"We're always in character."

ADVENTURES IN JOURNALISM

Going After the Gonzo

When the author was sent to visit Hunter S. Thompson—five months before Thompson shot himself—he found a writer trapped inside a legend

BY RICH COHEN

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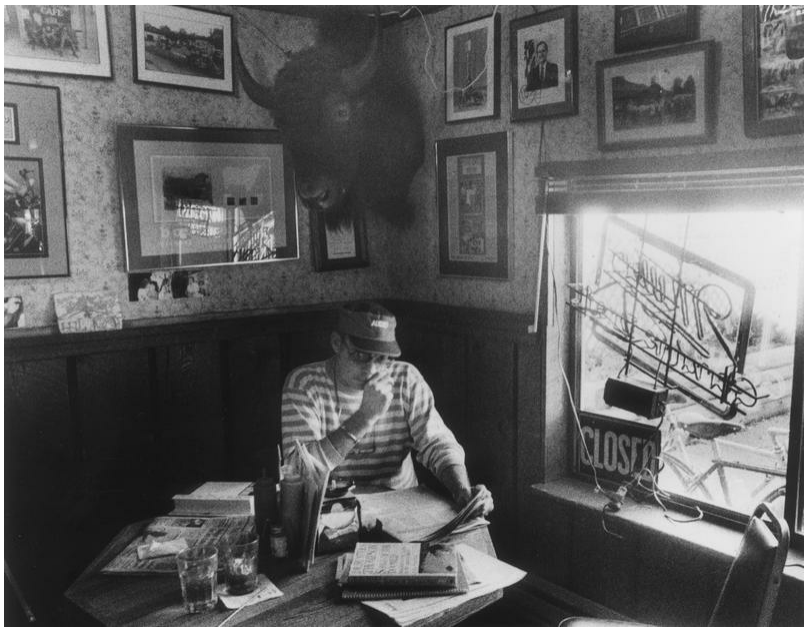
In the fall of 2004, Jann Wenner, the co-founder and editor of *Rolling Stone,* told me to go to Aspen, Colorado, the home of the most famous dateline in gonzo journalism—Woody Creek—to hang out with Hunter S. Thompson and write about him, but I knew the boss had something more in mind. Jann and Hunter, who'd been confidants since first meeting in 1970, had fallen out, as they had before, possibly over temperament, possibly over money, but this time it seemed like the break would hold.

It was painful for Hunter and more painful for Jann. Hunter had been the brand for *Rolling Stone,* the voice of the magazine for millions of readers. Without Hunter, there would be no *Rolling Stone*. The magazine was different—wild and weird—because Hunter, with his chrome dome, cigarette holder, and maniacal grin, had turned the craziness and paranoia of his times into prose. Jann had given me an assignment akin to that of Captain Willard in *Apocalypse Now:* I was to go upriver and bring Kurtz back home. I was a delivery boy sent by a grocery clerk.

As with Willard, I would fail in my mission.

A Man Trapped Inside Gonzo-Land

I stayed at the Hotel Jerome on Main Street, a relic and memory of Aspen's silver-rush glory. The Jerome is famous for its bar. Just off the lobby, and looking like a saloon in a John Ford Western, the bar has been a hangout for many generations of celebrities. Gary Cooper, Jimmy Buffett, Bill Murray—they've all stumbled drunk from the Jerome into the thin mountain air, the sky speckled with stars.



Hunter S. Thompson poring over newspapers at the Woody Creek Tavern, in Aspen.

Most of us who grew up reading *Rolling Stone* know the Jerome Bar as the nighttime haunt of Hunter S. Thompson, who, muttering through clenched teeth—that plastic cigarette holder has to be kept in—would order drinks for the house, then bail before the bill. In his later days, Hunter was known less for his writing than for his strange vocal style, a gnarled mumble, drunk even when sober, cynical even when elated, booming over the inebriated buzz of the crowd.

