H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Kindman. *My Odyssey through the Underground Press.* Edited by Ken Wachsberger. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011. xx + 206 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-61186-000-9.

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Published on Jhistory (August, 2012)
Commissioned by Heidi Tworek

My Odyssey through the Underground Press

Social movements of the Sixties–a cultural era often said to have begun in the 1950s or even 1940s and to have continued until nearly the mid 1970s–gave new voice to a variety of groups that previously had been marginalized in U.S. society.[1] During this period, as Abe Peck writes, "War, racism, class, nationalism, the environment, sexuality, the nature of consciousness, culture, work, lifestyle–all were radically, substantially, sometimes explosively reconsidered."[2] Alternative newspapers and magazines were key components of this reconsideration, as Peck and other scholars–including John McMillian in *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (2011)–have documented.

Since the 1970s, a number of books and articles–including Sean Stewart's *On the Ground: An Illustrated Anecdotal History of the Sixties Underground Press in the U.S.* (2011)–have given voice to the people who produced these alternative American media. Rarely, however, has a single alternative media producer shed light on as many movements of the Sixties as Michael "Mica" Kindman in his posthumous memoir *My Odyssey Through the Underground Press.* In a book edited by Ken Wachsberger as one of four volumes in the Voices from the Underground series, Kindman, who died in 1991, recounts his involvement in student protests, an autocratic urban religious commune, the back-to-the-land movement, the men's movement, and gay liberation. As Kindman was either a creator of, contributor to, or acute observer of the media of all these struggles, his book will be useful to historians of both alternative media and social movements.

The first three chapters of the book chronicle Kindman's transformation into, in Wachsberger's words, "a legend of the Vietnam era underground press" (p. xv). The story begins in 1963 when he arrived at Michigan State University (MSU) from Long Island, one of nearly two hundred National Merit Scholarship winners wooed by MSU that year to improve the school's reputation. A journalism major, Kindman quickly found a job on the copy desk of the campus daily, the *Michigan State News*, and moved up to co-editor of the editorial page. He grew increasingly disillusioned, however, with "unexciting" journalism courses "taught by traditional faculty with a heavy commitment to what we have since come to know as the 'myth of objectivity"' (p. 5).

In 1964, he moved toward activism, becoming involved in an MSU activist group called the Committee for Student Rights, participating in the Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march in Alabama, and being placed on social probation for cohabitating off campus with his girlfriend. The next year, when staff members at the *State News* were told they must adhere to a policy of having "no loyalty above the *State News,*" Kindman quit (p. 8). With his girlfriend, Carol Schneider, and housemate Larry Tate, he started a new weekly newspaper called the *Paper*. (Issues are archived at http://www.msupaper.org.) Kindman served as editor of the new publication, which critiqued the administration and the university's connections to the war in Vietnam, battled for campus distribution rights, and jabbed at the *State News*, publishing seventeen issues in 1965-66.

Over the next two years, circulation of the *Paper*, which was produced largely from Kindman's various homes, grew to 5,000. Staff and volunteers "numbered in the dozens" (p. 21). The *Paper* directly inspired the creation of at least one other campus alternative newspaper, the *Rag* at the University of Texas Austin. But the stress of running a weekly publication for several years–while experimenting with psychedelic drugs and discovering bisexuality–left Kindman ready for a change.

One night in winter 1968, "in an LSD-induced haze" (p. 37), the author and a new girlfriend, Candy Schoenherr, left East Lansing and hitchhiked

to the Boston office of the *Avatar*, a counterculture newspaper begun in 1967 that Kindman had admired from afar.[3] (Some text and covers are available at http://www.trussel.com/lyman/avatar/avatar.htm.) The newspaper was published under the auspices of the Fort Hill Community, a loose urban commune led by folk musician and self-styled "world savior" Mel Lyman, a former member of the Jim Kweskin Jug Band.[4] (Three years earlier, at the Newport Folk Festival, Lyman had became a popular music icon after using a twenty-minute solo harmonica version of "Rock of Ages" to calm a crowd of folk purists disgruntled by Bob Dylan's use of electronic instruments)[5]. Kindman and Schoenherr were welcomed into the cult-like Lyman Family but soon were "reduced emotionally to childlike conditions by the complexity of the life and subculture we had stumbled upon" (p. 47).

Both initially worked at the *Avatar* offices, Kindman on layout (though he is credited as being "managing editor" in the staff boxes of two issues) and Schoenherr as a typist.[6] Soon, however, Kindman writes, the South End staff that produced the newspaper clashed with the Roxbury-based commune over control of the content. A legal fight resulted in the South End group publishing a few more issues of a standard alternative newspaper called the *Avatar*, while commune insiders began putting out four issues of a magazine called *American Avatar* (see archives at http://www.trussel.com/lyman/amerav.htm#amav1) that featured Lyman's religious ramblings and images of the Fort Hill Community. Although Kindman never seems to have gotten close enough to Lyman to be allowed to help produce *American Avatar*–he writes that he "never found the secret" of moving into the group's inner circle–he does provide detailed accounts of its content (p. 89).

Kindman remained with the main Fort Hill group or its New York City outpost for four years, recounted in chapters 4 through 14, losing Schoenherr's affections to a higher-status group member; proselytizing, reuniting with, and breaking up with his old girlfriend, the *Paper* co-founder Carol Schneider; learning construction and other jobs to bring in money for the commune; and being assigned to sell *American Avatar* at Woodstock, where he wound up directing traffic in the rain and mud. He left the community, he writes, only after angering Lyman by beating him at cards and being given a choice: stay and be demoted in his workgroup or leave immediately. Kindman chose the latter and hitchhiked west.

Kindman did not make a complete break from Lyman's influence, however. He eventually landed, as chapter 15 recounts, at a Kansas farm where members of the Fort Hill group were attempting to build a rural outpost. Again, Kindman became entangled in a community that controlled his life–at one point, he writes, he was assigned to move in with a female commune member and care for three children newly arrived from Boston–leaving only after he was beaten in a bizarre confrontation.

Kindman wound up in San Francisco's Mid-Peninsula suburbs, where his sister lived, and returned to the activism of his college years, which is recounted in the final four chapters of the book. While working construction, he spent his free time volunteering with a peace-oriented men's group, a rural commune known as The Land. The men's group produced a page of content for an alternative community newspaper called the *Grapevine*, for which he both wrote and sold advertising. He also began to explore the gay scene.

Although during part of this time he lived with a woman who supported his sexual exploration, they eventually parted and he began to live as a gay man. He adopted the name "Mica" and became active with the "Radical Fairies," a group of "spiritually seeking and politically active" gay men (p. 174). An afterword by member Steven S. Muchnick describes how Kindman helped the group acquire land and, at some points, published its newsletter, at that time called *Nomenews*. Kindman found out in 1988 that he was HIV positive and that the diagnosis had progressed to full-blown AIDS. "I don't feel ready to declare the 'eventual outcome' of my life and circumstances," he writes, "But there is no doubt that all this experience has added up to something" (p. 188).

As a memoir of the "long Sixties," Kindman's book is fascinating as it encompasses almost the entire length of that era. The book's editor, Wachsberger, worked on an East Lansing publication that was a successor to the *Paper*. After he initially commissioned a chapter by Kindman for the first edition of a volume about the Vietnam-era underground press, he commendably recognized that Kindman's story, which he finished just before his death, deserved its own book.[7]

The minor shortcomings of the book for scholars are those common to memoir. Dates of events occasionally are reported, with the understandable fuzziness of memory, as "within a few weeks" (p. 73) or "during this period" (p. 145), requiring the reader to look back to the most recently cited month or year to determine what happened when. The focus of the book also necessarily reflects what seemed important to Kindman at the

too-early end of his life. Scholars of the campus alternative press, the San Francisco-area alternative media of the 1970s, and the gay liberation movement may wish that the book had contained more information about the *Paper*, the *Grapevine*, or the (variously spelled) Radical Fairies, and less about Kindman's involvement with Lyman's cult.

The considerable space the book devotes to the Fort Hill Community will be extremely useful, however, to scholars of alternative religious movements of the Sixties and is understandable, given the profound impact those years had on Kindman's life. The book indicates that long after Kindman was living in California, he continued to think of and reach out to Lyman (the book includes correspondence between the two from 1977, the year before Lyman's death), Schneider, and other Fort Hill members. As Kindman writes, recalling a letter he wrote to the group in 1986, "I couldn't seem to get beyond the nostalgia … and was a bit horrified to find myself thinking so kindly of those people and that place…. Like so many attempts at communication that preceded it, it elicited no response whatsoever. But it was quite healing for me in my own process" (pp. 182-184).

Notes

[1]. Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c. 1958-c. 1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2]. Abe Peck, *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press* (New York, Citadel Press, 1985), xiii.

[3]. David Felton, "The Lyman Family's Holy Seige of America," *Rolling Stone*, December 23, 1971, 40-60.

[4]. Mel Lyman, *Autobiography of a World Savior* (New York, Jonas Press, 1966). Available at http://www.trussel.com/lyman/savior.htm.

[5]. Josh Frank and Charlie Buckholtz, *In Heaven Everything is Fine: The Unsolved Life of Peter Ivers and the Lost History of New Wave Theatre.*(New York: Free Press, 2008), 72.

[6]. "Issue No. 22," *The Avatar*, March 29, 1968, http://www.trussel.com/lyman/avatar/av22.htm, and "Issue No. 23," *The Avatar*, April 12, 1968, http://www.trussel.com/lyman/avatar/av23.htm.

[7]. Ken Wachsberger, ed., *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam Era Underground Press* (Madison, WI: Incredible Librarian Books, 1993).

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Citation: Susan Keith. Review of Kindman, Michael, *My Odyssey through the Underground Press.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. August, 2012.
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