

READING 'THE ROCKET'

A SOARING JOURNEY THROUGH THE EARLY HISTORY OF
SEATTLE'S LEGENDARY MAGAZINE OF MUSIC AND CULTURE

BY TODD MATTHEWS

Shortly before Nirvana released its epic album "Nevermind," a publicist for Geffen Records asked the band members how they might define the album's success. Their answer? An appearance on the cover of "The Rocket."

It was a dream shared by many local bands.

If you lived in Seattle during the 1980s and 1990s, you probably recall seeing at coffee shops, bars and nightclubs throughout the city stacks of free issues of "The Rocket" — an influential magazine of local music and culture that was launched in a Capitol Hill house in 1979 and soared for the next two decades before its final issue crash landed in October 2000. "The Rocket" counted approximately 90,000 readers and produced editions in Seattle and Portland at its peak, not bad for a magazine whose first issue was just a 16-page special supplement to "The Seattle Sun."

Today, "The Rocket" occupies a special place in local music history.

Sub Pop Records' roots trace back to the label's cofounder, Bruce Pavitt, and the column he wrote. Former "Almost Live!" host John Keister wrote for "The Rocket" under his own name and the nom de plume Johnny Renton during the magazine's earliest years. Charles R. Cross, author of "Heavier than Heaven," a bestselling biography of Kurt Cobain, started out as a contributing writer at "The Rocket" before purchasing the magazine in the mid-1980s and becoming its longtime editor.

To be clear, Nirvana had already appeared on the magazine's cover (in December 1989) by the time "Nevermind" was released, and Cobain had a connection to the magazine long before he achieved rock stardom. Growing up in Aberdeen, Wash., he picked up "The Rocket" at a local record store. In 1988, while searching for a drummer, Cobain placed a classified advertisement in "The Rocket." He also combed its ads to find the cheapest studio space to record songs.

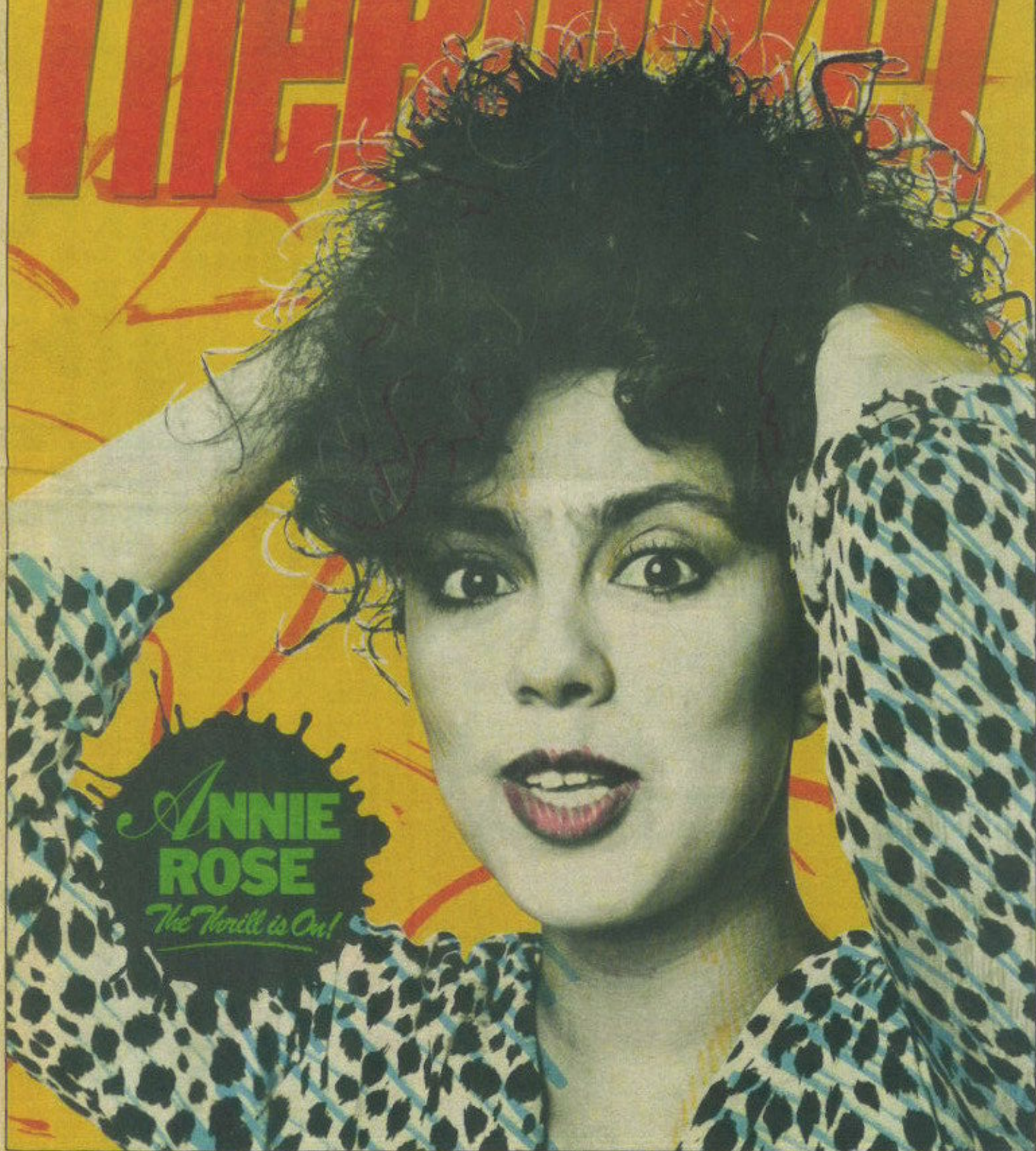
By the time its final issue was published, "The Rocket" was experiencing turbulence. It had been sold on twice to two different out-of-town media companies, and looming internet headwinds were poised to create a sea change in the world of magazine publishing.

