

Hot Type

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The Death of Indie Distro?

It used to take months for *Punk Planet* and *Venus* to get a check from their distributor. Those were the good old days.

By Michael Miner

A couple of local zines, *Punk Planet* and *Venus*, got really bad news a few days ago. It came in an e-mail from Richard Landry, executive director of the Independent Press Association, the national trade alliance they belong to. He wrote that IPA's distribution arm, BigTop Newsstand Services, was having "cash-flow problems" that weren't close to being solved. IPA had some ideas about how to fix things, but "this process is taking much longer than any of us would like."

Zines like *Punk Planet* and *Venus* live hand to mouth. Newsstand revenues from one issue pay for the next. These revenues are always slow to reach the publishers, and Landry was warning that the wait would get even longer. In the past IPA has borrowed from itself to pay its publishers in something approximating a timely fashion, but "about a year ago our board agreed that this was not a sustainable approach for our organization to continue to take."

Amy Schroeder, editor and publisher of *Venus*, which she started in a Michigan State dorm room 11 years ago, says 80 percent of her revenues come from newsstand sales. "We were supposed to receive our last payment on September 15, and we still haven't received it," she told me after hearing from Landry. "The check is really substantial [high four figures], so around that time I started making phone calls asking where it was. They said, 'Next week. Next week.'"

IPA now concedes it should have admitted BigTop's troubles last spring, but it naively hoped to fix them over the summer. According to Schroeder, mere days before she got Landry's October 19 e-mail someone finally leveled with her: BigTop didn't know when she'd be paid.

"I have to play hardball now,



Amy Schroeder at *Venus*, Dan Sinker and Anne Elizabeth Moore at *Punk Planet*

but what can I do?" she told me. Her idea of hardball was getting in IPA's face and making it feel guilty. "I typed up a three-page letter basically explaining why we need this payment so badly," she said. "We're basically on deadline now. We have to ship the next issue to the printer next week. Without the payment, we may not be able to. So I wrote the letter to 15 people or so, including employees of IPA, the board of directors at IPA, and also employees at BigTop." (BigTop was recently renamed Indy Press, but no one calls it that yet.)

Schroeder's check arrived on Halloween. It covered newsstand sales for the spring issue and allowed her to print the winter issue. She's still owed for the summer and fall issues, but she wasn't expecting that money yet anyway.

Distribution is a miserable thing for a publisher to deal with. Revenues from the nation's sales racks flow slowly to big magazines and more slowly to the zines. BigTop represents about 90 of IPA's 500 member titles, giving

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them all a louder voice. It collects revenues from the distributors and sends them back to the clients, and when the wait's been longer than a client can tolerate it's advanced the money from IPA's funds. But in the past two years the number of copies BigTop is responsible for has roughly tripled. That volume drove up collectible revenues to a point where BigTop could no longer pay off clients the old way—by advancing them IPA's money.

IPA hopes that one day it'll be big enough to demand better terms from the distributors. "But in the meantime we've started fund-raising," says treasurer Cheryl Woodard. "What we really want is a line of credit, or outright grants from foundations to give us a cushion." She says several foundations dote on IPA because they value the independent press as an alternative to media conglomerates. Even so, creating that cushion—a revolving fund to support the loans—hasn't been easy. Woodard says IPA needs \$1 million it doesn't have now.

"Nobody's choking at that number or turning us down, but it takes a while to raise it. It can take years."

She says IPA got serious about raising the money a year ago, which was a year after it recognized the problem. "The board thought that by early summer we'd have at least some of that money in hand. And actually we do have some in hand, but not all of it. The misery that publishers are feeling is real and it's justified. If you're the one that's going under, there's nothing I can say that will change that for you."

In These Times is the best-known Chicago magazine to distribute through BigTop, but publisher Tracy Van Slyke says its newsstand revenues aren't critical to the operation. Besides, at the moment *In These Times* is repaying a loan from IPA by letting it keep what BigTop collects.

