

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas Forty Years Later: A Special Issue

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The Two Sides of Hunter S. Thompson

by William McKeen

There were at least two Hunter S. Thompsons. One of them was the cartoon character, the “Uncle Duke” wild man of the comic pages, the one college sophomores impersonate every Halloween. (And can we blame them? It’s an easy costume: a slouch hat, a cigarette holder and a flowered shirt. Suddenly, you’re as recognizable as Spider-Man, a fairy princess, or the generic ghost in a sheet. Everyone knows who it is when the figure appears at the door, demanding, “Give me some candy, you swine.”)

The other Hunter S. Thompson was the writer. He was a serious man who would sometimes labor for hours—in the company of friends and bourbon, of course—over word choice. He subscribed to that axiom of Mark Twain: “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter; it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.” He approached his writing as a composer of music, with his ear attuned for hearing the occasional bad note, always ready with the perfect fix.

Everybody seems to know that first Thompson. People who don’t read might identify *that guy* as their “favorite writer.”

The second one is known mostly to those who see beyond the caricature and admire the writer, political philosopher, and serious artist trapped in the clownish exterior.

Thompson’s greatest literary creation was probably that exaggerated version of himself. The executor of his literary estate, historian Douglas Brinkley, calls it “the Hunter Figure.” For shorthand, we can call that alter ego Duke. As a young journalist, Thompson would sometimes conjure a name to go with a quote, and the name pulled from the ether was often “Raoul Duke.” Duke also appeared as the name of the protagonist in Thompson’s masterpiece, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

The Duke persona was a brilliant invention. It was also—to borrow an image from one of his favorite writers—his albatross.

We’re closing in on the first decade of Life After Hunter Thompson. The real man recedes into collective memory. He was the one who watered and manured that cartoon version of himself during television appearances and in his articles, which had often descended into self-parody.

What’s left is his work.

The time has come to take Hunter S. Thompson seriously as a literary artist, and without the distraction of the overshadowing persona. There is no better time, since we mark with this issue the fortieth anniversary of the appearance of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in book form. The book was his undeniable masterpiece, perfect in a way that few books are. (He was so fond of Scott Fitzgerald, so let's call *Fear and Loathing* his *Great Gatsby*.)

So we have assembled several scholars here to discuss Thompson's work and we present what Thompson might have called a "king-hell bastard" of a special issue to mark the anniversary of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Two pieces are explicitly devoted to the book: "The Right Kind of Eyes" by Robert Alexander offers an excellent overview and analysis of the book. And Jennifer M. Russell's "A Savage Place" shows how Thompson's literary obsessions shaped the narrative.

But where did this masterwork come from? In "On the Road to Gonzo," Bill Reynolds finds the DNA of Thompson's distinctive style in his journalism published in the decade before *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* appeared. And speaking of that distinctive style, Jason Mosser in "Parsing Gonzo" breaks down the derivation of the word that made it into the Oxford English Dictionary with Thompson's help.

One thing we can't dispute is Thompson's influence. An example here is Brian J. Bowe's "A Brain Full of Contraband: The Islamic Gonzo Writing of Michael Muhammad Knight."

Finally, we have "Apocalypse and Hell" by Nick Nuttall. The great unfinished work of Thompson's writing career carried the ponderous title *The Death of the American Dream*. He slaved on the book and struggled to articulate all of his jangled feelings about his country onto paper. Eventually he did, but rather than resorting to some blistering screed, he laid those sentiments subtly between the lines of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.



Photo by Lewis Gardner

Thompson signing a copy of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* at Western Kentucky University in 1978 where he was the subject of a question and answer session with William McKeen.

Thompson has legions of young admirers today. Like Bob Dylan, Thompson speaks to a time of life, and once both of those writers take residence in your soul, it's tough to move them out. Who would want to, anyway?

I was a seventeen-year-old fledgling newspaper reporter when I read "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," serialized at the time in *Rolling Stone*. Within a year, as Thompson began his revolutionary political coverage for that magazine, I was also on the campaign trail for my little newspaper, following around candidates.

Every reporter in my newsroom read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and the book was passed around, ending up in my custody, scarred with underlining, dog-eared pages, and human bite marks. It spoke to the role Hunter S. Thompson played in our lives and in our feelings about what we did. To me, that might've been the high water mark, the place where that wave finally broke and rolled back.

