it isn't pretty.'"

The band is clearly not destined for MTV-style stardom, but it will also never be a huge cost liability to the label. Whether the new incarnation of Interscope decides to drop it or not will largely be an issue of tidying up a weird little entry in the ledger. "We don't have some huge contract, so it's not really a big plus or minus to them either way," says Morrison. "The bean counters at UMG probably won't even know what to make of us."

By the Dismemberment Plan's standards, however, The Ice of Boston has already been a huge success. The record has been selling well locally, and the band can barely keep it in stock to sell at shows on the road.

The Ice of Boston EP, produced by local rockers J. Robbins (of Burning Airlines and Jawbox) and Chad Clark (of Smart Went Crazy), features a demo from the as yet unscheduled Emergency & I, as well as one new song and a track from the Resin Records Fort Reno Benefit compilation. The title track was taken from the band's March 1997 DeSoto release, prophetically titled The Dismemberment Plan Is Terrified.

"Whatever...it will all be fine," says DeSoto label head Kim Coletta, shrugging off the takeover's possible implications for the Dismemberment Plan. "It's not like independent music isn't going to

survive this deal. The merger hasn't really intruded on any of our plans."

In 1993, when alt-rock-hungry labels were actively looking for the next Nirvana and the next Seattle, Coletta's band, Jawbox, happened to be one of the most highly regarded bands in D.C.'s flourishing punk scene. She has a unique perspective on the indie-vs.-major label debate: Jawbox's decision to leave the independent blueprint label Dischord Records for a contract with the Atlantic Group stirred up its share of underground disdain, but she never gave up on DeSoto. Coletta has helped Dismemberment Plan through its decision to sign with Interscope, and she still primarily regards it as a DeSoto band. As it did for the major-label Jawbox albums, DeSoto will likely press vinyl editions of *Emergency & I*—vinyl recordings being one of the clearest casualties of music's digital age.

"I think the cultural setting was much different when Jawbox signed," says Morrison. "All kinds of things were presumed for them about their philosophies and their lives just because they had been on Dischord. At the time, there were these notions that bands like Jawbox and Shudder to Think were going to be on the cover of *Interview* magazine or something, even though it was clear that was never going to be the case."

Besides, Morrison adds, he doesn't think speculation on the band's success is very interesting to people anymore. "Most people couldn't care less about what level of success we reach," he says, "and they realize that it's a much more shaded and nuanced decision. It's not like I'll be standing at DCCD watching Faraquet one night and then I'll suddenly vanish and reappear on the TV as some kind of superstar."

Morrison says the Dismemberment Plan has always had one foot in the underground music scene but has never had any real, undying loyalty to the DIY ethic. Like any band worth its chops, the Dismemberment Plan just wants to rock—if not under the aegis of Interscope, then for DeSoto or just about anybody else.

"I wouldn't say that playing underground venues took its toll on us, but we're curious to see how a different crowd would respond to us," says Morrison.

And while Jawbox and Dischord labelmates Shudder to Think took a lot of flak six years ago for deciding to try the majors, Morrison suggests that the stigma has largely dissipated.

At any rate, he's holding out for good news. "We love to play. If everything works out with Interscope—and we really haven't given up on it—they'll cover our budget to go out and tour," says Morrison, considering what it will mean to be on a label with acts like Nine Inch Nails and No Doubt. "We won't personally make a lot of money off the tour, but we won't be in any more trouble when we come back than we were when we left, which seems almost a vulgar luxury after doing it the way we did it before." CP

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February 26, 1999

1347 words.



B Feature

Dial J.

In his eight years performing with the band Jawbox, J. Robbins was never a behind-the-scenes kind of guy. The charismatic rocker had earned his punk pedigree as one in a long line of bassists for the semi-legendary local band Government Issue, and Jawbox's debut at a 1989 gig with Fugazi and Shudder to Think had poised the band at the center of a punk scene that was quickly gaining national attention.