Two years ago, while looking for a project to curb pandemic-related anxiety and boredom, I began to read old issues of "The Rocket." Flipping through 40-year-old issues with my ink-stained fingers, I felt as though I was unsealing time capsules to peer inside and learn new things about a city that I thought I knew after living here for 30 years. My interest grew when I tracked down nearly a dozen of the magazine's earliest contributors — publishers, editors, writers, art directors and other staffers — who shared their stories about starting a scrapping magazine during a period of Seattle lost to the ages. Here are some of them.

ROCKABILLY/OINGO BOINGO/THE FARTZ/GUNS/FEB.'83

The Poolvot

FREE



Annie
ROSE

The Thrill is On!

KZOK
SOUND CHECK
CALENDAR
INSIDE
FREE

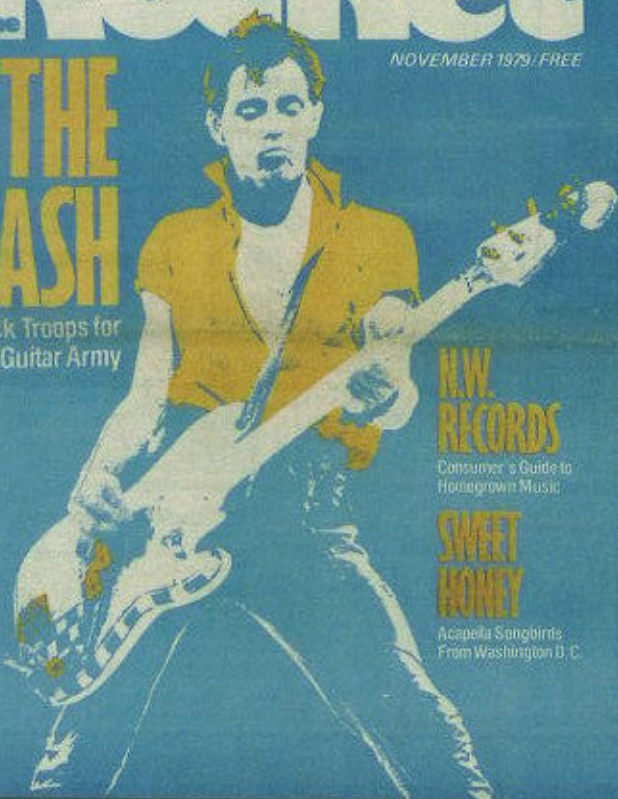
Seattle Jazz/Heath Brothers/New Blondie

the Rocket

NOVEMBER 1979 / FREE

THE CLASH

Shock Troops for
The Guitar Army



N.W.
RECORDS
Consumer's Guide to
Homegrown Music

SWEET
MONEY

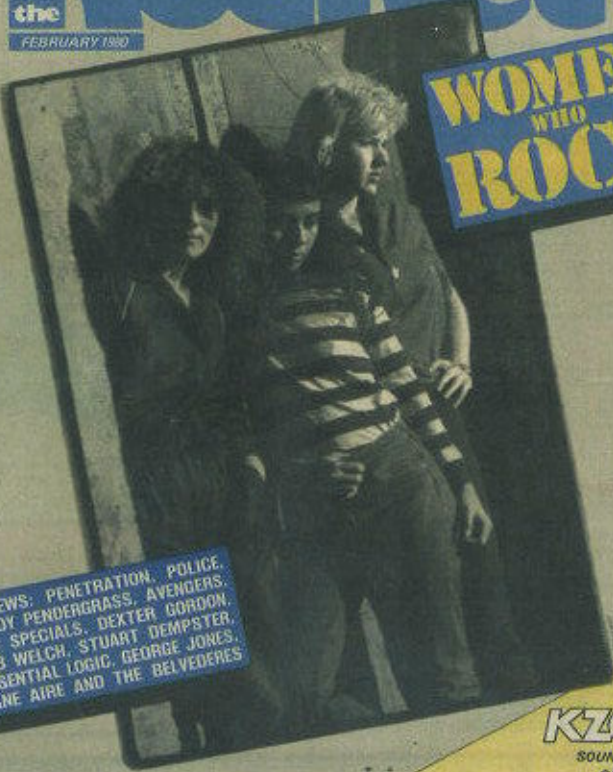
Acapella Songbirds
From Washington D.C.

ROCHES / DYLAN / PINK FLOYD / BONE-FONE / JAZZ SERIES

the Rocket

FEBRUARY 1980

WOMEN WITH ROCK



REVIEWS: PENETRATION, POLICE,
TEDDY PENDERGRASS, AVENGERS,
THE SPECIALS, DEXTER GORDON,
BOB WELCH, STUART DEMPSTER,
ESSENTIAL LOGIC, GEORGE JONES,
JANE AIRE AND THE BELVEDERES

FREE
INSIDE

KZOK
SOUND CHECK
CALENDAR

KZOK
SOUND CHECK
CALENDAR
INSIDE
FREE

Hard Drivin' With the Cars

the Rocket

OCTOBER 1979 / FREE



So you wanna be a Rock 'n' Roll star...

Local independent record
producer Harry Kool

By Robert Ferrigno

HEAR THAT sound? If you listen real close you can hear the recording industry whimpering like a wounded dinosaur.