THE GENESIS OF *FEAR AND LOATHING*

When I wrote the two biographies on Hunter S. Thompson, one for the more scholarly crowd, the other for the popular, I learned intimately about how *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was written. Here's the story, adapted from *Outlaw Journalist*:

The genesis of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* came that spring afternoon at the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel, when a dwarf waiter walked up to Thompson with a portable phone and said, "This must be the call you have been waiting for all this time, sir."

Or so goes the story.

The lingering question, the one that Thompson was always asked, the one that frustrated, amused and sometimes angered him: *Is it true?* In a reflective moment he said, "*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a masterwork. I would classify it, in Truman Capote's words, as a non-fiction novel in that almost all of it was true or did happen. I warped a few things, but it was a pretty accurate picture. It was an incredible feat of balance more than literature. That's why I called it *Fear and Loathing*. It was a pretty pure experience that turned into a very pure piece of writing. It's as good as *The Great Gatsby* and better than *The Sun Also Rises*."

He might have wondered: *I bet they didn't ask Hemingway these questions . . . or Fitzgerald . . . or even Kerouac*. The comparison is apt: Kerouac claimed an essential truth for *On the Road*, but changed the names and classified it as fiction. Thompson wanted the same for his book, but for some reason it was held journalistically accountable, at least as some sort of distorted reality. In the years since *On the Road*, Thompson had realized what an influential voice

Kerouac had been to his generation. Thompson's story would be the twisted buddy saga for the next era.

Thompson and Acosta were in Vegas for the running of the Mint 400 motorcycle race on March 20. The race was lame and with motorcycles and dune buggies swarming through the desert, there was no way to witness any kind of race; everything was lost in the sand. Thompson and Acosta spent most of their time in bars and casinos and driving the Strip in their rented Great Red Shark. After the long weekend, Thompson had what he needed about Salazar and also banged out 25,000 words on the race for *Sports Illustrated*, which the magazine "aggressively rejected" (Thompson's term). There was no way to salvage a copy block or even a caption from the copy Thompson sent. So he kept going, writing his Vegas thing for pleasure, while finishing the Salazar article.

He hadn't planned to write about his Vegas adventures. In his dark moments, he remembered that he was three years overdue on some bogus bullshit called *The Death of the American Dream*. The project that would become his most celebrated book began with the simple desire to get Oscar Zeta Acosta away from his handlers so they could have some face time for an interview, hence the Beverly Hills Hotel. While having drinks with Acosta, Thompson recalled that his friend Tom Vanderschmidt had said something about a motorcycle race in Las Vegas, an opportunity for some quick-and-easy freelance money that should be a breeze for a professional writer and an opportunity for a nice expense-account weekend. He called Vanderschmidt, who was out. So Thompson hunkered down over Singapore slings with Acosta. Eventually, the dwarf came bearing the telephone and the deal was set.

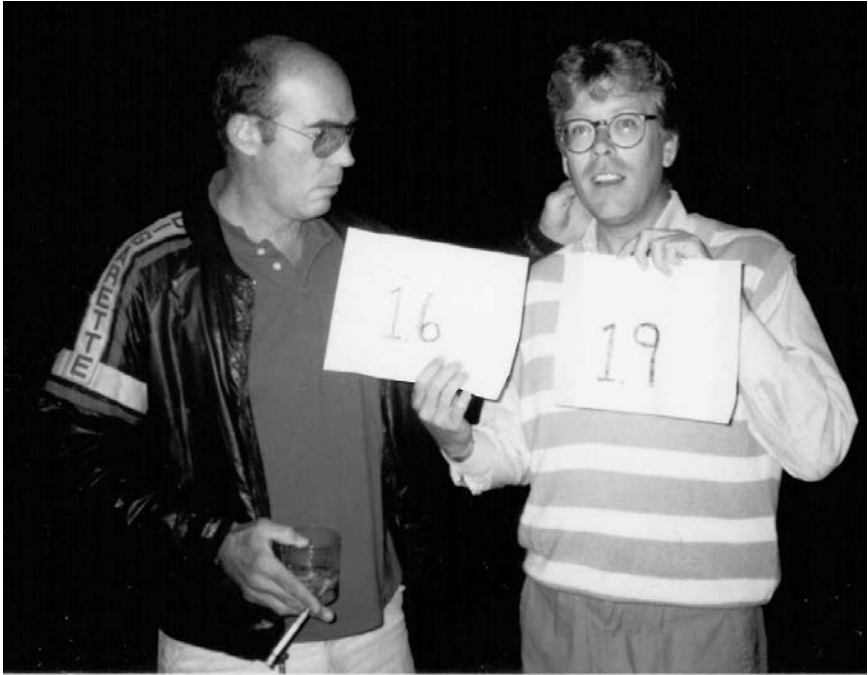
The account in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was a heightened version of reality. While in Las Vegas, he and Acosta talked about Salazar and the merits of Acosta's case against the city. They also took a lot of drugs and ran amuck. The talks informed Thompson's reporting for "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan." The recreational madness gave him the foundation for something he called the "Vegas thing," which he was writing for his own amusement, like a five-finger exercise for a pianist . . . just something to keep loose.

