



The original founders: Shane Smith, Suroosh Alvi, and Gavin McInnes



THE PUNK-ROCKIN' -CENSOR -BAITING-
MASTURBATORY -DIY -OVER-SEXED-
ENVELOPE-PUSHING MAGAZINE-GETS-
INTO-BED-WITH -VIACOM-TO-BECOME-
PROFIT-SPINNING-MULTIMEDIA-BRAND-AND-
UNLIKELY-BASTION-OF-JOURNALISM STORY

VICE GOES GLOBAL

BY STEPHEN BALDWIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDREA STERN

BAGHDAD, 2006

Iraq's August sun blasts waves of heat like a blow-dryer to the skin. Under palm tree shade, Suroosh Alvi and Eddy Moretti are surrounded by a motorcade of film crew and AK-47-toting security. They've paid \$1,500 a day for a bulletproof SUV, another car without armour, two drivers, two shooters and a translator named Ahmed, who begs to have his identity hidden for fear of his life. Alvi and Moretti are two of the young moguls at the helm of *Vice* magazine, the counterculture bible-turned media-conglomerate. They're in the most dangerous city on Earth to interview the four members of Iraq's only heavy metal band, Accrasicauda. "We've been following them for three years and we needed to check in on them, see if they're still alive," Alvi explains.

They're a long way from New York, where *Vice* has endured as a centrepiece for North America's hipster culture since the late 1990s. But its ability to agitate the rebel youth is lost in a place like Baghdad, where true counterculture movements don't launch magazines—they launch mortars.

"Nice and tight—get that belly in there," Alvi mumbles to Moretti as they strap on beige flak jackets. "This is risky, it's dangerous," says Alvi to the camera. "People would say it's really fucking stupid for us to be doing this, but, um, you know...heavy metal rules."

This opening scene from *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* marked the moment at which *Vice's* shift in identity began to manifest itself through film. The VICE Films documentary—a critical success at the 2007 Toronto International Film Festival—pulled the pair away from their comfort zone among North America's subcultures and into an unpredictable international underbelly.

For Alvi, it's been a gruelling journey. As one of the three founders of *Vice*, he has guided the magazine from a crude Montreal indie rag covering the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll of the underground scene into a multi-million-dollar media conglomerate employing 560 people in 30 countries—not to mention 2,500 freelance print, web and broadcast contributors. Moretti, who has

had varying, but central, roles in the company since 2000, is the executive producer of *Vice's* web channel, vbs.tv (*Vice* Broadcasting System). It launched in 2007 as the company's third content channel, after *Viceland.com* and the magazine, all of them free. vbs.tv tackles international stories with elements of social justice. Its *Vice Guide to Travel* and *Vice Guide to Film* have steered audiences through gun markets in Lahore, the radioactive wasteland of Chernobyl, and an undercover investigation of North Korea. The filthy discourse and ignorance of cultural taboos that *Vice* built its reputation on remain (see vbs.tv's *Asses of the Caribbean* and *Japanese Senior Porn*), only now they're positioned alongside global issues and responsible journalism (see vbs.tv's *Mecca Diaries* and *House of the Setting Sun*). The two sides are on different ends of the spectrum, but they both share *Vice's* propensity to stumble upon raw, if sporadic, truth.

Viceland.com and vbs.tv together receive nearly four million hits per month in the U.S. alone, and *Vice* magazine has stretched its distribution to an international circulation of over a million copies in 25 countries—28 by the end of 2011, including China, Russia and South Korea. But while this expansion from local to international markets has been fuelled by the popularity of its subversive content, it's the company's commercial relationships that have financed growth. Over the years, *Vice* has entered a number of unexpected unions with corporate giants, which have found a lucrative side route to profit off of a hipster youth demographic that has been trained to reject them. Retail companies like Sony and Nike have been advertisers for years, but it's the more recent deals that threaten the company's anti-establishment roots. vbs.tv and its new MTV show, *The Vice Guide to Everything* (Moretti is an executive producer), are both produced in association with Viacom, which by 2010 was the fourth-largest media conglomerate on the planet. *Vice* also has web projects with Dell and Intel, and a marketing arm that has put together campaigns for companies like Microsoft and ESPN.

