MARCHING to a different beat.

The Drummer, ISU’s alternative publication, is celebrating its 10th year on campus. With anyone paying attention?

If there were such a thing as poetic justice in the world, or at least symmetry, now would be the perfect time for The Drummer to flourish again. On this campus, which harbors a lot of future engineers and to-be-dotcom magnates, its voice is usually disregarded. Let’s face it, Iowa State University’s alternative newspaper—recently turned magazine—doesn’t appear to be read that much anymore, except by people who need something to paper—recently turned magazine doesn’t appear to be read anymore, except by people who need something to read. That wasn’t always the case.

The Drummer was born about a decade ago, when the first President George Bush was in office fighting the war with a Middle Eastern enemy that had a lot of power and support. Originally called the People for Peace newsletter, it was a forum for college activism. (Yes, there was a lot of it on campus at the time. Yes, this campus.) It was an outlet for people who didn’t support the war in the Middle East, who were against it, and as one of the first staff members told me for people who did not trust the mainstream media to tell them everything they wanted to know about the world. Whatever your opinion of its current incarnation, it began as a thing of beauty—college activism at its finest.

Today, The Drummer is struggling to redefine itself, in physical form if nothing else. Its format has changed; it’s now printed on glossy magazine paper. It has a new editor, although The Drummer is renowned for having former staff members still hanging around and contributing. The publication’s basic message is the same as two years ago, though—in a nutshell, peace, brother, and don’t believe everything you read or see in the mainstream media. The current Drummer staff has the good luck (if that’s what you want to call it) of publishing during an odd and interesting time in American history, one that nearly parallels the publication’s origins. Another war in the Middle East, another Bush presidency. But what’s a publication to do when some say it’s outdated its relevance, when others believe it’s not journalism but propaganda, and when conservatives on campus think the Iowa State Daily already got a hold in the liberal-rag market?

Story by Kate Kompas

The Evolution
Don’t ask Jonathan Goetz whether The Drummer’s a magazine or a newspaper. He’s the latest editor-in-chief, but he struggles over the question: Exactly what is The Drummer now that it’s published on glossy paper? “That’s a good question,” says the 21-year-old sophomore in journalism. “It’s to boost our readership. People are attracted to pretty color.” No matter. The content in the first issue, which came out in late October, is similar to Drummer issues in recent years. It will publish four times this year, twice a semester. Not surprisingly, in the first issue there’s commentary on the war in Afghanistan, and there’s also a piece about family farms, as well as book and music reviews. “I know there are some past Drummer editors who feel there should only be ‘hard’ news in it,” Goetz says. “I need a break from that now and then.” He points out that his music critic only writes about artists from the past or eclectic ones whom no one’s ever heard of. That keeps The Drummer outside the mainstream, he says.

Some of the featured cover stories in The Drummer’s history include the controversy over putting McDonald’s in the Memorial Union, former ISU President Martin Jischke’s somewhat questionable involvement on the corporate board that handles university money and a cover with a photo illustration of President George W. Bush with a raised, straight arm and a title that reads, “Heil to the Chief?” That cover, which Goetz says “was meant for a chuckle,” made some people really, really angry. Goetz says it was often tossed off its distribution racks and turned upside down. Tons of issues disappeared. “That’s discouraging, because that’s our product, it’s getting across a couple and hitting nerves.”

The Drummer’s entire history has centered around hitting nerves. The first issue, which premiered in October 1991, is so chock full of political news it takes some resolve to get through it all. City Council candidates, endorsements for local government, the war in Iraq. The later issues haven’t followed that format as closely; there are lot more reviews and lighter topics. It’s not always good writing;

photos by Cyan James
in fact sometimes it's downright awful. But it's a different voice for sure, with lots of coverage of outside-the-mainstream political issues that I'd bet most college students know nothing about. And, of course, there's plenty of Establishment bashing, which means everything from the ISU administration to the Iowa State Daily. Goetz says there won't be as much name-calling in future issues. "I don't have time to be picking fights with anybody," he says. "I'd like to kind of become comrades with the other student media." That doesn't mean The Drummer won't occasionally be critical of them, but Goetz says, "We don't have to be assholes about it."

Goetz can count all his staff members on two hands. The Drummer is produced in a tiny room in the East Student Office Space in the Memorial Union. He asks that the door be kept open during his interview because it gets very hot in there with two computers running. There's an American flag hanging on the wall.

I point out to Goetz that this surprises me, a very establishment image in a non-establishment publication's office. "Pre-9/11, it was upside down," he says. "I was scared someone would go apeshit and tear up the office. But it's not to say that America's great now, but we had to go through a period where we just had to figure everything out."

Goetz, who voted for Ralph Nader in the last election ("And that doesn't mean that I voted for George Bush"), readily admits that The Drummer is a leftist publication, but he says he wouldn't have a problem with publishing conservative articles, as long as the viewpoint was unique and something not often echoed in the mainstream. He said he was attracted to The Drummer about a year and a half ago, after picking up an issue about Jisches's corporate interests. "I thought, 'This is what I want to write.' So I e-mailed Jen Hirt or whoever the managing editor was at the time and said, 'Look, I have a lot to get off my chest. I'm an angry guy.' My first couple of articles were, with apologies to Dennis Miller, ranting."

