



A Tale of Two Weeklies

Episode 3: The Best of Times

[music]

Paul Matwychuk: You know there's some sort of alchemy there where it's a bunch of different voices but they all feel like they belong under the same tent and you just want to check in with I, you know, every week

Fish Griwkowsky: It was an open happy conspiracy to write about the people that you knew.

Mari Sasano: A lot of us just kind of ran in a pack for awhile and we were young enough that we didn't have to worry about early mornings or responsibilities.

Bryan Birtles: It was really a dream come true, for a 20 year old.

Mari Sasano: I just considered us sort of like this like special world of people who happened to be lucky enough to be able to do this.

NARR: For 26 years two rival magazines existed as the alternative weekly press in one blue collar, Canadian prairie city. This is the story of Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine, two weekly papers that ran in Edmonton between 1992 and 2018 this is an elegy and love letter to those papers. The rise, glory days, notorious rivalry, and eventual decline. I'm Andrew Paul. I'm Fawnda Mithrush. I'm and Paul Blinov. This is *A Tale of Two Weeklies*.

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NARR: By the late '90s alt weekly papers were blooming across the continent. They were packed with local news opinions and arts features. Most major cities had at least one free weekly, but now that two different alt weeklies Vue Weekly and SEE Magazine had emerged in Edmonton. An ecosystem was starting to form around their rivaling coverage. Readers could pick up both SEE and Vue on Thursdays, planning out their weekends and reading local focus features on arts and events. Artists found coverage, features, reviews and clippings to draw from both magazines. They would vie for mentions in either paper, or ideally both, and writers, especially emerging ones suddenly had two new paying outlets to pitch and pen for. Not that the pay was particularly good. Standard rates for paper article didn't change much from what they were in the late '90s, but the magazines provided inches for conversation and expression and they were distributed all over the city. They were, if anything, a chance for writers to hone their voices. And for plenty of young scribes looking to freelance, the between-paper rivalry didn't quite hold the same relevance it did for the staff working in the respective offices. In this episode we focus on some of the voices that emerged during Edmonton's golden alt weekly era. There are a lot of voices. You'll also hear all of the podcast producers in these interviews as well.



Fish Griwkowsky: I mean, here's the thing that huge war happened and everything split apart, and Ron went and reformed Vue and all sorts of people had opinions about it and everything. And then in the ruins of all that, like there's this sort of like shattered SEE and I just walked into it and I didn't know anything about that stuff for like, I dunno, a year or two afterwards.

NARR: That's Fish Griwkkosky. Here in 2019 he's an art critic for the Edmonton Journal and a freelance cartoonist, but Griwkowsky joined the alt writing scene over a decade ago after cutting his teeth at the University of Alberta's student newspaper, the Gateway. A longtime columnist for SEE Magazine thereafter, the alt weekly format let Griwkowsky hone his voice the way he wanted to, which didn't follow traditional journalistic parameters.

Fish Griwkowsky: I get called a journalist but I feel like a diarist more in a lot of ways. Like a, what I ended up doing for SEE in its heyday was to live in the city and take photos of the bands I was watching and just drop it all into the paper. And I mean this was just, was fun and you know, we got to drink and everything but also there was the sense of a history being laid down.

NARR: The papers were offering a sort of living history and doing it in a more personal voice than the daily papers would ever frame their coverage in. Writers covered the things near and dear to their hearts. The column, Griwkwosky eventually anchored in SEE Magazine, Wildlife, would feature the happenings at the bar scene on any given weekend. It was all SEE n through the lens of his personal connections. And for a then young writer like Griwkowsky on the outside of the offices, the rivalry was more of an inconvenient social obstacle than an actual line in the sand.

Fish Griwkowsky: I came into the Vue/ SEE battle with that in mind essentially where I'm just like, well there are people, certainly I heard, I heard that SEE people were vilified to some degree because of the battle or whatever. But you know, when you, when, when I went and hung out with them, all that goes away. Always. It's a modern lesson we could remember right now. I mean it's always better to talk. People talk to people face to face and you know, when you're mad at someone and they're not in the room, it's going to grow and fester. But if they're actually right there, then you know, it does subside a bit. But yeah, so we, we technically weren't, but I really loved it. Like, occasionally I would shoot a photo for of a band or something like that. And then that really good photo of the band would be like the cover of Vue. And I was just laughing my head off. I'm like, Oh my God, they're going to be mad at me at SEE . But it felt so great. And I mean, I think a whole big part of the SEE /Vue thing is that, you know, when you're younger you're just so excited about all these sort of firsts and you're really first time you get a cover, first time you SEE your name in print, first time you get a photo in the paper, anything like that. Like it's, it's really, really exciting. And then, and then if you do a great job and you get a lot of feedback, that's groovy too.