While these projects would be marked as achievements for a mainstream media company, the measure of success for a counter-

culture magazine is its ability to reject popular culture and remain exclusive. It's by this gauge that critics see *Vice* as both a success and a failure.

So how is it that *Vice* has increased in popularity even after associating with the same corporate foxes that it claimed to subvert? How does a company that has based its reputation on celebrating subcultures survive as a mainstream entity? Think of *Vice* less as a band of sellouts, which they may well be, and more as a reinvention of the mainstream.

MONTREAL, 1994

Vice's history begins in 1994, when Suroosh Alvi completed his second stint in rehab for heroin addiction. In the process of completing a master's in psychology at the University of Toronto (having already earned an undergrad degree at

IN MANY WAYS, MCINNES WAS THE IDEAL VICE READER: AN INTELLIGENT, UNINHIBITED PUNK ROCKER WITH A NATURAL TALENT (AND DESIRE) TO OFFEND PEOPLE.

McGill University in Montréal), Alvi conceived the idea in rehab of a punk rock magazine with punk rock style. He soon got the attention of Gavin McInnes and Shane Smith, members of a band called Leatherassbuttfuck. Like Alvi, McInnes and Smith were intelligent, motivated and outspoken university graduates with very little to lose. They acquired funding from a non-profit Haitian organization called Images Interculturelles, on the condition that they each become welfare recipients, which they somehow found a way to do, and then went on to produce the first issue of *Voice of Montreal* in October '94. It featured an interview with The Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten.

Voice of Montreal soon turned to *Voice*, and *Voice* to *Vice*. The three borrowed \$5,000 each from their parents, moved locations within Montreal, sold ads in Toronto and, just like that, became an independent three-man organization with national distribution agreements. Soon after, *Vice* was banned from Carleton University—McInnes and Smith's alma mater—for running an ad that pictured pubic hair. The result was a censorship debate on the Carleton campus, and more momentum for the magazine.

Vice's first flash of money came from a tech firm. After running an article on an eccentric Montreal techno-mogul, Richard Szalwinski, the millionaire offered to invest in the company ("It was our own ignorance that led us to value ourselves at \$4 million, which was way too much," Smith said in *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*). With new money, the trio found themselves on a fast track with inevitable repercussions: they moved into a cushy Manhattan office alongside *Shift*, another Canadian publication Szalwinski had a stake in; sold merchandise online (at one point, they owned two warehouses full of clothes); opened *Vice* fashion boutiques in Toronto, New York and London; attended trade shows and sought to buy out businesses overseas. "We were literally buying up the phenomenon that was streetwear," says Smith in *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*, "stores, magazines, clothing companies, the works. We actually had letters of intent to buy companies that were fucking ten times our size."

But the growth was too intense to keep track of, and, realizing they were owed \$900,000 in unpaid invoices from advertisers, the three demanded Szalwinski—who by this time was living in Nantucket—sell the company back to them. They moved out of their cushy Manhattan offices and into a warehouse in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and eventually turned a profit.

BROOKLYN, 2010

"Hello?"

"Hi, Gavin?"

"Hey wait, wait, I have an idea. I read horoscopes to the oldest, most renowned astrologists, and as they come up with their ridiculous explanation, I'll be looking at the camera sort of nodding and rolling my eyes. What do you think? I don't know, maybe I'm a little bit drunk."

On an average day, Streetbonersandtv.carnage.com, not surprisingly, is the definition of lewd. The website, like its founder, is openly prejudiced in every conceivable way. A banner at the top of the page reads, "FROM THE CREATOR OF VICE MAGAZINE."

This is what has become of Gavin McInnes, the only *Vice* co-founder available to speak to the *RRJ*. It's a glimpse of what *Vice* once was, could have been and sort of is now. In 2008, McInnes—

known as the menace of the three founders—sold his shares in *Vice*, citing creative differences with the other employees; he isn't legally allowed to disclose details. "The ultimate goal of starting *Vice*," McInnes says, "was, yeah, to be a shit-disturber, but it's more intricate than that." To him, provoking

the readers is the only way to lead them to truth.