Bill Murray, who hung out at the Jerome while researching his performance as Hunter in the 1980 movie *Where the Buffalo Roam,* warned Johnny Depp, before his own turn as Hunter in Terry Gilliam's 1998 film of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* not to imitate Hunter's way of speech. "Because," Murray told me, "once you start imitating Hunter, you can't stop. It took me years to kick it."

Depp did not follow this advice, and, in fact, if you study his oeuvre, you'll notice that his performances changed after 1998, becoming cartoonish in a way that suggests a man trapped inside gonzo-land. ("Gonzo" is the term Hunter used to characterize his journalistic style, which he described to me as "learning to fly by falling out of a plane.") Depp became Hunter and remained Hunter—that was the danger of entering his orbit. Hanging out with or merely reading him has bollixed generations of young American men.

I experienced the best kind of omen at the Hotel Jerome. My room had a view of the mountains beyond and the pool deck below. Early one morning, I spotted a small bear at the edge of the pool deck, looking up at an apple tree, which waved like a flag. A big bear was working atop the tree, picking and tossing apples down to the small bear. I'm an obsessive reader. I have gotten so lost in books that the world itself has come to seem to me like a text that can be read in the way a critic reads a novel—for signs, symbols. Nothing is included by accident. The messages are there if you learn to look. In this case, the message seemed clear: Hunter was the big bear in the tree. I was the small bear on the deck. Hunter, being the big bear, would pluck apples of wisdom and drop them down to me, the small bear.

Johnny Depp in the Basement

Hunter lived at Woody Creek ranch, which, for most of us, existed as both a *Rolling Stone* dateline and an imaginary space. It was a frontier shack in our imagination, a cabin in a geologic sink high up in the Rockies. There was nothing in the imagined house but a manual typewriter, some dope, some booze, and a few shelves of books, most prominent among them being *The Great Gatsby,* which Hunter regarded as scripture.

"He turned the craziness and paranoia of his times into prose." Thompson in 1990.

At the outset of his writing career, Hunter copied the entire Fitzgerald text out on his typewriter just because he wanted to feel the sentences, the flow and silk of them, pass through his fingers. Anyone who knows Hunter's work will recognize Fitzgerald's influence, which can be heard in his melancholy dips, the sad, lyrical passages where you catch the echo of the last pages of *Gatsby*—"Most of the big shore places were closed now …"

Woody Creek was in fact a midcentury suburban house in the hill outside Aspen. Hunter, who made the purchase in the early 1960s, before the boom—it was a bargain—was surrounded by famous neighbors on Woody Creek Road, many of whom complained—Don Henley, who lived up the street, was vociferous in his annoyance—when Hunter stumbled drunkenly outside at four or five in the morning to shoot guns.

Depp became Hunter and remained Hunter—that was the danger of entering his orbit.

He was still in bed when I arrived at five P.M. His place was a bit of a wreck by 2004. It was like a house haunted by a person who is still alive. Or like the ruins of the temple of an obscure sect. Worshippers turned up on Sundays, but few could remember why. There was a kitchen with a long counter from which, sitting on a stool, you could watch the big living-room TV. There were empty bottles scattered here and there, dog-eared books, magazines. There were many drawers. When you opened one, you might find forks, a blender, or pills. When you opened another, you might find cash and bullets. Or a manuscript covered in scrawl. The house resembled a house that had been the scene of a big party the night before, only this party lasted 30 years. And now the hangover has come.

It was Monday. I know that because it was only the prospect of watching *Monday Night Football* that got Hunter out of bed. He'd been sleeping since 10 A.M. He introduced himself from the kitchen door. He was in what looked like pajamas. No button, nor snap, nor zipper, nor hard band anywhere. He was tall, stooped, wild-eyed and bleary.