NARR: That excitement was pervasive in the young writers that filled the weeklies' pages. For Bryan Birtles, who went from freelance writer to an editor at Vue, the weeklies were something he grew up with.

Bryan Birtles: I was, I was aware of all weeklies by the time I was 13 or 14, I first started going to punk shows then, and that's where you could read actual interviews with the guys who were in the bands. And so, so I've been picking it up since then.

NARR: The alt papers were a bridge into that world. Later when a friend became music editor, Birtles started writing CD reviews, which was the extent of his involvement for a few months. Then somebody else fucked up, a writer couldn't make a scheduled interview with a band, and Birtles was there to take it. And little by little he managed to work a permanent employment with the paper, first as a one day a week copy editor that is an editor for multiple smaller sections.

Bryan Birtles: They needed some extra help on Tuesdays, which was production day at the time. And so they said, well, we'll pay you for a day a week and you can come in and, and copy edit on Tuesdays. And so I started doing that and then I just sorta kept sneaking in on Wednesdays. And then I started going to the staff meetings on Fridays and then all of a sudden just any section that somebody didn't want, I would say, yeah, I can take that on. A lot of what alt weekly cultures are is just an effort to save money. And so as I took on more and more responsibility, if you were to give those responsibilities out to five—well I shouldn't be so up on myself—say three other people, like if you were just to spread them around instead of giving it to me, you have to pay those people adequate salaries. But if you give all the responsibilities to one person, you can just kind of give them like a little bump. Each new responsibility they take on. But you don't have to pay as much. And that's kind of the same thing with people who are just hanging around you. If you, you know, if we were to poach somebody from SEE or we were going to poach somebody from another city, we would have to entice them with a big check, you know? But if it's, if you're moving a freelance or up to an editor, you can just say, Hey, here's what the last editor got. That's what we're going to pay you. It's sort of, it's easier to just turn over like that.

NARR: The alt weekly pay was low, but it was livable and Birtles was embracing a teenage dream. He was immersed in the cultural scene of the city, with the access and prestige that came with the newspaper job.

Bryan Birtles: The money, the money at Vue was never great. I was at a, you know, I was at a newspaper conference one time and somebody said to me, you know, this job won't make you a millionaire but you'll never have to be. And I, and I really believe that, because a lot of what you get out of out of an whole briefly is that you get to do the things you already love. You get to do them for free. So I got to go to any show, any show that I wanted to go to, I could just call it the promoter and I could go for free. And then I was there. I was, I was doing the things that I wanted to do anyways and I didn't



have to pay for it. So I had a lot of more money left over for beer and then boy I drank a lot of it. So yeah, it was, it was totally amazing.

Paul Blinov: Right, right. Living up to sort of that, that teenage dream of what and what working at an all weekly might be like.

Bryan Birtles: Exactly. No, exactly. I was talking to all my favorite bands. I was drinking as much beer as I could. I was, I was out five nights a week because I would only not go out on production days, 'cause I needed to be in the office of it and like early, but most of the days I would, I would stay up all night and then breeze into the office at like one, and that was totally acceptable cause that was my job. Yeah. It was really a dream come true—for a 20 year old.

NARR: Another young voice that appeared in both papers was that of Rollie Pemberton, you might know him better as rapper Cadence Weapon. He started out at SEE and moved over to Vue in later years.

Rollie Pemberton: Yeah. When I first started writing for SEE I was still a teenager and I was finding myself very isolated at the time and I was like writing a little bit at the time for Pitchfork. My, my first editor was Zoltan and he was very influential guy to me. He's a very cool guy. I really liked him and he weirdly enough took me extremely seriously for, you know, just being like a random teenager off the street in Edmonton. And he really encouraged me with a lot of the writing, and I think some of the earliest stuff I would be doing probably like underground rap, like album reviews and stuff. Like I used to, you know, I remember I reviewed The Killer's album too, when you get the promos you get all the CDs and like I'd review whatever free CDs. I couldn't believe it. I was getting CDs for free. This is the best job ever.

NARR: Zoltan Varadi had become an editor at SEE after working at Calgary's weekly, FFWD, for a number of years. He continued to freelance with SEE until 2008.

