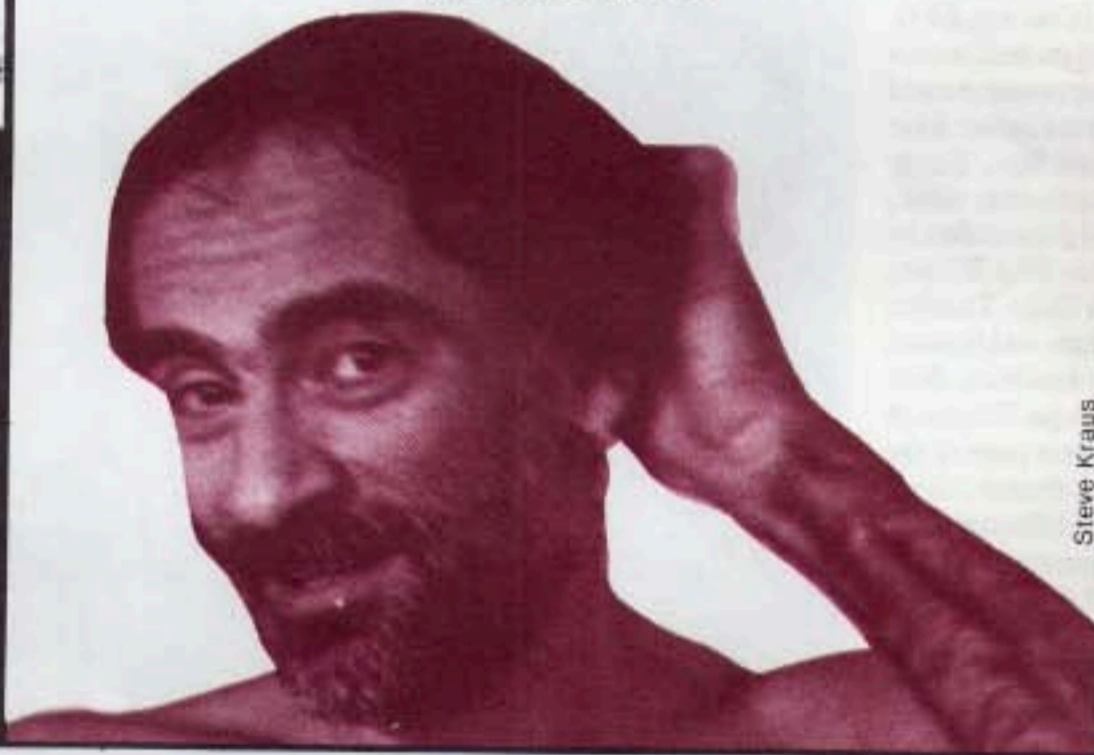


IN THE EAST VILLAGE OTHER



How Green Was My Underground

by Steve Kraus



Steve Kraus

Will Rogers, the late cracker-barrel cowboy philosopher, once remarked that America was the only country in history to ride to the poor-house in a Cadillac limousine. It is also the only country in history to have had an underground press whose product you could buy on thousands of newsstands, an underground press subsidized by the ads of a system it was supposedly out to destroy, an underground press whose brighter stars graduated without any trouble to cushy

jobs in the "pig" over-ground, so-called straight media.

So, before fake nostalgia or glamorous legend sets in, let's get the tape straight. What was it like to work in the underground press? In a word—GREAT! I should know; from 1967 to its still-lamented demise, I was a contributing writer on New York's *East Village Other*, known familiarly to its staff as *EVO*. After that folded I was, for all of its struggling but amusing seven or so issues, a contributor to *EVO*'s

bastard offspring, the *New York Ace*. What did it feel like to be in the "underground" press in New York City in those years? Let's say it out loud: it was a helluva lot of fun! Just drop in on any two ex-*EVO* staffers who have not seen each other for some time. Before you can drop a participle, out come the fond reminiscences, the anecdotes, the stories, growing wilder with each year, that begin with, "Remember when ..."

