

THE TIME OF HIS/OUR TIME:
CHANCE MEETINGS WITH
NORMAN MAILER

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I SIT DOWN TO WRITE THIS BRIEF FOOTNOTE to the time of his time just as the TV series *Mad Men* begins its run on BBC4 bracketed by a slew of documentaries recalling the rise of Madison Avenue in the early sixties. How remote it all seems and yet it was right then and there that the greed game was given a new set of rules and just about the time when I began fumbling around looking for a place to stand. All my Cambridge peers who had a yen to be “creative,” rather than to go into the Foreign Office (like they were s’posed to), were dashing off to learn how to follow in the footsteps of the king of Madison Avenue, a professional Englishman in New York by the name of David Ogilvy who was responsible for Shweppervescence, the Man in the Hathaway shirt, and other such towering contributions to western civilization.

It’s no accident that my discovery of Norman Mailer came with *Advertisements for Myself*—the title itself his own wry comment on the buttoned down hubris of those who were busy inventing “*the big idea*” on Madison Avenue. I dimly remember what a profound effect it had on me and since I started to reflect on my odd, brief relationship with Norman, I’ve been trying to figure out why.

I had read *The Naked and the Dead* and those other American war stories in thrall to Papa Hemingway and his notion of courage, but for a London kid whose father’s soul had been all but destroyed in not one, but two world wars, there was something sickening about the kind of heroism being sought. On the other hand, living in the shadow of the evil embedded in the

history of the European nation states, so well conjured up by Camus, Sartre, and Beckett, scared the shit out of me. The Beats' form of escape, although seductive, didn't fill the need—"the best minds ... ?" I doubted it. In any case, I could never forgive them for their love of Chet Baker and his bleached version of the music that seemed to me to contain the only truly authentic voices of defiance and freedom out there—Miles and Monk and Mingus, Sonny and John C.

There was something about *Advertisements* which *felt* like bebop. It was a brash, arrogant, and, in some ways, a naïve and stuttering language, "blue notes and endless quotes," but always, always intensely, sometimes embarrassingly, personal on an urgent search for a beat beyond 4/4. It seemed, what's more, to stand against any pretence at epic sweep, seemed, for example, to undermine the grandiosity and pretension of the quest for The Great American Novel. In truth, The Novelist was probably just taking a break, trying to figure out his next move in that direction but, whatever, I was hooked. And then, of course, it contained the essay "The White Negro." I have black friends who still remember their anger at being defined and colonized *yet again*, this time to be used as a poetic metaphor for something they had many reasons to be suspicious of. Yet despite its potential exposure to the sneering of hindsight, there was something heroic in the attempt to capture something alive in that moment. Many years later I made a film with James Baldwin who, one night while listening to a great jazz guitarist in his brother's bar, threw his hands in the air and exclaimed "if only I could write like that!" Baldwin was, of course, referring to the music and, it must be said, was no great fan of Norman's but, nevertheless, it was the bebop in Norman's writing that got to me.

In the meantime I got lucky. By being in the right place at the right time, I was able to document several of the seminal events in the emergence of what came to be known as Swinging London—Christine Keeler, The Beatles, etc., etc., gaining a certain amount of notoriety in my dealings with British television. A group of us, operating as independents, managed to extract enough money from networks in the US, Canada, Germany and the UK to make a series of portraits of artists. I chose to attempt to chase two: The Novelist and The Prince of Darkness, Miles Davis. It started badly. Miles demanded a fee equal to two thirds of my budget and when I said I couldn't make the film with what was left, his whispered response was unequivocal: "*Tough, motherfucker!*" (To deal with this tangent first, I then wrote a

letter to my second choice, the great saxophonist, Sonny Rollins, who had retreated from public view to deal with his demons, and, to my great surprise and joy, Sonny responded.)