Zoltan Varadi: Cadence Weapon was still in high school and maybe junior high cause he, he approached us a little bit later. I actually, I remember him, if there was a story, he sent me an email saying 'yo, a resume' and I ignored it. I was like, what the hell is this kid? And then I saw his name mentioned in Pitchfork as a reviewer and I was like, hey, that's the same kid. I gave him a call. And he started writing for us.

NARR: Varadi's style was suited for the alt weekly beat, but there were also times he felt he may have been an ill fit for the music section, especially when it came to comparing SEE's coverage to Vue's.

Zoltan Varadi: I think we were a little bit more comprehensive on things like and again this is all blurry to me, but I think maybe in things like theater and whatnot, we were SEE m to me a little more comprehensive. And I think their music coverage was a little bit, and this is a little bit maybe a condemnation of myself cause I was music editor, but I think they



were a little bit younger and hipper. I was holding onto the dying embers of rock music and we would try and compensate for that by bringing in writers to write about things. I had no knowledge of like electronic music and hip hop and stuff. That was why I brought in Rollie to write, he had his finger on new indie bands, not only hip hop but new indie bands that I had never even heard of because he'd get the records through, you know, illegal downloads before they dropped. And I wasn't even doing that sort of thing yet. I was still getting my physical copies from the record company. So he, he knew about a lot of stuff that I did not. And so, you know, we would put Ike Turner on the cover and they would put on Wilco, who at that time where, you know, they're dad rock now, but at the time they were critical darlings. And so I think it kind of skewed that way.

Fawnda Mithrush: Did you ever get any pushback from the Ike Turner story?

Zoltan Varadi: Well, I called Ike out on, I asked him about it, and he gave me some dance around about how they were both he and Tina were hotheads, and kind of let it slide a bit, but I did bring it up, but no, I didn't get any pushback. This is the old dark days where people can get away with being horrible human beings and still have careers.

Fawnda Mithrush: So as a writer, you know, trying things out. The thing about the weekly is that you always have the next week, right? You always kind of like got another shot. Do you ever feel like there were any sort of mistakes or regrets that you had about certain stories or reviews or anything like that?

Zoltan Varadi: I'm the type of person who cringes at pretty much everything I've ever done ever. So I can't, I can't pick one. Yeah, my whole career is a series of regrets.

NARR: There were some small victories though. Varadi recalls one instance when he and the SEE editors responded directly to a cover that ran in Vue.

Zoltan Varadi: I have one that where I was kind of being a disturber and was where I was being critical of Vue actually. So that's how it all ties in, but Vue put in some put out some edition, and I don't even remember what the story was, but it was about the Edmonton music scene and they gathered a bunch of local musicians and for their front cover and photographed them on the steps of the legislature. And my editor, Kevin was like,

NARR: That's referring to Kevin Wilson who is managing editor at SEE from 2001 until 2008

Zoltan Varadi: And my editor, Kevin was like, 'everyone in this picture is a guy.' And so we mounted our own rebuttal, which are supposed to be kind of funny, but also make the mad a bit. And we got musicians from every walk of life and all genders too. We basically recreated the shop a more diverse and we knew it was going to make them angry, but I didn't anticipate the anger that came. Remember that, that kind of punk a chat site In Decline? Yeah, they went nuts. Slamming me. So and so that was, that was interesting.



NARR: You might have noticed by now that most of the voices we've talked to in this series so far are male, white males. It's from a point of privilege that so many of these young, single educated or otherwise guys were able to get away with extended periods of working for very little with or without student debt for a lot longer than someone from a different background or with a significant societal ladders to climb. They could spend time being freelancers and that consistency and regularity would make them the next ones in line for larger roles at the papers. We didn't find many writers or editors in the historical staff directories who had children when they worked there, or who were persons of color, and comparatively few women made it to the higher ranks of the editorial teams during both magazines' lifetimes. As our story gets closer to the present day, the pool of voices diversifies a little bit, but especially back then, these were very white, very male environments. Anyway, most of the writers for both papers knew each other, if not by friendship than at least by by-lines, and the act of writing for one or both carried some social weight. Mari Sasano, a longtime freelancer for SEE, found her way into that scene through a moment of serendipitous timing.

