

# STILL BURNING BRIGHT

## Sy SAFRANSKY TAKES 'THE SUN' MAGAZINE INTO ITS FOURTH DECADE

Sy Safransky, editor and co-founder of *The Sun* magazine, loves neatness and organization. His desk gives him away immediately with its alarming absence of clutter. There is not a stray piece of paper in sight. Not a paper clip out of place. And Safransky's example seems to be contagious because, on closer inspection, *The Sun's* entire office (a two-story house on North Roberston Street in downtown Chapel Hill, North Carolina) is much the same way. The whole place is efficiently neat and an oddly inspiring environment to walk into. Far from the expected bustle, *The Sun's* office and those working in it exude an aura of calm.

But this setting belies none of the years of close calls endured by the monthly magazine and Safransky. Back in 1974, Safransky and cofounder Mike Mathers borrowed fifty dollars to produce the first issue of *The Sun*, originally known as *The Chapel Hill Sun*. There was no business plan; there were no financial resources; there was no office. There was only the idea to make the best magazine possible and to fill it with as much good writing as could be found. The cover price of that first issue was one quarter. But instead of selling it on the sidewalks of Chapel Hill as planned, Safransky gave it away because he was unhappy with the print quality.

For years afterward (Mathers departed the magazine early in its history), Safransky, a former New York newspaper reporter, es-



chewed financial comfort in favor of remaining steadfast to the magazine. For a while he lived in *The Sun's* former office in a house on West Rosemary Street in Chapel Hill, and in 1980 he worked as a part-time ditch digger when the magazine could not afford his \$100-a-week salary.

Referring to those lean years, Safransky attributes *The Sun's* survival to a sense of grace, and, given some of the lucky things that happened, it seems plausible: the printer who let the magazine carry a printing balance for eight issues; the reader who gave Safransky a car when his broke down for the last time; the North Carolina philanthropist who donated \$50,000 to the magazine just as it seemed the office on North Roberson Street would have to be sold. These acts and more like them helped the magazine survive in a time when it needed that support. *The Sun* has since grown into a reader-supported publication with more than 60,000 subscribers and has been lauded by media outlets as diverse as *Utne Reader* (*The Sun* received four Alternative Press Awards from it) and *Entertainment Weekly* (*The Sun* landed on its Must List in 2003).

Free of advertising and unique in content and tone, *The Sun* is a study in shades of gray: from its striking black-and-white photography to its sparsely beautiful pages to its high-quality essays, fiction, poetry, and interviews, the magazine concerns itself not with fashion, diet, or celebrity but rather with exploring the vagaries of the human condition. For instance, in the Readers Write section, in which readers submit short nonfiction pieces on predetermined subjects such as Coming Clean, Letters, and Turning 30, there is an honesty that is palpable and compelling, sometimes surprising, and occasionally discomfiting. Issues and experiences are served straight up, and chances are that when you read *The Sun*, you will find out as

much about yourself as you do about the writers in its pages.

Given *The Sun's* sometimes dark tone, it may seem that an afternoon spent with Safransky would be subdued at best, that the man behind this magazine would be dour and grim and a chore to be around, someone forever looking at the sky and seeing only rain-clouds. Instead, publisher Dave Korzon found that Safransky, who also contributes an essay to each issue, embodies the totality of *The Sun*: he's thoughtful, engaging, and, though cognizant of the world's troubles and the conflicts inherent in being human, welcoming of the joys and jokes life offers us. Like the magazine's office, he projects calmness and warmth. For more than thirty years, he's been having conversations with his readers about things that really matter; we appreciate his graciousness in continuing his dialogue with us.

**THE VILLAGE RAMBLER MAGAZINE:** Is it important for you to be able to define *The Sun* in a couple of well-formed, portable sentences?

**SY SAFRANSKY:** [Laughs] I wish I could, but *The Sun* is a notoriously difficult magazine to describe.

**RAMBLER:** Do you find yourself ever put on the spot to do that?

**SAFRANSKY:** Yes, but I usually wriggle out of it.

**RAMBLER:** Do you wriggle as in "I'd rather not answer that," or do you try?

**SAFRANSKY:** Sure, I try. I've been trying for thirty years. But I'm never very successful. If I start by describing the personal stories about love and loss and betrayal and compassion, I end up slighting the political dimension. If I focus instead on *The Sun's* interviews with radical political thinkers, it may seem as if *The Sun* lacks a spiritual dimension. If I talk about how *The Sun* tries to honor our fundamental connectedness, I may give the impression that the magazine is out of touch with the real

world. For me, trying to define *The Sun* in a couple of sentences is like trying to define life itself in a couple of sentences. Then again, maybe a magazine that honors the mystery at the heart of existence shouldn't be so easy to define.

