

BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

Spontaneous Combustion

Richmond's creative class is hot, hot, hot. Pioneering new ways to collaborate and inspire one another, commercial artists are becoming a driving economic force in the region.

By James A. Bacon

Were it not for the "Euro" décor of polished metal and sleek furniture, the corporate culture of Rainmaker Studios seems would seem only one step removed from that of a college dormitory. Musicians leave electric guitars propped against the sofa. Take-out pizzas are delivered with the pepperonis arranged in four-letter words. Pranksters play bizarre music tracks -- Iranian gangsta rap, or Harry Connick Jr.-style crooning of the Red Hot Chili Peppers -- to phone callers stuck on hold.

Her goal, says Kristin O'Connor, Rainmaker's infectious owner, is to foster an atmosphere of quirkiness, creativity and fun. It takes more than sinking a million dollars into digital recording gear and sound insulation, she explains, to produce advertising soundtracks for the likes of Nascar, Quiznos Subs and Nick at Nite. It takes talented, creative people who are jazzed about their work and don't mind pulling the occasional all-nighter.

It also helps, O'Connor might

have added, if you can impart the zaniness to your friends and neighbors. Rainmaker was the first permanent tenant at the Superior Production Exchange, a renovated, 36,000-square-foot warehouse in Shockoe Bottom. When she set up shop there in June 2000, O'Connor



coaxed Bunt Young, a cinematographer, to move in as well. Then, working their contacts, the two of them persuaded other business buddies to join them. Before long, much to the delight of the lucky landlord, others were clamoring to "join the fun."

With 24 commercial tenants, the Exchange is nearly full. The building now sustains a complete business ecosystem under a single roof, pulling together ad agencies, film makers, post-production boutiques, web developers, copy writers, editors and even a bookkeeper and an entertainment attorney. There's nothing like it in the world, says O'Connor, who has searched for parallels. The Custard Factory, an arts and media cluster in a re-

stored warehouse in Birmingham, England, is similar, she says, but it lacks the intense advertising-driven focus.

Tenants tell O'Connor that locating in the Exchange gave them a 10 percent to 30 percent bump in revenue. Companies frequently refer business to one another and collaborate on big projects. But the Exchange is more than a glorified tip club. It's a place where professionals in the artistic trades can mingle and inspire one another. Whether they're roller skating in the atrium, brewing coffee in the kitchen or organizing a Rodney Dangerfield film festival to raise money for Shockoe Bottom flood victims, people are constantly interacting. "There's a spirit here," she says. "The atmosphere lends itself to creative and innovative thinking."

No higher authority planned for the Superior Production Exchange to turn out like it has. The cluster of media talent just assembled on its own. In that sense, the Exchange is a microcosm of the larger artistic community in Richmond. The city is home to hundreds of creative boutiques and free-lancers -- writers, painters, graphic designers, film producers, musicians, Web developers -- who make a commercial living in artistic fields. Most of the enterprises are so small

that they're invisible to anyone outside the advertising profession. But they're getting organized, and they're a growing social and economic influence in Richmond.

Commercial artists are a force for urban renewal, moving into the city while other businesses continue to move out. Craving interaction with other creative types, they congregate in older neighborhoods with distinctive architecture, great restaurants and, in Shockoe Bottom at least, a lively club scene. Working artists also have a penchant for renovating empty old warehouses and industrial buildings and refitting them with urban flair. In sum, they bring an indisputable aura of coolness to a city that is otherwise very pin-striped and button-down.

Richmond has been recognized as a regional creative center for years. There has always been a strong corporate base – the region boasts of ten Fortune 1,000 companies – and a strong advertising community to support it. The Martin Agency, the top ad agency in the Southeast, reels in national clients, recruits world-class creative talent and seeds the landscape with start-ups by former employees. Meanwhile, Virginia Commonwealth University's School of the Arts, ranked 6th nationally among programs for art and design, unleashes more than 500 graduates into the workplace every year; many of them stay in Richmond.

