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OUR TOWN

## The Revolution Was Televised

*Opening the archives of an insurgent TV show.*

*Author: David Witter*

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Howie Samuelsohn's in the basement of his Highland Park home, inserting tapes into a VCR. The monitor shows a Native American woman in a velvet sport coat with a flower in her hair. She's singing and playing a guitar.

"Is that Buffy Sainte-Marie?" Samuelsohn asks.

"Yeah, that's her," says Marshall Ellenstein, a video technician. "She always sang with that vibrato."

Samuelsohn switches tapes and new faces appear: Joan Baez, John Prine, Harry Chapin. There's Jesse Jackson, Afro reaching skyward, sitting in a TV studio. Jane Fonda speaks at a Detroit rally. Donald Sutherland solemnly stares into the camera and reads an antiwar poem.

"They look pretty good after sitting on a shelf for 30 years, wouldn't you say?" Samuelsohn exclaims. The next tape reveals the musings of three topless women.

"The owner told us he wouldn't air this one, but we decided to shoot it anyway," says Samuelsohn, smiling. "On our show we tried to break all of the rules, and we got away with a lot."

That show was the Underground News, which premiered in 1970, the year Channel 44 went on the air. Back then, viewers had to purchase separate receivers to get UHF stations, and Channel 44's daytime programming consisted of elevator music and scrolling news stories taken straight off the AP ticker. Fresh out of college, Samuelsohn was given ten minutes to fill at midnight six nights a week.

Though many couldn't tune in the UHF station, Samuelsohn says, "We always made the ratings in Chicago, so we knew we had an audience." And that audience was growing fast. Soon the show had created a buzz, attracting such guests as John Lennon, the Grateful Dead, Senator Charles Percy, the Chicago Seven, Robert Crumb, and Peter Max. The program also offered news: Samuelsohn claims it was the first TV show in the U.S. to disclose the secret bombing of Cambodia, address the treatment of American POWs in Vietnam, and broadcast the Winter Soldier Investigation, a 1971 hearing at which former GIs spoke about the horrors of the war. Before it went off the air in December 1972, the Underground News had expanded into an hourlong program broadcast once a week and was syndicated in Kansas City, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Saint Louis.

Last year Samuelsohn began to revisit old tapes of the series, after a filmmaker approached him about doing a documentary on his life as a media activist. Then in September he sold an Underground News segment to VH-1 that showed an early performance of the band Styx in a Milwaukee park. He now hopes to put together a 13-episode series of bits culled from the program. But the ultimate reason for Samuelsohn's reexamination of the Underground News may have been the return of his eyesight.

Samuelsohn had been legally blind for more than 20 years, after being exposed to chemicals at a video shoot. His right eye is covered by a patch, but a new operation and a special contact lens have restored sight to his left eye. This may be the greatest triumph in a life spent battling powerful forces, armed only with a video camera.

"My father worked at a TV and radio store, and I spent my childhood thinking about how I would grow up and make a cool radio show," says Samuelsohn, a native north sider who attended Sullivan High School in Rogers Park. "Back then TV was around, but the creativity was still in radio."

As a psychology major at Southern Illinois University, Samuelsohn worked at the PBS station in Carbondale. When he came home in the summer of 1968, he landed a job at Channel 26. Aside from working on shows like Soul Train, the young Samuelsohn got a bird's-eye view of the disturbances at that summer's Democratic convention. By the time he returned to school in the fall, his outlook had changed.

"All my civics and history classes told us that we were going to be the generation that didn't have to go to war," Samuelsohn says. "Our parents sacrificed for freedom, we went through the cold war and the A-bomb scares, and now here we were getting drafted and going to yet another war. Somehow I felt that we had been cheated."

After graduation, Samuelsohn applied for a job at Channel 44. Three days after being hired, he was put in charge of the operation. He quickly asked for a slot on the tiny station, and on July 1, 1970, he began to replace the AP wire copy for ten minutes at midnight with news gleaned from other sources. Independent body counts from the war were among the last things viewers saw before the station went dark. "It was classic--after 18 hours of lies we showed the truth for ten minutes," says Samuelsohn. The spots attracted attention almost immediately. "People were watching us to see the real news and how we contradicted the mainstream outlets."