Anyway, with the Novelist, I was luckier. I happened to be having an affair with someone who knew Norman: “an Englishwoman of whom I have a certain regard” as she is described, as I recall, in *The Armies of the Night*. When we arrived in New York we were invited to Brooklyn Heights mainly, I suspect, so he could see her again, but there I was, lurking in the background. Norman was in the middle of planning his improvisational film, *Beyond the Law*, and I was a friend of the filmmakers he was collaborating with. Somewhat reluctantly, he agreed that I could come along to the shoot. So it went from then on. Each event he allowed me to film happened in ad hoc fashion: a PBS television interview about his new book *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (which I absolutely adored), an aborted attempt by me to observe his domestic existence which ended with him turning to the camera and calling it off with: “*I can’t do this.*” Each encounter was marked on his side by considerable reluctance up to and including the main event: The March on Washington. As he explains in *The Armies of the Night*, the decision to make the trip was made late and not without great reservation. He felt the same way about my stringing along with my cameraman, Richard Leiterman. As it turned out, Rich was a Mailer hero *par excellence* and followed him through the line of infantry which faced us at the Pentagon, without a blink. I did blink, but followed in a flanking movement, providing some distraction as he marched on to get himself arrested. After his incarceration overnight and through the following day, we arrived at the prison with bail money and filmed Norman’s perfectly conceived short sermon, at which point our relationship went through a subtle change. We became what Mort Sahl once described as “men in war.”

After Washington: no sleep, lots of booze and the exhilaration of battle, we trudged back to New York where I accompanied Norman to the studio for his appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show*. I remember sitting with him alone in the “green room” watching one inane anecdote after another, asking myself with increasing alarm “how the hell is he going to get out of this?” He sensed my lack of faith and, as he walked out onto the stage, said something like “*don’t worry, kid, we’ll do ok.*” Did he ever! First of all he demanded equal time and then went on the attack: “*One minute in the life of General Westmoreland is more obscene than all the dirty words written by all the dirty*

writers in America etc., etc.” I later filmed the broadcast in a Brooklyn bar, which caused a reaction just as hostile as the boos and hisses which met Norman as he stomped away from the studio. It was that night in some anonymous bar when he made a gesture to me of quite extraordinary kindness and trust. We had talked about my admiration for *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and how I believed a great film could be made from it. He then proceeded to offer me the rights to it *for free* on one condition—that I was the director. Later, this became the basis for my first attempt at grappling with Hollywood, which fell apart when the man I had in mind to play the lead character DJ, Jim Morrison, died in a bath in Paris as I was on my way to clinch the deal with him.

Meanwhile, I had come back to London to spend three months in a cutting room constructing a film which became *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* using a radio DJ, Cousin Brucie, in an ironic reference to *Why Are We in Vietnam?* to separate the various roles Norman played during the adventures which led to *The Armies of the Night*. One aspect of that experience which still gives me chills: having spent endless hours with the filmed record of the events Norman describes in the book *before* it was written made the reading of it quite uncanny. It’s a long book, right? I was present at most of the events he describes so brilliantly but also reports verbatim in page after page of dialogue. I don’t remember one inaccurate line in the whole book! I know he didn’t take a note. How did he manage that? It’s miraculous. We are all aware that even short newspaper reports of events we have witnessed are almost always riddled with errors. Again: how did he do that?

Our next encounter came three years later when he decided to run in the Democratic primary for Mayor of New York, supported by Jimmy Breslin and Gloria Steinem. When I called to suggest that maybe this event should be documented, his reaction was to ask whether I could raise some money for the campaign. I thought that maybe I could. In exchange for occasional exclusive access, the BBC turned out to be one of the campaign’s biggest outside contributors, much to the fury of the British competition, who threatened to expose my treasonous behavior in providing funds from the British Govt. (via the BBC) to a candidate in a foreign election, presumably to start a new American Revolution. The spirit of Tom Paine hovered! The imaginative and radical ideas passionately expressed by Norman and his running mates collected enough votes to allow the ghastly Law and Order candidate,

Mario Proccachino, to win the primary over the lackluster liberal candidate. In the end, Mayor Lindsay won the overall election and adopted or, at least paid lip-service to, several of Mailer/Breslin's ideas—some small vindication for what, regrettably, was more Don Quixote than Mr. Smith.