But something qualitatively different is happening now. Like water vapor that crystallizes on a window pane, the artistic community is spontaneously searching for structure. There's no one leading the effort – as if artists could agree to be led by anyone – and no one is priming the pump with government funds or philanthropic grants. It's a ground-up movement driven by the conviction among the artists themselves that interacting with their peers stimulates the creative juices.

While the Superior Production Exchange is the first artistic ecosystem to establish itself, others have followed. A developer has renovated an old warehouse in Manchester, across the river from downtown, to provide studio space for artists and craftsmen in one part of the building and a Torpedo Factory-like environment in the other, where artists can show their wares to the public. Nearby, two architecture firms are planning to share space with a graphic design studio, a photographer and a coffee shop with the conscious intent of sparking creative interaction.

Even writers, as hard to herd as cats, are getting organized. The James River Writer's Festival, which originated as a conference for working writers about two years ago, has evolved into a year-round support network for working and aspiring writers. The volunteer group is organizing workshops, insti-

gating poetry slams and sponsoring short-story readings.

O'Connor finds it all quite marvelous. Moving to Richmond after graduating from Rutgers University, she co-founded Rainmaker at the age of 23. Over the past eight years, she has built the sound studio into a \$1.5 million-a-year business. The rent happens to be cheaper in Richmond than in New York or L.A., which is a bonus, but that's not why she's here, she insists. "It's about being here at a time that Richmond's becoming a destination, being acknowledged for its arts, its music, its innovative spirit."

To all outward appearances, Danny Robinson had it made in New York. As a co-founder and creative officer of Vigilante, he specialized in a rarefied marketing niche: advertising to urban audiences. He focused on where cultural trends start – usually among the urban youth -- and how they percolate into broader society. His sales pitch to advertisers was to market products to the ultra-hip consumers in major cities like Manhattan, Miami, L.A., Paris and London in the hopes that they could hitch a free ride into the mainstream. He worked on major accounts like Pontiac, Heineken, the USTA and Akademiks, an urban clothing brand.

New York is the center of the North American advertising universe, but there was a

downside to Robinson's life. The commutes from Fairfield County into Manhattan were grueling: a 15-minute drive to the station, a 60-minute train ride, a 15-minute subway ride, and a 15-minute walk to the office. After knocking himself out for six straight years, he was undergoing a period self assessment when he received a phone call from Mike Hughes, president and creative director of the Martin Agency. How about moving to Richmond, Hughes asked.

The prospect of a 20-minute commute and a lower cost of living had some appeal, says Robinson, but the Martin Agency's reputation was the clincher. Even in New York, the agency is known for top-drawer creative work: *Advertising Age* proclaimed it the "third most creative" advertising agency in the world. Even more importantly, he shared Martin's philosophy towards clients and employees. "It's identical to the way I think about it," he says. "It's the way people work and treat each other. It's the integrity of the place."

There are many excellent small and midsized advertising agencies in Richmond, but only Martin has the national stature to snatch star talent like Robinson from the nation's major advertising centers. With approximately \$350 million in billings, Martin is the largest agency in the Southeastern U.S., sporting blue chip clients like Alltell, Geico, Coca Cola, Hanes, Miller Brewing and UPS.

There is no overstating the impact that Martin has had on the Richmond creative community. It out-sources elements of its ad creation to local businesses like Rainmaker, giving them shots at national accounts they might never get on their own. More importantly in the long run, Martin acts as a giant talent pump, siphoning top creative professionals from major media centers into Richmond, a city they wouldn't otherwise consider moving to. Some stay at Martin, some move on, and some split off to start their own firms.

Martin Agency alumni are everywhere. The Hodges Group, a public relations firm, founded by two ex-Martin guys... Free Radicals, a web design boutique, started by refugees from Martin Interactive... The Boomer project, a marketing firm launched by Martin veteran Matt Thornhill, specializing in the Baby Boomer demographic...