By late 1993, after two albums on Dischord Records and more than 260 live shows, that attention was focused squarely on Jawbox. Robbins and his bandmates—ever-sanguine and eager to make a living off their music—were happy to oblige when Atlantic Records offered them a contract for two albums. Jawbox's 1994 Atlantic debut, *For Your Own Special Sweetheart*, was good enough to quiet fans who had bemoaned its move to a major label, but few people were surprised that the band never materialized as "the next Nirvana." Executives at Atlantic were nonplused, releasing *Jawbox*, the band's 1996 follow-up, only out of contractual obligation on TAG, a doomed boutique label.

It's been two years almost to the day since Jawbox called it quits, and Robbins, whose brief stint in the spotlight didn't suit him, has found a new calling as a producer and studio engineer. If the influence of Jawbox seems ubiquitous on recent records by local and regional bands, it's because Robbins has been at the dials: His studio credits appear on roughly 25 of the most highly regarded indie releases of the past two years.

Robbins' new band, Burning Airlines, has a new record, *Mission: Control!*, out this month and embarks on a U.S. tour in April, but lately his studio work has been attracting the most attention. The emerging "new D.C. sound" has Robbins' touch all over it: Kerosene 454, Bluetip, the Most Secret Method, the Stigmatics, Monorchid, the Dismemberment Plan, Sweetbelly Freakdown, Sleepytime Trio, and

other local rockers all have availed themselves of his services.

"It's been a really good case of getting along personally and aesthetically with some really good bands, as well as word-of-mouth advertising and a little bit of luck," says Robbins. "It's kind of snowballed from there."

Word of Robbins' mastery has spread quickly, attracting national acts like the Promise Ring, Braid, Compound Red, Squatweiler, Four Hundred Years, and Jets to Brazil to Shirlington's Inner Ear Studios, his workbench of choice. Robbins had always wanted to make a living making music. One year ago, with studio projects piling up, he quit his day job and finally settled on a way to make a go of it.

"There's a reason why he's getting so much production work lately," says Travis Morrison, singer and guitarist for the Dismemberment Plan. "He's a fun guy to have around—which is essential, because being in the studio is pretty much like being in a submarine. He brought performances out of us that I didn't think we had in us, pulling us out of our butts without us knowing. He's great about indulging bands and their neuroses about how everything should be."

Robbins, though, has his own neuroses to tend. The pop-culture industry depresses him, even as he creates, engineers, and fine-tunes the music that will become part of its soundtrack. In the studio, behind soundproof acoustic paneling, he tries not to think about anything outside of his craft.

"What intrigues me about the studio process is the idea of songs and records as little worlds that are constructed by artists," says Robbins. "A lot of times, I think the most wonderful production is stuff that's incredibly subtle, doing things that heighten the drama of a song that may even be imperceptible to somebody who's listening."

A producer can either enrich a band's material or ruin it. The Dust Brothers, for example, have been credited for the success of records by Beck and the Beastie Boys; yet the Rolling Stones fingered them for botching tracks on *Bridges to Babylon*. Recording engineer and analog purist Steve Albini has publicly suggested that most producers don't have a clue. Big-name guys, Albini among them, can cost a fortune—upward of \$50,000, by Albini's estimate in his *Baffler* essay "The Problem With Music." But Robbins isn't getting rich off the business just yet.

"Beyond any of the technical stuff, what we were looking for was

somebody to help us get the sounds that would make the band go, 'That's it,'" says John Wall, bassist of the now-defunct Kerosene 454, whose 1995 debut, *Situation at Hand*, was the first record Robbins had a hand in producing. His sole qualifications at the time: He had been in Jawbox, and he was cheap. "He allowed us to work with him, touch the knobs, and pull things around until it got there. We weren't looking to pay somebody to tell us how everything should be," says Wall.

So far Robbins has worked only with bands on independent labels, and he says he learned everything he knows about audio technology and production by watching over the shoulders of the people who worked with Jawbox—Don Zientara ("Around here he's like the patron saint of recording"), John Agnello, Geoff Turner. He dismisses the notion that the bands he's worked with constitute any kind of unified aggregate sound, but acknowledges that his role in the studio is clearly reflected in the records he's produced.