Punk Planet is another story. Publisher Dan Sinker signed up with BigTop early this year with the understanding that newsstand revenues would start arriving late in the year, so he hadn't

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The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

Is there any basis to accusations of Coca-Cola's having tortured, killed, or otherwise violated the human rights of workers in Latin America? I am a student in college and have heard much mention of these supposed "facts." I am not sure what to make of them, and am wondering if you could reveal the truth. —Yeh Kahn Yiin, via e-mail

been worried. Landry's e-mail made him desolate.

He wrote Landry back, "When I received your e-mail last night my first thought was 'This is the blow that kills us.' Independent publishing is a shoestring business. If one of those strings breaks, everything comes tumbling down. If our payments from BigTop are delayed by any significant amount of time (and by that I mean months, possibly even just weeks) we will be put out of business. I know others are in the same boat. . . . I find it ironic that for the first time in twelve years I find myself staring the end directly in the face and it's being brought about by the very organization that was originally put in place to support the independent press."

"The problem is there aren't other options," says Sinker. "BigTop is the last distributor that specializes in the small independent press. So do you go to a big national distributor, who doesn't understand what you do and doesn't understand why you'd want to sell 15,000 copies instead of hundreds of thousands or millions? And those distributors have even more arduous payment terms than BigTop has."

When Sinker pulled himself together, he and associate publisher Anne Elizabeth Moore wrote an e-mail asking for help: "An immediate influx of cash will allow us to pay off back debts—to contributors, printers, web hosts, etc—and better enable us to weather any coming storm caused by nonpayment from our distributor." Moore says, "We pretty much sent copies to anyone we had ever heard of or met in our entire lives and asked them to send it to everyone they had ever heard of or met."

It's worked. "We've been pretty overwhelmed with the amount of support," says Sinker. "We proba-

bly cut our overall debt in half. It was in the \$16,000 range, which for a big business is a rounding error and is for us a significant amount of money. It's given us a little more breathing room."

More power to them, says Woodard. "Yeah, I'd encourage publishers to find other sources of cash," she says. "I know how hard that is—I consult for start-up magazines. But I also know that it doesn't work to think, 'I'll get paid from the March issue in time to pay the printer for my September issue.'"

Preaching to the Preachers

Plenty of people preach that words are cheap and the act is all, but it's an odd message from a writer. Yet here's syndicated columnist Victor Davis Hanson in the October 28 *Tribune*: "To paraphrase the ancient Greeks, it is easy to be moral in your sleep. Abstract ethics or soapbox lectures demanding superhuman perfection mean little without deeds."

Hanson was sneering at Amnesty International and other "global humanitarian groups" for fretting over the trial of Saddam Hussein. "Now these global watchdogs are barking about legalities—once Hussein is in shackles thanks solely to the American military," he wrote. "The new Iraqi government is sanctioned by vote and attuned to global public opinion. Saddam Hussein was neither. So Amnesty International can safely chastise the former for supposed misdemeanors after it did little concrete about the real felonies of the latter."

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The truth in this case is a tall order. But maybe I can lend matters a little focus.

A few clarifications. First, we're not talking about violating the rights of workers in Latin America in general, but specifically in Colombia. What with drug traffickers, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing death squads, life in Colombia isn't easy, particularly for union members—by one count something like 2,100 have been murdered since 1991. The killers are thought to be rightist paramilitaries, but few have been prosecuted for the crimes.

Second, detailed allegations have been made not about multiple murders but one murder, specifically that of Isidro Gil, a union leader who was gunned down on December 5, 1996, at the entrance to a Coca-Cola plant in the Colombian town of Carepa. In a lawsuit filed in U.S. federal court in 2001, Gil's union claimed that before the murder the plant manager socialized with paramilitaries and announced publicly that he had told them to destroy the union. After the murder the other members of Gil's local either quit the union or left town, allegedly after paramilitaries entered the plant and told them to resign or else. The suit mentions several additional killings circumstantially tied to Coke, but information on them is sketchy and I won't take them up here. Various other charges have been laid against Coke elsewhere; to keep this manageable, though, we'll stick to murder.

