

## LISTENING IN/George Vukelich

## Sketches

**J**ay Rath was born in Lake Geneva in 1962, and lived in Gays Mills and Boscobel before being brought to Madison when he was 10. He grew up here and graduated from Edgewood High School. Rath then earned a degree in journalism from UW-Madison in 1985, served an internship at the *Capital Times* and was an editorial assistant with the *CUNA Union Management* magazine. In August 1986 he founded the now-legendary free weekly *West Side Stories*—"the little paper"—in cooperation with the Regent Food Market—"the little store." The circulation of *West Side Stories* has been as high as 3,600; it now averages around 1,800.

"I do everything at *West Side Stories*. I sell the ads. I edit. I write. I do the billing. I do the typesetting. I do the deliveries. It's like doing a small-town newspaper, except that I don't do the printing.

"It's funny. In my senior year at Edgewood, for the yearbook, they asked what everybody's ambition was, and I said I wanted to become America's greatest humorist. What's funny is that many readers of *West Side Stories* think America's greatest humorist is Joe the Grocer.

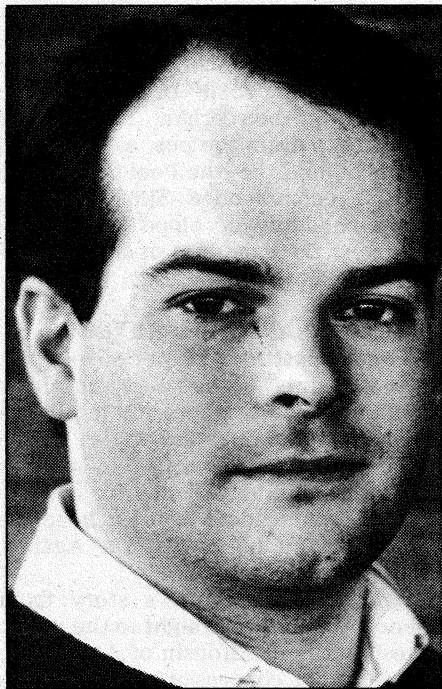
"Joe has the most popular piece in the paper—it's an advertisement for the Regent Food Market. Joe actually writes it all by himself. I fix up some of the grammar and that's about it.

"The piece I really enjoy reading is the column by Jessica Heiden-Spear, a grade-schooler. Jessica is just outrageously funny.

"Do you know the book *How to Eat Like a Child?* I forgot who wrote it. Was it Nora Ephron? Anyway, this is that kind of stuff except this is written by a real child. Jessica is offering advice not only to kids, but also to adults on how to raise their kids.

"I don't edit her stuff as much as I edit Joe's except when she gets into a run-on sentence. But I leave everything else in—her punctuation, her usage, everything. That's what makes Jessica so funny. We don't pay her and I don't know why she does it. She probably doesn't realize all the humor that's in it.

"As far as my own career goes, if I had one wish that could be granted tomorrow, I'd want to be a syndicated cartoonist—a comic strip cartoonist. But it's very difficult. I've been trying since I was 18, and I think I've done more than a dozen different strips—everything from outer space to pigs to cows to everything else. I draw the



BRENT NICASTRO

Jay Rath.

'Regent Market Funnies' ad that appears in *Isthmus*.

"As a cartoonist, I'm mostly self-taught, although I did take a course on

the history of comics art from Mike Baron. If I have an idol, I would say it was George Herriman, who drew *Krazy Kat*. It's not that my style is so much like his; it's more that he knew the conventions of the medium and he figured out how to go around them. He really saw the freedom you could have in a comic strip.

"As far as my writing goes, I think my influence there is James Thurber. When I was in high school, everything I wrote was in his style. I try not to write in his style now, but in high school I just loved him. Then I read a biography about him which just devastated me. All of a sudden he was a real person with real problems. He had a serious drinking problem and was committed to an asylum several times, a private recuperation place, a 'spa.' Real emotional difficulties.

"When I was in college and life was a little unpleasant for me, I rediscovered Thurber and really appreciated him all the more for the difficulties he had.

"I don't know how long I'll be doing *West Side Stories*. I don't know how long I'll be in Madison. I do know that I've been spoiled by the freedom of free-lancing. I could never sit in an office or newsroom all day now. I have to get out. I like people too much." ■