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THE GREAT COFFEE CONSPIRACY

Sander Hicks opens shop in Ditmas Park.

By Alexander Zaitchik
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It's not much of a shock to learn that Vox Pop is the only unionized cafe in New York City. It's not even that surprising to learn that the store's eight employees are all card-carrying Wobblies, rare living remnants of the Industrial Workers of the World, the legendary radical union that a century ago was the boisterous, militant vanguard of American labor.

One of these 21st-century Wobblies is Sarah Bender, a former Starbucks barista who was fired earlier this year for trying to organize the first Starbucks union in the country. She's currently suing the Seattle coffee giant, and is happy to discuss the case with you while she prepares your fair-trade espresso. Vox Pop is that kind of place.

It is, after all, the personal business of one Sander Hicks, the colorful publisher, activist, conspiracy-maestro and founder of Soft Skull Press, whose adventures in alternative publishing are immortalized in the 2001 documentary, *Horns and Halos*.

Formerly a video store, Vox Pop opened its glass doors in November, just as the *New York Times* had decided to put the leafy Flatbush neighborhood on its "hot" list with a series of articles describing the area as under-priced and up-and-coming—that is, too full of old houses and too close to South Park Slope to remain Section-8 territory for long.

Hicks winces at the idea that his store is part of some slow-motion gentrification tsunami, even as he admits that, yeah, it kind of is. "The community is changing, slowly," he says. "But the *Times* doesn't really understand Ditmas Park. They just see the prices and the Victorian houses."

Although the shop and its owner have yet to be fully embraced by the largely black neighborhood—"There's still some resentment toward us by the kids on the corner," says Hicks, "but we're trying to bridge that"—Vox Pop appears well on its way to being a genuinely mixed community center, a regular hangout for both



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progressive whites moving to the neighborhood and longtime residents happy to have a place to nurse a boutique blend of bean while plugging into Vox Pop's free wi-fi. This year, the Flatbush Development Corp. nominated Vox Pop for a community award, sending the fiercely anti-establishment Hicks to Gracie Mansion, where he posed briefly with the mayor.

Under the motto "Books, Coffee, Democracy," Vox Pop hosts a dense schedule of readings, music and open-mic events on a modest stage at the front of the store. Recent events have included the earnest stylings of local political folkie Steven Bacon and a reading by former CIA agent Brad Ayers, whose book, *The Zenith Secret: A CIA Insider Exposes the Assassins of President Kennedy and the Secret War Against Cuba*, will be published next month by Hicks' indie imprint, Vox Pop, which is run out of the cafe's basement.

Hicks, his wife, Holly, and three-month-old son, Coleman, meanwhile, live in the apartment directly above the store. "I never leave this block," says Hicks. It's hard to tell if he's complaining.

The cafe side of Vox Pop is better than you might expect, based on the limited granola grub available at other lefty bookstore cafes such as Bluestockings in LES, or the Brooklyn Community Bookstore in Park Slope. You can actually eat a decent meal at Vox Pop, choosing from a menu featuring solid coffee and tea lists, fresh smoothies, hot and cold sandwiches (mostly veggie, with some bird flesh), vegan and nonvegan pastries, and pizzas from the Savory Pie Company, a local organic pizza wholesaler best known to Whole Foods shoppers. By fall, Hicks hopes to have a liquor license approved, whereupon the political discussions and events will likely get rowdier.

Opposite the cafe/restaurant is a wall of new books that reflect the owner's interests and politics: CIA exposes, media criticism, "hidden histories" and the other underground genre threads that make up the tapestry of an immediately recognizable and proudly paranoid take on the world. Vox Pop is likely the only bookstore in town with a 9/11 section, and Hicks' own 9/11 book, *The Big Wedding: 9/11, The Whistle-Blowers & The Cover-Up*, will be released on Vox Pop next month.

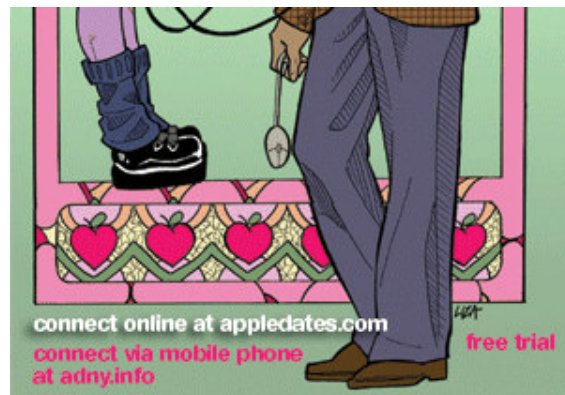
Hicks' interest in small publishing is also evident in the modest office overlooking the cafe, where sits the city's only Instabook machine. Invented by a Mexican author/inventor, the Instabook is an elaborate color printer contraption that allows local authors to publish and bind their own books on the spot for a small fee. "The idea," says Hicks, "is to integrate every aspect of the store—cafe, community, books, publishing, politics—like a braided rope."

After eight months of braiding, that rope is looking pretty strong, if still a little out of place.

Volume 18, Issue 31

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