"A record is like a photograph," Robbins

says, referring to the idea that photographs represent objective truth. "But a photograph isn't at all the truth. It's absolutely subjective. Recording and production are the same way—somebody's always making choices about how the songs are presented."

"Suitland High School Theme Song," the first song of the Most Secret Method album *Get Lovely*, begins in degraded, low-fi mono, and then the band comes crashing in spectacularly in full 16-track stereo sound. On an album full of inventive production tricks, this set piece is signature Robbins.

"We make a lot of tapes in our basement with this crappy boom box that sits in the middle of the room. From time to time that box is so crappy that the songs actually sound great on it, and we wanted to try to capture that on the record," says Most Secret Method guitarist Marc Nelson. "As we're explaining all of this to J. in the studio, he pulls out this busted mic that was just completely smashed up. It did the trick."

Robbins calls such moments "happy accidents."

"The most important thing is your ears, and how you imagine things to sound, and how you react to the way things do sound when they're actually in the room or captured on tape," he says. "Serendipity...can be a wonderful thing in the studio."

Mission: Control!—produced by Burning Airlines, recorded by J.

Robbins—sounds a lot like Jawbox at its best. Dissonant guitars, hammering drums, and the lyrical style evoke the later Jawbox material, and the band features two of Robbins' most frequent conspirators: Jawbox's Bill Barbot on bass and Government Issue's Peter Moffett on drums. Robbins' songwriting, like his production technique, pervades the record.

Though the U.S. tour in April will be sandwiched between scheduled studio dates with Qui Vicino and the Promise Ring, Robbins says he's ready to "do the whole rock-band thing" again. And despite all the trouble Jawbox went through, Burning Airlines might still be a choice target for major labels.

But Robbins says he's not particularly interested: "All the things you have to think about in conjunction with being on a major label just don't even appear in Burning Airlines' landscape at all," he says. Burning Airlines is now on DeSoto Records, a local label operated by Barbot and Jawbox bassist Kim Coletta. With Robbins' new stature and tech savvy, the band was able to take all the studio time it needed to get the record just right. "I just don't see what a major label would have to offer that would be worth trading that in," he says. "But you never know—the world is never black-and-white." For the moment, he's content to be the man behind the curtain.

CP

June 16, 2000

1971 words.



Arts Feature

Don't Call Me Leader, Punk

Mark Andersen never wanted to be at the helm of the punk collective Positive Force. But guess what?

By **Colin Bane**

Mark Andersen, historian of the D.C. punk scene, can't keep his thoughts off the past this month. Scouts from Paul Allen's \$100 million Experience Music Project in Seattle have been pestering Andersen's musician friends for artifacts--guitars, picks, fliers, drumsticks, photos--from the heyday of D.C. punk. Photographer Glen E. Friedman's "Fuck You All" exhibition of portraits, including some of Andersen's heroes in the bands Bad Brains, Minor Threat, and Fugazi, is on display in Georgetown's Govinda Gallery until June 24. And Fugazi is helping to represent D.C. at the Smithsonian's American Folklife Festival on the National Mall June 27. This week also marks the 15th anniversary of the first public meeting of Positive Force, the local punk youth-empowerment collective he helped found.

"Let's be perfectly frank...I ain't no youth activist no more," says Andersen, now 40. He's the last of the original members still active in Positive Force, and as countless teenagers and 20-somethings have cycled through the organization and the walls of its communal house in Arlington, he's come to be known as "Granddaddy." He accepts the term graciously--just don't say "leader." Positive Force does not think of itself as having a leader.

Although he's never balked at leadership, Andersen is the type of person who wishes that this article didn't have to be about him. Though he hesitantly holds the helm of the supposedly helmless organization, Andersen is doing everything he can to step away from that role. After 13 years, he has moved out of the Positive Force house, trading up for a 15th Street apartment closer to his office at Emmaus Services for the Aging, at the western edge of the Shaw neighborhood, where he staked out his career in community service.