When you are young, you wake in a moment. Click. Like that. Your eyes open, the world is there, and you meet it. When you get older, you wake in stages. Consciousness returns, but your eyes stay closed. The world still calls, only now, being wise and jaded, you meet it slowly, and on your own terms. When you get to be the age Hunter reached in October 2004, less than five months before he killed himself—not a number but a condition few of us will ever reach—you turn away from the world, go back to sleep, and stay asleep until summoned by the *Monday Night Football* theme. Even when he was up and moving, he seemed like he was asleep. For Hunter, waking was a process. He took a stool at the kitchen counter, watched the opening kickoff, then began rummaging in drawers for elixirs.

A glass of vodka was placed at his elbow.

In his kitchen, which doubled as an office.

Hunter's mind had become an overgrown forest by the early aughts. By means of various intoxicants, he opened a clearing in that forest. It took about two hours to achieve the right mix. Then his mind emerged, sharp and honest, wise as it had ever been, but he knew this clarity would not last, and so he had to carefully decide what to do with this precious time. He could write—he was on deadline for a magazine—hang out, or sit for an interview, playing the role of Hunter S. Thompson yet again. Or watch football. But he could not do everything, not like he used to. It frustrated him. That night at around three A.M., he asked me to write the piece he owed an editor in New York. He'd given me his clarity and believed I owed him something in return.

I spent several days with Hunter in Woody Creek. He drank and drugged and talked and laughed but never seemed happy. He asked me to stay at his house, in the basement. When I told him I did not want to sleep in his basement, especially when I had a room at the Jerome, he said, "Johnny Depp stayed in that basement. It was good enough for Johnny Depp."

I said, "Yeah, well, Johnny Depp is a Method actor."

He said, "So what?"

I said, "I'm not researching a role, I'm not in character."

He laughed and said, "We're always in character."

There was a cult of Hunter S. Thompson in my high school, but I never joined it. I did not carry his books in my backpack, nor use the term gonzo in conversation. I was born in 1968, meaning I did not care about McGovern or Nixon—Hunter's polestars. I did not like him for the same reason I did not like the Grateful Dead. I could not stand the scene, the acolytes, the dancing in the parking lot. I could not even bring myself to walk through the crowd to get to the stage.

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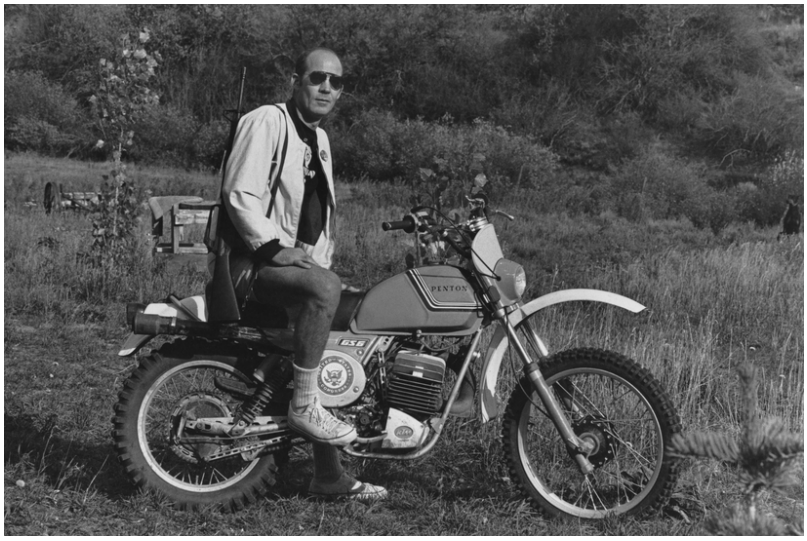
The cult around *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas,* with its oft-quoted first line—"We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold"—seemed worst of all to me. If I saw a kid reading it, I steered clear. Because such a kid was, in my eyes, a wannabe, so desperate to be cool he was uncool. Yes, I read the book, but I had not liked it. I never could stand people who bragged about their drug use, or all the crazy shit they did.

As with the Grateful Dead, I was wrong. I had confused the rabbi with his congregants, the story with the listeners. I had missed the message of *Fear and Loathing* because I

had accepted the misreading of the acolytes. To them, the book was about partying to excess, about how much a person could imbibe and still not die. To them, it was a paean to the joy found on the other side of that excess. But this reading misses the context entirely. It's the past seen from the present, a viewpoint that will always mislead.