Evan Davies, an early convert to the Internet, credits a stint with Martin's interactive group with accelerating his Web design career. Working for Martin's interactive division in 1994, he built most of Coca Cola's very first website. That credential served in him good stead when he founded Davies New Media, a high-end Web design firm that thrived through the '90s and is still around today.

While Martin is the 800-pound gorilla of the Rich-

mond advertising/marketing community, there are plenty of 400-pound silverbacks to keep it from getting complacent. Just look at the Richmond Ad Club's 2003 "Ad Show" awards. Although Martin ruled the "advertising" category, smaller agencies dominated the "design" and "interactive" categories. Second-tier firms like Siddall, Barber Martin, WORK, just to name some of the larger ones, are widely recognized for their creative work as well. Although they don't handle as many national accounts, Richmond agencies dominate the Mid-Atlantic regional marketplace. They, in turn, outsource much of their work to local boutiques and free-lancers.

"Richmond has always been known as a small Mecca of agencies," says Rachel Bender, creative account manager at Aquent, a temporary employment firm. The agencies are the big fish in the pond; they line up the projects and assemble the creative teams, often drawing up extensive networks of outside talent. "About 80 percent of the work we do is with free-lancers," she says. "There is a huge free-lance community here."

Ask Bruce Hornstein how he fits into Richmond's artistic domain, and you won't get a simple answer. As co-owner of Pyramid Studios, his specialty is designing multimedia for museum exhibits. His projects entail writing, historical research, photogra-

phy, film making, sound production, computer programming, music, and editing and post production.

It took all those skills and more not long ago when he and his wife/co-owner Dixie tackled one of the biggest jobs of their career: designing Frontier Texas. The people of Abilene had found the money to build a museum from the ground up to tell the story of western Texas between the years 1780 and 1880, before the railroad tamed the region. Between the Indians, the Spanish, the buffalo hunters, the cattle drives, the outlaws and lawmen, it was an incredibly colorful epoch. Project historians had compiled a wealth of material, says Hornstein, but they didn't know the best way to tell the story. Adding to the challenge, the museum had no artifacts – whatever he did, it had be media intensive.

Hornstein hit upon the idea of telling the story through eight individuals – an Indian, a cowboy, a soldier, etc. – who lived in and impacted the region. Then, using state-of-the-art display techniques, Pyramid created three-dimensional holograph-like images to tell their stories. Visitors encounter each character in turn, and then finish the story in a special effects amphitheatre. Sitting on swiveling stools, they rotate 360 degrees and watch as an 18-minute show immerses them in thunderstorms, prairie fires, a saloon card game and a buffalo

stampede. Huge sub-woofers shake the seats as the cattle rumble past.

How did a business like Pyramid Studios wind up in Richmond? Pyramid is here because Hornstein is here, and Hornstein is here because VCU is here. He had no special connection to the city before enrolling at VCU: His father had worked with the CIA, and he'd moved all around the world. Studying communications art and design, he landed a local job when he graduated in 1980, and he met Dixie soon after. One thing led to another. They started Pyramid. They got married. And they rode the business bronco as it bucked one direction and then another until they figured out what they did better than anyone else in the country: design multimedia for museum exhibits.

Like the Martin Agency, VCU is a turbine that sucks up artistic talent from around the country and disgorges it into Richmond. Last year 88 graduate students and 474 undergrads matriculated from the School of the Arts, says Dean Richard E. Toscan. He doesn't keep formal track of where they all go, but he estimates that between 40 percent and 60 percent stay in Virginia – most of them in Richmond. While Martin recruits working artists at the top of their game, VCU brings in fresh, unformed talent. The graduates may be raw, but they've been schooled in the latest digital technologies and they display

a willingness to push the envelope of the possible.