Punk rock inspired Andersen to activism at a young age, and, like many of the adolescents he's since mentored, he came into his own at the confluence of politics and music. "Punk rock--sorry to be so dramatic, but it's true--punk rock saved my life, and it gave me a life," says Andersen. "I would never minimize the revolution that went on within my life in the summer of '85. I didn't come to Washington to become part of the D.C. punk scene--I came here to grow up and become an adult. But this whole other thing happened."

By Andersen's reckoning, Washington in 1985 was a perfect setting for the making of a politicized punk scene. "The Reagan administration was a great catalyst for political action within American punk communities," he says. "You can't even really conceive of the American punk scene as it exists today without the formative inspiration of Ronald Reagan. There were just so many causes to stand up around!"

But from his perspective, the Washington punk scene was relatively apolitical by 1985. The leftist sentiments of bands like the Dead Kennedys, MDC, and Crass weren't integral to D.C. punk, and the agitation spawned by the punk record label Dischord a few years earlier was on the wane.

Andersen arrived from Montana in 1984 to attend Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies and to groom for a career in foreign service. But D.C. delivered a shock to his small-town system: The extent of race and class segregation startled him. Homeless people were everywhere; one homeless war veteran froze to death in front of the White House during Andersen's first winter here. The punk scene seemed to be in shambles, too: Andersen's first exposure to it came when he went to call his parents to assure them that he hadn't been mugged or murdered and found "Nazi Punk" graffiti on the pay phone. Skinhead violence marred the first shows he attended, and punks were in the news that year for assaulting gay people in Dupont Circle. Andersen felt totally disillusioned; he was not alone.

"I think that summer was a time where people decided to re-energize themselves," says Fugazi's Ian MacKaye. One of his earlier bands, Minor Threat, had dissolved by 1985, but several bands it had inspired were rising. Among them was Rites of Spring, which epitomized the energy Andersen hoped punks would recapture. MacKaye and his friends were eager to quell the violence that had overtaken their scene and to renew the creative spirit that had once driven them. "It was a

pointed decision at the time to give it that name: 'Revolution Summer,'" says MacKaye. "We sort of set our sights on that summer."

A separate group of people, including Andersen, had their own plans for that summer. Andersen had never been a musician, but he believed strongly in the promise of punk rock. He and Kevin Mattson, his now-estranged Positive Force co-founder, envisioned a political organization that would focus some of punk's energy on creative protest and political action. "We were all straining for the next step, and Rites of Spring signaled not only what the next step might be about, but that it was possible," says Andersen.

Many people in the D.C. punk community looked at the early Positive Force with suspicion, since other groups, like the Revolutionary Communist Party, had previously attempted to co-opt and exploit the energy of punk rock. "The history of radical politics in the D.C. punk scene had been a little tortured, and, to be quite honest, Positive Force did have a contingent from the RCP at that time," says Andersen. "I thought, big deal--we also had anarchists, Situationists, young positive punks who just wanted to do something....We had neo-hippie activists, and then you had me--just a total oddball. I'm this graduate student from Montana who's going to school with folks from the Honduran military and the CIA and many of the embassies. I'm sure they all thought I was some sort of spy."

The history of D.C. punk is one of Andersen's favorite topics of discussion, and in 1995, after the spectacle of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" transformed the punk community, he drafted *The Dance of Days*, a book-length history of the local scene. The first chapter is now available online, and the finished version of the book, co-authored by Washington City Paper critic Mark Jenkins, is due out later this year from Soft Skull Press. Folks who know Andersen well, however, will believe that the book is out only when they see it in their hands: Andersen has a tendency to think ahead of himself.

But Andersen's visions do tend to pan out eventually. Positive Force has organized more than 200 benefit concerts and has raised more than \$200,000 for such organizations as the Washington Free Clinic, the Community for Creative Non-Violence, Helping Individual Prostitutes Survive (HIPS), and Justice for Janitors. It has helped to seed and foster dozens of projects, including Simple Machines Records, Food Not Bombs, riot grrrl, D.C. Books to Prisoners, and the DC Show Collective. Most recently, Positive Force has been helping to launch the Arthur S. Flemming Center, a community center in Shaw, with

Emmaus, the Catholic Workers Party, the Hip-Hop Federation, and a half-dozen activist groups and service providers.