**RAMBLER:** Did you always have a good head for business or is that something that developed along with the magazine? Or, actually, do you have a head for business? For all I know, you don't.

**SAFRANSKY:** I'm hardly a typical CEO. But the fact that *The Sun* comes out monthly and has more than 60,000 subscribers around the country means I probably do have some business acumen. During the first decade of *The Sun's* existence, it certainly didn't seem that way, though. We had about 1,000 subscribers, I barely earned a subsistence wage, and there was never enough money to pay the bills. Making a lot of money was never my ambition, but the deeper truth is that I was ambivalent about running a business. I saw myself as a rebel, a poet, a seeker—not a businessman—and I feared that becoming a successful businessman would be tantamount to selling out. I actually harbored the suspicion that it was more admirable to be broke. I imagined that my heroic struggle to keep *The Sun* alive attested to my integrity. Maybe it did. But as our readership began to grow, I saw that being able to pay the bills on time didn't compromise our independence; that having some money in my pocket didn't diminish my concern for social justice.

**RAMBLER:** How much formal planning went into creating *The Sun*?

**SAFRANSKY:** None.

**RAMBLER:** Because some say that if you don't have a business plan, you're going to fail.

**SAFRANSKY:** I didn't even know what a business plan was in those days; actually, I still don't. Starting *The Sun* was more like building a house from a sketch made on a

paper napkin. One day, I was having a conversation with Mike Mathers, another expatriate from New York, who ran the Community Bookstore in Chapel Hill. Mike told me he'd been thinking about starting a local magazine. I told him that was one of my fantasies too. So even though we had no money, didn't know many writers, and had no idea if there would be enough readers to support another alternative publication, we decided to go ahead. We solicited work from friends and relatives. I typed up everything on my manual typewriter. Mike drew the illustrations. We knew someone with a copying machine who was willing to print the magazine for free if we supplied the paper. When we were ready to go to press, I borrowed fifty dollars to buy paper, and a few days later I was standing on Franklin Street, selling copies of the first issue. I'd say our business plan was about as sophisticated as a kid setting up a lemonade stand.

**RAMBLER:** What did you actually say to people when you approached them with a copy of *The Sun* for sale?

**SAFRANSKY:** As I recall it was pretty simple: "Would you like to take a look at a new magazine?" The rest was body language, the tone and pitch of my voice, making eye contact, smiling—but not smiling so eagerly that people thought I was handing out a religious tract.

**RAMBLER:** Is Mike still involved with the magazine?

**SAFRANSKY:** No. We worked together for a year and a half, then parted ways.

**RAMBLER:** Were there magazines that you looked to when you started *The Sun*?

**SAFRANSKY:** There have always been magazines I've admired. *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, which later became *Whole Earth Review*, in-

spired me in the early days, as did *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and other smaller journals, some of which aren't around anymore. But there was no single publication I modeled *The Sun* after. The form of the magazine has evolved on its own.



*Sy Safransky, left, selling copies of The Sun on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1975.*

**RAMBLER:** Can you talk about the structure of *The Sun*? Do you have a board?

**SAFRANSKY:** *The Sun* is a non-profit magazine and has a board of directors, which is legally and financially responsible for the conduct of the organization but isn't involved in editorial decision making. As far as our working staff, be-

sides me there are six full-time and seven part-time employees, and *The Sun* comes out every month thanks to their dedication and hard work. One of the pleasures of being editor is that I get to experience what happens when people work together toward a common goal.

**RAMBLER:** What got you to Chapel Hill from New York in the first place?

**SAFRANSKY:** After finishing college and graduate school and working for a while as a newspaper reporter, I left New York in 1969 to travel in Europe and North America. I was gone nearly two years. During that time I became interested in the back-to-the land movement: living communally, being closer to nature, growing my own food. Then I returned to New York and went back to newspaper work because I was broke. Later that year, I heard about an intentional community called New Eden that was being started near Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I'd never heard of Chapel Hill before, had never been further south than Washington, D.C., but the philosophy behind New Eden intrigued me. My wife and I moved to Chapel Hill in the beginning of 1972, intending to join New Eden and build our own house there. But then our first child was born prematurely and died after three days. A few months later, my wife and I split up. Not long after that, New Eden fell apart. I thought about returning to New York, and going back to newspaper work, but instead I stayed.

**RAMBLER:** What kind of reporter were you?

**SAFRANSKY:** I worked as a general assignment reporter for the *Long Island Press*, which, in the late sixties, was the seventh-largest afternoon newspaper in the country. *(End of excerpt)*