Industry profits are way down, 20 percent or more, according to ABC News. The unemployment offices in L.A. are crowded with dated Manhattan executives in Guccis who mumble things like "monster!", "promo package," and "bullet" as they finger the gold chains that

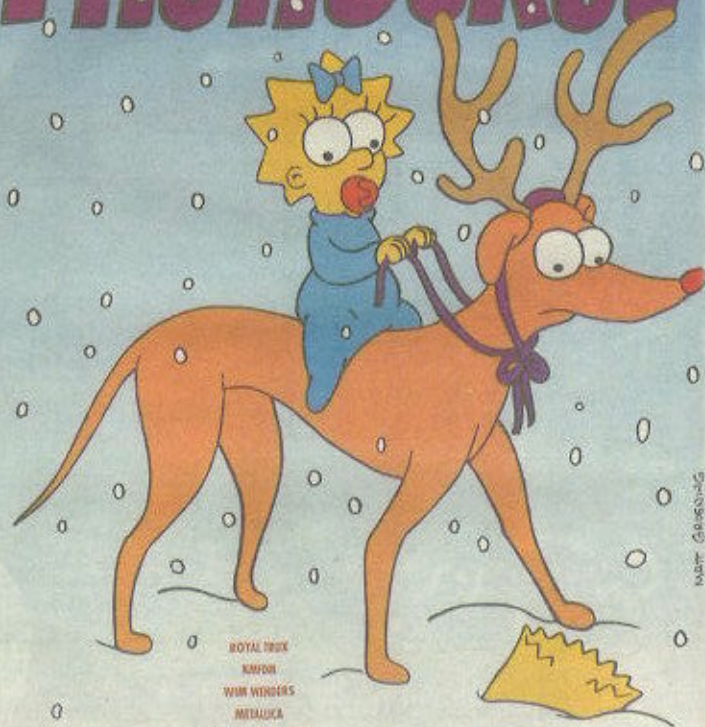
swathe their necks. A plastic surgeon could send ten generations of his kids to Harvard on the now-reconstruction jobs in the INFORMATION line.

Maybe it's disco. Maybe it's the recession. Or a temporary slump after a decade of strong advances. Maybe. But other possibilities suggest themselves. Maybe the recording industry has been outflanked, its byzantine, layered bureau-

Continued on page 7

The Rocket

DEC 22 - JAN 26, 1980 / FREE



ROYAL TRUX
KINOH
WIN WINDERS
METALICA
THE END LIST O' PLINY

MARK GARDING

ROBERT 'BOB' NEWMAN

COFOUNDER, SENIOR EDITOR, EDITOR (1979-1986)

I think the original idea for "The Rocket" came from our sales guy, Danny O'Brien, who was plugged into the local music scene. In the beginning, we knew the magazine would be a monthly insert in "The Sun." We didn't know what it was going to be called, what was going to be in it or how we would make it happen. Everybody had a different vision, and we had long meetings with a rotating cast of characters kicking around ideas and concepts, large and small.

"The Rocket's" name came about when we started talking about using the word "jet" in the title because of Boeing. Some people wanted to call it "Jet City," but I think there might have been a band called Jet City Rock. Of course, there was "Jet" magazine. "The Rocket" seemed perfect because of the supersonic connection and the words "rock" and "rock-it."

The first issue was only 16 pages, so it didn't cost much to print. We cooked up an advertising deal with KZOK-FM, one of the two big rock stations. KZOK got a gatefold calendar, a page filled with news about the radio station and a little place on the cover. That KZOK connection is what launched "The Rocket." It gave us instant legitimacy, a mass audience and some money.

After a year, it became apparent that the relationship between "The Rocket" and "The Seattle Sun" wasn't going to work. So, a core group of us decided to buy "The Rocket" from "The Sun" and move to an abandoned storefront around the corner from The Comet Tavern on Capitol Hill. It was a very rock 'n' roll neighborhood. At night, when we were working, we could hear the bad music and all the drunks at The Comet.