In many ways, McInnes was the ideal *Vice* reader: an intelligent, uninhibited punk rocker with a natural talent (and desire) to offend people. To McInnes, the aim of *Vice*, as well as his new project, was to do "smart things in a stupid way, and stupid things in a smart way." With his new website, he's looking to wage war on the politically correct with what he calls "discourse camaraderie." It was McInnes who formed *Vice's* early bonds with avant-garde photographers and artists like Terry Richardson, Ryan McGinley and Bruce LaBruce.

LaBruce, a Toronto-based photographer and filmmaker, is a bohemian with a natural sense of the limits of artistic expression, and an ability to move beyond them. His work for *Vice* included unsettling photos depicting nudity, amputees, homoeroticism and, sometimes, all of the above. He also wrote strongly opinionated articles like "I Hate Straights" and "Hijab vs Short Shorts," in which he defended the use of the hijab. "At *Vice*, you could play the devil's advocate," LaBruce says. "I often argued things that I didn't even agree with."

But he noticed *Vice's* verve diminishing as its popularity grew. Both he and McInnes felt that Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's gentrification of New York changed the city's dynamic. LaBruce believes that *Vice* changed with it. "After Giuliani, New York became a lot more corporate and formulaic," he says. "It was inevitable that alternative publications would have to adapt or fail. *Vice* adapted."

It was around this time that *Vice* noticeably veered away from its image as a name brand. The stores in L.A., New York and Toronto, along with plans for future expansion, were shut down in 2005; a Showtime deal for a *Vice* TV show starring actor/comedian David Cross never materialized; and, in London, the company decided to name a dive bar it had purchased The Old Blue Last, instead of The Vice Bar as originally planned.

But *Vice* learned to identify and improve upon its strengths. A 2002 deal with Atlantic Records to create Vice Records (representing artists such as The Streets, The Stills, Bloc Party and Justice), continued to prosper throughout the decade. The company signed a deal with Warner Books to publish an anthology of its best features called *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*. Soon came the web and film deals with Dell, Intel and Viacom, and the advertising and marketing deals with Nike, Microsoft (Xbox), Sony (PlayStation), New Era, Mountain Dew, Scotiabank's Nuit Blanche, HMV, Intel, and others.

It was the 2007 Viacom deal that may have been the tipping point for McInnes, who left in January 2008. Elements of his influence are still embedded in the web and print content, especially his classic Do's and Don'ts section, a group of pictures with scathing captions below. But looking through the magazine today, it's clearly not what he had envisioned for *Vice*. McInnes was known, and often appreciated, for his indiscriminate discrimination; he casually used gender and racial slurs, and professed a love of being white. Co-founder Shane Smith, in an interview with *Wired*, said that McInnes's constantly racist content was more in tune with his personal notoriety. "This is not what we're about," Smith said. "It's never what we've been about, and it's not the way we want to go."

It's difficult to weigh what *Vice* has lost in losing McInnes, but the ultimate result is fairly clear. Along with *Viceland.com* and *VBS.tv*'s over six million unique web hits per month and the magazine's planned 28-country circulation, *VBS.tv* now licenses content to Canada's IFC, MTV Latin America, *CNN.com* and many others. *VBS.tv* content has also been compiled into episodes of *The Vice Guide to Everything*, the MTV show launched in December 2010. It's a positive contrast to the channel's predominantly superficial programming.

It's as if *Vice* made it its objective to dip a finger in every jar of western pop culture, even if it means getting in bed with corporate America. *Motherboard.tv*, a relatively unknown Vice-Dell joint multimedia product and Dell advertising vehicle, also responsible for the *Vice* iPhone app, "is an online video network and community focused on the exploration of the nature and culture of technology." The Creators Project, an online arts and culture platform produced in association with Intel. All of *Vice*'s online ventures are a part of the AdVice Network, a group of cutting-edge websites such as *Rhapsody* and *Lookbook*, that collects over 100 million hits each month. *Virtue*, a cheesy play on words that the early *Vice* would have scoffed at, is a sister marketing arm of *Vice*. *Virtue* focused on "brand strategy, creative development, production and distribution," and has given companies like Mountain Dew, Red Bull and many of *Vice*'s advertisers a fresh outlet to rebel youth.

