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Gordon Alexander collection

Title: Gordon Alexander collection
Collection No: MSS.170
Extent: 1 cubic foot
Inclusive Dates: 1969-2019

Abstract: The collection comprises copies of Memphis, Tennessee newspapers that music writer Gordon Alexander created or contributed to, including *Bluff Town Buffoon* and *The Dixie Flyer*.

Processed by: Gerald Chaudron, October 2021
Access: Open to all researchers.
Language: English
Preferred Citation: Gordon Alexander collection, Special Collections Department, University Libraries, University of Memphis.

Publication date: 2021 October

Biographical information (provided by Gordon Alexander)

Kelly Gordon Wiles was born in Orlando, Florida to Kelly Wiles and Anne Alexander, in the early hours of February 13, 1948. After their divorce in 1951, he lived with his maternal grandparents in Kosciusko, Mississippi, until his mother found work in Jackson, 70 miles south and he joined her there in 1953.

Gordon attended Davis Elementary School on Congress Street, alma mater of the famous novelist Eudora Welty, as well as Bailey Jr. High and graduated from Murrah High School in 1966. He moved to Memphis, Tennessee in the fall of 1967 and attended the Memphis Academy of Art in Overton Park for two years. His love for the fine arts having waned, he began writing poetry before moving to New York City in 1969. In 1971 he moved to San Francisco where he shared his writing by performing poetry readings at San Francisco State, City Lights bookstore and other venues in the North Beach area, home of the beatnik subculture.

Homesick for the South, Gordon returned to Memphis in 1972. He picked up a few jobs writing advertising copy, worked as a waiter in several local restaurants and became manager of The Keith Sykes Band, an old friend who had released several records on Vanguard before moving back to Memphis in 1975. In 1977 Gordon began publishing a humor newspaper called The Bluff Town Buffoon, printing and distributing satirical articles and political commentary for two years, as well as writing copy for a radio hour hosted by Memphis musician Larry Raspberry on local radio station WHER.

Having met and befriended several Memphis musicians upon initially moving to Memphis, he signed on as manager for The Randy Band, a New Wave group led by songwriter Tommy Hull. Around this time, 1979, he joined forces with several other Midtowners to launch the city's first regional tabloid called The Dixie Flyer, serving as the paper's music editor until 1982.

In 1984 Gordon moved to Los Angeles for 6 months; he and his old high school friend, attorney and author H. Lee Hetherington were signed by The Jack Rose Agency and began co-writing several screenplays and a sample script for the daytime soap opera Days Of Our Lives.

Frustrated at being unable to interest anyone in LA with the screenplays, he quit writing until 1994, devoting himself full time to a new medium, the short story. Only a few were ever published, in small college literary magazines, but he continued writing, polishing his craft and self-publishing a book of four short stories entitled "The Slow And Gradual Descent To Higher Ground" in 2019.

Currently he is still creating new work, rewriting and polishing some of the old stories but also works at Ardent Recording Studios in Memphis as bookkeeper and merchandising manager and devotes his spare time to historic preservation and the promotion of smart urban growth with the group he founded in 2010, Midtown Action Coalition.

Scope and contents

The collection comprises 11 copies of a satirical newspaper titled *Bluff Town Buffoon* written and published by Gordon Alexander between 1975 and 1977. Alexander was also part of the group

that founded “The Dixie Flyer” in Memphis, and the collection includes eight issues from 1978 to 1982. There are two issues of “WEVL”, the newspaper of the Memphis radio station which Alexander worked on in 1978. There are also two issues of “Atlantis” from 1969, a newspaper published for young people focusing on music and alternative lifestyles.

Subject terms

Newspapers—Tennessee—Memphis.

Inventory

Box 1

unfolded

1. *Bluff Town Buffoon*, Memphis, Tenn., Vol. 1, No.1-Vol. 2, No. 6, 1975 November-1977 September (11 issues).

The Bluff Town Buffoon – Memphis' Only Humor Newspaper by Gordon Alexander

When I was a child I began listening to my mother's phonograph records. She didn't have many but about half of them were comedians, from the cerebral humor of Shelley Berman to the wacky world of Jonathan Winters and the regional southern humor of Justin Wilson and Brother Dave Gardner.

When I was older I became a fan of *Mad Magazine*, which was my first introduction to satire. There was a *Mad Magazine* impersonator called *Cracked*, but it wasn't as funny. *Mad* parodied popular TV shows, movies, music, politics and I just couldn't get enough of it.

I began writing poetry when I was nineteen, moved to New York City for three years and came back to Memphis in the fall of 1972. I wrote a bit of advertising copy to make money but had ceased my attempts at poetry. I became enamored with the Harvard Lampoon, a satirical publication produced by undergraduate students at Harvard University which was established in 1876. It was far more sophisticated than *Mad Magazine* and later became the *National Lampoon* and even spawned several popular movies.

In 1976, I had the urge to publish my own satirical paper and call it The Bluff Town Buffoon. My live-in girlfriend's job supported the two of us and with a little financial help from my family, my friends Tom O'Neil, Suzanne Phelps and I wrote all the copy and published our first edition. I began the task of selling advertising and gradually rounded up a few dollars from a radio station, a record store a “head shop” called *Whatever* which catered to hippies, a concert hall and a store called *The Seed*, which sold health food products, home-baked goods and incense.