Back in his shabby hotel in L.A., Thompson blasted the Rolling Stones' *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out* while he pounded the keys. As the sun came up each morning, he set aside Salazar and began writing something fun. "I've always considered writing the most hateful kind of work," he said later. "Nothing is fun when you *have to do it* . . . so it's a rare goddam trip for a locked-in rent-paying writer to get into a gig that, even in retrospect, was a high-hell high-life fuckaround from start to finish."

During the early stages of the Salazar editing, Thompson showed up at Felton's home one morning, clutching twenty pages of the Vegas thing. "He had these *pages* in his hand," Felton said, "and he was *very excited*." Felton loved what Thompson was doing, and the first nineteen pages ended up in Jann Wenner's office almost immediately. Shaking with excitement, Wenner told Thompson, "Keep on going."

He had started out writing by hand on Mint Hotel stationery, nervously wondering how to sneak out of the hotel without paying. He retyped them later, but the words maintained their sweaty urgency. The pages were passed around the *Rolling Stone* office. Some whistled admiration, others broke out laughing, some were struck numb. "As soon as you finished it and went home," journalist and editor Charles Perry said, "life was incredibly dramatic. You expected disasters to come rolling out of the alleys, water to be boiling over."

By the time he wrapped up the Salazar article and got the *keep-on-going* message from Wenner on the Vegas thing, he knew he needed more to extend



Reprinted courtesy of Bill Dixon

Thompson and his friend, attorney, and political operative Bill Dixon hold up signs indicating their blood alcohol levels. Photo circa 1978.

the narrative of his adventure. He first wrote to Vanderschmidt at *Sports Illustrated* to thank him for the assignment and thank him for rejecting what he wrote. “Sooner or later you’ll see what your call (to me) set in motion,” he wrote. “The Lord works in wondrous ways. Your call was the key to a massive freak-out. The result is up in the air and still climbing. When you see the final fireball, remember that it was all your fault.”

Though the eventual work focused on two events that seem to come over the course of a long, nightmarish week, there was a month between the Mint 400 and the National District Attorneys’ Conference on Drug Abuse. Prosecutors and cops came for three days of fun in Sin City, hoping to learn something about the drug menace. But they didn’t recognize that the menace was right there, sitting next to them during the seminars: two experienced drug users, one disguised as a journalist, the other as an attorney.

After a nearly two-month exile from [his first wife] Sandy and [son] Juan, Thompson finally returned to Woody Creek. After the shitholes and Mc-Motels of L.A., he was ravenous to be back home, to make love to his wife, to shower ’til the hot water ran out, to fuck in the snow, to indulge himself with his strange appetites (peanut butter, mayonnaise, and garlic). He was happy. After leaving Vegas and the isolation of the California motel, it took him a while, back among the comforts of home, to get back into the crazed rhythm he’d found in exile. “This happens every time I leave the scene of a piece,” he lamented in a letter to Tom Wolfe, sending him the first part of the Vegas thing. “What I was trying to get at in this was [the] mind-warp/photo technique of instant journalism: One draft, written on the spot at top speed and basically un-revised, edited, chopped, larded, etc., for publication. Ideally, I’d like to walk away from a scene and mail my notebook to the editor, who will then carry it, untouched, to the printer.”

Once he got back on track, Thompson knew he was writing something manic and marvelous. He didn’t lose the thread or fail to find the jangle when he came back to it. *This* writing wasn’t painful. It was like being high. He bragged to Wolfe, king of the wild frontier pushers, that he—disguised as Raoul Duke—was now pushing the limits of whatever new journalism was. “I haven’t found a drug yet that can get you anywhere near as high as sitting at a desk writing,” he said.

Downstairs at his home, there was a large room with a stone fireplace, a thick rug and redwood paneling. Thompson set up an old door and two saw horses and planted his IBM Selectric II front and center. Armed with Dexedrine and bourbon, he worked through the summer of 1971. Thompson ate the tuna-and-bacon and grapefruit-and-eggs that Sandy made him, and they took acid and made love again on the carpet, in front of the fireplace. Sandy



Photo by Lewis Gardner

William McKeen adjusts Thompson's drink holder at the podium, during an interview he conducted with Thompson at Western Kentucky University, 1978. McKeen recalls: "He chugged a Lowenbrau before going onstage, but was not allowed a drink on stage. He had requested 30 pounds of ice. We chipped away at it. But as far as I could tell, he drank only water. He walked away from a few 'speaking' engagements at that time if alcohol was not allowed, but because he was back home in Kentucky, I think he gave them a pass."

was his protoplasm alarm clock. Whenever he finally crashed, it was her job to gently wake him with a whisper in his ear. When he finally woke, she helped him worship with newspapers at the altar of breakfast. Eventually, he headed off to the door desk in the writing room in the basement and worked eight to twelve hours at a stretch.

Thompson hid behind Raoul Duke. Acosta appeared as Dr. Gonzo and was changed to a Samoan, because Thompson liked Samoa and to protect Acosta's identity—not that any intelligent reader of "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan" couldn't put *dos* and *dos* together.

Midsummer and nearly done, Thompson called Ralph Steadman to ask him to illustrate the story. He gave him background on what brought him together with Acosta, and what he was like. "Oscar is a bit fucked up, by the way," Thompson said. "He suffers from ulcers and self doubt. . . . I asked him to accompany me on a journey to the Heart of the American Dream. I was going to ask you, but after that Rhode Island business, I reckoned you would have had enough. And I needed a lawyer—even a Samoan one."

“I thought you said he was Hispanic,” Steadman said.

“Well, he is, Ralph, but for the sake of the story I have written Samoan sounds better. Anyway, what I really called you about was whether you would be up for doing some vicious drawings for it if I send you the manuscript.”

When the manuscript arrived in England a week later, Steadman breathed a sigh of relief that he had not been along. What Thompson and Acosta did in Las Vegas (assuming the story was true) might have killed Steadman. Too much time with Thompson could be dangerous. “I often thought I would not come back from going places with him.”

Steadman read Thompson’s pages and realized it was a brilliant piece and he also felt that he had, in a way, been there. There was the “shock of recognition” as he called it. Looking from the outside in, Steadman projected himself into the car with Duke and Gonzo. “What I was doing was spewing out the fears and pent-up things that I’d had from the drug [experiences] onto paper. It just poured out.” The botched America’s Cup assignment had been “a dress rehearsal for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.”

Steadman set aside his current work on *Alice Through the Looking Glass* and gave frightening and memorable life to the images suggested in Thompson’s writing: two hollow-eyed madmen hurtling through the desert in a car; a horrifyingly naked Dr. Gonzo vomiting into a toilet while a maid screams in terror; Dr. Gonzo again, waving a knife in a bathtub while he awaits electrocution; Raoul Duke sneaking out of the hotel lobby, leaving behind the largest unpaid room-service bill in the history of Las Vegas.

Photo and caption by Tom Corcoran

Sugarloaf Key, Florida, 1981. The year before, while “researching” a possible novel about the Mariel Boatlift exodus of refugees from Cuba to the Florida Keys, Thompson stayed at the Sugarloaf Lodge north of Key West, toured nearby waters in his powerful motorboat, and spent many hours (as seen here) in the air-conditioned bar. [William McKeen added that Key West mystery novelist Corcoran and Thompson wrote two unproduced screenplays together.]



Whatever *Gonzo* is, when it's dissected Ralph Steadman's art is part of its core DNA.

