



# They couldn't get past the 'mimbos'

*When 'Playgirl,' founded 35 years ago as a feminist response to 'Playboy' and 'Penthouse,' published its last issue this month, more was lost than just a platform for photos of naked men*

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Not long after Nicole Caldwell became editor in chief of *Playgirl* magazine, she realized that looking at photos of naked men all day was not everything she had imagined it would be. When she would meet them, there was often a curious rapidity to the men, who Caldwell took to describing as "mimbos."

Readers, Caldwell decided, deserved more. So she and her fellow editors, all women in their 20s and all relative neophytes to the world of magazines — and pornography — resolved to fill *Playgirl* with something different. They aspired to bring *Playgirl* back to its roots, back to a time when the magazine covered issues like abortion and equal rights, interspersing sexy shots of men with work from writers like Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates.

All the while, the editors juggled the demands of the publisher, Blue Horizon Media, which they said pushed to fill *Playgirl* with more nudes and fewer words.

"It always felt like this uphill battle," said Jessanne Collins, 29, who was *Playgirl*'s senior editor.

The women's dreams crashed when Blue Horizon Media, which also puts out hard-core magazines, announced it was shutting *Playgirl*. The last issue, dated January/February 2009, recently arrived on newsstands.

Although the *Playgirl* Web site is still running, the graphic content is geared more toward gay men. None of the magazine's editors are involved.

Caldwell said *Playgirl* suffered from the twin malaises of rising costs and declining sales; Blue Horizon Media did not return repeated calls for this article.

*Playgirl*'s passing certainly will not be lamented as would the death of a more respected magazine. Yet for its writers and fans, something tangible has been lost with its closure.

"It was almost a way to get back at *Playboy*," said Pamela des Barres, the famed former rock groupie, who wrote a music column for *Playgirl*. "It was a great idea, and it could have been done better. It did offer women a way to see

some gorgeous hot, young, sexy guys, and nothing's wrong with that."

*Playgirl* was started 35 years ago as a feminist response to *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. (*Playboy* sued *Playgirl* in 1973 for trademark infringement; the suit was settled amicably.) Over the years, the magazine changed ownership, began catering more to gay men, and whittled its operations down. Still, the magazine drew an avid readership, Caldwell said, selling 600,000 copies per issue in more than three-dozen countries.

In contrast to much of the slender offerings of pornography aimed at women, which tends to be softer and more story-driven than that marketed toward men, *Playgirl* was in-your-face.

Now the three editors' nudie magazine with feminist leanings is gone, and with it, strange and exciting career moments.

"I think a different kind of porn is very degrading to women, but the kind of stuff we were peddling was about what women wanted," said Caldwell, who is 26. "For better or worse, this was a real blow for feminism. We were the only magazine that offered naked men to women."

In the end, *Playgirl* was run by a skeleton crew of these three editors, along with what Caldwell described as "a whole horde of eager unpaid interns."

Caldwell was a New Jersey girl who had helped run a community newspaper and graduated from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism; Collins has a master's in creative writing from the New School; and Corinne Weiner, 26, the magazine's designer for its last two-and-a-half years, was a graduate of Pratt Institute.

Weiner and Caldwell got their jobs the old-fashioned way: by sending in a resume. Landing such a high-profile job just four months out of graduate school seemed "so over the top," Caldwell said. "In the end," she said, "that was far greater than the reservations I had."

Caldwell hired Collins after she wrote an essay for the

magazine about orgasm-related migraines. Weiner was the only one who said she was half aspired to a career in pornography publishing. "It definitely was a bit intense at first," she said. "But it really didn't bother me. I'm definitely all about looking at naked dudes."

*Playgirl* shared offices with Blue Horizon's other publications in a hive of gray cubicles in an old Art Deco building near Grand Central Terminal. Outwardly, it seemed the blandest of places, were it not for the lurid photos and videos that filled workers' computer screens.

After being hired at *Playgirl*, each woman followed a similar trajectory of experiences:

— **First week:** Shock at being inundated with photos of naked men; slight horror at catching sight of photos from Blue Horizon's triple-X magazines; terror at

having to put out a magazine with only two other people.

— **Second week:** Less shock, less terror, less horror. Amusement at all the full-frontal photos that regular Joes — plumbers among them — mailed in.

— **Third week:** The realization that one's eyes are glazing over at the sight of photos of naked men, who all begin to look the same. Bewilderment at the letters from female fans, who wanted specific fantasies to appear. (A common theme: a naked man doing chores for the fully dressed lady of the house. The editors complied with a photo spread.)

Caldwell was struck by how many people assumed she was a sex expert and then go on to disclose highly private details about their lives. Weiner said her parents found her job "hilarious." Collins' parents were congratulatory, at first. But just after being hired, she called their home in Connecticut and sensed some hesitation in her father's voice.

"I thought you were really into this," she said.

"Yeah," her father replied. "That's before Mom went out and bought a copy of the magazine."

The three editors strove to publish articles that were saucy but relevant. They printed articles about a campaign to take toxic chemicals out of cosmetics and about problems with Amsterdam's red-light district. To her delight, Caldwell landed interviews with Jack LaLanne and Dolly Parton.

A do-it-yourself ethic bloomed. The magazine had no marketing or public relations budget, so its editors sought to revive the *Playgirl* brand themselves, throwing parties at a Lower East Side bar. After Blue Horizon denied a request to finance a blog, Collins built one herself, starting it

on WordPress, a free platform.

Their efforts, the women said, got virtually no support; indeed, their higher-ups, all of them men, usually resisted their push to give the magazine editorial leeway.

Earlier this year, warning signs surfaced. While newsstands sales were up, Caldwell said, so were production costs. In the spring, subscription cards suddenly vanished; the staff members were told it was a cost-cutting measure. Then they were told that issues would come out bimonthly. In July, a subscriber wrote to complain about a letter from Blue Horizon saying that *Playgirl* was no longer in print.

Caldwell entered the office of an executive editor at Blue Horizon and asked: "Is there something you want to tell us?" After some blustering, she learned that the magazine's end was near.

And so began the death throes of *Playgirl*, which, for all its swinging history and sass, ended remarkably unremarkably.

There were no final cocktails, no last hurrah. Instead, there was a frigidness between the *Playgirl* staff members and the other Blue Horizon workers. "It was kind of like a long breakup, where you're both still living together and neither of you have left the apartment," Weiner said.

The magazine's editors said they were never told why the magazine was shut down. But, they said, they were always struck by the paucity of ads.

"I'm not a publishing expert, but it seems to me like it would be impossible to sustain a magazine on the quantity of ads *Playgirl* sold," Collins said.

On the Monday of her last week, Caldwell was called into a morning meeting, where she received an awkward round of applause from Blue Horizon staff members. Two days later, the executive editor took Caldwell and Collins out for sushi. (Weiner had already left.)

Caldwell's last day was Oct. 3. Weiner and Collins were not around; they had already found new jobs — Weiner as an officer manager in Brooklyn, Collins as a copy editor at a male lifestyle magazine. (Caldwell now edits at *Diamond District News*.)



Left: From left, Corinne Weiner, Jessanne Collins and Nicole Caldwell in Brooklyn, New York. The three editors sought to include more articles (along with the nudity) in *Playgirl* magazine. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE