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The Left Bank Collective

An interview in two parts

Jason McQuinn

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The Left Bank Collective
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1994

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(Phone: 206-632-5870), which is also the address for AKA Books. Left Bank Books is located at 92 Pike St., Seattle, WA 98101.

Russell first volunteered at Left Bank in the early '80s, unsatisfying experience, a lot of ideological debates, not a particularly friendly place at that time, reinvolved in the later '80s when he became interested in printing and publishing things himself, and heard LB had a press.

He started volunteering again, LBB was having problems, a lot of volunteers joined and put more energy into it making it more solvent.

Co-publishing the new edition of Revolution of Everyday Life with Rebel Press in England, ought to be available at an affordable price very soon. A new introduction, a revised translation, with a new cover by Cliff Harper.

Co-publishing with Autonomedia the new Drunken Boat anthology of anarchist art and aesthetics, and working on a book of poetry by a late Seattle poet, a number of pamphlets. Hope to get the Left Bank printing press operable this year. Looking for manuscripts (with a SASE), ideas, and especially proposals for co-publishing (Russell: "a good cooperative way to get things out" "Autonomedia has really taken the lead in doing that...At this point they're the most exciting publisher of materials. They take a lot of risks, a lot of chances.")

"I think collectives are experiments within society"

Catalogs are free!!

"I really think that the freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press. And in the same sense, an extension of that is to those who are able to distribute their own books, too."

-Russell Puschak

more accessible, and you can make something that's readable easier now than ever before. Of course, a lot of times people make junk. But I think there's a lot of great stuff out there."

Kent : "And for people who are interested in starting up new projects, don't hesitate to ask other people who are already doing things. I think a lot of people who are already doing things sometimes feel very alone...but there's a lot of people out there with a lot of information and the more that is shared the better."

Russell : "And I hope that people see the value in this kind of communication. Sometimes I'm a little bit skeptical, given the TV sort of mindset,...that people sit down and actually read periodicals and read books. But I think that there is still a tremendous amount of interest in valuable material and I really hope that more and more people continue to pick up on the kind of publishing, alternative press projects that have been started in the last ten years.

And again, you're always welcome to try to call and talk to us. If we have some time, we can try to send you some information. You can call and ask to talk to Kent, or myself, Russell, Noreen, Linda. We have a lot of day to day contact with different publishers and different bookstores. And often, like when someone's starting up a project in New Jersey or Washington as has just happened in the last year, I'll say, well talk to Wooden Shoe in Philadelphia. They've been doing it for many years. Go down there. Visit them. See how they're doing it. See if you like their system...Don't be afraid to ask...That's the only way you're going to find out anything.

We at Left Bank have gone through ups and downs financially. And five years ago the retail bookstore was not doing well and we had to really struggle along asking and finding out things for ourselves. And I'd like to share that information. We found out how to build up our inventory, how to better manage our money and that kind of stuff...

Left Bank Distribution has a brand new catalog available for free from: 4142 Brooklyn Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98105

Part 1: Alternative books and zines in Seattle

The Left Bank Collective

Interview by Jason McQuinn

Alternative Press Review, Spring/Summer 1994

In late January several Left Bank Collective members took time out to talk for this APR interview. The Left Bank collective—originally organized to run the Left Bank Books store located at the Pike Place Market next to the downtown Seattle waterfront—celebrated its 20th anniversary in August, 1993. The collective's work is now spread out between the original downtown bookstore (selling new and used books), AKA Books (selling a wide selection of used books in the university district), Left Bank Distribution ("the largest provider of anarchist and independent radical books in North America"), and the Left Bank publishing project (with books including John Zerzan's *Elements of Refusal* and Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*). In addition, Left Bank has been intimately involved in the creation and maintenance of a national Books To Prisoners project, and most recently with the opening of the Black Cat Cafe, a collectively-run vegetarian restaurant.

I spoke primarily with long-term collective members David Brown, Kent Jewell and Russell Puschak while I was in Seattle. Most of our discussions are included in the following pages. We began by talking about the Left Bank Distribution project, before moving on to discussion of the bookstores and other aspects of the collective.

Russell Puschak : "In the last year it's been very exciting to see a sort of mini-explosion of radical bookshops, or infoshops as they're now called, around the country...They're springing up all over now, which is really a great thing, and it hasn't happened for quite a few years, I guess. And we've been very interested in supporting these projects. In fact many of them have reported to us that we're the only book distributor that has given them credit in the United States at this time. We try

to establish personal relationships with the people, get people to accept responsibility for the books, and then try to work out payment plans and help them. Because we know how difficult it is to develop an inventory with the price of books these days.”

David Brown : “Since we have our own stores we know only too well what the other end of it’s like.”

Russell : “We also encourage people to start distribution networks.”

David : “And publishing. I mean that’s been the other end of it. You see so many small radical presses, with just a few titles and no way to get them out.”

Kent Jewell : “And that can be seen in just the last few years, we’ve more than doubled the number of titles that we carry [in Left Bank Distribution]. And that doesn’t include just books, but there’s a great increase in the number of magazines and zines, and other things out there, too.”

Russell : “Within the last year I can think of five or six bookshops or infoshops that have started up, which doesn’t sound like a lot, but in terms of the radical book world, I think it’s a significant amount.”

Kent : “Especially considering what’s happening in places like Britain, where the number has gone downward. At least in the U.S. it’s gone upward.”

Russell : “I think our most crucial function is to serve as a supplier of books for these things that are just starting out, and to really try to assist them. We also provide them with the knowledge to develop an inventory system if they request it, how to pay people properly, how to get information out to other publishers, how to supplement what we see as a successful radical bookstore with used books, and perhaps not just remaining ideological in narrowly defining political books as books that are about politics, but that there’s radical literature, there’s radical magazines, there’s radical fiction,...all kinds of things that tie in. And I think the days where a bookstore could survive as a political bookstore are gone. Now it’s very marginal. It’s a very

sell as well. We’re very small. We care a lot about the books that we carry. We’re passionate about them. And when people grow bigger, they seem to care less about what they have and more about the bottom line, and dropping out the things that don’t sell. And we think, you know, if there are more small distributors, with people who care about what they’re carrying, they’re not just going to drop them without knowing what they are just because they don’t sell.”

David : “Well, some small distributors, they can have their whole stock in their garage, and it doesn’t cost them nothing. Or it’s in a bedroom, or it’s in a bathroom, or in a closet. But since they don’t have this huge overhead they carry the stuff because they think it’s important. They want it. And then the question of size is something that somebody like ourselves, we have to look at ourselves every once in awhile and say, why are we doing this? How big are we getting? And is this the direction we want to go? And I think the fact that we encourage other distributors is important, because it keeps the pressure off of us to try to do everything. We can’t do everything. There’s no way. And I don’t think we want to. Eventually I think we’d lose sight of our own interests and goals if we tried to keep growing and be all-inclusive. We have to pick areas of our interest. And the best thing to do is to have a multiplicity of these distribution networks, kind of like an Internet of distributors. All kinds of people doing all kinds of different things, and when you connect them all and look at them from a larger view you can see how they’re all working together even though they’re doing different things.”

Russell : “I encourage people to start their own publications, become their own publishers and their own distributors. And it’s more accessible now than ever before. Although I have some skepticism about computers, what I really see as valuable is that you can typeset things yourself and get them out there, even if you don’t own a computer, through public libraries or borrowing your friend’s, of something like that. So it’s a lot

and-forth, rather than towards a top, a pinnacle, or working up a ladder. You can cross-fertilize that way. You can share stuff that way. You can't share in a hierarchy. The higher you get up the ladder the less you share. Somebody else takes it over. Somebody else controls it. Or, simply, it becomes a power structure and those people who have power begin to wield it and it doesn't matter what you want at the bottom. You have no say. They shut you out. Or things get so distorted and so weird that you can no longer participate. You just become alienated from everything. And hopefully by sharing or interlocking in a non-hierarchical system there's some chance for survival. There's some chance to have some effect and meaning in what you do."

Russell : "And when the distributors get bigger and bigger, they have more and more bills to pay, and the larger publishers they take on, say for instance Bookpeople and Inland, they're going to pay the people that are huge and powerful, who have a lot of books first. And that this is really what's happening. Over the last few years I've been talking to a lot of publishers, and what they say is that it's real hard to get money out of these places, not that they're intentionally stiffing them, but you're going to give the money out to your largest corporate people that are threatening to cut you off first, because you turn over a lot of those books and you make money from them. But one of our things at Left Bank Distribution is we try really hard to pay everyone at the same time. Whether we're distributing twenty of your books, or you're just starting out with one zine, the way the computer system that Dave has set up works, is that we'll pay you at the same time. We write the checks for the three zine copies that sold, at the same time we send it to the small press publishers that have more titles."

Kent : "One of the things that we've also noticed, is that some distributors, once they get bigger, start looking at the bottom line more...Once they get bigger, from our experience in running retail store, they tend to start dropping things that don't

different kind of thing. You really can't. You have to provide a diverse list of reading materials for people."

Kent : "And in a sense we're lucky because a lot of these things we've learned, we've learned the hard way. Because we run a used bookstore, a new and used bookstore, and distribution. So we get to see a lot of different angles to things and that helps us out with our distribution. You know, we can provide answers to people maybe better than other distributors, because we're also retail booksellers. So we realize what kind of tips and breaks you might need if you're just starting out."