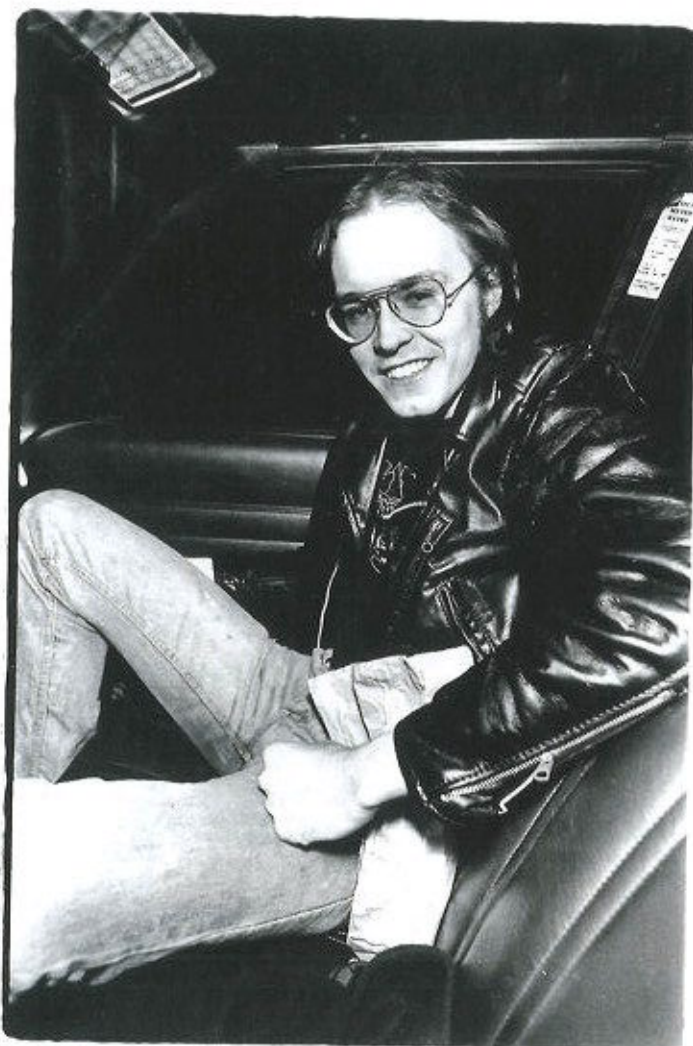
Later, "The Rocket" moved into offices above the Rendezvous in Belltown. It was a crazy place. There were bands rehearsing, parties on the roof, people living in back, a payday loan shark with an office and enough shady characters wandering around that one "Rocket" writer had to chase off more than one with a baseball bat. But, in retrospect, it was the perfect place to be. If you had a passion for keeping as much of your creative spirit as possible, "The Rocket" was the place to be. People would hang out in the office all day long blasting music, fielding crazy phone calls and talking with visiting musicians.

Post-"Rocket" career: Newman moved to New York City, where he went on to work as a creative director and design director for "Details," "Entertainment Weekly," "Fortune," "New York," "Vibe," "The Village Voice," and many other notable publications. Today, he is the creative director of "This Old House."

DANNY O'BRIEN

"LIP SERVICE" COLUMNIST "RICKY CRESCIEND'O"
AND ADVERTISING SALES (1979-1981)

Artistically, things were happening in Seattle. People were hungry for something new. At "The Rocket," you had all these talented people who were free to create whatever they wanted. They were funny and irreverent. People started to dig the coverage of the



(Above) Robert Newman in Seattle, 1979.
Opposite: "The Rocket" through the ages.

bands, the reviews and the opinions. People trusted "The Rocket" to tell the truth and offer opinions.

While at "The Rocket," I also worked as KISW's mascot, the Duck. It paid \$275 weekly and included tickets to all the concerts and a lot of free records. I met all the different music industry promoters and A&R people for the different artists. I would go to a lot of shows. I was backstage a lot. I remember being in the Duck costume when Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young walked offstage. They saw me and started goofing on the Duck: "Ha! Ha! Look at this guy!" At the Seattle Symphony, William Shatner was the guest conductor for a performance of "Music From Outer Space." I performed with Shatner on stage in a tuxedo, or "duxedo."