Then station manager Yale Roe hired Chuck Collins, a record producer who had just graduated from Lake Forest College, to take the show live, and on November 16, 1970, the Underground News was born. Collins was the host. Samuelsohn directed and coproduced.

"We were sponsored by Head Imports on Lincoln Avenue and read the Mother Earth News over the music of the Grateful Dead," Samuelsohn says. Within two weeks the Grateful Dead appeared live; within two months Samuelsohn and Collins were featuring guests like Fonda, Sutherland, and Angela Davis. "Back then the only way our generation could get their voice heard was on underground radio, or in papers like The Seed," Samuelsohn says. "So when Underground appeared, the thing just took off."

As he sorts through his stacks of tapes, Samuelsohn continually puts drops in his left eye because, he says, he can no longer produce tears. Pulling a small bottle out of the holster on his belt, he manages to wet his eyes while changing videotapes. On the screen, Chuck Collins is sitting next to Jim Croce, doing a promotional spot for the show. Then Woody Allen flashes across the screen, talking about sex. "Everybody wanted him and couldn't get him," Samuelsohn recalls. "Then one day he just called and came on the show. That is the way it was: after word got out, the show just produced itself."

They had to persuade Lennon to appear. Samuelsohn contacted the Beatle through street singer and activist David Peel. But Lennon had no plans to come to Chicago, so Samuelsohn went to New York for the recording of an album by Elephant's Memory, Lennon's onetime backing band. Fortunately there was a TV studio upstairs, and Samuelsohn was able to capture the footage of Lennon that's he's now showing on his big-screen TV.

"I think it is good to scream," says Lennon, a famous advocate of primal scream therapy. Yoko Ono nods in approval. "I mean, when we were lads growing up everyone told us you are a boy, you shouldn't cry. So think about the great release you have after all those years of keeping in your feelings."

The segment starts with Peel and activist A.J. Weberman discussing which rock stars are committed to causes and which aren't. They specifically name Mick Jagger, who suddenly walks onto the set. Peel begins to play his guitar, improvising, "He thinks he's African, he thinks he's English, he thinks he's American." While Weberman talks about rock stars needing to spread around their "garbage," Jagger laughs, looks cross, and says, "Oh, you mean the green garbage. You think I should spread around the green garbage?" He then covers the camera lens with an album cover--Peel's 1972 *The Pope Smokes Dope*--and stalks off the set.

The appearance of Lennon and Jagger on this tiny independent show was a high point for the *Underground News*. A write-up in *Life* magazine described the program as "a lot of hair, very few ears, and some great advertisements for waterbeds."

"There were a lot of shows with talking heads that were lit better," recalls Ron Vasser, an *Underground News* contributor who's now a production director at CBS 2 Chicago. "But artistically what Howie was doing was a forerunner for MTV and *Saturday Night Live*."

Yet despite its constant stream of entertainers, the show was always about politics. "We were telling the story of the antiwar movement, or the inner city and the Black Panthers, telling what it was like to get bashed in the head," Vasser continues. "Howie put the message out there that nobody else did."

The show would often begin with Collins reading from classified government documents, which were sent anonymously to the station almost daily. "Once Chuck was reading about our dropping bombs on Laos and Cambodia," Samuelsohn remembers, "and the next day we got a call from an air force pilot who'd participated in the bombings. He appeared on our show at the same time Nixon went on TV to tell the country there was no bombing." Another former soldier and heroin addict claimed he'd been promised an honorable discharge if he'd go behind enemy lines to kill American deserters. The Underground News was the only TV show that aired an antiwar public service announcement. That's when, Samuelsohn claims, he and Collins became targets.

"At first it started with guys jumping out of an alley, taking our picture, and running off," Samuelsohn says. "Sometimes they would follow us home. One night Chuck was beat up by a bunch of guys who called themselves the Legion of Justice."

Collins, who went on to become a correspondent for NBC News and is now a writer in Scottsdale, Arizona, recalls the legionnaires shouting, "Lay off Nixon." He says the harassment was relentless: on more than one occasion, he found drugs and paraphernalia planted in his car. "I think I must have been stopped for speeding on Lake Shore Drive six or seven times--once I was with Jane Fonda, and once I was with Rennie Davis."