David : "Yeah, or what kind of books, or what titles, because we know why books are selling out of our shops for specific reasons quite often. A lot of people are just starting up and need suggestions, or they're ordering things, they have no idea what they're doing exactly, and you can see it. They're just beginners. Clearly, you can tell them that ordering twenty copies of this pamphlet isn't a good idea, whereas you should try twenty copies of this one. Right now the Open Pamphlets are doing very well, whereas the other pamphlets...you just need a couple."

Russell : "One of the problems with distribution, and how people see distribution is basically, that we wouldn't be surviving if it wasn't for volunteer help at this time. Although some of us are paid, volunteer help is crucial. The workload is immense and it's very hard to survive distributing books and pamphlets. If we didn't have the assistance of the used bookstore at the same spot, it would be difficult to see if we'd be able to float by this time. And the assistance we've given to people is pretty much if they've asked. Or if we can, we've talked about developing some kind of material that we can hand out like "How to organize your radical bookstore, or your shop. But we haven't yet done that, and it's pretty much just people writing letters or asking us, and we try to assist them that way. Also with some of the new bookstores that have started up we've assisted them by giving donations of books and materials, just sending a care

package of radical stuff if we can, although I've found that as more and more of them start, we have less and less resources to be sending out care packages as frequently as we were before. But there definitely is a need and desire for this information to get out to people, and one other thing that is going on is tabling projects, too...Maybe eight to ten."

David : "Some of them are just hit and miss. They're one time. You know somebody's doing a conference and they say we'd like to carry a bunch of books. In fact we do tabling locally ourselves but you never know, it's erratic. You never know what's coming up. It's a situation that looks good for us, and also it's volunteer, so we have to have the energy to do it, and the people. But sometimes they come to us and say they'd like to have certain books and we supply them. We give them the books."

Russell : "BobbEE in Olympia has also just developed a relationship with a bookstore, which is something people can try if they're interested. If you see there's a bookstore that's an independent in your neighborhood or your city, and they don't carry the kind of books that you're interested in seeing there, what he has done is he's approached them and said, 'Look, I'll take responsibility for getting the books—ordering them, getting them in there—and you can sell them, I know they'll sell because there's a demand out there.' And a lot of times bookstores are skeptical. 'I never heard of T.A.Z. or all this kind of stuff.' And what he does is puts them on the shelf and he basically does it as a labor of love to get the books out, because he makes like 5 or 8% off of it. He just wrote us a letter, and he's been doing it for a year, and he's sold quite a few hundred dollars worth of books, but he's made \$40 total off of it. But it is a way to get books out there, and a way to get experience working in bookstores."

Jason : "What kind of help can you provide for zine, magazine and book publishers?"

Russell : "Well, actually, we've just made a few decisions within the last few months about zines, and alternative peri-

Kent : "So one of the dilemmas is, since there are more small presses, and there's a lot more radical publishing going on, is making sure that those books can get out to small towns and rural areas in the U.S. because a lot of the big chain stores in major cities, they're not going to carry any of the small press stuff, etc. Nor do the big distributors. So it's good to see a lot of small distributors like ourselves, like Desert Moon and Fine Print doing magazines and stuff. But there's a lot more small distributors so that's really good."

And there's been a growth in mail-order and I think that will only increase in the computer age and having more zines put out there, as people in rural areas can be more hooked up to what is available to them through mail-order. Because they're not going to find it in their local, small-town bookstore."

Russell : "I really think that the freedom of the press belongs to those who own the press. And in the same sense, an extension of that is to those who are able to distribute their own books, too...If you look back at the sixties from what I've been able to see (and other movements, too), the larger things become, and the more that radical publishers hand over their books to people that don't have the same goals as them, the more danger you have of getting swallowed up by them, or getting stiffed by them in a payment sort of way. And I'd like to see, from my own perspective, my own hopes and goals are, that we can develop more and more independent, radical distribution networks around the country. And that's one of the things we have helped start and are encouraging people to start themselves. The more that it's spread out and decentralized, the better off we'll be."

David : "Interlocking, rather than the larger ones that are sort of hierarchically oriented. You have these huge distributors and these huge chains, and it's just this huge hierarchy. But you really want to get away from that and develop a sort of a flat interlinking where people are constantly talking back-and-forth, or moving back-and-forth, or making contacts back-

economy. Particularly like for people we've had for years, quite often people who can put in a lot of time, say, people who are on welfare or unemployment. And as the economy's tightened up fewer and fewer people are able to donate large amounts of time. We don't have people who say, 'I can put in two days a week, because I do this or I do that.' It's more and more people who have to work other jobs constantly and who don't have the luxury of time that they used to."