"Hanging out with or merely reading him has bollixed generations of young American men."

I only realized this years later, when I re-read Hunter's first and best book, *Hell's Angels,* his deeply reported examination of the motorcycle gang and their supreme leader, the nihilist biker chieftain Sonny Barger. In fact, if you read *Hell's Angels* before *Fear and Loathing,* you'll recognize *Fear and Loathing* for what it is: a postscript; an afterword tacked on to the end of *Hell's Angels.* It's about what happens when the party turns ugly and the crowd of once happy revelers becomes a self-devouring mob. That's when the nasty visions appear. ("And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats … ") In this case, drugs are taken not for recreational purposes but to ease the pain of hangovers that followed the highfalutin dreams of the 1960s. *Fear and Loathing* is the boomers' hangover committed to print.

The book is subtitled *A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* because that dream had led to this spiritual Las Vegas, the most cynical money-grubbing place in the world, the antipode of Haight-Ashbury in 1967. The book is really an elegy—that's the Fitzgeraldian tone. It's a preacher reading over the grave of an era. If we recognize that now more than people did in the 1980s—when I first noticed the cult—it's because the last few decades, with their promise of internet connectivity and cyberspace

Shangri-La, have led us right back to Vegas. It's the 1970s all over again. Only worse. This time we have the hangover but never got the party. *Fear and Loathing* should in fact be required reading for 2023, because it's a survival guide. It tells you how to live amid the ruins of a collapsing dream.

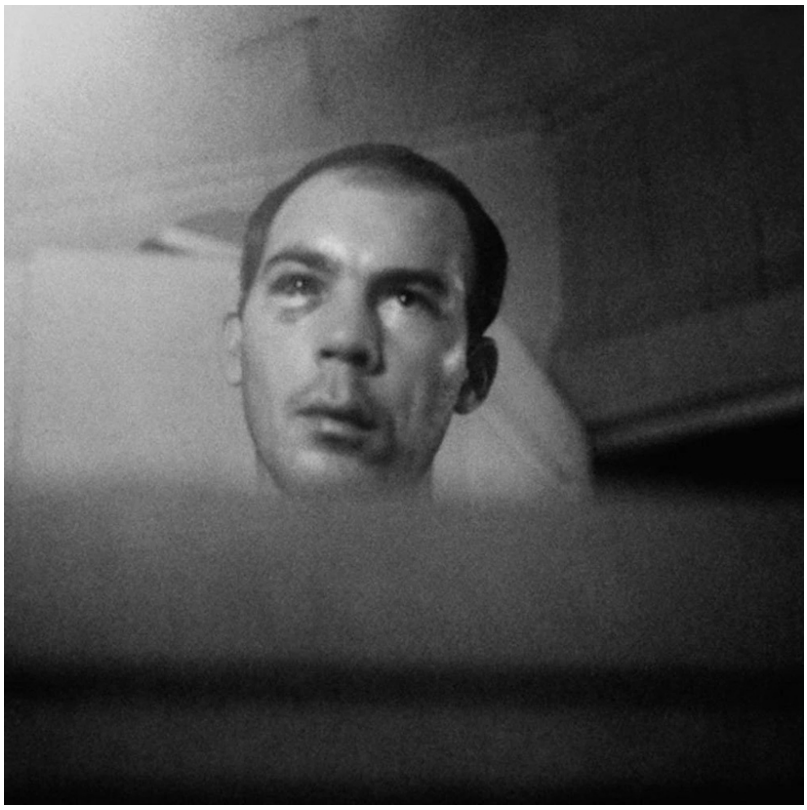
Was that dream real? Or had it always been a mirage?

Hunter's concluding message seems to be this: his generation, the boomers, had the dream in their hands for one perfect moment, then dropped it. And it broke. Or, to quote that other ur-text of the bad-trip dream, *Easy Rider,* "We blew it, man."