He would have worked for the Daily if the The Drummer didn't exist, but Goetz says The Drummer is his dream publication. That's why he spends up to 25 hours a week working on it, worrying about everything from articles to designs to if the distribution racks are everything they could be. "I think it's a great thing to do," he says. "This is exactly what I want to do."

The Originals
The thing about The Drummer's founders is that they're stuck true to their ideals. Former employees now work for the American Civil Liberties Union or for humanitarian organizations. Some of them occasionally contribute to The Drummer. It's apparently a bonding-for-life experience. "It's like a brotherhood, a unisex brotherhood," Goetz explains.

Many people have come and gone through The Drummer's ranks over the years. Mark Ingles probably stayed the longest, from 1990 to 1998, as unofficial editor, designer and finally adviser. For Ingles, working on The Drummer wasn't just an act of youthful rebellion. "This was a life-changing experience for a lot of people," says Ingles, who now works for a human-rights organization in San Francisco. "Everyone who got involved in The Drummer grew as a person."

Jeffrey Weiss, 35, now works for the American Friends Service Commission, an international human-rights group that's won the Nobel Peace Prize. He says The Drummer was born out of a simple principle: "If you don't like the media, create your own." "I think The Drummer was pretty popular," Weiss says. "The Drummer was a product of serious activism. The Drummer was always sort of a medium where the next rally would be printed, what speakers Iowa State was bringing in; we were there the years before The September 29th Movement."

The Drummer was governed collectively; in the early issues it's hard to identify who was the editor in chief. Like many do-it-yourself publications, the staff sacrificed many sleepless nights to put The Drummer out. "It was very decentralized, but we had a lot of arguments in the beginning in terms of how to organize ourselves," Ingles says. "We were idealists and were looking at the mainstream news and how they weren't covering the things we were interested in, the Iowa State Daily, the Ames Tribune, The Des Moines Register. In general, that's what motivated us. We felt shut out of the media."

The staff members, Ingles says, had little to no journalism experience. "I'd equate this to the underground papers that were created in some of the little cafes in Paris," he says. "There were a handful of little restaurants where we would be hanging out, and we'd have a round of beers and approach people. We made $1,500 in those cafes alone."

Bamshad Mobasher was a doctorate student at ISU when he helped start The Drummer. "We printed about 5,000 copies of the first issue, and as far as we know, most of it got picked up," says Mobasher, now a professor at DePaul University in Chicago. The Drummer tackled local topics in its first few issues, including diversity at ISU. The Drummer published many articles dealing with the mandatory institution of diversity credits at ISU and a gay-rights ordinance in Ames, still one of the few laws of its kind in Iowa.

"We actually wanted to focus more on local issues; we did focus on national issues, but our main features were things of local relevance," Mobasher says. "We were one of the only papers that really investigated the measures on cutting the ISU budgets. Our article was used in the debates on the floor of the Iowa Legislature."

Ingles says he's still proud of the investigative work The Drummer has done, including pieces on university clothing made in sweatshops and McDonald's in the Memorial Union, which he says was emotionally wrenching for staff members because of their association with the Student Union Board.

When asked how The Drummer was able to cultivate a following on a mostly conservative campus, Mobasher says he disagrees with ISU's label as an outlet for young Republicans. "I think that conservative and liberal are to an extent relative terms," he says. "The work that we did, like tuition increases, those are pretty broad-based issues. ... There have always been a significant group of not only students or faculty but Ames residents that are not conservative. In fact, Story County might be one of the most progressive counties in Iowa."

Jeff Hall, an employee at Parks Library and
"It really serves an important function because it was a strong, outside, extremely liberal point of view, and it dug into some campus affairs," says Bill Kunerth, retired ISU journalism professor. "It was always kind of schizophrenic in that it never knew whether it wanted to deal with national affairs or whether they wanted to concentrate on the university. There was an audience for both."

Drummer of old to the current rendition. The aforementioned "Heil to the Chief" cover embarrassed him. "That's just sensationalism," he says. "I just thought it was poor judgment." He notes the ironic anniversary of The Drummer's 10th year, that it's taking place during a war in the Middle East. "I wonder if people are flocking to The Drummer. Back then, it served as a connection point for people who didn't have a community."

David Cmelik, now a law student at the University of Iowa, played an integral role at The Drummer from 1994-2000. Cmelik, who says he honed the critical writing skills necessary for law school at The Drummer, had an establishment background when he first started working for The Drummer — he was GSB vice president from '94-'95. He wrote his first article about, as he calls it, Jischke's "pro-business technology transfer agenda."

Cmelik says he still relishes the chance to read The Drummer. The definitive Drummer article, in his opinion, was former ISU student Ed Snook's piece on Jischke's affiliation with Banker's Trust. The story was followed up by the Daily, the Register, the Tribune and The Associated Press.

The article "was a significant factor leading to Martin Jischke's departure. Among those factors that included faculty dissent and the petition calling for an investigation into Jischke's methods and mission," Cmelik said in an e-mail interview. "Thus, that's my pick for best Drummer article ever."