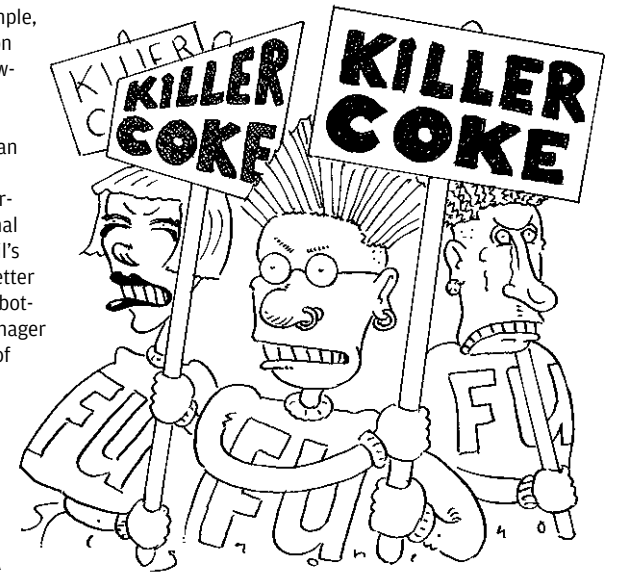
Third, notwithstanding the impression you may get from slogans like "Stop Killer Coke," no one seriously contends that the Coca-Cola company of Atlanta, Georgia, orchestrated the murder of Isidro Gil or other union members. Coke bottling plants in Colombia, as in most of the world, are independently owned and operated. The argument essentially is that Carepa plant management called in goons and that Coke HQ, or at any rate its wholly owned Colombian subsidiary, had advance warning but did nothing to prevent the violence.

Is it true? You got me, compadre. Some

basic points are in dispute. For example, a key allegation in the 2001 lawsuit is that on September 27, 1996, more than two months before the murder, the national office of Mr. Gil's union sent a letter to the Carepa bottling plant manager accusing him of "working with the paramilitaries to destroy the union" and demanding security for the workers. A copy of this letter

was allegedly sent to Coke's Colombia office. When I asked the Coke people in Atlanta about it, they sent me a copy of a September 30 letter from the Carepa union local to the national office asking that the September 27 letter be retracted, saying that the local was "unaware of any relationship that the Manager may have with the Paramilitary groups." A lawyer for the union suggests that a faction within the local may have been afraid of antagonizing the manager.

Events after the murder are no clearer. Coke says two separate judicial inquiries, one by a Colombian court and the other by the Colombian prosecutor general, "found no evidence . . . that bottler management conspired in or encouraged the murder." The court finding that Coke has made available online does state, "Nowhere has it been established that any Company executive ever played a role in violating [workers'] rights." However, the ruling doesn't mention the Gil murder but rather addresses a related case. A Coke lawyer says he has read the prosecutor general's decision and that it specifically discusses the Gil case and



SLUG SIGNORINO

absolves the bottling company of blame. No one has been able to supply me with a copy of this decision, though, and it's impossible to say how thoroughly the matter was investigated. The union's lawyers say there was no investigation and no one was ever charged with Gil's murder.

In 2003 a U.S. federal judge threw out all charges against Coke and its Colombian subsidiary on the grounds that they didn't control the Carepa plant. Pending a resolution of the remaining charges against local bottler management, the Colombians are taking their case to the public. U.S. labor organizations and activists have rallied to the cause, among other things organizing a Coke boycott on college campuses in North America and Europe. In 2004 Coke general counsel Deval Patrick resigned, reportedly because Coke's then CEO nixed his plan to send an independent fact-finding mission to Colombia. Coke now has a new CEO and is considering a fresh inquiry into its Colombian labor practices. A question not on the table, but which I think is still pertinent, is: Who had Isidro Gil killed?