"It's hooliganism," Steadman said of Thompson's story, "but it's the finest kind of hooliganism. It's not mindless idiocy; it's something special. It's got to upset people. It's no good otherwise."

Steadman sent the art to Wenner at the end of September 1971, never realizing that he would never see the originals again. It was copyrighted as part of the planned double *Rolling Stone* issues to feature Thompson and Steadman's work.

"They were fucking beautiful," Thompson said of the illustrations. "I told Wenner right off that nobody could possibly catch the madness of this story & that I refused to let anyone else illustrate it . . . but Jesus! I was overwhelmed when I saw the shit."

Wenner promoted the work, now titled "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas," with a full-page house ad in the October 28 issue, promising something new and different in the next issue. To draw reader interest, the first two paragraphs of Thompson's manuscript were printed:

We were somewhere near Barstow, on the edge of the desert, when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like, "I feel a bit light-headed; maybe you should drive . . ." And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: "Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?"

Then it was quiet again. My attorney had taken his shirt off and was pouring beer on his chest, to facilitate the tanning process. "What the hell are you yelling about?" he muttered, staring up at the sun with his eyes closed and covered with wraparound Spanish sunglasses. "Never mind," I said. "It's your turn to drive." I hit the brakes and aimed the Great Red Shark toward the shoulder of the highway. No point mentioning those bats, I thought. The poor bastard will see them soon enough.

Charles Perry recalled that "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" came in from Thompson as a complete manuscript. "In fact, I believe he hired a typist, so that the manuscript would be in near-perfect shape. It was very neat. We edited that in what we later realized was a more leisurely fashion that we would work with him in the future."

The article ran in two parts (November 11 and 23, 1971) and was credited to Raoul Duke, even though the manuscript made reference to an associate of Duke's named Hunter S. Thompson.

There was the usual haggling over expenses. The initial investment came from Time, Inc., but when *Sports Illustrated* kicked back Thompson's copy as unpublishable, the magazine refused to pay even the minimum expenses, necessitating a hasty retreat from Vegas. When Thompson returned for the drug convention, he was on the *Rolling Stone* dime. He also assumed that it would be OK to turn in expenses for drugs, alcohol, and weapons paraphernalia. He got an advance wired to him in Vegas from David Felton, but it turned out to be his retainer, not expense money. He ran up such a monumental credit-card bill that American Express banned him for life. Carte Blanche and the Diners Club put him on a hit list.

Wenner had started a book division called Straight Arrow and most of the early titles were from *Rolling Stone* projects. He assumed Straight Arrow would publish *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. But before Wenner could get the book contract signed, Thompson made a deal with Jim Silberman at Random House. It was the Random House money at the finish line, in fact, that had encouraged Thompson to complete the work in the first place.

On the verge of his great breakthrough, Hunter Thompson was once again staring down financial ruin.

Outlaw Journalist appeared after Thompson's death. But I was pleased to learn—and again *after* his death—how much he liked the first book I'd written about him. *Hunter S. Thompson* (Twayne, 1991) was part of a series of books about writers and their work. I am pretty sure it's been cribbed and plagiarized a lot over the years by high school and college students doing term papers on gonzo.

Thompson cooperated with me on the book and even gave me what turned out to be an extremely helpful interview.

His intern that year was one of my students from the University of Florida, and when we completed the interview, she said Thompson wanted my permission to use his answers in a book he was working on then.

Of course, I told her. *They're his words.*

He suffered writer's block during the writing of *Songs of the Doomed*, she said, and my questions helped undo his logjam. I couldn't have been happier. (He later used other parts of the interview in *Kingdom of Fear*.)

That intern was Catherine Sabonis-Bradley. When the galleys of the book were finished a couple of months later, I sent Thompson the copy he'd demanded.

Within a couple of days, my office fax machine began spewing pages—seventeen in all, most of which were about a bull-sperm auction in Colorado. But the first page contained his reaction to my book: "McKeen, you shit-eating freak. I warned you not to write that vicious trash about me—Now you better get fitted for a black eye patch in case one of yours gets gouged out

by a bushy-haired stranger in a dimly-lit parking lot. How fast can you learn Braille? You are scum. HST.”

Almost as soon as I collated the pages of the mammoth fax, the phone rang. “You got the fax, right?” Sabonis-Bradley said. “That means he liked the book. You *know* that, right?”