Tori Rosin, a senior in journalism and mass communication, was The Drummer's managing editor last fall. She's the woman responsible for the George-Bush-is-a-Nazi cover, which she had a friend from Baltimore, Md., design. She doesn't regret it; it was her way of venting over an election she thought was stolen from Al Gore. ("If people were mad about it, they didn't come to me.") Rosin said she was drawn to The Drummer because she shares its liberal ideology, but she's also worked for the Daily as both a reporter and columnist.

"The running of the two is pretty similar," she says. Rosin admits that one's profile is considerably higher than the other's. "Iowa State is a conservative campus. That's just the way it is. Many students don't think outside the box. And with that conservatism comes apathy."

Cmelik says that The Drummer, by virtue of being a member of the alternative media, adds a perspective the Daily and other mainstream media cannot.

"The Drummer brought this premise to campus: No news is objective," he says. "It's all subjective observation. All journalists make judgment calls about what they will or will not say. The Drummer said things that the Daily is unwilling or unable to say, because of its preprofessional or advertising associations.

Whether its superior or not is a matter of opinion, but it's pretty clear that The Drummer today isn't as well known or read as The Drummer of yesterday. Editor Goetz knows that. "Its profile on campus needs to be better," he says, which is one of the reasons for the switch to glossy paper, which Ingles has long wanted to do. Goetz is also looking at better ways to promote it, which he says can be difficult when The Drummer doesn't necessarily have name-brand recognition anymore. He watched in one of his introductory journalism classes as the Daily, Ethics and ISUs got their allotted time for student recruiting. The Drummer was just mentioned until he raised his hand and asked for equal time at that point, it was a lost cause. He says, "I knew I wouldn't get through to anybody."

Rosin credits Goetz with doing a lot to improve The Drummer. And she believes it's on the upswing. "I think it can be improved, if we continue our good relationship with GSB, and attract interested students, and keep them."

Giles Fowler, associate professor of journalism, says he rarely thinks about The Drummer, and its staff has never asked ISUs journalism school for much, if any, help. He says staff members probably wouldn't like to hear what journalism professors had to say: That they need to do more reporting and less shouting. "I think and teach journalism, which to me requires thinking and at least the effort to be fair and have linear logic," he says.
Drummer doesn't do those things, "and it seems to glory in that fact." Fowler adds, though, if he were 20 again, he might be a staff member. It's a harmless outlet, and it's an opportunity to do some self-expression." When asked if he thinks of The Drummer as a member of ISU's student media, he says: "If you want to know the sad truth, I haven't thought of it at all."

The Establishment
As editor-in-chief of the Iowa State Daily, Andre Hauser has a lot more resources to put out her publication than Jonathan Goetz does to put out his. Her office alone, located in the corner of the Daily in Hamilton Hall, is almost bigger than the entire Drummer office. She estimates the Daily has about 40 student reporters, not counting the ones who freelance for the newspaper as part of their journalism classwork. That's a clear advantage over Goetz, who talks a lot about stories he was hoping would come through but the reporters bailed on him. For the record, the Daily received $89,000 from CSB last year (keep in mind ad revenue contributes quite a bit to the Daily's total revenue), The Drummer received $14,000, Ethos received $52,500 and ISU-1 received $10,336, according to Finance Director Steve Medanic's records.

Part of it is because the Daily comes out five days a week, every school day except during finals week and university holidays. The obvious advantage is in that the Daily publishes 14,000 issues every one of those days, and it's estimated that up to 75 percent of ISU students read it every day. "We are recognized as the dominant student media, which I take very seriously," says Hauser, senior in journalism and mass communication.

There are more similarities than meets the eye, however. Both struggle, although on a different level, to retain student employees when there is a lot of competition coming from classwork, other jobs, etc. Both have gone through dramatic redesigns within the past couple years. Both are always trying to find new ways to promote their product. For the Daily, since it is unquestionably the dominant student media, that means pissing off a much bigger portion of people. The Daily, in the past, has often been a target for both The Drummer, which is ultra-left, and the conservative College Republicans, who reportedly want to start a publication again, because the Daily is too unabashedly liberal.

Hauser is nonplussed by the attention. "Everyone takes potshots at the Daily," she says. "I think if we're getting attacked from both sides, we're doing a good job."

Hauser says she welcomes the criticism from The Drummer, and she actually praises the publication saying what the staff is writing is very brave. Her newspaper of course, has restrictions that The Drummer doesn't.

The Drummer would call that the Daily's corporate ties. The Daily editors would say it's because they're trying to teach their student journalists how to become reporters for the real world.

"That's the beauty of journalism, that people are learning about it as they're doing it," Hauser says.

Cmelik says he's confident The Drummer can find its voice again. After Jischke left for Purdue, the publication lost a favorite target. No matter, he says.

"Martin Jischke is gone, but there is a national tragedy and a new war in Afghanistan," Cmelik says.

"The issues change, but the passion is still there. The underlying values are there but the perspectives are fresh. This will be a challenge for The Drummer to find its new soul — and I think its student editors are up to the task. There is, unfortunately, plenty of injustice to go around for another decade at least."

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