This was before the introduction of computers so all the articles were typed by me on an

IBM Selectric typewriter; I pasted up the articles using press-type headlines and photos lifted from newspapers and magazines. Gradually we gathered a cult following and had Buffoons on sale at several locations in Memphis, as well as Jackson, Tennessee. At some point a young man named Barry Heifner, who hailed from Michigan, contacted me and offered to do paste-up and layout; I gladly accepted his offer.

The Buffoon was politically-incorrect before anyone knew that particular term, as we took our cue from pioneer humorist Lenny Bruce, and attempted to offend everyone, no matter their race, color, creed, national origin, religion or political beliefs. With articles entitled “Farting May Cause Cancer”, a two-part interview with the Pope, whom we accused of being involved with organized crime, a reoccurring column called “Let's Talk Japanese” and a story claiming Ike Eisenhower was gay, we began to attract attention and a local news station brought their cameras to my house for an interview.

The Buffoon came out irregularly as it took an inordinate amount of time to write the copy and accumulate enough cash to have it printed. The amount of time I spent on the paper strained my personal relationship and my girlfriend moved out, leaving me with no income to continue.

The very last edition of the The Bluff Town Buffoon tilted slightly from the original theme with a cover story on the death of Elvis Presley entitled “What Are We Gonna Do With Elvis Gone?” There were also several articles on the national music scene, which started me down the path to my collaboration on a regional magazine called *The Dixie Flyer*.

After three years *The Buffoon* ceased publication and I tried to get a real job. Writing and publishing *The Buffoon* was a barrel of fun but it never generated enough cash to stay in business. But to this day I can truly say it was one of my proudest moments as a writer.

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2. *The Dixie Flyer*, Memphis, Tenn., Vol. 1, No. 1-Vol. 4, No. 5, 1978 August-1982 February (8 issues). The first issue included, as a supplement, a copy of *Weekend Magazine*, Toronto, Canada, Vol. 28, No. 32, 1978 August 12. “The Last Days of Elvis Presley”.

The Dixie Flyer by Gordon Alexander

For approximately three years in the late 1970's and early 1980's a group of Memphians published a newspaper called *The Dixie Flyer*. Its creation came about in a very organic manner, beginning with a conversation with Sara Van Horn, who was currently the editor of the WEVL volunteer radio newsletter. Tom O'Neil, my co-writer on another paper I had published, *The Bluff Town Buffoon*, had gotten me interested in the music of Elvis Costello and I began developing an article on New Wave music. I called Sara Van Horn and asked if she would be interested in the piece. She liked it and “New Wave - They Don't Want To Be Your Lover, They Just Want To Be Your Victim” appeared in the next issue of the WEVL newsletter.

I met with Sara, graphic designer Eddie Tucker and another gentleman whose name escapes me and, over a few beers, we discussed the concept of a regional tabloid with Sara as editor, myself as music editor and Eddie handling art direction and layout. We tossed different

names about but the one that struck a common chord was *The Dixie Flyer*.

We did a test run in the next issue of WEVL, inserting articles on music, the theater and other topics but were summarily dismissed by WEVL and told to take our talents elsewhere.

Sara Van Horn and her assistant Beth Hoople put together a staff of writers that included Tom O'Neil, humorist John Fergus Ryan, Joe Mulherin, writer and horn player for Larry Raspberry and The Highsteppers, recurring columns on local theater by playwright and critic Howell Pearre, author and lecturer Phyllis Tickle's "Inner City Essays", my own column featuring new Memphis music and studio news called "Off The Record", concert and album reviews by various contributors, as well as local community news.

Our feature stories covered a wide range of topics. Memphis music historian David Less, author of "Memphis Mayhem", did a two-part interview with local musician, producer, rabble-rouser and leader of Mud Boy and The Neutrons, Jim Dickinson. University of Memphis professor of English Gordon Osing wrote a cover story called "Last Train For The Liberal" and Suzanne Phelps and I penned a story about the Sex Pistols infamous performance at the Taliesyn Ballroom entitled "A Day In The Life of The Sex Pistols". Even Walter Dawson, then music critic for *The Commercial Appeal*, wrote an article on the art of tattooing, under a pseudonym of course.

Our photographers were Richard "Doc" Sidman, Sheila Sanderson, Elbert Greer and world-famous rock photographer Ebet Roberts.

We had hoped to publish monthly but that was impossible for two reasons. Everyone on our staff had day jobs so work for the *Flyer* had to be completed in our spare time. We also had very limited distribution so the ad money trickled in slowly. Only when the finances coincided with content was another issue of *The Dixie Flyer* born.

Shortly after our last issue was printed a group of investors joined forces and put together a paper based on our format, calling it *The Memphis Flyer*. They had the financial capital to make it viable, as well as a very talented man named Jerry Swift, who brought in advertisers from all over the city. They were very successful and are still printing that paper today.

The Dixie Flyer was truly a labor of love. No one involved ever received a single penny for their contributions but the beauty of it all was that no one was ever edited. Articles were turned in and printed verbatim because Sara Van horn trusted her writers implicitly.

I am extremely proud of the quality of work we produced and to this day remain astonished at the talent that we attracted in such a short period of time.

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4. *WEVL*, Memphis, Tenn., 1978 May, July.
5. *Atlantis*, Memphis, Tenn., Vol. 1, No. 1, 1969 September 15; Vol. 2, No. 1, 1969 October 6.
6. *The Slow and Gradual Descent to Higher Ground: Four Short Stories* by Gordon Alexander, 2019.