The print edition is still found only at hipster hangouts. In Toronto, according to one record store employee, they are usually snatched up within 48 hours of being dropped off. Issues are passed around between friends (averaging 5.6 readers per-copy), and are often saved as collector's items. It's how *Vice* is able to sell full-page ads for \$12,000 (U.S.) and front spreads for \$23,000 (U.S.); in Canada, \$9,000 and \$18,000, respectively. A 2008 issue featured a superimposed glow-in-the-dark BMW ad—like *Vice*'s corporate identity, hidden in plain sight.

"We were recently offered \$10 million (U.S.) for 10 percent, but we're not selling," Alvi told *Canadian Business* in 2006. "We don't need to do the deal. We're comfortable and doing great deals, and our equity will be worth a lot more in a year." And that was all before *VBS.tv*, the MTV show, *Virtue*, *Motherboard.tv* and The Creators Project. They recently welcomed investment partnerships with MTV co-founder and former head of Viacom Tom Feston, media conglomerate WPP and New York's Raine Group investment firm that was reportedly, "in the high eight figures." Smith told *The New York Times* in April that he expected *Vice*'s profits to approach \$50 million in the next couple of years.

The most vocal critic throughout this transformation has been the brash and opinionated group of bloggers at New York-based *Gawker.com*. *Viceland.com* and *Gawker* have developed a sort of love-hate (predominantly hate) relationship that, at least recently,

has been dominated by *Gawker* calling out *Vice* for each and every sellout move that the company makes.

In May 2009, after *The New York Times* had published an article about *Virtue*, *Gawker*'s Hamilton Nolan posted, "*Vice* Magazine is trying to be the coolest magazine in the world and, simultaneously, the biggest bunch of sellouts ever to walk the streets of Williamsburg, in an effort to see if it's actually possible to bend over backwards far enough to give a blowjob to oneself." A 2010 post expressed some mildly complimentary opinions of *Vice*, but not without criticizing, among other things: *Virtue* and its affiliation with multinational corporations, the magazine's policy of barring its writers from working on Gavin McInnes's website, the hiring of Alex Detrick (a former U.S. government press secretary) and employing cheap PR strategies like bragging to the media about a \$250,000 party. "*Vice* still produces some good work, and I still respect them," says Nolan. "The problem is the extent to which they've packaged and commodified their sense of coolness. They've just become another hipster cliché."

As far as *Vice*'s content, however, *Gawker* has little to criticize. Over the past 16 years, the only noticeable change has been in the quality of reporting. Cover stories like 1998's "Students who whore" are still a part of the magazine, only now they're placed alongside interviews with American author/historian Howard Zinn and British journalist Robert Fisk. Its framework allows experienced journalists free expression of their ideas. In 2010, *The New Yorker* staff writer Elizabeth Kolbert wrote a piece on Charles Darwin and the causes of end-Permian extinction that would have been worthy of *The New Yorker*. The February 2010 issue featured a story about three American men attempting to smuggle black-market diamonds out of Sierra Leone. *Vice*'s editors appear to follow a formula that allows them to touch on global concern while remaining on the outskirts of the mainstream. As *Vice* evolves, its audience broadens but somehow its content retains the same subversive, unrefined ethos that it's always had.

In a 2008 *VBS.tv* documentary—aired in January 2010 on *CNN.com*—Shane Smith was led barefoot through rural Liberia's swampy, lush terrain by ex-general Butt Naked. Smith asked the general about his name and the answer was fairly straightforward: during battle, he used to fight naked. As the pair continued to consider Liberia's viciously militant past and present, Smith casually probed deeper. "Most of my boys," the general said,

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"they would drain the blood from an innocent child and drink it before going into battle."