The VCU School of the Arts is the sixth-ranked art school in the country – the *second* ranked school if you're considering only public institutions. The sculpture program is ranked *top* in the country, while graphic design and painting/drawing both crack the Top 10. Of significance to the Richmond economy, the School doesn't turn out artsy-fartsy *artistes* – it graduates artists who understand the realities of the marketplace.

"The design fields are totally focused on commercial work," says Toscan. Graphic artists typically wind up working for advertising agencies or setting up free-lance businesses. Even fine arts students are encouraged to develop a personal vision with the goal of eventually connecting with a gallery that can sell their work.

Kelly Alder came to Richmond to study illustration at VCU. After four years there, he landed a local job, worked in New York a few years, and then came back to Richmond. He works mainly for national magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Fortune*, *Business Week* and *Men's Health*. He sometimes marvels at all the illustrators he knows in Richmond. "When I started out, it was Bill Nelson and Scott Wright. Now there are quite a few – and some are doing very well."

Another VCU alumnus, Mark Smith, has worked the graphic arts scene from every angle. After graduating, he worked his way up to creative director at a Richmond ad agency. Then, concluding that he liked the graphics end of the business best, he left to start his own design shop. He kept the firm very small for years until, about five years ago, he merged with firm owned by Susan Hogg to create Circle S Studio. The firm happily sticks to a six- to seven-person staff, says Smith, that's capable of doing graphic design rivaling the work done "anywhere in the country."

Phaedra Hise worked as an editor at *Inc.* magazine in Boston before she followed her husband, Bill Hargis, to Richmond. She had no idea of what to expect when she moved to this strange city in the South. "I didn't know a soul. I was terrified."

But fear of the unknown didn't slow her down for long. She just made up her mind to link up with other writers in town. Every time someone dropped a name or she read about someone in the newspaper, she made a point of meeting them for lunch. Soon, she'd compiled a long enough list – novelists, poets, journalists, essayists -- to throw a cocktail party.

"I was amazed at how many professional writers there are in Richmond," she says. "I know more people here

working at a consistently higher level than I did in Boston. I know a dozen people here who are working on books, or they've just published one, or they're working on a deal. I have four friends who have screenplays written based on their books!"

A couple of years ago, David Robbins, a life-long Richmonder and accomplished World War II novelist, approached Hise with a proposal: How about creating a writer's festival? Charlottesville already had a major literary event, aimed mainly at book lovers, but this would be for writers and aspiring writers. The idea was to create a vehicle for getting writers connected with one another.

Thus was born the James River Writers Festival. For two consecutive years, the Festival has brought nationally renowned authors like Tom Robbins (*Only Cowgirls Get the Blues*) and Mark Bowden (*Black Hawk Down*), plus editors and agents together with 300 or more mostly Richmond-area writers. Like any business conference, the Writers Festival was structured to help writers with their professional development through workshops, panels of experts, keynote speakers and networking opportunities. No one in Richmond had ever treated writers as a *profession* before.

The festivals have been successful and the organization is gaining momentum. Plans

are afoot to hire a staff person, invest more money in public relations and build programs. Even now, Writers Festival volunteers are acting as an information clearinghouse for the Richmond area. The group maintains a literary calendar – book signings, author lectures and the like – as well as a newsletter.

Additionally, the Writers Festival is developing a year-long series of professional workshops, and it's acting as a sponsor and publicist for other events such as Virginia Arts & Letters Live, a series of short stories performed by local actors. One spin-off has taken a life of its own: poetry slams. Acting under the Writers Festival aegis, D.L. Hopkins, a local actor and poet, organized a couple of poetry competitions at the Café Gutenberg bookstore/wine bar. By the third event, Hise says, the place was so packed that the restaurant started worrying about the fire marshals. Now the monthly event has moved to the Firehouse Theater.

"In terms of our central goal -- seeding writers' communities throughout the city -- it's a runaway success," says Robbins. "Aspiring writers are being put into the presence of professional writers. Communities are forming large and small."

