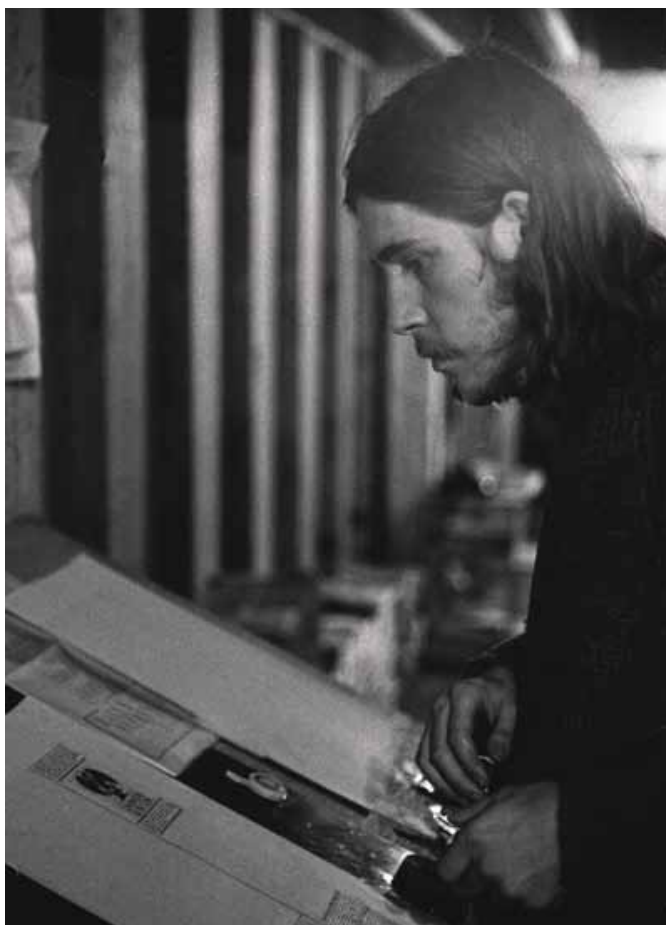


Remembering Bob Mercer

By David Spaner

Bob Mercer was one of the SFU 114 arrested for occupying the administration building in 1968. In those days, political defendants were often lumped together by number (the Chicago 8 were the best known), but each one of these Simon Fraser University 114 had their own story to tell. Bob's began in Manitoba in 1948. "I came from a Father Knows Best kind of family. Everybody's got shit, right, but I was well-nurtured." Bob liked to say, "I was the son of a preacher man." He followed his United Church minister father across the Prairies, pausing longest in Calgary, where he grew up a keen observer of popular culture, especially rock 'n' roll (playing his own), comic books (drawing his own) and Mad Magazine (devouring each new issue). In the summer of 1967, he hitchhiked to the West Coast and enrolled at SFU where he fell in with the campus radicals, joining SDU (Students for a Democratic University).

After two years at SFU, Bob ran off with the Vancouver Street Theatre. Following a performance of a commedia dell'arte farce in Stanley Park, Bob engaged in impromptu repartee with a couple of cops patrolling on horseback. "They had come around and started hassling us. 'Do you have a license?' Yes, we did." The police continued talking. "Basically insulting remarks. We were young comedians and this was an improv opportunity like you don't get thrown every day, so we just gave back as good as we got and the remnant of the audience kept on chuckling. Cop says something stupid and insulting, it gets turned around in his face, and they're all laughing at the cop who thought he was going to get the laugh. This cop suddenly dismounts and says I'm placing you under arrest." The charge: Smart-assing an officer. Dismissed on appeal.