Jason : How do you get new people to volunteer? Are you always encouraging people? Or do people just come and hear about it and want to do it?

David : "Usually. Normally friends of friends, word of mouth. Like it will start out from the bookstore, friends of people who are already working there, or their friends when they start working there. Once in a while somebody will just walk in off the street. But mostly it's word of mouth. There are new people constantly coming in or going out, so it changes from month to month or year to year.

Jason : What about the current state of radical publishing in comparison to five years ago—in the U.S. especially. Are there more publishers, are they publishing more things, are their books being more well received?

David : "Yes, yes, yes, and yes. I mean, I think it's the general state of publishing overall that the huge companies have bought each other up and collapsed them, and are publishing fewer and fewer books. And so you see more small presses developing overall within the publishing industry, more independent presses, which is a healthy sign actually. It gets the control out of the hands of the conglomerates. It gets it back to people who care about what it is they're publishing and the people they're publishing, and the kind of literature they're publishing. And you see that in the radical stuff as well, because nobody's publishing radical books in the big conglomerate industry, so people are forced to do it themselves."

odicals. In the past we've had enough trouble just maintaining books and keeping them in stock in inventory. Especially when a lot of our books come from England and it's quite difficult to figure out how to get them here and keep up with demand and that kind of thing. But we've decided in the last few months that we'd like to start carrying more self-produced, alternative zines. In the same respect we carry a lot of pamphlets that are small productions. And although we don't make much money on it, it's part of our commitment to keeping things out there that are affordable, and different, and interesting, etc."

David : "We've also done the same thing, you know, trying to provide aid to some of the small presses. Or, if somebody needs equipment, we've made donations financially. We've helped people buy equipment. And then also, like with bookstores, for example when Bound Together gets its windows knocked out, or gets trashed, over the years we've made some fairly substantial contributions to those things. So that helps other bookstores in the process. [Examples cited include helping out The Match! about a year ago with getting some printing equipment, and the Fifth Estate with materials.] Mainly what we try to do rather than just floating money out there is we try to provide a very specific, concrete, tangible object, so that we know where and how the money's being used. It's like with the Black Cat [a new restaurant collective], you know. They needed some loans. What we tried to do is eyeball some specific equipment...an espresso machine, cash register."

Kent : "Back to zines. We've been carrying zines at our retail bookstores for years and years, and the number of those have increased. And we have been distributing zines, but as Russell said, we're carrying more now. And we'd like to encourage that growth. We see distributing them as an extra step above and beyond carrying them directly at the bookstore. And a lot of things that we've carried at the retail store we've liked carrying direct over the years, because it does give percentage-wise more money to the people who put them out. As opposed to

dealing with some larger distributors which cuts down their percentage quite a bit.”

Russell : “Even though we distribute periodicals, we also encourage people if they’re starting up a bookstore to go direct to the publisher of the zine or periodical and that way it will help support the project cause then our 10% will not be taken out...since most things are such low-budget projects anyway. Part of the problem...we see with distributing alternative zines is getting the knowledge out to all of the bookstores that we are picking up zines and carrying them. And since many of them are dated material, or at least, dated in their cover and that kind of orientation, it takes awhile—numerous mailings—to alert people to the fact that you are carrying them. And most of them are so inexpensive, that if you’re going to do distribution of real underground periodicals, it’s mainly a labor of love. And we’re interested in expanding that, but we’re also interested in carrying things we personally like and see value in.”

David : “There’s really no money in this, either. And the other thing is that we really don’t have any business with newsstands...So we just don’t have a huge base, either. It mainly...makes it available to bookstores, or it lets people know it’s available, maybe getting to individuals so they can pursue it after that.”

Russell : “And one of the more exciting things is, for instance, we’ve been dealing with some people in South Africa who are running a bookstore under tremendous harassment from the government. But one of the periodicals we’re very happy to carry is one about the abuse of psychiatric survivors and victims...and it’s called Dendron. And for us just being a small distributors, we were able to send ten copies into South Africa of that extremely obscure magazine. And they don’t care if they get it six months late there, if it even goes through the censorship. And that’s something that I see as really valuable, a valuable function of Left Bank.”

here and half over there. I mean, you do get complaints from some customers. They come in and they’ll just throw a fit, and that includes some women.”

Russell : “Writers especially.”

David : “But, in fact, they don’t complain about science fiction being separated out of fiction. Or, really what those sections are supposed to be about—and there are books that defy classification, or they overlap in so many different categories, I mean you know, where do you put it? It depends on who’s shelving it which section it ends up in—but what you do is you try to find a convenience. Otherwise you’ve just got a mass of books, a pile. How do you find something you want? And it’s easy to say this way. And we started highlighting the women’s literature so many years ago...”