Why was it so great to be on the *East Village*

Other? Well, for one thing it was a rare opportunity to be on the staff of a paper which was both a product of its time and one of the main influences which made that time what it was. It was exciting, it was exhilarating, it was gratifying to be in the center of things . . . to feel that what you wrote, about some funny and interesting weirdos you just met who were trying to mooch a million dollars from rich people they stalked, or your experiences sniffing the tear gas at peace demonstrations, would be read with wonder and interest and concern by thousands of people you would never meet.

The *East Village Other* was founded by some surrealist, dada-influenced, ex-beat-soon-to-be-hippies in 1965. I was ensconced in my \$30, two room, centrally-heated pad on East 2nd Street and I remember the walls of the neighborhood blooming with posters announcing *EVO's* coming: a large, realistically reproduced eye looking at you, together with some sort of message that a paper was being born. Alan Katzman, Walter Bowart and 'other' started the damn thing. (Katzman once told me that the 'other' referred to one of the many names of Satan.)

The East

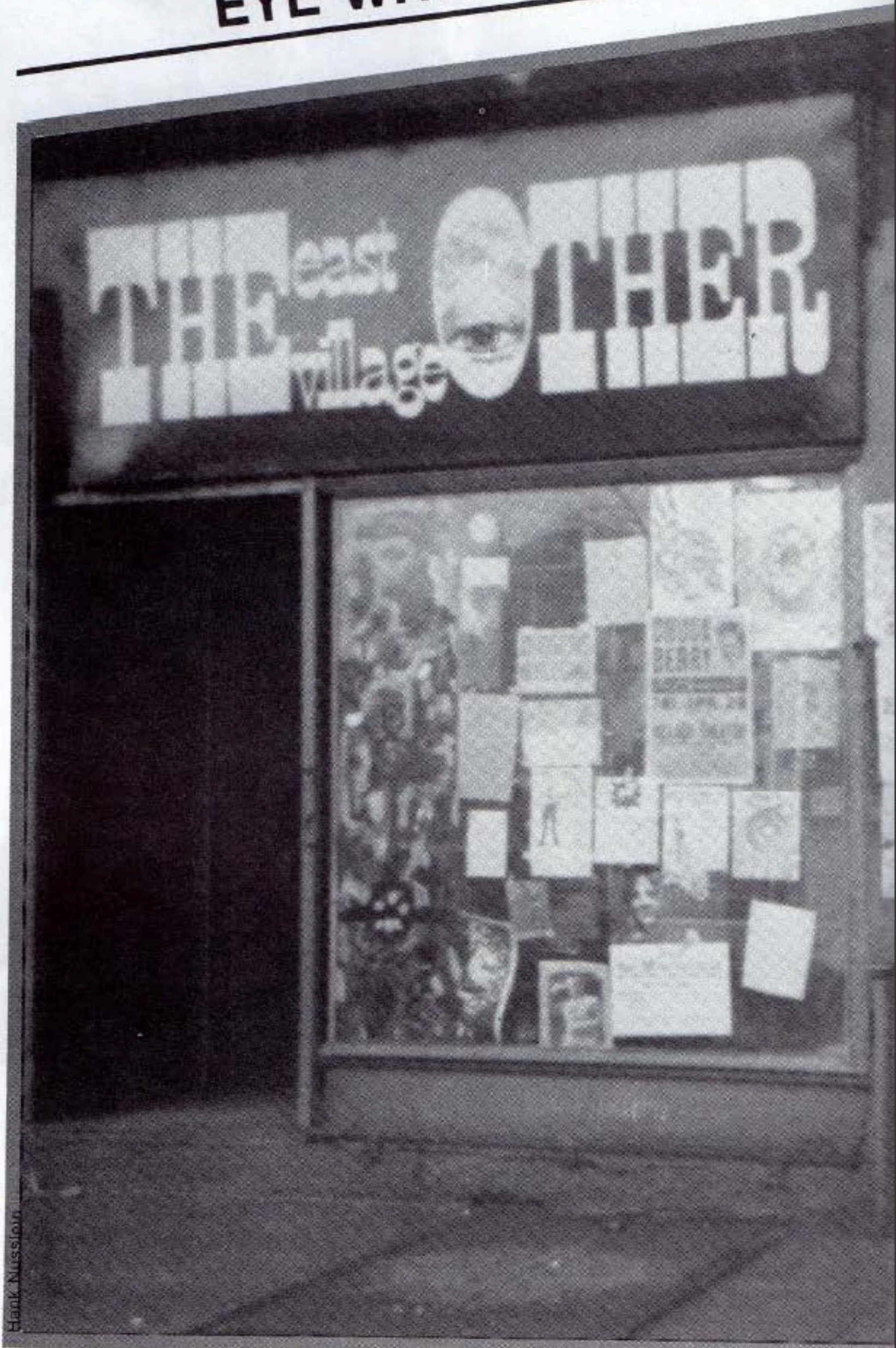
I didn't join the staff till 1967. A girl I was in love with at the time was off to London and parts east for summer. It seemed like a good idea to follow her, so I went around town arming myself with letters of accreditation. (Like a dyed-in-the-scotch true free-lancer, I never used any of them, but it felt good to have them!) One of the publications I dropped in on was *EVO*. By then its publisher had made a deal with a 19th century-type pirate entrepreneur named Roger Euster who had started what later became Bill Graham's Fillmore East. Euster had booked some pretty unorthodox talent, people like Yevtushenko, Leroi Jones before he went to Africa, a still unknown Flip Wilson, and Sarah Vaughn, to his Village Theater. Euster made a deal with Katzman and Bowart; he gave them a large office, a rambling, floor through loft adjacent to the Village Theater, in exchange for the use of the back page of the paper to advertise events in his theater.