Mari Sasano: So basically I had just finished my master's degree and I was doing whatever I could at the time I was making sandwiches, I was doing temp jobs. And first I actually, I actually had approached Vue with just some clippings cause I, and they'd kind of looked me up and down and said, thank you for coming to our office. And I never heard from them again. And then, and I kind of was talking to people about maybe wanting to write and my sister's ex-boyfriend's band, the drummer was Scott Lingley. And so my sister's ex boyfriend said, you should take some stuff down. And I'm like, Oh, well that's probably a good idea. And they'd just fired someone. So right place at the right time. And so they gave me like one little movie review and then that was it. Like, I got regular work every week and after a while I start to write for other places, for the Journal. And but I, yeah, I wrote for SEE for like, a really long time, like 10 or 12 years.

NARR: Those 10 or 12 years placed Sasano in the thick of that culture with all of its highs and lows.

Mari Sasano: A lot of us just kind of ran in a pack for awhile and we were young enough that we didn't have to worry about early mornings are responsibilities and it was quite a lot of fun. Like I was in my mid to late twenties into my thirties and there are a lot of things about that time that were like the absolutely worst. Like some of the things at that, at that time were like really super hard. And part of that was about, you know, certain people that were maybe not really good for me in that, in that scene, but at the same time, like it was an awful lot of fun, and I think we did kind of push each other. So like I just considered us sort of like this, like special world of people who happened to be lucky enough to be able to do this.

Fawnda Mithrush: How do you feel that those years and maybe that lifestyle impacted your, your career and everything that you do now moving forward? What do you, what do you still take? What did you take from that experience?



Mari Sasano: Well, I'm not really scared of uncertainty. I'm not afraid of making do. There are a lot of situations that people find terrifying, like the instability of it or you know, like what if I get into a situation I can't get out of? Well, clearly some situations might be very dangerous and, and might lead to disaster, but if you survive those things, you're probably going to be okay. Figuring out how to become, like, the eye of the storm is super useful. I work with people who have never, you know, who talk about well, maybe someday I will quit my job and then I'll do this. Like maybe, maybe you should do that before you're too old to enjoy it.

NARR: For many who worked in and around the papers, the rivalry existed in a bubble that was only visible to them. On the outside, the rift between the papers wasn't nearly as apparent as it would become for anyone who crossed either SEE or Vue's doors for a reasonable amount of time. Such was the case for Vikki Wiercinski, a production designer for Vue.

Vikki Wiercinski: I didn't even realize that Vue and SEE were basically the same word spelled differently. What I mean, and somebody pointed out to me when I'm, when I got there and I was like, Oh wow. Like, okay. You know, and then they kind of just like, people at the office just naturally start telling you about this, like universe they lived in where these two papers for like fighting it out to the death. And I drank the Koolaid pretty quick, you know, but out of the two, even before I worked at Vue, I felt like Vue was somehow better and I don't really, I can't really explain that. It felt more homey. It felt less alien. Right. But maybe that's just because I never set foot in SEE's offices, you know, like who knows? I mean, yeah.

NARR: Wiercinski had applied to work at Vue after seeing a job posting on Craigslist, she was hired almost immediately.

Vikki Wiercinski: I later found out that they were so screwed for staff that they, they, they were actually sitting there going, how are we going to make it through the next two weeks? And then I applied. Yes. You know, and so it was this kind of really great mix of just being in the right place at the right time. And also then finding that I actually am quite good at layout, quite fast at producing graphics, and it was a really good fit for awhile.

NARR: The bulk of Wiercinski's job involved designing and laying out the ads that would bracket the paper's pages. Just like for the editorial staff, that meant long hours and a sense of comradery.

Vikki Wiercinski: I always call this job like the ad factory, like I made quite possibly hundreds of ads a week. And you know, I had good skills, you know, I was a good young designer and I learned how to get fast and I learned how to get really quick with things, which is actually very valuable as a, you know, as you move forward in your career. So that was super cool. And so I just remembered being handed like an ad roster and just being like, okay, well here's the content, here's the photo, like start pumping these out, you know, and I did and it was fine. It was great. And like there was this big like horse shoe



production room kind of in the middle of you. I'm sure anyone who's been in the offices who remembers it. So it was me and the layout guy and Mike Siek and Lyle Bell. There might've been someone else floating around. Yeah, I dunno. Lyle just like played great music. Yeah. And we'd just sit there and get things done. You know, there were some long nights that I got used to. I liked it, it definitely wasn't like a nine to five like standard job, you know? Yeah. And then every week we'd just like, there would be this like race to the finish line, which was Wednesday at noon. Paper went to print. Yeah. We'd all like a lot of the time we'd wind up at the Commodore afterwards like eating a burger and some curly fries in this old version of downtown that I don't even know exists anymore. But we would wander through these dusty surface parking lots and you know, go to the Commodore and like celebrate the paper being out or something.