Kent : “And also we have a very large fiction and translations section. For that reason, too, to highlight a lot of those books we carry that a lot of other stores do not.”

David : “Or you can go down to, you’ll find other stores like Cody’s or City Lights Books...they have all their English or British literature in one section, or African, a whole section of literature. It highlights. Otherwise, it’s like you’ll find certain kinds of literature just get lost, like fiction in translation. Whereas when you highlight it people begin to look at it as a distinct kind, they start exploring it. And it’s easy to find authors that way that otherwise get lost.”

Jason : How many volunteers are there at any given time now in your projects?

Kent : “On an active basis working in the retail stores, I’d say somewhere between a dozen and fifteen people at any one time. But there’s a lot of changeover. Some volunteers will volunteer for four or five years, and some volunteers will only volunteer for a short time while they’re off from school or taking a break from work or things like that. So it’s kind of hard to define.”

David : “In my own experience over the years we’ve had ten to eighteen people as pretty standard. It depends a lot on the

1993. The collective's work is now spread out between the original downtown bookstore (selling new and used books), AKA Books (selling a wide selection of used books in the university district), Left Bank Distribution ("the largest provider of anarchist and independent radical books in North America"), and the Left Bank publishing project (with books including John Zerzan's *Elements of Refusal* and Raoul Vaneigem's *Revolution of Everyday Life*). In addition, Left Bank has been intimately involved in the creation and maintenance of a national Books To Prisoners project, and most recently with the opening of the Black Cat Cafe, a collectively-run vegetarian restaurant.

I spoke primarily with long-term collective members David Brown, Kent Jewell and Russell Puschak while I was in Seattle. Most of our discussions appeared in the last issue of *Alternative Press Review*. This is a continuation of that interview.

Jason: You can't help but notice when you enter Left Bank Books that the fiction is divided in the front of the store between sections labeled "Fiction by Women" and "Fiction by Men," which I thought was a pretty interesting way to do it. Does that get many comments.

Kent : "It get's a lot of comments."

David : "It has ever since we started it."

Russell : "People either love it or they hate it. I believe, what I've been told...is that it was started at a time, if you think back, when there were virtually no women's presses...and it was done as a means of highlighting women's fiction that would just get lost in the sauce of the total lake/ocean of men's fiction and the women's fiction was put aside to highlight it. And now where there's tons and tons of women's presses out there it's not quite as necessary, but we've continued it on as a tradition. And sometimes we've polled people and it almost comes up fifty/fifty, those that love it and those that hate it."

David : "It's not that big a deal. And you can take it out of the ideological sauce and say, well, we don't have enough room to put everything on one side of the store. So we just put half over

David : "The ability to get things to far off places for people that want them. Not just to get things on the newsstand and to get sales really quickly for the month that it's out. That's somebody else's function and we haven't oriented ourselves to that at all."

Jason : "Did the Left Bank collective get any help from other collectives when it started?"

David : "When Left Bank got started it did not have any help. This was what...73. And it was mainly just a few individuals who loaned or provided the start-up money. Around '78 we started the publishing project and felt that we were doing one book. And felt that to help get that book distributed, it would help if we had other publishers as well so we could offer a number of titles. So we did distribution of, say, the Freedom Press titles, for example, from England, which were not getting well distributed in this country at all. There were a few small mail-order, direct-to-individual distributors, but there were no bookstores that could easily order titles that were being produced in England. So we picked up Freedom Press and a number of small pamphlet presses and a few other books. Around that same period of time in '79 or '80 we started the Books To Prisoners project. Although the bookstore had been providing books to prisoners all along for specific requests, we couldn't meet them all. So we started a specific organized project to provide books to prisoners free. And we got a very generous grant at that time to help it get going, a grant to provide mainly postage costs. Books and other things were being donated, and labor was donated. And then in '83-'84 we started AKA Books as a used bookstore in conjunction with Left Bank."

David : "[I got involved in the project] in '78. I used to provide books on consignment much like BobEE Sweet does with that store [in Olympia]. In around '71 I started Mother Earth, mostly mailorder. And so when Left Bank started and when Red and Black [another Seattle bookstore collective] started I used to provide both stores with anarchist books on consign-

ment, mainly because I was ordering that stuff from England. I'd order the Freedom titles, the Solidarity titles and I got all the pamphlets."

Russell : "Just as a side note for a collective history of Seattle, in the early years in the '60s and '70s there was a tremendous collective movement here with a collective auto shop and grocery—this is besides the co-ops—a flour mill, and all kinds of things like that. And at this point with the introduction of the newest collective, the Black Cat Cafe, which was started this past September, we're up to three collectives in Seattle and two of them are bookstores. There's the Red and Black, which Dave just mentioned, which has been around for twenty years, and Left Bank Books."