Andersen has been barreling ahead with plans for the community center, which will occupy three houses near 9th and P Streets NW, and the buildings' renovations are finally starting to take shape. MacKaye is on board to help run the center's performance space, but he hesitates to discuss the project. "I don't like to talk about the future," he says. "I like to get the shit done, and then we can talk about it. Mark is the plotter--I have no idea how this thing will play out."

A 12-year partnership with Fugazi (in the Washington area, the band plays only free concerts or benefits) accounts for more than half of the money Positive Force has raised; all of it has been given away. The tactic has earned Fugazi the slur "monk rock" and raised suspicion that Positive Force is a communist front.

Although Positive Force has earned the respect of the bands and service organizations it works with, the group has also garnered loads of criticism throughout its history. It's been perceived as a puritanical cult and dismissed as a bastion of isolationist lifestyle politics and political correctness. Andersen admits that the group has made mistakes at times, has been too self-righteous and dogmatic, and has not strayed far enough from its own "punk-rock ghetto." Yet he believes that the group's current projects are on the right track.

There's been dissension within the group as well, and the turnover rate is high (which is not surprising, given its appeal to a young, transient population). According to Andersen, co-founder Mattson, who is now a professor at Rutgers' Center for the Study of Democracy, left the group after its first year because he feared it had become cliquish; he said that he found its countercultural agenda for social change too limited. Andersen is concerned that Mattson's critique might come true--that punk music and youth culture might be co-opted and that Positive Force might become nothing more than an adjunct to the rock industry capital machine. Andersen doesn't think that's the case, but he's certainly wary of the threat.

The organization's biggest hurdle has been overcoming apathy. When Positive Force members take the stage between bands at their benefit concerts to enlighten the masses with political patter, they are as likely to receive "Less talk, more rock!" heckles as to find themselves preaching to the choir. Political activism has fluctuated in the punk scene, and there's still general resistance to the merging of music and

politics. "I don't know how to answer that," says Andersen. "I don't know how you can separate politics and art."

Katy Otto has worked with Positive Force for five years and is one of its most visible members. She was 6 years old in 1985 and came to punk-rock activism straight out of the Nirvana-fueled "alternative nation" rock industry that Andersen has come to abhor. Yet if seniority held any sway with Positive Force, Otto would be No. 2.

"Right now, we have a very young contingent--besides Mark, I've been with Positive Force the longest," she says. Though her band, Bald Rapunzel, is one of the more politically outspoken acts on the current scene, her veteran status with Positive Force at age 21 is a strange concept for her to grasp. Many of the bands she's booked in the past have agreed to participate in the Positive Force anniversary celebration.

"In this upcoming year, I think it's a new and broader Positive Force, with many individual projects run by many individual leaders," Otto says. "Mark has never wanted to be seen as the leader... But at the same time, he has a 15-year history. He's really been a mentor to a lot of people in this community, and when we're trying to set up Positive Force events, people recognize the credibility that Mark's name has."

Andersen takes pride in Positive Force's history, but he laments how little progress society has made over the past 15 years in the areas he's devoted his life to. "I have no illusions about how immense the forces are that we're wrestling with," says Andersen. "But I also have no doubt whatsoever about the power of committed young people, because I've seen it happen. I've seen lives transformed--most of all mine." He says he keeps thinking back to something a friend told him not long ago: The trick to his kind of work isn't to be young and idealistic--it's to be old and idealistic. **CP**

Upcoming Positive Force events include the Fugazi show at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival June 27 and a HIPS benefit with Girls Against Boys and Scaramouche at Black Cat July 7. For more information, contact Positive Force at (703) 276-9768.

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June 18, 1999

1608 words.