NARR: For some young writers with their sights set on a byline and one of the alt weekly's pages picking aside was necessary. Sometimes the choice of writing for SEE or Vue was made with full understanding of the between paper situation. Other times it was based on something else, a more instinctive reaction to the coverage of what was inside one or both papers.

David Berry: Well, okay. Another thing I remember, and this kind of I guess fits into the idea of the rivalry was like when I was first starting out, it was a bit of an open question like, do I go to SEE or do I go to Vue?

NARR This is David Berry who cycled through a number of editorial roles that Vue Weekly before departing for the National Post for a time. He now freelances and in May, 2020 his first book, *On Nostalgia*, will be published with Coach House Books.

David Berry: Like I knew I wanted to do arts writing of some kind. And so there was the, this vivid memory I have of *The Shape of Things*, which was a Citadel Theatre production. I want to say 2003 and I was, I had to SEE it for a class actually I was in, it was, it's like theatre class and the teacher in this class loved Neil Labute, loved this play. Couldn't get enough of it and like, whatever your feelings on him. I, don't like him. And this play in particular is just like, I find it like freshman garbage is just like over the top and so galling. Most of his construction I think. And the off the top of this is the opening line, which is like they're in a museum or something like that and the guy, the first line of a play is 'sir, I think you've stepped over the line' and it's just like, are you kidding me? Like that. Like this is how you're opening your thing? Which, so it's like, it always like clanged for me and I hated that shit. And I remember going to read the reviews in Vue and SEE afterwards and the SEE review, the writer will remain nameless, like called this out as like this is how brilliant and transgressive this play is. It opens with 'sir, you've stepped over the line'. And the Vue reviewer opened with a discussion of how like this is exactly the kind of dumb bullshit that idiots who don't know what they're talking about focus on and like, so like obviously they couldn't have known what each other was writing. It was just like a perfect you know, like parallel thinking except the opposite sort of thing. But so that like the instant I read that I was like, okay, I probably have to go to to Vue, like this, whether they're right or wrong or whatever. Like they're clearly the ones I agree



with about this stuff. So like, yeah, that was, that was it. That was like, that was the moment that I was like, okay. Yeah. This is, this is my paper

NARR: Author Michael Hingston, who's now a full time publisher at Hingston and Olson, the outlet responsible for bespoke projects like the Short Story Advent Calendar and the Ghost Box collaboration with Patton Oswalt. He began writing for SEE Magazine shortly after moving to Edmonton from Vancouver. He didn't know the particulars of the papers rivalry, but pitched SEE based on what happened to be on the cover that particular week.

Michael Hingston: So I moved to Edmonton in spring of 2008. I was an aspiring arts writer with two clips under my belt or something like that. And I had, one of the pieces I published just before moving here was in an alt weekly. So when I moved to Edmonton I thought I should see if they have an alt weekly and then maybe I can get a story or two with them. And I remember walking down Jasper the first week I moved here and there were two of them, couldn't believe it. Like two, not identical but similar looking boxes next to each other. And I just couldn't believe my luck. You know, Vancouver has one big one and as someone looking for work, seeing two was a very good sign for my future job prospects. So I was very early in my career and when I saw those boxes I had to decide which one I was going to contact first. I had an inkling that you couldn't write for both. It was my hunch at the time. And so I remember the cover of SEE that week was a bit cooler. It was a picture of Cadence Weapon on the front. I remember it very clearly blue background. He's kind of like pumping his fist almost. And so based on literally the cover of the issue that week, I went home and pitched SEE, or offered SEE my services

NARR: Cadence Weapon or Rollie Pemberton was someone who was on both sides of the weekly, sometimes writing for them, sometimes being written about as a musician and later as Edmonton's Poet Laureate. Pemberton took it as a particular badge of pride to get coverage in the papers, especially the cover having his image peering out from thousands of news boxes all over the city.

Rollie Pemberton: Oh, that was my ultimate goal. That's the thing. Like it was like I got on the cover of SEE Magazine, I'll never forget, there was like a picture of me like jumping in the air and I was like, man, I made it, you know, that was just like the most iconic thing. It was like being on the cover of the Village Voice or something if you're in New York. Like it was just so significant to me. And yeah, I was on, I was on Vue for the poet laureate thing. I was, I'm very proud to have been in the final issue of Vue as well. I dunno, it's just been, that was like the ultimate status symbol, you know, like, it's just like, wow. Like everybody at the Sugar Bowl is like reading about me, you know, I was like, it seems like I could be playing like Glastonbury or something, wouldn't matter as much.

