

# Ty Davis: NewPaper Founder on the Closing of the Providence Phoenix



The closing of *The Providence Phoenix* last week after 36 years is “a sign of the times,” said Ty Davis, the founding publisher of *The NewPaper* in 1978. He continued in that role until its sale to *The Boston Phoenix* group that led to its eventual re-branding as *The Providence Phoenix*. During that decade running the paper, he saw at first-hand the initial stirrings of what would become known as the “Providence Renaissance” that moved arts, music and culture as much as it moved the river.

Many mourn the loss, including *Motif* publisher, Mike Ryan, who wrote, “Modern American media needs this spirit [of the alternative press] more now than ever before, and to lose a voice in support of that cause is a loss for all of us.” Davis, however, was philosophical and praised its staying power. “I’m amazed it survived as long as it did. It could have gone down the tubes as early as 2001, with the rise of the Internet,” Davis said, noting the business pressures facing the entire industry that forced its Boston parent to cease printing in March 2013. “There will always be a need for information, but it’s gotta be paid for.”

Although he had relatively little to do with it after he sold it to *The Boston Phoenix* group under Stephen Mindich, “They did a great job of leaving the paper alone,” Davis said. “*The Providence Phoenix* today looks a lot nicer than *The NewPaper* did when I sold it in 1988. The changes in technology have been amazing.”

Davis started his journalistic career in 1967 with *The Providence Journal*, then a powerhouse that dominated Rhode Island in a way that no publication is ever likely to be able to do again. “My first piece was about an album by a new guy that no one had heard of - Jimi Hendrix,” Davis said. Covering the Woodstock Festival in 1969, Davis had a press pass that was supposed to allow him backstage, but “it was so crazy I never got a chance to use it,” he said. He recalled from being in the press van that the famous estimate of 400,000 attendees originated from a remark by a police sergeant to a reporter from *The New York Times*, but he is convinced that the true number was much higher, at least 500,000.

His then-employer was often “the only thing that stood between the people and anarchy,” Davis said, praising its commitment to honest news reporting in what was then a Mafia-run city. “A lot of the writing was first-rate. They got a Pulitzer for reporting that [President] Nixon didn’t pay any taxes.” Still, in the era of the Vietnam War and the years immediately afterward, he felt the paper “was not reporting the stuff that was out there” and editorially had become “very right-wing at the time.” Davis said that he began meeting veterans “coming out of the Vietnam era, talking to guys coming home giving us a totally different story” than had been officially reported.

The desire to start an alternative magazine percolated for years in Davis' mind because he was "very frustrated" that he consistently had a half-page of material on his beat but could only get an eighth-page into print. *The NewPaper* was, he said, an extension of his *Journal* column in coverage of arts and music.

The music scene was changing along with radio stations taking the attitude, as Davis put it, "Why do we have to have a three-minute song? Why can't we have a five-minute song?" Live clubs such as Lupo's and the Living Room were opening up and needed to reach their audience, and that became a main role for the alternative press and a source of much of its advertising revenue. "Rich Lupo, in particular, was a huge factor in the 'Providence Renaissance.' I've made the case that it began when Lupo brought Bo Diddley to town and had the Young Adults backing him," Davis said. "The first time I saw the new mayor [Cianci] was at the opening of Lupo's, drinking for free at the open bar." Lupo and Living Room owner Randy Hein "represented a whole new way of doing things," Davis said, "especially because they were not mob-connected."

Davis is proud that he upheld journalistic principles. "We never did editorial trade for advertising. We had a fairly strict separation, which the *Phoenix* continued. I firmly believe that it resulted in our having a much better reputation, and people could trust us," he said. On the other hand, often the advertising people provided story leads. "That's how we found out about a new thing called 'paintball.' The ad staff were an underrated part of the paper." As a matter of policy, quotes were not cleaned up, he said, remembering an incident when the *Journal* claimed that presidential candidate George McGovern had told someone "Kiss my *backside*," a claim that was not believable to anyone. "We tried to avoid vulgarity, but we always quoted people accurately," Davis said.

"I'm very much a Rhode Island booster and I think it's a great place to live. It's small enough to get around and get your business off the ground," Davis said. "You can get a meeting with the governor or the mayor just by asking for it." He was told that *The NewPaper* itself was an integral part of the 'Providence Renaissance.' "It was exciting to be part of it."

"*Providence Phoenix Folds Its Wings*" by Mike Ryan, Oct 10, 2014,

<http://motifri.com/providence-phoenix-folds-its-wings/>

"Dear *Providence Phoenix*: An avalanche of remembrances, tributes, tall tales, and trivia," Oct 15, 2014,

<http://providence.thephoenix.com/news/160120-dear-providence-phoenix/>