Bob Mercer working at the Peak, 1970. Photo by William Reimer

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At SFU, Bob had found SDU too staid for his liking, so he helped form a student council electoral slate called FART (Front for Anarchist Revolutionary Terrorism). The group announced itself as a member of the Northern Lunatic Fringe of the Youth International Party (Yippie). There would soon be Yippie collectives across Canada, but Bob's FART was the country's first YIP group. When Vancouver Yippie formed in 1970, Bob came up with the name Yellow Journal for its newspaper. The Yippie combination of theatrics and protest appealed to Bob, as did YIP's mix of New Left politics and hippie counter-culture. It was Bob who came up with this inspired description of Vancouver Yippies' intentions: "We're out to smash capitalism. And we mean business."

The era's street politics came to a head in May of 1970 following the U.S. government's invasion of Cambodia and the shooting deaths of protesters at Kent State University. Vancouver Yippies met to consider a response to these events and decided to invade America at the Blaine border crossing. An "INVADE AMERICA" poster designed by Bob went up across the city. As much as any action, the Blaine invasion combined the comedy and militancy that defined Yippie. It was an original, funny premise — Canadians invade their "superpower" neighbour after it invades a small country — but these invaders also shared the anger millions of people were feeling that May. Young protesters were taking to the streets



Then-Georgia Straight editor Bob Mercer (right) backstage at The Cave nightclub with Ginger Rogers and David Boswell, Sept. 26, 1978. Photo: David Boswell

like never before and the story of this invasion of America was broadcast everywhere from BBC radio to Walter Cronkite's evening news. The Blaine Journal editorialized: "One of the saddest and most degrading incidents suffered by the people of this country since the Alamo."

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Bob and I crossed paths in many ways on many days. We first met as Yippies, then cofounded The Open Road newspaper, then I managed the punk band The Subhumans and he designed our posters and album covers. I wrote for publications (Vancouver Magazine, Georgia Straight, Vancouver Lifestyle Magazine) he edited and when we found work at the same daily newspaper we took time once a week to have dinner together. So, we were more than cofounders and coworkers. We were friends and comrades, drawn to counter-cultures and popular culture. And I deeply admired so much about Bob. He could do so many things extremely well. He was a brilliant graphic artist, designing several publications, and he returned to SFU to teach magazine production in the communications

department. Also, a wonderful singer-songwriter and front man for several rock bands. Bob's song "Wilson, Lucas and Bruce" was an anthem of the prisoners' rights movement. The one thing about Bob that stood out above all else: his sheer honesty. Bob instantly saw through b.s., and the pompous and the pretenders rarely escaped his withering wit. With most everyone else, though, Bob was a big softy, as kind and generous as can be.

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Almost 50 years after the Blaine Invasion, Bob and I visited the American border town. In the middle of Peace Arch Park, the border is demarcated by a 67-foot-high monument. On May 9, 1970, after the invasion Bob stood at this Peace Arch monument with its "May These Gates Never Be Closed" line whittled in concrete. As a theatrical gesture, he gave its bolted-open iron gate a tug. To his surprise it gave a bit. "Other people jumped on it and they were full of beans. ... We're like little five-year-olds playing on the jungle gym. We pull the gate. It came free. You can imagine the roar that went up from the people nearby." Returning to the arch a half-century later, Bob reached for its gate and gave it another playful tug. We stepped out from the arch and Bob turned serious, saying that the Blaine Invasion is best understood as one small part of the culture of resistance against the Vietnam War. "That kind of activism didn't actually stop that war in and of itself," he said. "It's hard to say just what successes were achieved by it ... except the whole world was made aware of the capacity of the state to proceed without the consent of the governed. Every once in a while the governed gets a little bit crazy and puts the brakes on that. And if so, we were on the side of the angels because no way did the Vietnamese deserve to be colonized and recolonized by the French and then the Americans."



Some people thought Bob moved like Mick Jagger on stage, but he told me that the one he loved was John Lennon. In Bob's song "I dreamed I saw John Lennon," he wrote: "I dreamed I saw John Lennon floating down a stream. I asked him what he knew of dreams, of dreamers such as me. Said John, 'A dream you dream alone is only just a dream, a dream you dream together is reality.'" ❖

David Spaner is a graduate of SFU. His latest book is *Solidarity: Canada's Unknown Revolution of 1983*.