NARR: For editors, it was a point of pride to discover an excellent new writer, one who would go on to a meaningful career in publishing or otherwise. Paul Matwychuk, who would spend years as an editor at both SEE and Vue recalls that the moments of discovery with some vindication.



Paul Matwychuk: You know, like, I remember the first time that Michael Hingston submitted an article to me, I, I said to the other people like, Oh, this guy is going to have a very successful career. And he has, he's published published books. He's got his own publishing company. And I feel like, I you know, I think anybody would've realized that he was good, but I was the one who happened to give him his first professional writing job. So, and I think there's, there's a whole, you know, succession of people like that. So I think we had a really strong stable of writers during those years who were very knowledgeable, took their job seriously, were very good interviewers and very good writers. And I think we had a, a product that was the equal of anything in the city at least as far as you know, entertainment coverage.

NARR: When Matwychuk started out, he was at Vue, his main interest was writing about film. And it was a rewarding gig to have, especially when it meant booking interviews with moguls of that industry. The style of Vue's coverage he says was what drew him to the paper.

Paul Matwychuk: My impression, I guess the reason why I walked into the office at Vue rather than the office at SEE that first, you know, fateful day as I recall, I guess I was thinking that Vue just seemed, it seemed better written to me and I, you know, this is so long ago, this is like 20 years ago. I don't know what I would exactly point to, to say why I thought it was better written. I think it also, I think a SEE seemed a little more like it was, it was the home of like Fish Griwkowsky and Darren Zenko and I, and I wasn't quite as like rough and tumble as those guys. I wasn't as much of a cool kid as them, and Vue seemed a little more serious and disciplined, and I guess I was a little more buttoned up than that. You know, I don't know if I would stick by that assessment.

NARR: Matwychuk mentions Darren Zenko there. Zenko was an entertainment columnist for both magazines at various times and became known for his column titled The Most Famous Guy in Town. He went on to be a video game reviewer and contributor to the Toronto Star. A number of writers from both weeklies remember him well.

Rich Cairney: One of my favorites on our ship was a Darren Zenko, the late most famous guy in town. He was a guy whose advice to young aspiring writers was 'don't file your copy until the last fucking minute because then they can't screw with it.' And it worked. I mean, it was fun. He had lots of ideas. This was a guy who was such a hustler and such an imaginative guy. You know what his best thing was? He wrote a review of a bus route, I think the 107 or something like this. And he just went from one end to the other and back. And it was pretty going through some sketchy parts of town with different characters getting on and off the bus. And he wrote this as a story for us. And then many years later, he wrote the same story for Vue. It was brilliant.

David Berry: One of my other favorites I guess was Darren Zenko, who sadly is no longer with us, who like I think introduced certainly Edmonton and maybe most of Canada through some sort of weird freelance thing to Pokemon, actually. He like went over, happened to visit Japan, saw Pokemon, was convinced this is going to be huge, and brought it over here



and like actually talked a bunch of people into doing it, but also just was maybe the most brilliant writer I've ever known personally and probably also like the laziest human being I've ever met. Like, I once saw him tell a panel of student journalists that the best way to make sure that no one messed with your writing was to send it in late. That was his advice to aspiring journalists was miss your deadlines, which he basically never failed to do.

Fish Griwkowsky: Zenko? Yeah man, he was great. Well, he was like, he again, he was like, he was this incredibly a prolific writer and he was always hustling. And he had, the great thing about Darren is he knew that his, here's the thing, like he would like beat the newspaper quite often and be like, you don't deserve me. Like he was so convinced of his own genius, but he wasn't entirely wrong. That's the thing about him. His writing always needed like more time and and more editing. But it was so energized and so great and his mind worked. It was just so agile. And his interests were really wide. And I think, what's it, he, I know he had a rule, which is like always file late so that they can't edit your copy. Like that was, so, I mean, I always, I laughed at that, but doesn't necessarily always work like that in the real world. But people did put up with him a lot because this is, his copy was so much fun, but you just didn't know what you were going to get. Right. You could assign him anything and he would be able to write about anything and quite often just veer away the hell away from the desk trench and like just fly off into space. But yeah, just even the, even the concept like the Most Famous Guy in Town was a parody of sort of like kind of like Nick Lees, Graham Hicks style. Like, and it started off very much about like the buffet table and stuff and it was sort of a direct satire, but then it just became this mad diary of like, you know, being a gen X-er who is too smart for his own good, basically. Yeah. Who like, and he was always getting in trouble and you know, yeah. So I mean, I miss him a lot.

NARR: Zenko passed away from complications with cancer in 2012 at age 38.

NARR: Two other prominent voices in the papers passed away during the magazine's timeline. One was Gilbert Bouchard in 2009 at the age of 47. He was a long time contributor to SEE, CBC ,and the Edmonton Journal's art section. Another was Ross Moroz, who was Vue's managing editor when he died in 2007. He was 24.

NARR: With crews of writers and artists and more freedoms than in a traditional newspaper, the weeklies cultivated a style and a focus more niche than the papers of record could or wanted to provide. Local visual art shows, touring bands who had more indie cred than record sales, and political views would splash across their pages. When the papers hosted serialized content, it was of those with edgier voices: independent journalist, Gwynne Dyer's clear breakdowns of international situations, or sex columnists like Dan Savage and Josie Vogels and their risqué Q and A's. Whether the focus was local or abroad, written in house or brought in from afar more than anything. The papers took pride in covering offbeat interests, as Bryan Birtles for calls.



Bryan Birtles: I think that what weeklies provide is a look into an underground or a local scene that dailies certainly weren't doing at the time. And, and I just don't think have ever had much of a capacity to do, they're much more mainstream. They need to sell a lot more papers than we would have to move in order to make a profit. And so they need to talk about arts. They have much more wide ranging interests like, a larger pool of people who might be interested in, if it's music, they would talk about oh, you know, the Rolling Stones are coming, or we've got a, we've got an interested the Queens of the Stone Age or, or the White Stripes or something, you know, big, big bands. That's, that's the only things that they really have the capacity to cover and not calling out dailies. I think they're good. And I think that you know, someone like Fish Griwkowsky is doing a good job right now of trying to bring the underground and the overground and he's doing an excellent job. But again, he started at the weeklies. It's like, you know, that's his bread and butter.

NARR: So it was a life of low wages, but vibrant social experiences for those on the inside, or at least that was the pleasant bubble they use to justify low pay to themselves. For the people being written about, the artists that filled the weeklies pages, the impact of the paper's coverage was significant. It could also vary wildly and its impact. Just because you wrote glowingly about a niche art form doesn't necessarily mean people would flock to it. Here's Griwkowsky again.

Fish Griwkowsky: And I certainly know that the musicians appreciated that and I used to ask them sometimes, you know, does it actually help? You know, you'll write a preview of something and then you go to the show and like nine people go to it and you kind of think, oh well maybe that didn't work so well on my side. But the musicians were very happy about it because they could at least use a clipping to encourage being booked across the country.

NARR: That dynamic is a co-dependence between the writers and the scenes they covered. A Venn diagram where the overlap was often bigger than the independent slices. In any small to mid sized city, the people writing about art and the people making it are going to be in the same rooms more often than not. In Edmonton, those rooms could feel pretty tight sometimes.

Fish Griwkowsky: I certainly made a lot of friends and, and, and we were all, we were all in it together as the idea and it was an open, happy conspiracy to write about the people that you knew. I mean, I used to joke all the time about how, you know, SEE and Vue or just like writers writing about people they knew. I mean it was, and I heard from people in the outside of that or people that were new to town. It's like, how do you crack into that? And the answer was just basically simply like go to the bar three nights in a row or go to shows, like be part of the scene.

NARR: Still the papers rivalry did leave fractures to be worked around. Longtime SEE editor and contributor Scott Lingely recalls both the social impacts of the SEE/Vue divide, the risks of being seen with the figurative enemy, and their battles over the most popular



serialized content of almost any alt weekly paper, Dan Savage's sex advice column, Savage Love.

