

EXILED FROM MAIN STREET: SAFE HARBOR

I haven't written anything for a while. Which is why having to sit down just now to write for semantikon conjures a familiar feeling.

After all, back in early 2003, after having abruptly resigned from my monthly literary column at *X-Ray Cincinnati*, I wasn't writing much either, for the entire experience had left me flattened and unmoored.

X-Ray Cincinnati began in January 2001 as a sort of upstart attempting to challenge Cincinnati's local alternative newspaper, *CityBeat*, the former positioning itself as something like an alternative to the alternative. I wrote the cover story for the first issue and had a monthly column titled *Exiled on Main Street* that appeared most months, one that detailed my Little Tramp-like exploits living downtown trying to make it as a writer as I toiled away as a suburban warehouseman.

But having been asked by the publisher to collate and edit a literary supplement for the magazine in February 2003, a task I threw my whole weight behind and saw through to a satisfactory and challenging degree in my estimation, said publisher and I bumped heads over the inclusion of the opening piece, an excerpt from the novel *A Prayer for Dawn* by Nathan Singer, titled "Welcome to Niggertown." As a result, the two of us resorted to playing a game of chicken and, as is often the case when two stubborn people play chicken, there was no winner.

Short story shorter: The solution I proffered was either they publish the piece in question, or they published my resignation instead.

And as I said while signing off for the last time in *X-Ray*: I liked my little column. Finally, I had found a platform after so many years of writing diligently for an audience of one. That said, there were in fact other, ancillary reasons in mind while I ushered myself to the exit door.

For one, I wasn't enjoying the constraints (or discipline, maybe) of my column's smallish word count. As is still the case now, at the time I was most interested in writing stories that explored all necessary detours and therefore required a large canvas, which resulted in more than one occasion in me doing stories in serial form, an enterprise not particularly suited to a monthly magazine, especially one with a sometimes erratic publishing schedule.

To make matters worse, because the paper had increasingly become a collective in which its writers were expected to chip in on its production, I found myself jumping from writing a column, to being a Contributing Editor, to picking up the published magazines at the press, to dropping off copies at distribution sights, to attending meetings, to realizing that a certain month's worth of magazines didn't make it to the streets—this after spending much of my creative energy the prior month writing my column and often proofreading the magazine—to doing interviews and features and literary supplements and, finally, to writing a resignation, the whole venture initially pitched as a place where writers would be *paid* for their work, when in fact the opposite had proved true: I was *paying* to play, and how.

So, yeah, there I was in early 2003, after something that had started as a creative shot in my arm had turned instead into something resembling a bad habit, all my momentum and inspiration dissipated, left with the awareness that my column had been more than a series of individual

pieces, had something of the arc of a novel even, but the necessary armature had broken abruptly, leaving my sculpture in an unfinished, unsatisfactory state, and I had no idea what to do about that fact.

Enter Lance Oditt and semantikon.

The smoke had barely cleared before the former came in and picked me off the mat. Lance and I had some history in collaborating creatively, seeing as we had produced *Ominibscure*, a literary magazine that published from April to September 1998, another creative enterprise that had ended abruptly, this one largely because of my own personal issues related to mental health and self-medication.

Ominibscure had been a print magazine, but not merely. It also had a web component that was ahead of its time. Hell, in 1998, I had no idea what the web even was. But Lance did.

Thus, when he began to speak about creating an online creative arts journal in early 2003 and asked me if I would consider continuing my *Exiled* series on it, I was interested, even though I couldn't spell this new venture either. Thanks to my former publisher at *X-Ray* who had charitably gifted me a computer, I was no longer using my old Brother WP-3410, and so I had *some* idea at the time what an online community looked like.

Despite having reservations that an online community where people wore clothes could actually work, I signed on.

As I remember it, Lance initially asked me for some short stories to test the waters before I resumed my *Exiled on Main Street* series in earnest, the first of which was published in April of 2003 alongside a bevy of less-distinguished writers such as William Blake and Antonin Artaud whose works were made available via semantikon's library of public domain works. The following month semantikon's publishing arm, Three Fools Press, debuted with a print version of a mini essay of mine entitled *Bukowski*, which accompanied a performance event wherein I attempted to conjure the titular character's spirit by performing his works live.

Afterwards, I spent the bulk of 2003 working on and sending short stories while semantikon diversified with offerings such as audio tracks from the late, great Aralee Strange and poetic works by the mysterious Marle Galveo. It wasn't until November 2003, though, that I finally resumed my *Exiled on Main Street* series with a piece titled "Dear Cathy," the longest *Exiled* piece to date and one that was miraculously unleashed to the world in one fell swoop.