My first encounter with *EVO* illustrates the power of chutzpah and/or looseness of the paper. At that time I was still dressing pretty straight—suit, dress shirt, tie and all. Thus attired I walked into the grungy, freak-infested *EVO* offices to ask for a letter of accreditation. Any underground newspaper worthy of its name had at least a couple of speed freaks hanging around doodling endlessly, or bending your ear with some nonsensical speed rap. It

Village

was one of these guys who told me to penetrate the inner office, where Katzman held court over a battered typewriter. I introduced myself and told him that I had written for the U.S. Information Agency, but was willing to write for him too, if he gave me a letter of accreditation.

**CARTOONIST R. CRUMB AROSE
EYE WITH A WELL-AIMED**



The East Village Other office on Avenue A, circa 1967.

AND PASTED FABRICANT IN THE BANANA CREAM PIE



EVO co-founder, Alan Katzman

Not at all taken aback either by my background or my straight appearance, Katzman threw over a piece of *EVO* stationary and told me to write my own accreditation. He then proceeded to sign it.

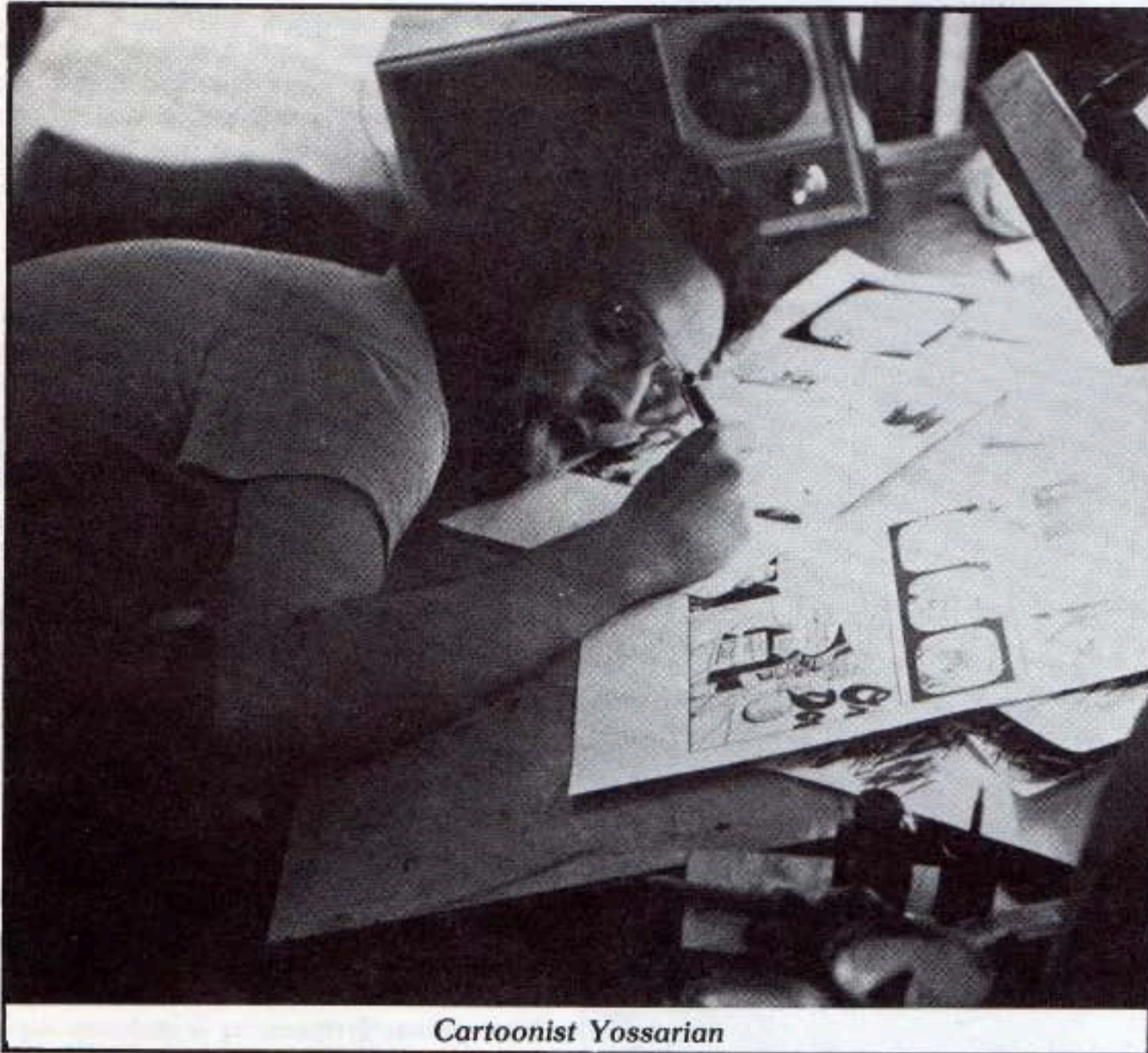
When I returned to New York that fall I started writing for *EVO*, which along with the *Los Angeles Free Press* was among the first to portray the new culture which was sweeping the country at the time. Rock 'n' roll music. Psychedelic art. Dope. Opposition to the escalating war in Viet Nam. Sex. Its graphics were wild, though sometimes making the text unreadable; its language was free, often blasphemous.

Other

In the years that followed I wrote numerous stories, while getting to know my highly individualistic and talented colleagues. Ray Schultz and Dean Latimer were fixtures; not only did they write for the paper, but they literally called it home, sleeping on some of the spavined couches which littered the place. There was Jaakov Kohn, an ex-Israeli freedom fighter whose interviews with the luminaries of the time highlighted nearly every issue. Spain, an ex-biker from Buffalo, contributed his marvelously drawn "Trashman" comic strip, which celebrated violent exploits of his larger-than-life hero as he fought assorted pigs, cops and evil characters. Rudnick and Frawley, together with Charlie Frick, covered the rock 'n' roll scene. There was Alfred, a mysterious, androgynous figure clad in a toga-like garment, who contributed the Copogram, a summary of dope prices. I remember a make-up night which culminated, for some reason, with Alfred's distribution of ounce bags of marijuana to one and all present. (*EVO* make-up nights were something to be remembered. The paper was often put together by people flying high on acid, which contributed mightily to its happy-go-lucky contents and appearance.) There was Jackie Diamond, also known as Coca Crystal, who wrote for the paper, and served as resident Goddess of Beauty. She also served breakfast occasionally to the more impoverished members of the staff out of her East 6th Street apartment.