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, www.straightdope.com, or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

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It's true. Amnesty's dozens of reports on Iraq were only words. In April 1998, for instance, it protested "a wave of expulsions targeting 1,468 Kurdish families" and announced that it had written the Iraqi government "expressing concern." In November 1999 it issued a long report, "Victims of Systematic Repression," that began, "Gross human rights violations are systematically taking place in Iraq. They range from arbitrary arrest and detention to torture, extrajudicial and judicial executions after unfair summary trials, 'disappearances,' and forcible expulsions on the basis of ethnic origin." Amnesty explained that since its frequent letters to

Baghdad had accomplished nothing, it had decided "to put its grave human rights concerns in Iraq on public record."

An "urgent action" bulletin in November 2000 reported that "up to 50 women accused of being prostitutes and men accused of procurement have reportedly been publicly beheaded" by a paramilitary group controlled by Saddam's son Uday. Fearing "that scores of women may be arrested and executed as suspected prostitutes," Amnesty urged anyone who cared to "send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English, Arabic or your own language" to Saddam Hussein. In April 2001 it listed by name eight political oppo-

nents Saddam had recently executed. That August there was another long report, this one titled "Systematic torture of political prisoners."

Mere words failed. In September 2002 Amnesty conceded that Western governments had "turned a blind eye to Amnesty International reports of widespread human rights violations in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, and ignored Amnesty International's campaign on behalf of the thousands of unarmed Kurdish civilians killed in the 1988 attacks on Halabja." Yet with war finally in the air, Amnesty protested that President Bush was making selective use of its reports "to legitimize military actions." This

bothered Amnesty, though someone like Hanson must have wondered what the problem was.

The idea that the only way to speak truth to power is with a gun—Hanson's phrase for the alternative is "abstract moralizing"—has a long history. If he wants to give Amnesty no points for trying it's his right. But there he is, someone full of contempt for mere lecturers, lecturing.

News Bite

► Four years ago Deborah Loeser Small hired Pat Colander to work for, then run, *Lake* magazine, a slick chronicle she'd created for the Small

Newspaper Group that's a who's who and what's where in weekend-cottage country. Last July she was hired away by the *Times* of northwest Indiana, where she'd once worked, to run its niche-products division, and now she's launching *Lake's* new competition, a slick magazine called *Shore*.

Colander left *Lake* suddenly and took several writers and editors with her. But *Lake* kept going, and this week the Small Newspaper Group announced that it had hired a new editor, Miriam Carey, founding editor of *Long Weekends* magazine in Ohio. Colander says she and Deborah Loeser Small had different visions. Colander says, "I wanted to be a regional *Vanity Fair*." ■

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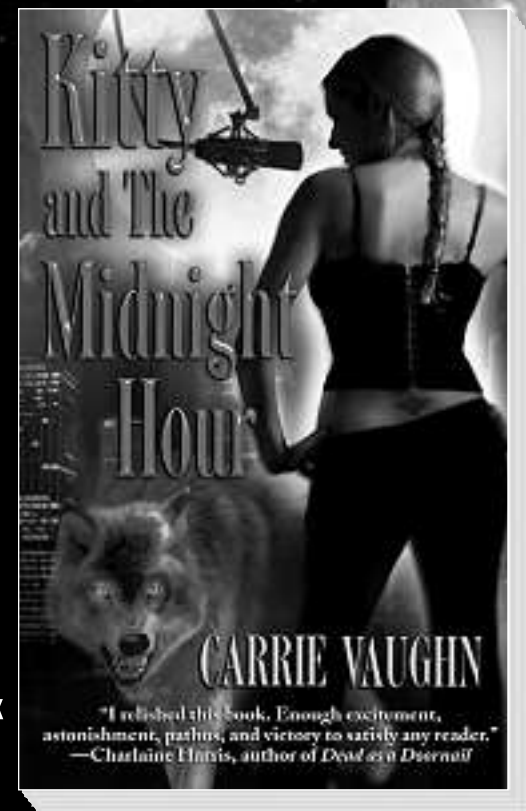
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