In 1971 Channel 44 talk-show host Merri Dee and a male guest were kidnapped, driven out to a field, and shot. Only Dee survived. Now a program director at WGN, she says she'd been stalked, but Collins has always wondered if someone was actually after him. He says, "The police advised me to leave town because they suspected I was the real target."

The suggestion of danger is what first attracted filmmaker Ken Goldstein to Samuelsohn and the Underground News. After spending a summer working as an intern for Samuelsohn, he decided there was a remarkable story that hadn't been told. "I've seen enough to be convinced," says Goldstein, who has worked for A&E and now lives in Los Angeles. "It is all true. I went with him through everything and the biggest shocker is that it is all documented."

Yet his upcoming documentary on Samuelsohn isn't meant to be a political statement as much as a summary of a remarkable life. "I wanted to do a series on amazing people who are not known to the public, and he was the first guy that came to mind," says Goldstein. He plans to enter his documentary at Sundance, Slamdance, and other festivals. "Howie has had a long and really tough life filled with numerous struggles and he has still come out on top."

Samuelsohn and Collins claim the Underground News was canceled because the station and its sponsors were pressured to back off. Once the show was gone, Samuelsohn's politics made others wary of hiring him. "A lot of hippies kind of changed when they found that it might hurt their careers," says Vasser. "But Howie walked the walk and talked the talk and paid the price for his hipness."

As the 70s wound down, Samuelsohn found himself increasingly working for the man, producing commercials for McDonald's, General Motors, and Eli Lilly. While shooting a commercial at a paint factory, he was exposed to toxic chemicals and contracted Stevens-Johnson syndrome. "The chemicals and reaction caused second-degree burns over my entire body," Samuelsohn says as he squirts more lubricant into his eye. "I suffered cardiac arrest and had to be jump-started three times. I couldn't eat or sleep for 30 days. I was supposed to be a vegetable."

He survived, but resulting complications left him legally blind. Forced to go on disability, he volunteered at the Highland Park local cable-access channel and later at WGBO, Channel 66, where he produced the Sunday-morning environmental-issues show Earth Network Television.

"I now see the environment as the major issue of today, just as Vietnam was for our generation," he says. Working with his one good eye, "six inches from the screen," Samuelsohn and his crew of volunteers covered topics like "The Diaper Dilemma" and "Alternative Medicine." The nonprofit, public-interest show won a Visionary Award from the Center for New Television in 1994.

In 1998 doctors invented the Boston Scleral Lens. Patterned after a conventional contact lens, the oxygen-permeable plastic rests on the white tissue of the eye and does not damage the cornea. "Before the lens I was in pain every time I blinked and could only see one part of a person's face or body at a time," Samuelsohn says. His "cure," featured in Chicago Tribune and Pioneer Press articles, restored his vision to 20/400, then 20/70. Now Samuelsohn claims the vision in his left eye is 20/50, "practically restored."

He's gone back into what he calls the "video truth" business full-time.

In September he videotaped garbage workers commingling recyclables and trash, putting both into a landfill. The footage was shown on Channel Two and hearings were subsequently held by the Highland Park government, though no action has been taken. Now, at 54, Samuelsohn would like to re-create the Underground News, and if he can't find a willing TV station he'll put the show on the Internet. "There are so many camcorders out there--good eyes and ears--and people shoot a lot of wrong-doing. It's a shame there's no place to show this work." He has already taped a pilot featuring singer A.J. Croce, Jim's son, and is looking for suggestions for new episodes.

"The old Underground produced itself because there was a logjam of truth that needed to be broken," Samuelsohn says. "Today we have cable, but so many of the stations are owned by the same corporations the situation is almost the same as it was with 14 channels. So my question is, is free speech still alive in 2001?"

*Art accompanying story in printed newspaper (not available in this archive): photo/Jon Randolph.*

Hello again. I am in the process of starting a Internet Television Station. I have re-partnered with Chuck Collins to release some of the aforementioned archives. We are also in the process of shooting a documentary.

Obviously this will take a great sum of money. We are eager to fund our venture from alternatives sources. Your venue would be a blast. I am currently living in Santa Barbara and Chuck Collins lives in Scottsdale.

I live on disability due to my continuing legal blindness and Chuck is now confined to a wheelchair and also lives on disability.

We are both extremely dedicated to preserving our democracy through revealing the truth and speaking out to power.

There is much more to this story.