Kent : "And a side note on Seattle. We're lucky to be in Seattle because Seattle is such a diverse town with a lot of people with a lot of varied and intensive reading interests. And there's a lot of bookstores, and a lot of diversity of bookstores compared to most cities in the United States. We're definitely grateful for that. And we've got a great location. Our retail bookstore, Left Bank, is down in the Pike Place Public Market. We wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the city than there. It's a great spot."

Russell : "It's one of the very, very fortunate things that the people that started Left Bank Books had the foresight to not only go to one of the coolest parts of town where the Pike Place—the oldest continuously operating farmers' market—existed, and get a street-level storefront that's right there, and people can stumble on us from all over the world and pick up books that are almost not available in their communities at all. And that's been a really great thing. It's one of the reasons we've been able to survive and maintain the kind of bookstore that we've wanted. We haven't had to make many concessions to bestsellers at all, or any of the kind of books that we're not interested in. In fact it's given us the ability to have a tremendous backlist. And one of the things we really focus on is keep-

antee, obviously... Co-ops are very useful and they do undercut certain notions, but for the most part they're not anti-capitalist or anti-authoritarian. They see themselves as doing the same job as Safeway does, only they want to provide a better type of food and maybe make it a little more democratic. But really the mistake, particularly with a business project, is to think that you're doing something radical or revolutionary. I've seen people come in with that attitude, or think they're going to create something like that. But we're all working within this commodity capitalist system, the society of the spectacle. And all we're doing really is choosing our poisons, and hopefully in a small way contributing to undermining all that. Maybe not so much in the commodity, but maybe the ideas that are embedded in those commodities. Maybe we can subvert the commodities, and someday those books will be free."

This interview will be continued in the next issue of APR.

Write for a free catalog! Left Bank Distribution can be contacted at: 4142 Brooklyn Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98105 (Phone: 206-632-5870), which is also the address for AKA Books. Left Bank Books is located at 92 Pike St., Seattle, WA 98101.

Part 2: Alternative books and zines in Seattle

The Left Bank Collective

Interview by Jason McQuinn

Alternative Press Review, Fall 1994

In late January several Left Bank Collective members took time out to talk for this APR interview. The Left Bank collective—originally organized to run the Left Bank Books store located at the Pike Place Market next to the downtown Seattle waterfront—celebrated its 20th anniversary in August,

tional capitalistic model of rat-race, pull-yourself-ahead-of-the-next-person-as-aggressively-as-you-possibly-can mentality.

And for that matter, for people who are starting projects, you have to decide whether or not you're oriented towards selling things and having a mark-up. And the part that gets confusing is people think that if you're marking up things and selling them...that you're making a profit...whereas...it's what you do with that profit that people get confused about. I mean if the profit only goes back into the project or to yourselves and you're doing respectable things with the money that's one thing. But unless it's going to be an all-donation, all-giveaway project like the Diggers, or something else like that, you're going to have to charge something for what you're selling. And I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing, especially if you're looking at collectives and wanting to pull people out of the rat-race."

Kent : "And in terms of overall access to information, since we do different projects within the collective, we do charge money for certain books that go through the mail and all that, but we also balance it out. The money that we do make from some projects goes towards others. We do send out a lot of free information. We do send out a lot of free books to prisoners. We do have a reading room where people are welcome to hang out and read a lot of the books. Increasingly a lot of the books there are ones we have from distribution. We're donating some of those so that people, at least those who live in Seattle, have access to books without having to buy them."

David : "I personally wouldn't say it gets us out of the rat-race. It probably helps us buy into the rat-race. We certainly don't work any less hard. It's just as bad as any place else. Except for the degree that I can be slinging hamburgers, or I can be doing this other job over here where I don't have to work for a boss, and maybe some of the things that I'm working towards I think are important. I can help contribute to the break-down of the rat-race or the breakdown of capitalism. There's no guar-

ing backlist books—books that are maybe five years old—that you don't sell more than one copy a year of, but we find them to be valuable books. There's virtually no other bookstore in town—in Seattle, even being a booklover's town—that makes a commitment to backlist books like we do.."

Jason : "Was Left Bank successful from the beginning? Did it pay its bills?"

David : "When [Left Bank] first got started it was all volunteer. It paid the bills, but one of the founders, for example, who had the ability to provide money to buy books, over a period of years put several thousand dollars into the store, with the hope that he would get his money back eventually. Which he did, but it took about ten years. And the first four or five years there was no one paid. It was an all-volunteer staff. But again, the idea when the store was started was that eventually it would be able to support a small staff. To be able to provide better service and get to know the business better by providing some support for a few people...Out of the collective, I think we have ten people that are paid."