Carbon Leaf, an acoustic-based rock band with Celtic overtones, is on the verge of making it big. With a hot-selling new album, *Indian*

Summer, the Fan-based band now spends most of its time on the road, playing at concerts and festivals that draw audiences of 1,000 to 1,500 per show.

It hasn't always been that way, says Barry Previtt, lyricist and lead vocalist. "We've been on the scene in Richmond for 10 years. It took us all that time to garner a following." He remembers the early days when he felt lucky to play in front of 30 people at the Cary Street Café. "We couldn't book a gig at Alley Cats for the first six years of our career! We scraped for anything we could get."

But Previtt and his four fellow band members persevered, working their way up to bigger gigs and expanding their performance circuit from Richmond to the Mid-Atlantic, and now traveling as far as Nevada, where they were when *WORK* magazine caught up with them. Meanwhile, they've built a strong repertoire of material: Over the years, they've recorded five of their own CDs. Their big break came about a year ago when they won the American Music Awards, organized by Dick Clark of American Bandstand fame, after a national talent search.

Richmond is a great base of operations for a band trying to get a start, Previtt says. It's a lot easier to scrape by during the lean years in Richmond than in expensive cities like New York or Los Angeles. And Richmond's location at the mid-section of the

East Coast makes it equidistant from major touring circuits. Besides, after all this time, says Previtt, Richmond feels like home. "I can see myself settling down here. I'd like to stay rooted in the area."

Previtt is hardly alone in his thinking. Richmond is home base to a surprising number of successful bands playing punk, rap, heavy metal or experimental music that are better known in Europe than they are at home. John Morand, co-owner of the Sound of Music recording, recalls living in the Oregon Hill neighborhood when he first came to town. The rent was only \$240 a month. "We were living in this neighborhood because it was so cheap," he says. "There were some 30 different bands in Oregon Hill -- that had record deals and were all out touring."

Morand is well positioned to track the indie music scene in Richmond -- many local musicians record their CDs at the Sound of Music. Recording equipment has gotten so inexpensive that bands can turn out decent CDs in their basement, but the more accomplished groups are willing to hire a producer like Morand or his partner David Lowery to critique and polish their performance. Of course, Morand and Lowery are accomplished musicians themselves. Morand and his wife play in *Slow News Day* in the *Vampire World*, an "electronica"

band which he describes as "an ambient form of electronic dance music" with a heavy European influence. Lowery plays in two bands, *Cracker* and *Camper van Beethoven*.

Musicians form a creative sub-culture that flies under the radar of the city's power brokers, who seem largely oblivious to its existence. Richmond, says Morand, has long been known as a punk rock town. Punk rock? Sure, "At any one time," he adds, "there are probably five or six Richmond punk bands on tour in Europe or Japan."

While most musicians dream of cutting their own CDs and playing the concert circuit, a number marry music with the advertising business. Richmond's "other" music recording studio, *In Your Ear*, specializes in cutting jingles and soundtracks for ads, adding yet another resource for the advertising sector. As a consequence, there is a fair amount of cross-over between the commercial and artistic sides of the business. Robin Thompson, one of the principals of *In Your Ear* and author of Virginia's unofficial state anthem, *Sweet Virginia Breeze*, has cut a number of CDs and periodically gives live performances.

There's so much happening in Richmond's music scene that, even with all his connections, Morand says he has trouble keeping up with it all. "There's a lot going on here," he says. "People who say there's nothing to do in Rich-

mond have way too much time on their hands.”

In a business like architecture, competitive advantage comes from the creativity of the architects. And Jay Hugo, principal of 3north, thinks that creativity comes from the interaction of different disciplines and perspectives. That’s why, when he opens the firm’s new office next year, he wants to share it with other tenants. Indeed, Hugo wants to literally tear down the walls between the tenants.