“I figured,” I said.

After his death, his longtime assistant and confidante, Deborah Fuller, told me that my first Thompson book was always within reach from his command post in the kitchen. He kept it on the shelf with the well-worn copies of his books he constantly referenced. Wayne Ewing, his cinematic Boswell (director of *Breakfast with Hunter* and other fine films), said Thompson would often ask houseguests to read aloud from it.

After his death, when I set out to write *Outlaw Journalist*, a book for the popular market (unlike the ‘semi-scholarly’ *Hunter S. Thompson*), I wanted to make sure the new book would have the same seriousness of purpose. Much of the literary analysis and guts of *Outlaw Journalist* is seen first in *Hunter S. Thompson*. What I wanted to do with *Outlaw Journalist*—that I had not been able to do with the earlier book—was to tell the story of his life and how he came to be the King of Gonzo.

Several of the books on him, published after *Hunter S. Thompson*, were often literary exercises that showed off the writer’s skill, but didn’t say all that much about Thompson. My job as biographer was to stand back and let the story tell itself. There was no need to try to write a gonzo biography. As I often tell students, “There’s only one guy who can write like that, and now he’s dead.”

After Thompson’s death, his former editor, Jann Wenner, compiled (with Corey Seymour) an oral history of Thompson’s life called *Gonzo*. I thought that was a difficult way to tell Thompson’s remarkable life story. Oral history is by its nature disjointed and somewhat incoherent. If ever a life needed coherence, it was this one.

When I set to work on *Outlaw Journalist*, I started out by assembling calendar pages for every month of Thompson’s life and then writing down what I could document happening on those days. I wanted, to the best of my ability, to see the arc of his life. I hung up three huge bulletin boards with index cards devoted to everyone I deemed to be a close friend or an important influence on Thompson. Just seeing those cards every day pushed me to try harder and dig deeper.

Through interviewing people who’d known him as far back as first grade, I felt I was watching his life unspool again. And it was great to meet his lifetime of friends, and get to know them. He amassed an impressive tribe and had an artist’s ability to match people and to plant and fertilize new friendships.

But I hope the fact that I took his writing seriously is what drew some of the attention *Outlaw Journalist* received. So many people who wrote about him wrote about a clownish caricature. I wanted to write about a great American writer who had so much talent that he got away with using only a fraction of it.

It was Amy Cherry, my editor at the publishing house, who suggested that we take the *shit-eating-freak* letter and publish it, in his original scrawl, at the end of *Outlaw Journalist*, where it appears as a seeming message from the Great Beyond.

When people see that letter, they're baffled by it. Visitors to my office wonder why I'd have such a rude thing hanging on my wall. They obviously don't know that in Hunter S. Thompson's vocabulary, "you are scum" was seen as praise. I happily embrace that benediction.

NOTES

Excerpt on page 9 adapted from *Outlaw Journalist* by William McKeen. (c) 2008 by William McKeen. With the permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

"This must be the call": Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 6.

"*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a masterwork": Hunter S. Thompson, interview with William McKeen (1990).

"I've always considered writing": Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt* (New York: Summit Books, 1979), p. 109.

"He had these pages": Robert Draper, *Rolling Stone: The Uncensored History* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), p. 176.

"As soon as you finished it": Charles Perry, interview with William McKeen, May 20, 2006.

"Sooner or later you'll see": Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), p. 376.

"This happens every time": *Fear and Loathing in America*, p. 375.

"I haven't found a drug yet": Thompson interview (1990).

"Oscar is a bit fucked up": Ralph Steadman, *The Joker's Over* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), p. 70.

"I often thought I would not come back": Ralph Steadman, interview with William McKeen, November 8, 2006.

"What I was doing": Sharon Martin, producer. *Biography: Hunter S. Thompson* (Biography Channel, 2004).

"dress rehearsal for *Fear and Loathing*": Steadman, p. 63.

"It's hooliganism": Martin, producer, *Biography*.

"They were fucking beautiful": *Fear and Loathing in America*, p. 457.

"We were somewhere near Barstow": *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, p. 3.

"In fact, I believe he hired": Perry interview.

"Hunt didn't need": Jann Wenner, interview with William McKeen, January 15, 2008.