

Michael Hollett speaks out

Now magazine 'fills void' in Toronto media

Last week Now Magazine published its fourth anniversary issue. David Byrnes, Elliott Shiff and Henry Sum, all veteran members of the longer- and better-established Excalibur, interviewed Now's founder and publisher, Michael Hollett, last month. Hollett, who was Excalibur's editor during 1976-77, inexplicably left the paper to start Now.

Q. What did you take at York?

A. English. And I'm two credits away from graduating. I like that somehow.

Q. Are you planning to go back?

A. I'll go back just for fun. I mean I love the idea . . . the idea of university gets all the more fun as you get out of it. Unfortunately when you're there you often have a different agenda, which most of the people I worked with did. They were sort of between the newspaper and political activity and all kinds of things.

Q. Looking back at your year at Excalibur, it seems there was so much lively stuff going on then. More political things than anything.

A. Yeah, well, it really energized the campus, because, I mean, those things don't separate, you know, and the political stuff is happening in the halls, and then it's happening in the newspaper; it ends up happening in the classroom, too. This sort of thing creates a whole energized feeling to the place. University has to be more than just going to the classes, too. I mean, it's what you guys obviously know, being involved in Excalibur. Otherwise it's just a punching in—it's a brain factory, it's not enough, not broad enough.

Q. So you spent your time as a student mostly at the newspaper?

A. Yeah, I have to confess.

Q. Were you involved in any of the college papers before Excalibur?

A. The first week I was at York I got up my nerve to go to Excalibur. I was used to places in Quebec as sort of dingy basements, you know, behind some Coke machine there'd be a door and that would be where the newspaper was. Excalibur looked so classy to me that it intimidated me for about four days. And then once I got in there I basically didn't leave for four years. Except about two years into it I for some reason had this great idea that it wasn't as much fun as I . . . I experimented with running the paper at Stong with a friend of mine, we sort of revitalized it a bit, it hadn't been publishing that much and we did that for awhile. Publishing it every two weeks was a bit ridiculous. Sort of a burnout frequency for a college paper. We were trying to do new stories and everything, so it was a bit nuts. After a half a year we went back to Excalibur.

Q. What do you have in common with the people at Now?

A. We're very loosely cohesive, you know, we have sort of an "opposition" kind of attitude. And also fun-loving—very key to remember as well. It's not a stuffy dogmatic group of people by any means.

Q. It looks like you have fun.

A. We sure do.

Q. What's the name of your dog?

A. Danny.

Q. Do you have any specific memories of your year at Excalibur, anything stand out that helped shape your ideas?

A. I'll tell you one thing that Excalibur taught me, which to this day we always use here—teamwork. Working with a volunteer staff is the best experience . . . I don't want to impose my experience on the world, but to me it's just about the best experience you can have because in that dynamic you can't be an autocrat and you can't push people around, so it teaches you to learn to be able to defend your ideas rather than your authority, and get them to move because they like what you're thinking, and that . . . that's one of the experiences that people here, you know, like Alice (Klein), have had. Also, you don't lose it. I was editing Excalibur and then I left and immediately I became editor of two small-town papers in Orangeville and Caledon. There, I was often in a situation of being younger than most of my staff, so the Excalibur lesson was very useful, because when you're 20 and everybody that works for you is 32 or something, you're not going to get very far shouting at them or saying 'I'm the boss.'

Q. That's nice to hear.

A. Really, the people that were at York when I was there—hopefully it's the same now—they were very talented, but when you're working with them, it's like, "yeah, they're talented but I guess everybody is"—you know, you sort of underestimate it in a sense . . . I walk into a room of 15 people, and you know, 10 of them would really be on. So at the time I almost undervalued their cleverness. But when we went off and did other things I realized I was working with really sharp people. So, one of the things at Now was to develop a project where we could utilize those contacts of clever people—largely people from York. And that's a real big part of how the concept of Now started.



Former Excalibur editor Michael Hollett flips through void-filler as fleecy clouds loom above.

Q. I always think of the Village Voice when I think of Now Magazine, because I think it's kind of filling a void in Toronto. I mean the closest thing was Toronto Life.

A. I like doing the small-town stuff but sort of where I was then I was going to have to work on daily newspapers, and either become more of an editor or more of a writer—go in one direction or the other—something I didn't want to do. I like doing both activities frankly. And we realized that the nature of papers like this is such that you can't have your hands in all areas. And we realized that there was obviously no Village Voice happening in Toronto. There's 45 papers like this in the States at least. There's an organization called the Association of Alternative News Weeklies, which we actually just joined, got accepted into, and we grilled those people like crazy about what they were doing. It was very helpful.

Q. When exactly did Now start?

A. It started September 10, 1981, and we spent almost two years ahead of time planning it—about a year and a half. We researched, developed a plan, that kind of thing. It'll be our fourth anniversary this year, so I'll have been working on it for about five and a half years.

Q. And you're not tiring of it?

A. Oh, no! Just thinking of more angles.

Q. Now Magazine is interesting because there's not really an editorial voice, or at least I can't detect a specific editorial voice. Is that a conscious thing?