Though a small firm, 3north designs have made a powerful visual impact on the city through such structures as the Richmond Ballet and the new Dominion Power building on the James River. Now the firm hopes to make a statement through its own office building, a renovated industrial structure in Manchester. 3north will share the facility with Grace Street Residential Design, an affiliated architecture firm, as well as Circle S Studio, a graphic design firm, the studio of photographer Guy Crittendon, and a coffee shop. To round out the mix, Hugo would like to recruit a Web development boutique or a marketing firm.

Like the Superior Production Exchange, there will be common areas where people can interact. But there will be no hard walls between tenants. The walls won’t even reach to the ceiling. The goal is to open up communication. Says Hugo: “There’s so much

to learn from being around other people. We really thrive on that. We’re looking forward to being in a mix with all that energy and all that talent.”

The romantic notion of an inspired genius working in sublime isolation is dead. Creative people feed off of one another. There have always been places where working artists could plug into the community: the Richmond Ad Club the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, or the 40 or more independent art galleries in town. But market forces are working now to bring artists and other creative types together under one roof, typically in renovated warehouses or industrial buildings, where they can interact to do business.

Plant Zero in Manchester occupies 65,000 square feet of an 111,000-square foot warehouse that has been part of an old cigarette packaging plant. That space has been divided into 60 artist studios, ranging from 400 to 800 square feet and renting for \$200 to \$400 per month. The artist rents are subsidized, says Director Janet Kane, but they create a coolness factor that lets the developer charge higher rents to other clients. The facility also has an event space, a café, eight apartments and Artworks, a combination art gallery/artist studio.

The artists cover a wide spectrum, says Kane. There are painters, sculptors, photographers, a metal smith

and a woodworker. There are graphic designers, film and video makers and an indie magazine. “Our artists come in – they have no windows – they close the doors and they produce art without interruption. The goal is to give them space to create.” But there are ample opportunities for them to interact as well – in the hallway, in the café or at an event, like a film show, organized by the tenants themselves.

Brad Armstrong, president of the Virginia Foundation for the Performing Arts, entertains much of the same vision for the performing arts. He is trying to raise \$113 million to transform an entire block of downtown Richmond into a performing arts center that would support state-of-the-art theaters, practice halls, offices and a jazz club.

There are two economic drivers behind the project. One is to provide shared overhead – facilities the not-for-profit groups never could afford on their own -- for arts organizations like the Richmond Symphony, the Elegba Folklore Society, Theater IV and the Richmond Boys Choir. The other is to stimulate creativity by bringing these groups together under a single roof where they can collaborate and cross-pollinate one another.

Because of the huge price tag attached, there is no assurance that the Performing Arts Center will be built. Indeed, critics have argued that there are far more cost

effective ways to stimulate the arts in Richmond than by building a huge new facility. One group under the banner of SaveRichmond.com suggests that the city could accomplish far more through simple measures like easing its adversarial relationship with nightclubs, which act as incubators for local musicians, empowering independent radio, publishing an events guide and holding an annual music festival to promote Richmond musicians.

Taking the criticisms in stride, Armstrong espouses a big tent philosophy. It's not a matter of either/or, he says. Richmond needs to support the arts of all kinds: symphonies and opera for the tuxedo set; punk rock and poetry slams for the ear-ring crowd; film festivals and concerts for the Yuppies; graphic arts and illustration for the advertising industry. There's cross-over between all these sub-cultures, and the interaction between them spurs the artists to greater level of creativity and innovation. Says Armstrong: "We want creative people to stay here no matter what their discipline is."

As the advertising industry pulls out of its recessionary funk, Richmond's ad industry is getting more business, and work is filtering down to the artistic class. Simultaneously, as working artists learn to collaborate more effectively – whether by co-locating in old warehouses like the Superior Production Exchange or organizing professional organiza-

tions like the James River Writers Festival – they should become more competitive in the national marketplace for artistic talent. The 2000s could well be the breakthrough decade when Richmond gains recognition as one of America's centers of artistic creativity.

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