My alias, "Ricky Cresciend'o" for "The Rocket's" Lip Service column, was just something that popped into my head. The name "Ricky" was so Hollywood. The name "Cresciend'o" had sort of a European flavor to it. Ricky Cresciend'o sounded like a party boy. I liked the anonymity of it. I could sort of hide behind Ricky Cresciend'o. I had a lot of fun with it. I was not the greatest writer in the world, but I knew what was going on in the clubs and with most of the big, national, touring acts that came through town.

“‘The Rocket’ almost killed me because of all the partying I did.”

—DANNY O'BRIEN

“The Rocket” almost killed me because of all the partying I did. “The Rocket” was up-and-coming, and people wanted their name in it so they would invite me to parties. Of course, I wouldn't turn them down. Partying was a great way to network and sell advertising.

Post-“Rocket” career: In 1984, O'Brien landed a job as a file clerk with the city of Seattle's Municipal Court system; he retired in 2005. Between 2004 and 2016, O'Brien was a producer and board member at the Moisture Festival in Seattle.

KARRIE JACOBS

SENIOR EDITOR (1979-1982)

In late 1979, I was on the bus from the University District to Capitol Hill when I ran into Mark Michaelson, one of the art directors at “The Rocket.” He said, “We're having an editorial meeting. You should come. I think you'd be a really good addition.” I pitched two story ideas: a review of the latest Buzzcocks record and an interview with folk musician Tom Paxton. They assigned both to me. Sometime after that, I got a call from the editor, Robert Ferrigno, asking me to write something about what music would be like in the 1980s for the January 1980 issue. That piece inspired them to ask me to be one of their senior editors.

Seattle in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not the same as it is now. There wasn't a lot of money around, and it was pretty seedy. We could go around on our \$100 a month from “The Rocket” and feel like we owned the place. We were this funny little clique. We were a subculture.

I remember seeing U2's first Seattle show at Astor Park in Belltown in March of 1981 and just being completely blown away. I sort of knew that I was witnessing a phenomenon. There was electricity to Bono and how he connected with the audience in this very small room. Afterward, I wound up sitting in a closet at Astor Park with bassist Adam Clayton for an interview for the May 1981 issue. Recently, I read that article for probably the first time since it was published. What struck me was that Adam and I were two kids with very little experience of the world, sitting in a closet, literally, and talking about what the kids were like where we're from. I had never traveled to another country other than Canada. U2 was on its first tour of the States. The conversa-

tion we had during the interview was about mundane stuff like how crowds react to them at home, the attitudes of kids they hung out with. It was sort of about kid stuff.

Post-“Rocket” career: Jacobs joined the staff at “Phoenix New Times” before eventually moving to New York City. She was the founding editor of “Dwell,” architecture critic for “New York” magazine, a columnist for “Metropolis,” and a regular contributor to “Travel + Leisure,” “The New York Times,” “Fast Company” and many other publications. Today, Jacobs teaches at the School of Visual Arts in New York City.

Former Rocket art director Helene Silverman on Capitol Hill in the early 1980s



HELENE SILVERMAN

CONTRIBUTING DESIGNER AND ART DIRECTOR (1981-1984)

Seattle was just this incredibly vibrant community of people in a preinternet world. There was a high/low art scene, all kinds of music happening and it was hip. It was also so cheap to live there. My first apartment, which was on Capitol Hill, was \$135 a month.

I became friends with people connected to “The Seattle Sun” and helped out a bit with it. Eventually, “The Rocket” art director Mark Michaelson, cofounder Bob Newman and I started Square Studio in Belltown, which became the future “Rocket” location. When Mark left for loftier pursuits in New York, I started working as the art director at “The Rocket.” Looking back at covers of “The Rocket” during my tenure, I see a pretty cohesive trajectory of bold, colorful, poster-like covers — many centering on illustrations and comics, a nascent interest of mine.