I used some of the scenes and ideas from Norman's campaign as the opening to a semi-autobiographical film I made soon after. The Protagonist, played by me, is dragged away from cutting this political film that will change the course of human history by an Orson Welles-like producer who is demanding I place a naked model amongst pigs on a sausage-making production line to show what the world is really coming to. In response, I retreat into a self-destructive tour of my past—all very self-indulgent, you may say, and you'd be right. Anyway, this film, to my considerable embarrassment, was chosen alongside a rare British masterpiece, Ken Loach's *Kes*, to represent our sceptered isle at the New York Film Festival. I make the mistake of talking honestly to a reporter from *Variety*, who was looking for a story to undermine all this pretentious foreign rubbish being foisted on an unsuspecting American public. "*Filmmaker Trashes Own Film*" (or words to that effect) yells the headline. The phone rings in the hotel and the unmistakable voice, thicker than usual, rasping through the line; "*Dammit, you never say that. Understand? Never.*" Point taken.

A year or so later I was back in New York hanging out with an old friend who had just stormed through the American media wielding her feminist manifesto, *The Female Eunuch*. Germaine Greer was wowing them everywhere: on the cover of *Life*, as guest presenter of *The Dick Cavett Show*, making other feminist advocates seem hectoring and, certainly, humorless. The phone rings again: "*I want to meet that friend of yours.*" Germaine agrees and she, my partner Pat Hartley, and I arrive for dinner at the Park Avenue apartment of Marion Javits who was apparently good at such things. As I sat there between Germaine and Norman, eyeing each other up as fighters do at the weigh-in, I suddenly realized how paradoxically alike they were. Apart from the fact that Germaine is taller and has a longer reach (and I know couldn't throw a punch to save her life), here were two quite private people utterly committed to the glory and daily toil of writing, but who both had this demonic need to expose themselves in public, sometimes to tempt ridicule, in a search for what exactly? That is the intriguing question that has always kept us all on the edge of our seats. (Footnote: last year Germaine spent a week or so in the Big

Brother house until she quit in disgust. Why, though, go there in the first place?)

At two in the morning, the four of us, quite drunk, pile into a cab to head downtown. An argument begins, or continues—I don't have NM's extraordinary memory for dialogue—and, at the lights, Germaine jumps out of the cab on one side followed by Norman who takes up a position on the other. What I do remember and will never forget—I'm better at images—is the OK Corral standoff between the two of them as they stand on the hill silhouetted against the lights and the steam from the manholes. Only thing I regret is that I didn't have a camera, but then again, sometimes it's better to just have the memory. (This led, of course, a week or two later to the second bout, forever to be known as *Town Bloody Hall*, in which conventional wisdom tells us Norman lost the women forever. It's worth looking at the film Donn Pennebaker made again, by the way, since Norman is probably the winner on points and is certainly by far the more interesting and subtle fighter.)

The Standoff on Park Avenue marks the end of my vivid memories of Norman, except for one day ten years later on a subway station in Manhattan. As my partner and I were heading uptown to start filming the first of several films we made with the kids in The Bronx who had the inspirations that came to be known as Hip Hop (and were then, of course, all but destroyed by greed and cynicism), we ran into him. He asked us what we were doing and when we told him he said he'd had a go at writing about that, wished us luck, and jumped on the train. I had somehow missed *The Faith of Graffiti* back in 1974 when it was written, but when I finally caught up with its remarkable insight almost ten years later, we were about to begin a film we felt was ahead of its time but, of course, we weren't. We were way behind Norman Mailer and sadly now, we won't be able to play catch-up any more. What a huge loss to anybody who cares about the time of his time. But still, unquestionably, if I want to remind myself and understand more deeply the time of *my* time, there is no better source, no better source at all.