David : "But you're talking all the projects now: AKA, Left Bank, the publishing and distribution."

Kent : "Many of those ten are part time workers."

Russell : "Our full-time work week is 32 hours...Our wage compared to this society is very low. It's at \$6.00 an hour for those who get paid. And if you were to include all the hours we actually put in—which we have some requirements that we don't get paid for—our wage would be much lower, maybe down around \$4.00 an hour or \$3.00 an hour depending on each individual and how much time they put in. I think we have ten people that are paid at least partially at this time. There are six men and four women. But we should right away head off that the collective does not only include the paid members. We're not a closed collective. People can get involved in any aspect of the collective whether they're paid or not."

David : "An example is when we did our inventory recently at AKA thirty-six people showed up. At Left Bank it was also very high, twenty-some people, I believe, showed up there, which is pretty good because it's such a small store."

Russell : "And we have many volunteers at Left Bank Books. And our success really still goes back to the beginning of the store when it was volunteer. It depends on volunteer labor, on people that are interested in learning about books, working with books, and furthering certain ideals they see as valuable. For instance, a volunteer now can commit to working three hours a week for a minimum of three months and they receive training and education concerning books and also a very large discount on anything they're interested in purchasing."

Russell : "And one of the other things I'd like to say about the collective is that at this time when people enter the collective, we still have a process where if you are volunteering you learn skills, and then if an opening does appear, that's how we select people who join us. It's sort of a natural process where people are working together already. We see if we can get along. And then if there's an opening someone is offered it, if we can afford it."

David : "One thing that should be pointed out is that nobody has a personal financial stake in this collective. And when you come in it doesn't cost you anything...and you don't take anything out. So I've worked here since '78,...and I don't have any claim on the store. When I leave I go out just like I came in with nothing...It's not like some collectives where you have to put up a certain amount of capital to get in, you have to buy into the collective with money and you have shares, and then when you go out you cash out. We don't have that."

Russell : "We also don't have any form of profit-sharing. If at the end of the year, if we're lucky enough, to have more money than we started with, that money gets put back into the different projects that we sponsor in various ways. We've been fortunate recently to be able to buy some equipment that

falls. People call me up and say they're starting this project and they're just getting their statements together or their ideas. And it's not necessary. I mean, all ten of us are different individuals and we all think differently."

David : "Practice is more important than all the ideology in the world. You know, and the ability to work together. Because sometimes you can have full agreement politically or ideologically, or however you're gonna put it, but on a personal level you don't get along with somebody and you can't work with 'em. Or maybe you can socialize with 'em, but you can't work with 'em. So you have to work those things out. And really what's important in the long term is the ability of a group of people to work together around a broad or general kind of idea or practice."

Kent : "The desire to work together above all is what you need to survive as a collective, for some common purpose. And even though it may sound crass, if you want to run a business, you do have to ask other businesses that are out there...if you want to run a collective business and have it succeed it is a good idea to ask other people who have done it in practice, as opposed to setting up a few abstract ideals and trying to work off that. You have to do what works, basically."

Russell : "We get criticized from some people on the fact that our books cost money and they're not free, and we're not making them available as free resources to everyone. Well, there weren't that many books around, and there wouldn't be that many books around for very long if they were all free. But I think people's minds are so jumbled about dealing with capitalism and this society that they don't see that also working for yourself and doing it in a non-hierarchical way is difficult, but yes, you're freeing yourself out of the boss mentality. We have a lot of struggles collectively. It's not always easy. Sometimes it's great and smooth and excellent, but it's a fight all along. But at least we feel that we're pulling ourselves out of the tradi-

involved as possible. Not only could you learn new skills about carpentry, but you could also help out...So I would say that if anybody's interested in doing any kind of project in your community, you could do it yourself. But also look around to see what resources you do have. And look out of state, too. You know, there are different things that we can help out, and other projects around the country, too, can help individual projects starting up. Cause it's really difficult to start up."

David : "On a local level, mainly it's trying to get people to help each other and working in a mutually beneficial way. Sometimes it's more difficult than working by yourself or with one other person, because you're involving lots of different personalities and intentions and ideals and factors, but the more people you can get involved, the larger base of support you have towards ensuring the success of your project...And it's important to talk to other people and other groups that have attempted to do these things, because it isn't written down. And no matter what's written down, it never seems to quite have the realistic touch that personal contact can make. You know, when you call around and talk to a store that's been in existence for ten years, I mean that's a lot of experience that they can help supply you with on different levels. How to organize your project. Are you going to try to make money or you're not going to try to make money? Are you trying to do this or trying to do that? Other people have done that already and can help you in some way. Or can steer you to other people who have done similar kinds of projects and what their experiences are..."