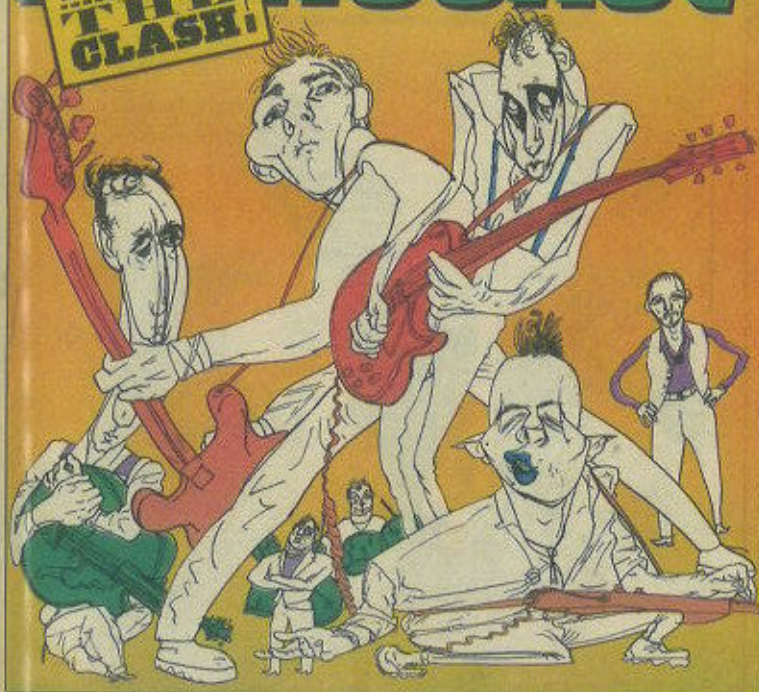
It was a wild scene at “The Rocket.” There wasn't much of a hierarchy. There were a lot of strong personalities, including my own. We were just a bunch of self-styled big shots. “The Rocket” had no money. We paid people \$25 for their work. It was

FIRESIGN/TELECLERE/MEN AT WORK/FEAR/SPRINGSTEEN/OCT. '82

The Rocket

FREE

THE WHO
THE GLASH!