Arts Feature

You Can Lead a Horse to Books...

Richard Peabody and Lucinda Ebersole made Atticus Used Books a thriving nursery for the small press. So why does he want out?

By **Colin Bane**

Richard Peabody is puttering around the front of Atticus Used Books & Music, dispassionately straightening the stacks and giving a sort of wild-eyed once-over to everyone who comes through the front door. He's run the cozy used-book store on U Street NW for years (having named it after Titus Pomponius--the ancient Roman writer, publisher, teacher, and bookseller known as Atticus), brandishing his enormous knowledge of books and writers, perpetually grumbling to anyone who will listen, and generally playing the part of a semi-elitist eccentric. When serious readers come into a place like Atticus, they're delighted to find a sourpuss like Peabody tending to the rare-books and specialty sections--a fellow bookworm prepared to kvetch about all things literary. But today, his bookstore-clerk fidgeting comes strictly out of habit. The bookseller has called it quits.

When he's not writing or editing his own projects or dealing with bookstore travails, Peabody passes the time by airing gossip. Peabody's tirades mix the evils of publishing-world machinery with tales of his ongoing battle against the ruffians who have taken to hanging out in the alley behind his store. He always has news of some unfathomable contract granted to yet another undeserving writer, harbors a venomous hatred of the superstores, and casts his critical eye on everything from the declining tastes of American readers to his own irregular customers. It all seems to have finally gotten to him, and now he's handing the reins over to his Atticus partner and longtime co-editor, Lucinda Ebersole.

"The publishing world is like anything else, I suppose--whatever system you're involved in always seems to suck," says Ebersole, who considers herself lucky to be surrounded by books all day and is happy

to take over the day-to-day affairs of the business. "Richard actually has a pretty thick skin about the things you have to deal with in this business. He used to have this album of grating, repetitious organ music that could make my teeth hurt, and if the store got really crowded and he didn't like the people, he'd just turn it on real loud and crank it up till they'd leave," she recalls. "Unfortunately, being your own boss is not always that great, because you also have to take responsibility for everything."

Peabody says that when he ponders his future away from the bookstore, he isn't exactly sure of where he's heading.

"In some ways, it's hard to let go of this," he says, surveying the store. But he should be plenty busy without it. His second novel, *Open Joints on a Bridge*, was published last month by the Argonne Hotel Press, and he's finishing up a novella called *Sugar Mountain* for release in the fall. Between teaching writing courses in the M.F.A. program at Johns Hopkins University and seminars at the Writers Center in Bethesda, Peabody has been interviewing for academic positions across the country. "Other than that, I'm gardening," he reports. "It's much different from slugging books all day."

Among the burdens in his life as a man of letters, he says, running the bookstore has become the most dispensable.

"I think Richard's at that age where he wants to get back to a real life," says Ebersole. "The joke is, he's never had a real life, so we're not sure how he'll make that transition."

Peabody's cranky persona belies his success of late. He and Ebersole just returned from a successful New York release party for the 42nd edition of *Gargoyle*, the literary magazine he co-founded in 1976 (named for the grotesque stone figures grimly observing the world from pristine perches), and, beneath the surface anyway, he seems about as ecstatic as he gets. Peabody now co-edits the magazine with Ebersole and their UK associate, Maja Prausnitz. *Gargoyle's* print run has risen to 3,000 copies, and it recently won a \$75,000 grant from the London Arts Board. The editors plan to use that money to begin publishing twice a year after the next issue; they also have a children's edition and a video issue on the drawing board. With the release last month of *Gargoyle 42* and *Open Joints on a Bridge*, and forthcoming projects piling up, Peabody is anxious to get on with his writing--and, finally, to take a little break, though he does have a way of making things easy on himself.

"Richard and I have developed kind of a good cop-bad cop dichotomy...when we deal with running Gargoyle," says Ebersole, content to let her partner play the good guy for a while. "When he doesn't like a manuscript, he'll tell the person that I was the one who hated it. So now our contributors think I'm the bitch queen of Atticus Books."