Fear and Loathing is the boomers' hangover committed to print.

For Hunter, the realization came at the end of reporting his first book, when he was beaten by his supposed friends in the Angels, the gang members the San Francisco intellectuals had come to regard as the shock troops of their movement. (Think of Allen Ginsberg talking about love with Sonny Barger.) The split that inevitably came was personified by Hunter's beatdown. Because Hunter never explained why he was "stomped"—a method of attack that set all against one—you were left to assume he'd transgressed in some unforgivable way.

"There was no vocal aftermath, then or later," Hunter writes at the end of *Hell's Angels*. "I didn't expect one—no more than I'd expect a pack of sharks to explain their feeding frenzy. I got in my car and sped off, spitting blood on the dashboard and weaving erratically across both lanes of the midnight highway until my one good eye finally came into focus."



Thompson after he was beaten up by Hells Angels.

The truth came out later, when an Angel confronted Hunter on TV. According to the biker, the stomping came after Hunter called out a violent, spouse- and animal-abusing Angel called Junky George, saying, "Only a punk beats his wife and his dog." Then they were on him. That is, Hunter was beaten for his chivalry. He'd been raised in Kentucky and was truly gallant. More than just one of the New Journalists, he was one of the last gentlemen, a chivalrous man who lived in a brutish time. The stomping broke Hunter's 1960s fever dream. It was only when he woke that he realized where he was and had possibly always been: Vegas in the 1970s, a Mafia town where the card counters are dumped in holes in the desert.

Fear and Loathing is the book the knight-errant writes after he's been stomped.

To Absent Friends

I decided to match Hunter drink for drink on my last night in Woody Creek. We drank whisky, vodka, beer. Hunter's friends arrived, including Ralph Steadman, the British artist who inked the Boschian images that accompanied the gonzo prose. The

local sheriff, another pal, reassured us when Hunter danced around with a rifle, saying, "Don't worry. I'm a safety officer."

Holding up a bottle of electric-green alcohol that had been dropped off by a friend, Hunter said, "There is no drunk like a Chartreuse drunk."

He told me the history of Chartreuse as we drained the bottle. He said it had been made by monks in the French Alps for hundreds of years, holy men who guarded the secret formula with their lives. "Any kind of art is a heritage," Hunter told me. "It has to be passed down carefully. It might last a thousand years, but if you miss a single generation—if a single generation fails—it will be lost forever."

The Chartreuse turned my stomach, but Hunter loved it. It made him glow**.** It made him want to talk literature, which he pronounced in two syllables, *lit*-sure. He talked about Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He dug through a drawer, then handed me a beat-up copy of *Fear and Loathing*. He opened it to the middle, pointed to a passage, shoved the book in my hand, and said, "Read."

"Fear and Loathing ... is a survival guide. It tells you how to live amid the ruins of a collapsing dream."

The football game had ended hours before. A preacher was on TV. I started to read, but the situation—reading Hunter to Hunter—made me nervous. He'd picked out the best passage of the book, maybe of his career. It recalled San Francisco, the Angels, Ken Kesey, the 60s golden days before Altamont, before the stomping, which was Hunter's own personal Altamont. It was elegiac in just the same way as the melancholy last pages of *Gatsby*.

But Hunter did not like the way I read. Pulling the book away, he shouted, "It's not journalism! It's poetry." Then he read it himself. He became sad as he did, as if the words were hands on a clock and he did not want them to turn, but could not stop the

flow. His voice was nasal, and, for a moment, he sounded like the oldest person who had ever lived:

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era—the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run … but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant....

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of "history" it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time—and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.

There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda.... You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning....

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave....

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.

He returned the book with a laugh—the sun had risen, the birds were making a racket outside—then said, "You know, a lot of this is bullshit, too. There are no hills in Las Vegas."

Rich Cohen is an Editor at Large at AIR MAIL *and the author of* The Adventures of Herbie Cohen: World's Greatest Negotiator

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