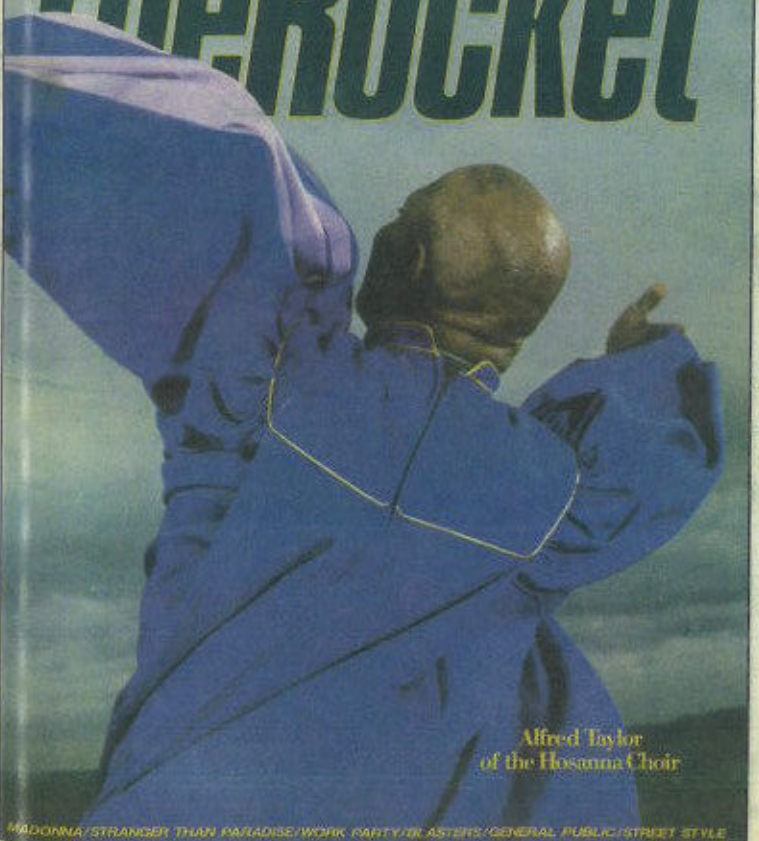
The Rocket

\$1.00

BLUES/CABLE TV/NEO-FOLKIES
NEIL YOUNG/TALKING HEADS FEBRUARY



The Rocket



Alfred Taylor
of the Hosanna Choir

MADONNA/STRANGER THAN PARADISE/WORK PARTY/BLASTERS/GENERAL PUBLIC/STREET STYLE

U2/BOWIE/LITA FORD/JOHNNY KOONCE/QUEENSRYCHE/JUNE '83

The Rocket

FREE



THE
VISIBLE
TARGETS

“Having ‘The Rocket’ experience informed how I’ve thought about life, work, capitalism, design, art and relationships. I just found my people there.” —HELENE SILVERMAN

not a very professional work environment, but it was exciting and we were very dedicated. I didn’t know it then, but my career is fully informed by working at “The Rocket,” where it was communal, and there wasn’t a heavy hierarchy. That’s why I mostly just worked for myself for most of my career, owning my own business.

When I lived in Seattle, which was only eight years, was when I felt like I was kind of born. I found like-minded people who helped me understand myself. The scene was so interesting, yet so small that it was manageable. I had such a lucky, free-form entrée to becoming a designer. I mean, I became a designer almost as a lark. Having “The Rocket” experience informed how I’ve thought about life, work, capitalism, design, art and relationships. I just found my people there.

Post-“Rocket” career: Silverman worked as a designer for “The Seattle Times,” then eventually moved to New York City, landing a job as a senior designer at Condé Nast’s “Mademoiselle” magazine. She was the art director at “Architectural Record” and “Metropolis,” and designed albums and directed a music video for They Might Be Giants. Today, Silverman is an adjunct professor of design at The Cooper Union in New York City.

ART CHANTRY

CONTRIBUTING DESIGNER AND ART DIRECTOR (1982-1994)

Two days before “The Rocket’s” deadline, the office would become a 24-hour party zone, and the art director before me would bring in her art friends and start laying out the magazine. That’s when I came in at “The Rocket.” I was one of those art friends.

Often, articles were printed in the wrong order, galleys were pasted up wrong and disasters happened. But if you couldn’t make a mistake at “The Rocket,” where else could you learn what a mistake was? So, “The Rocket” became an incredible learning tool for designers, illustrators and photographers. You could go in there, (screw) up and it was OK.



Art Chantry in his Seattle studio, circa 1996.

We always printed on the cheapest presses we could find and on bottom-of-the-barrel paper. Even 30 years later, the ink never really dried. You can

still smear it. Nothing you ever designed in “The Rocket” turned out remotely as you planned, so you ended up with this kind of “close enough” approach to design. One challenge was that we had no money. Another challenge was that we had no time because writers always brought in their articles at the very last minute. We had to bang out covers in minutes.

“I was “The Rocket’s” art director four times in 10 years. I quit three times and was fired once, but not in that order. It was a totally consuming, burnout job. I would always get sick after a production period because it took so much out of me. Still, if I hadn’t connected with “The Rocket,” my career would have probably been more corporate. I would have probably landed a real job somewhere. But I realize I am totally unsuited for a straight job.

Post-“Rocket” career: Chantry designed posters and album covers for Soundgarden, Pearl Jam, Mudhoney, Neko Case, The Presidents of the United States of America, the Fastbacks and Sub Pop Records. His work also appeared in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, the Smithsonian, Seattle Art Museum and the Museum of Modern Art.

The Rocket FREE

PETER TOSH/JEANETICS/ B'HAM / FUNKADELIC / LOUNGE LIZARDS

FUN WITH SCIENCE / STONES / FARTZ / THE ENEMY / FADS / OCTOBER



Staff of The Rocket magazine in front of their new 42-story headquarters.

OTIS KORN