It's this type of reporting that has attracted mainstream media companies looking to reinvent themselves for a younger generation. "They have an unvarnished way of telling stories," said K.C. Estenson, general manager of *CNN.com*, in an interview with *The New York Times*. "They represent an audience that sometimes feels disenfranchised by mainstream media, one that has the impression that *CNN* doesn't align with their interests."

In Smith's view, that same audience is just as disillusioned with the underground media. "If I'm still concerned about being the hipster's bible, then I should give up," said Smith in an interview with *New York* magazine. "I'm an old fat man, and I don't give a shit about shoes and denim anymore. I give a shit about what the fuck's happening."

But journalism has to be about much more than its presentation. *Vice*, like its core audience, remains exclusionary and self-centred. In another VBS.tv documentary recently streamed via CNN.com, Colombian designer Miguel Caballero loads a revolver and shoots correspondent Ryan Duffy in the abdomen at point-blank range. Caballero makes fashionable bulletproof apparel, but the story, through *Vice*'s lens, becomes more about Duffy and less about why it is that there's a demand for these products in Bogotá.

And this clash of personal ego with responsible journalism is what's troubling about *Vice* as a credible source. While *Vice* is objective, it often isn't sincere. There's no doubt that it has drawn attention to some of the world's most deprived and dangerous settings, but the audience is often left waiting for *Vice*'s inevitable punchline. "I think there were around a hundred deaths a day while we were in Iraq," says Moretti, looking back on *Heavy Metal in Baghdad*. "I'm talking about people being blown to pieces. The lucky ones were shot in the head." Increasingly, that punchline is nowhere to be found.

"Call it Gonzo journalism, call it cool," says *The Globe and Mail*'s John Doyle, "call it whatever you want. It matters." And as simplistic as this may sound, Doyle is absolutely right. Whatever your thoughts are on *Vice*'s transformation, whether you're on the inside or out, it's difficult to reject the thought that *Vice* has taken a step in a progressive direction—covering vital mainstream news stories, with the same subversive techniques. "We are building out the next MTV," Smith said at a company meeting in February 2010.

While its partnerships have seemed questionable to many, the company now has the resources to explore the sides of major stories that no one else has considered—the sides that may not be relevant to millions, but are still unmistakably captivating and, without a doubt, entertaining. And while this may be a tragedy to McInnes, LaBruce and the rest of its core audience, it's a triumph to generations X, Y and Z as a whole. The *Vice* ethos has broadened to encourage not only the anti-culture, but being and doing whatever you choose to be or do. These guys followed that mantra and came out on top—they had the corporate bulldogs *begging*.

But it's easy to have your thoughts twisted and pulled apart in this counterculture cyclone, because it's all an enormous paradox. *Vice* is a capitalist execution of anti-capitalism; the exposure of international exploitation brought to you by the makers of international exploitation. In many ways, it's forging its own definition of journalism, or at least doing its best to screw with the formula. But *Vice* is quickly growing out of this gap between subcultures and the mainstream, and it will soon need to determine what its role is in today's media—if it even intends to have one. "If I wanna stay the same, if I wanna be *Vice*, that used to be like, 'Fuck everybody, and Do's and Don'ts, and all this shit,' then I should retire," said Smith in the *New York* interview. "Because that shit's over. It is. It's over."

What has happened and what will happen to *Vice* in the next few years may mark a pivotal shift in mainstream media's adaptation of new methods, but it's up to *Vice*'s followers to determine whether this new *Vice* is a watered down version of the old, or a potent extension of it. Maybe the general public finally understands the quality and originality it offers, and that it's only a matter of time until, as Smith suggested, *Vice* becomes the next MTV. Or maybe, once again, the boys from Montréal are just in the right place at the right time. ■■■■

Stephen Baldwin is a journalist who covers a variety of topics, from music to drugs to politics. Stephen has written articles for local entertainment, sports and lifestyle websites as well as two Ryerson school papers. He has just completed an internship at the *National Post*.

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