I wasn't sure what to attribute it to, but the response to this story was immediate and unequivocal: Never had so many readers reached out to me to say how much a story had affected them.

Reading said piece at the 3rd Annual Exiled Show, which semantikon also helped produce and which followed shortly after its publication, I felt that any momentum or mojo that may have been lost by my resignation at *X-Ray* had been regained, which in turn injected the prerequisite energy to continue my series in hopes of guiding it towards a more proper ending, an endeavor that was only further bulwarked by the site itself growing exponentially: the public domain library got fatter, the monthly literary feature was introduced, then a monthly visual artist, then

films, then an RS feed to tell others about it all, then a radio station to soundtrack the party... and, through it all, something resembling a true community began to emerge.

By April of 2004, when it was clear that my decade-long stint in residence on Main Street should and would come to an end, I sat down to write the denouement to my series secure in the knowledge that it wouldn't just be me yelling into an empty well, and I only quit yelling after 6000 words, an ending of a story I began to tell in the pages of *X-Ray Cincinnati*, but had not the room to tell there. Thanks to semantikon my book, and my time on Main Street, had been brought home.

Which was more of a beginning than it was an end.

In September 2004, I had the honor of being semantikon's literary feature, where I could exercise my somewhat dormant poetic faculties, while also that month Three Fools Press published *in the stomach*, an annual review that featured a selection of *Exiled* pieces alongside a smorgasbord of talented writers that had featured or submitted to the site. There was also a special edition with a cover designed by semantikon visual artist alum, Tim McMichael, a true ARTifact that sold out almost as quickly as it was available. Said book release corresponded at a show held in the courtyard of the Iris, my home on Main Street, on my last night in residence there.

The preceding surely must stand testament to the dynamism of semantikon when considering that it only references the *first year* of the site's existence, partial as it is.

It was natural, then, once I found myself ensconced on Prospect Hill, only a stone's throw from my beloved Main Street, that I should begin a new column. Thus, in December 2004, *Exiled From Main Street* debuted in its pages, a prelude of sorts that was celebrated with a fifth (and final) *Exiled* reading, once again sponsored by the good folks of semantikon.

After that, as the man said, *it was on*. By my hand and count:

- 35 new columns
- 4 short stories
- 12 archived columns
- 18 poems
- 1 broadside
- 1 song
- 3 live audio excerpts
- 1 guest editorship and
- 1 published poetry manuscript that found its way to
- 10,000 downloads,

becoming the best-selling Mark Flanigan product of all-time, but only because, like all the other wares offered on the site, the price of admission was free.

Which reminds me of something Lance once said in the forward to *in the stomach*, something that strikes at the heart of the entire enterprise: "With every user that has taken the time to visit

semantikon, a community space has been activated where the audience and artists re-define what can be had when you're being offered something that is free, or worse, for spare change."

Aside from getting this author out of the gutter and helping him find a sense of community to further shield him from the void, the site offered so much more on a professional level. Of greatest import was the credence and legitimacy it lent my work by dint of being surrounded by such an impressive array of unmistakable talent: Joseph Winterhalter, Jay Bolotin, Angela Marsh, Nick Barrows, Michael Crossley, Stacy Sims, Aaron Cowan, Mick Parsons, Kate Schmidt, to name just a few, were the flowers that transformed my foliage into a bouquet. Without the legitimacy and context each provided, my outstretched hands would have been holding mere shrubs.

What's more, semantikon also provided an apparatus that functioned as a de facto website for someone like me who was lacking the wherewithal, expertise, or money to make a website, which was priceless. The ensuing online presence opened any number of publication and performance opportunities to me, and continued to long after it ceased publication in June 2009.

Even then semantikon did not go dark, but instead continued to function as a living online archive, where it remains accessible and resonant as of press time, not unlike many of the positive outcomes that resulted from my having signed on upon its inception. The ability of seeing my column through and keeping it together for the long haul afforded me the confidence to continue to look for other ways to network and grow my own community through the years, as well as answer the phone when who else but *CityBeat* called and asked me to write some *Exile from Main Street* columns for them.

But that's another story for another time. Suffice it to say, I wouldn't be here where I am—writing this now, from this vantage point—if not for my having experienced semantikon's ideal, a safe harbor where there were few restrictions and even fewer rules, the only one I could tell being that it was imperative for it to operate outside the inherently flawed, commodity-driven model emerging elsewhere online.

That battle, of course, is all but lost now. But in addition to bearing witness to its trove of intrinsically worthwhile artistic self-expression, this semantikon archive should also forever prove that said battle was not waged without salvos from some sort of resistance. And it's that very resistance that I am proud to have played a part in, however (im?)modest my part may have been.

Mark Flanigan
Cincinnati, OH
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