People

There were other sources of nourishment. One of the emoluments of being involved with *EVO* was the press party; CBS records or Prentice Hall or some other pillar of the uptown media establishment would be launching a new record or author and would send out announcements of a party. The entire *EVO* crew would turn out and could be encountered, yours truly included, around the bar and hors d'oeuvres table, scarfing up the free drinks and the free food with true bohemian gusto. Steve Paul, now the manager of the Winter brothers, ran the chic nightspot, a place called The Scene; since *EVO*ites Frawley and Rudnick



Cartoonist Yossarian

The printers and landlords got tired of going unpaid, and one day the *East Village Other* just up and died

were bartenders there, many a night would find staffers hanging out, drinking on the cuff.

EVO staff meetings, sporadically held, were occasions to remember. Some sort of height was scaled or depth was plumbed, at the historic staff meeting called by Joel Fabricant, who had for some arcane reason become the publisher, to call the staff to order and to introduce some sort of business-like conduct among the contributing geniuses. He shoulda stayed home. Fabricant was in the middle of his peroration and waxing obnoxiously business-like, when cartoonist R. Crumb arose and pasted him in the eye with a well-aimed banana cream pie. Crumb then proceeded to beat a hasty retreat, closely pursued by Fabricant, who had recently taken up the study of judo. Publisher and cartoonist returned to the meeting without much bloody damage to either, but the business like atmosphere of the meeting was irreparably damaged.

EVO could notch several accomplishments, among them the fact that it printed little ads in the classified section in the back of the paper, in

which horny men and women sought each other's company for purposes carnal and lustful. As a matter of fact, it was the first paper to do so, years before *Screw* appeared. (The only other paper to do so at the time was the *National Enquirer*, then in its previous incarnation as a violent, sensational rag.) I did a story on the people who put in the sex ads and found out that not only were the ads for real; they also worked and people got laid out of them!

The Viet Nam war escalated and *EVO*, displaced by Bill Graham, who had followed Roger Euster at the theater, moved to East 12th Street. (The events were not related.) For a couple of years things went on as before. Straight advertisers, such as the movie companies and the records labels, poured in ads; people subscribed and bought the paper on the newsstands to keep in touch with the youth revolution, the dope revolution, and the music revolution. But *EVO*'s days were numbered, even though we did not know it. The paper's very success was its grave-digger. Al Goldstein and Jim Buckley started *Screw* in 1968, and as it

caught on people no longer had to read our back pages to find out about sex. Rock 'n' roll had no more devoted chronicler than Charlie Frick, but out in the West a fresh young upstart called *Rolling Stone* was rearing its head.

The printers and the landlord on East 12th Street got tired of going unpaid, and one day *EVO* just up and died. Jaakov Kohn, by then the editor, and his son Steve who had contributed art direction, saved a bit of equipment and a couple of files. These were moved to a tiny room in the offices of a law commune on lower Broadway, amidst threats to resume publishing in the near future. These did not materialize. Much of the staff went along with Bob Singer and Rex Weiner to put out the *New York Ace*. As good as it was, the *Ace* failed to catch on (but it did throw some good parties.)

By late 1972 New York City did not have an alternative newspaper. The perverts had *Screw*; what the top brass of the New York City Police Department read I do not know. Frank Serpico, the heroic corruption-fighting cop whom I interviewed for *EVO*, once told me the top cop brass read every issue of the paper for its revelations about the NYC-PD secret subversion fighting unit. The rest of us were on our own once again. But if you want to get together to start another paper, let me know. I am ready. ■