Scott Lingley: We would have a SEE Best of Party, and Dave Johnston who was working for Vue, who was the music editor there for a long time, was walking by and Fish Griwkowsky and Steven Notley were friends with him, so they went and dragged him into the bar and he was, he acted like he had been pulled into a KKK rally or something. I think that, I don't know what was going on on the other side, but I think there was a lot of demonizing going on about who we were and what we did. I remember at one point we lost Dan Savage briefly, Savage love. He told us that he didn't want to be in our paper anymore and that had something to do with some approach that Vue had made to him and some things that they had told him about who we were, but that didn't last very long. That got sorted out. But it did give Dan Savage an opportunity to ask for more money. God bless him, you know? And that was after he had been here, you know, he had, he had come to Edmondton and we had run some events with him and give him an opportunity to flog his book and he had appeared at a couple of public venues that we had sponsored that stuff. And then after that, somehow what he had heard about us was displeasing to him. But it all got sorted out and he was back with us very short order.

NARR: Dan Savage's column was immensely popular, even when it wasn't. His no holes barred discussion of sex and his willingness to answer even the most ludicrous of letters led to negative reactions from the public, especially from advertisers who are also sharing the weeklies pages.

Scott Lingley: There's another anecdote that I can mention: So Dan Savage wrote a very famous column, which I believe is maybe known as the lobster column. Or mud shrimp column.

NARR: If you wish to read the column, go ahead and Google it. Google Dan Savage, mud shrimp. It's there. Fair warning. It's a lot to handle. It's also almost certainly untrue. Most of Savage's response to the letter is in fact searching for any tangible link to it, which he can't find, but still he serialized it and SEE published it and people didn't like it. They didn't like it a whole lot.

Scott Lingley: It's super disgusting. I won't reiterate the contents of that particular column, but we put it in our paper and put it out, and instantly lost like dozens of drops around the city. I personally entertained numerous, very irate phone calls from proprietors of family establishments who did not want to have that filth in their establishment, and there was even talk at city hall that that SEE Magazine was not going to be made available on public news stands, like it would have to be behind a counter or something. I'm not sure how they were going to work it out, but there was some talk that this offensive material was just too broadly available.

NARR: There were other mud shrimp situations over the paper's lifetimes. After all with their decidedly alternative slants, the papers were places where writers could push the envelope to discover the tolerances of what their audiences would accept in the pages



of a free paper and what would lead to hostile letters and boycotts. Having a forum to make mistakes, to deal with blowback, and to saddle up to do it all over again week after week was an invaluable training ground for so many writers, editors, and creatives as they began their careers. That didn't always feel good. If a glaring mistake made it past the editors or the wrong sort of controversy erupted around a story, those involved with, think about it every time they passed the newspaper box that week. But for Lingley and others, that was part of the appeal: to dig yourself out of a hole you dug yourself into every single week just in time to get the next one out the door.

Scott Lingley: Yeah, but there's nothing, I don't think there's anything sort of on par of an educational moment, like doing something stupid in print, right, where you've put it out in black and white into the world. Something ignorant or stupid or misjudged or just plain wrong, and then you've got to live with it for at least a week while it sits out there on the racks waiting for people to pick it up and witness it. I guess the only thing that I want to add is that it, it was really, it was great. It was really fun. Even though it made me miserable and eventually left me feeling sort of broken, it was also kind of the best time of my life. It's the, it's my favorite job that I've ever had, even though it was super hard. And I learned a lot, but mostly I've learned by doing something stupid and then figuring out a way to fix it. A huge regret of mine is that I didn't do a better job of archiving that stuff that I did while I was at SEE because it doesn't exist anymore. I imagine that Fish Griwkowsky has a large flammable pile of SEE clippings cause he's, he was very much a hoarder in that regard. He was very good about keeping the stuff that had his byline on it, but me not so much.

[music]

NARR: Next time on A Tale of Two Weeklies, writers and editors weren't the only people benefiting from the weeklies. The art scene, often the focus of their pages, embraced the highs and lows of focused local coverage, and artists' careers were chronicled in ink. A lot of it.

Liz Nicholls: Well, I would say that it's a theater town.

Murray Utas: Yeah. So reviews, reviews. Yep.

Mel Priestley: I think I've given two bombs and they were so, one of them still makes me angry to think about it because it was just so bad.

Trevor Schmidt: Lots of young artists get tied up in knots and work themselves into a fricking frenzy.

Paul Matwychuk: I look back at it, I really don't know how I was able to survive all of that.

Darka Tarnawsky: I think it was kind of like an embarrassment of riches, to be honest.



NARR: A Tale of Two Weeklies is produced by Andrew Paul, Fawnda Mithrush, and Paul Blinov. Music is by Luke Thomson. Artwork is by Michael Nunweiler. This series was made possible with project support from the Edmonton Heritage Council. Special thanks to Edmonton Community Foundation for use of their recording studio.