The duo has also teamed up in the past to edit the Mondo series, a collection of four anthologies of paeans to Barbie, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean, as well as another anthology called Coming to Terms: A Literary Response to Abortion.

Ebersole, whose novel, *Death in Equality*, was published in 1997, says she takes satisfaction mainly in working with so many writers and getting to see both the wonders and the drivel that get churned out each year.

"For the last fiction issue before he took a break from Gargoyle, Richard read thousands of manuscripts that were all Raymond Carver rip-offs--you know, 'Bob and Susan are bored. They live in Long Island.' Literature is just like everything else: It takes a fashion, and everybody wants to publish that which is in fashion," says Ebersole. "It's why Maggie Estep gets huge advances and Jewel is the best-paid poet in America even though she spelled the names of her 'idols' Bukowski and Tom Waits wrong in her book. But I think in the end, good writing always wins out over fashion," she says, reaching for a hint of optimism, as if to prove that Peabody hasn't rubbed off too much on her.

It was Ebersole who convinced Peabody in 1997 to resurrect Gargoyle from its seven-year hiatus in approximate time for its 20th anniversary, and both agree that a lot has changed in the writing world since 1990. Ebersole says that both the quality of writing they're seeing and the general climate for small-press literary magazines has improved immensely.

"Now we're finally seeing much better stuff coming in," says Ebersole. "Out of necessity, a lot of the vibrant work truly is coming from the small press, because, beyond business, there really is no rhyme or reason to the big publishing houses. If you look at the history of American writing, small press is where everything interesting started: Alice B. Toklas forked over the money herself to finally get Gertrude Stein published. Lawrence Ferlinghetti stapled together copies of [Allen

Ginsberg's] Howl and started City Lights because nobody wanted to publish any of that Beat crap."

Peabody remains curmudgeonly in character even as he talks about the success of Gargoyle, confessing to a touch of the New York envy that he says runs rampant in the local literary scene. But it's the London scene that really has him intrigued, and what he's most looking forward to right now is the magazine's British launch party on June 22 at the Islington International Festival.

"It's going to be a really big deal, because Gargoyle has been doing so much better over there than it's ever done here," says Peabody. "We joke and say it's because they only have a couple TV channels to occupy themselves. But whatever it is, people do read over there."

For all his harsh lamentations about the sad state of the local literary scene, Peabody & Co. have stood loyally by Washington writers. While Gargoyle 42 features a broad span of international writers, the D.C. locals weigh in strongly--the issue includes nonfiction by local language poet Mark Wallace; poetry by Buck Downs, Cathy Eisenhower, Stephen Gibson, Lisa Kosow, E. Ethelbert Miller, Mel Nichols, DJ Renegade, and Alan Spears; and fiction by L.A. Lantz, Joe Martin, Andrea Tetrick, and Jim Williamson.

"I was always interested in publishing sort of unknown and forgotten writers, as well as local writers and new writers," says Peabody. "That's the way it started in 1976, and we've always kept at that. I don't know what we have to do to get people here in Washington to really notice what we're doing, but it's working in London."

He's not sure how to account for the discrepancy--and despite a history of past comments to the contrary, he says he's not willing to totally denounce the American readership just yet.

"I think you have very different audiences in this country now, and there's very little crossover between the slam and open-mike audience, the academic audience, the print audience, and, now, the Web audience," says Peabody. "That's not a bad thing, because it means each has discovered its own audience. I mean, if they can get 800 people in to see a bunch of high school poets slam against Nikki Giovanni at Borders downtown, that's a big deal and that's great. But will all these same people be writing 10 years from now? For a lot of these people, it's trendy--it's a fad. They want to get on a video, and they want to get a CD out. But it's my life, and I know a lot of great

writers who have burned out and quit."

While he's giving up on the bookstore for now, he says he'll never quit the literary life to which he is doomed. "I'm pissed off, but I'm pissed off about a lot of things, and I'm always rambling--which is good for a writer," says Peabody, with a wry smile. "Life is tragic." **CP**

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