A. Sure, I mean, we write from a loosely . . . I mean, I wouldn't be involved in publishing a sexist or racist or a reactionary newspaper, but with that sort of limited criteria you have a lot of room. And one of the things I like about the Village Voice and a lot of those papers, and one of the things I dislike about so many mainstream media is that it's just predigested so that everything sounds the same—it's like processed cheese slices. I liked it to be a little different. About a month ago, I was faced with . . . I had to let John Harkness, indirectly, call me an asshole in print, and of course I think he's wrong, but I don't really object and I think that's a good part of the paper; that the opinions can be divergent enough so people can't know 100 percent what they're going to encounter when they begin that article. There's a lot of room. As you know full well, there isn't exactly a lot of unity in the "progressive world" or whatever you want to call it. So it sort of means there's lots of room for different viewpoints still . . . which is fun. That was one of the things I liked about Excalibur—we had a lot of similarity in our opinions on that paper but we sure had the most intense staff meetings; those meetings remain the most intense of any meetings I've ever had in my life—I mean, fist fights . . .

Q. Sounds like ours last week, actually.

A. When you have people standing on the coffee tables swinging at each other, then I'll be able to relate.

Q. Well, it was pretty close. Is Now Communications going to be expanding?

A. Oh, sure, we're working on expansions. We've got a few tricks up our sleeves.

Q. Do you want to mention what they are?

A. Not yet, but I think people will approve. But it wouldn't be anything that would change this specific format. We're going to be free forever. People often ask that—we're really committed to the "free" and it works really well for us.

Q. There's been a lot of stuff in the media lately about the What's On entertainment section in the Toronto Star. Do you see it as copying Now—as an indication of how successful Now has been?

A. Sure, well, they say it themselves. I don't know if you saw all the articles when they launched it—I was actually shocked at how forthright they were about acknowledging the rip-off, because I think what the President of TorStar said was that we think we can be as good as Now and we hope to be better, which I thought wasn't bad. They're 60 years old or something, we were three and a half at the time, they're learning from us. That's fine with me. It's been very helpful for us, in fact, because it has caused a lot of our readers and people who are in touch with Now to clarify, you know, to sort of look at us, to judge the Star's thing and ours, and I think we do really well in any kind of comparison.

Q. Obviously you are doing something different than the major dailies and your emphasis is mostly on entertainment. How would you distinguish your coverage of entertainment from the usual stuff that we see around Toronto?

A. Well, we don't use their star sort of hierarchy. Tina Turner's not on the cover of our paper this week, and there's a real conscious reason. It's tempting, that's the thing—the whole infrastructure exists to steer you in a very specific way. You know, to cover Tina Turner every time and to cover Richard Gere every time and to just get into that. We try really hard not to plug into the star system that's around, and our readers definitely appreciate that. We'll be covering bands that nobody's heard of, then suddenly these people are getting album contracts and winning Junos and things like that and the readers come to respect that you can bring different criteria to deciding somebody's good—not just if, you know, they've been on David Letterman. So, that's, I guess, what we push in entertainment. And the news is something that we are increasingly expanding. That is a growing part of the paper for sure.

Q. Are you always going to feature interviews every week?

A. People are the most interesting things around really, and even in the news we do that. We hang larger issues on an interview with somebody. I mean, you talk about the local thing—we don't write about international politics as such but we do interview people who have been participating in the making of international politics and that becomes interesting. People's personal stories are generally interesting. It's fun, it's a challenging kind of writing to get people to really reveal something of themselves, in a fair way—I'm not into tricking people into telling me who they're sleeping with by accident or the fact that they hated their mothers or something. But if you can get a real rapport going you can find out some very interesting, useful things.

Q. Your approach does seem very personal. It seems you try to hit home on the personal points when you're interviewing people.

A. Sure. I think that's the most interesting thing. I write about music generally, and I don't like talking to bands in a track by track way about their new album, who was in their band 20 years ago, and where they all went to drink or something like that. I find that really dull, and really limiting, because it narrows the whole frame of reference of the discussion. So only the people who are deeply psychotically interested to that degree . . . I'd much rather have somebody tell me how much fun they have when they stand up in front of 25,000 people, it that's enjoyable or not. I'd like to know the interpersonal dynamic maybe of their relating to their bass player as two artists as opposed to the gossip that goes on between them. What I'm happiest about is when I write about a band that is really obscure, and we're giving maybe a cover treatment so it means like a six or seven-take story. If I can write about that person in such a way and get them to talk in such a way that I can have people who are into performance art, avant garde theatre, coffee from Nicaragua, and as well some real music aficionada—have the group of them all kind of come into that story together and sort of still be there at the end, like somehow structured in such a way that you will meet all their needs without watering down the story but just structuring it in a personalized way.

Q. Do you take much interest in municipal politics? Do you jump into things like that?

A. Oh, sure. We increasingly will. It's essential. The entertainment area of Toronto is the least well served, it was most readily apparent that there was a real hole in the way entertainment was being covered in this city when we started the paper. Politically, news coverage I think is also very poorly served. But that's not as apparent. It takes a more careful reading because if nothing else they throw volumes at you. There's tons of words. I don't think they're the right ones. But still it's harder to see, it's like the meal that doesn't stick to your ribs, the news coverage here, but at least there's this huge bloody meal. So we knew that entertainment would be the easiest place for us to hammer out our niche in the market, and that's why we've very happily had a very high profile identification for our entertainment coverage. But I wouldn't want to work on a paper that was just entertainment.