Russell : "Talk to as many people as possible...In our collective—and I'm not speaking for all the volunteers since I don't know them all—we're loosely based as an anarchist collective, and most of us have a strong affinity to anti-authoritarian and anarchist ideas. But we have never fallen into—at least in the last five years—the pitfall of trying to define ourselves as a unified group. And that seems like one of the biggest pit-

we needed, and to also support many different projects in the city..."

David : "We have...collective meetings every month, and get together to talk about our business, and the issues that come up. And we do get requests for donations and that sort of thing."

Jason : "Was that how the decision was made to help Black Cat collective?"

Russell : "It's sort of off of the German collective model of the collectives, once they've been established, to help support other collectives. And that is that they should float a proposal to you and the other various collectives. Fortunately there they have a lot of 'em, so every collective doesn't have to kick in much. And if you like the idea then you can support their start, and they will continue to help support other new ventures."

David : "I think when Black Cat originally came to us they were looking for money, start-up money to help make improvements and buy equipment. I think, as I recall, they came to us with a proposal for a thousand dollar loan. And we said no, we'd rather do something concrete. And it ended up being two thousand dollars so they could get their espresso machine. They ended up getting more, actually."

Jason : "How did it work when AKA was started? Was it like Black Cat...?"

David : "A fellow had a small used bookstore. He was going out of business. And we went to look at books for Left Bank. And he offered, he said he'd sell us the whole store for three thousand bucks, a thousand up front and two thousand the next year. And we sort of went through the store and thought that would be reasonable. And since Left Bank was doing used books already in conjunction with the new books, it seemed like a logical extension. It was also more space...Until that time we'd been doing distribution and publishing stuff right out of Left Bank, a very tiny bookstore. So by opening a used bookstore at that time, it allowed us to make some shifts in the physical space and to pay another person. And also it just increases

the scope of the kind of books you can offer. It's wonderful to have all the new books that we think are valuable and important. But there's lots of books that are going out of print. And this gave us a way to supply those. Particularly when you get into radical, or labor, or black studies, or lots of small, obscure books that there's no way you can find them anywhere. You couldn't find them anywhere at that time. There was nobody doing any radical used books here, particularly in any kind of organized way...And it seemed like a natural extension of what we were already trying to do, with our mail-order, with our publishing, with our distribution, with Left Bank for the new books...AKA started out with five hundred square feet. It had two rooms, plus a huge basement, and that's where we had the prison project, and the distribution, and the old printing equipment we'd had in garages. From there between rental problems with the landlord, and wanting more room, we located a house that was actually cheaper rent that was twice the size of what we were doing...And then after three years there, we were again faced with a rental problem where the building was possibly be torn down, so we decided to move to a better location and more space, which led us to our present location. And we're kind of faced with the same problem right now. We're up against an odd lease situation, where when our lease expires we may have to find another location. Space is a problem again..."

Jason : "Are you selling more books every year at the stores and through distribution?"

David : "The last year has sort of leveled off. It's the first year it's leveled off. It may be the nature of the building, or the business, or the economy. It's difficult to know."

Russell : "It's very hard to tell exactly where we're at with the distribution, since most of the books we're holding on a consignment basis, and we pay quarterly. We'll know a lot more after the end of January how we're doing. And also, we've taken on a number of new expenses with distribution this year. The

Reading Room/Prison Project Space/Graphic Arts Area that is a storefront that has no income-generating possibilities at this time is being funded primarily by distribution, with also AKA Books and Left Bank Books chipping in some of the money. So distribution is taking on a large load, and we really have been very thankful of all the people that have supported us over the last years. And in particular over the last two years, where direct mail-order has really helped us out a lot in being able to start and fund something like the space that we've created there. And we're hoping that people continue to order books through us and continue to help us do the kind of work that we're interested in.

One of the things about distribution that's an interesting issue is that we sell new books mailorder to people at a retail cost. And some distribution outfits, particularly a lot of the younger ones that have started up, really try to give people a big discount. And so we supply books to some of those people and they're mainly all-volunteer operations. And they just mark things up a minimal amount in order to keep things going. But we've taken the approach that we...still believe that we're getting very good books to people at the going price, and we try to charge the actual shipping cost to people as much as possible. We don't pad the shipping and handling."

Jason : "If other people are interested in getting together radical book distribution projects in their own towns, would you recommend checking out to see if there's already any cooperatives in existence...?"

Russell : "It's a difficult question given the state of our state, the state of the state in 1994...Our approach has been, for instance, when we built the storefront space that now houses the Reading Room and the Books To Prisoners project and graphic arts area, we did that through asking for help from people in the community. And we had a series of 'barn-raising' so to speak. Every Sunday we would get there and have bagels and have a work crew going, and we'd try to get as many people