AN EXCERPT FROM MAILER'S LAST INTERVIEW: THE *VILLAGE VOICE*

J. MICHAEL LENNON

J. Michael Lennon, author of the recently published biography, Norman Mailer: A Double Life (*Simon & Schuster*), *interviewed Mailer in his home in Provincetown on September 18, 2007, less than two months before Mailer's death in a New York hospital. The focus of the interview was Mailer's close friend Robert Lindner, a psychoanalyst who had published several popular books on psychology, including* Rebel without a Cause *(1944), and* The Fifty-Minute Hour *(1955). Lindner died on February 27, 1956, and a week later Mailer eulogized him in the* Village Voice, *launched four months earlier. Mailer invested in, named, and wrote for the* Voice *many times over his long career. In the course of the interview, he digresses and speaks with some passion about his vision for the* Voice, *and how it conflicted with the ideas of its editor, Daniel Wolf and its publisher Edwin Fancher, two of the other co-founders.*

JML: How did the idea of the *Village Voice* emerge?

NM: When did Bob Lindner die? Late 50s?

JML: Yes.

NM: The *Village Voice* emerged in the early sixties.

JML: No, in '56.

NM: That early?

JML: October '55 was the first issue.

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NM: Then Bob was still alive when I was working there.

JML: Yes, he was still alive.

NM: Dan [Wolf] said that he wanted to start a paper and how did I feel about it. He hadn't been working at anything very steady or very satisfying for years. He had an old lady, a lady much older than him for a mistress and adored him and that was his life. He never brought her around; he was very private; he was very dissatisfied with his life. He wanted power; he had none. He was a quiet man with this wise sad smile, who was an absolute intensity of unsatisfied desires within. It had to do with prominence and prestige. He knew that he was brighter than anyone around and he wasn't getting enough for it. Not getting enough for it in terms of his own satisfaction. I don't know how or where or when the idea for the paper came to him. His best friend, other than myself, and maybe he was a closer friend for all I know, was Ed Fancher. The three of us started that paper, with Dan as the pivot. Fancher and I came together from the outside as the money men. Dan was the quarterback. The idea was that we'd start the paper for, I think, $5,000 apiece, Ed and me, with Dan's share being that he'd being doing all the work. And that's where the trouble started with the relationship because I had a certain idea for the paper, which was make it a revolutionary paper, take over the Village. All we had at that time for a model was a paper called *The Villager*, which was, you know, better than a shopper and worse than a news organ, and whatever news was in it was friendly, sort of. I wanted a real paper that explored the Village in all its fire and the three of us never came to agreement, but we put the money in, the $5,000 on each side. That went very quickly. I think in the first month we knew we had to put in more money. So we put in quite a bit of money in the course of the first year. Then I started writing my column ["Quickly: A Column for Slow Readers"]. That drove Dan insane; he felt it was much too fast, much too ugly. We were losing half the readers he wanted, but we were gaining the readers I wanted, and so forth. The fight went on and intensified. By that time, we weren't even speaking; we weren't friends anymore and then I quit. And I quit over . . . there was a guy there who hated me who ended up being a fine theater critic.

JML: Jerry Tallmer. Still around.

NM: Right. Every time we see each other, we're friendly, casual friendly. At any event, he was the proofreader and typos kept happening in my column whether he wanted them or not. Finally, I just quit the paper.

JML: "the nuisances of growth" instead of "the nuances of growth" was the straw that broke . . .

NM: Yes. So once I quit, a phenomenon occurred, a social phenomenon that I never forgot. Which was: I was missed. The paper was shocked. They received mail that up to that point had always been unfriendly—you know, "Who's this spoil-sport Mailer? Who's this smartass Mailer? He's a loser."

JML: Joe Jensen from Bank Street.

NM: Yeah, that's him. And then Jensen writes, "We're going to miss you." They suddenly realized that they were going to miss me. There had been something there, the paper had been exciting; it hadn't been before. Before that it had been like a glib, a nicely developed version of *The Villager*, which was *all but* a newspaper, you know, a truly fine shopper. Now they suddenly saw that there was a daring newspaper possible. And they went in that direction, although it was against the grain. They had the local genius . . . you see, they had been going in the wrong direction and then they reversed and it opened up the paper. And then along came [Jules] Feiffer and his cartoons and Feiffer made the *Voice*. People would buy the *Voice* to see his cartoons. They were extraordinary. What I failed to do with the column, Feiffer succeeded in doing each week with his panel. Then the articles got wilder, the insights got stronger, the attitude became bigger, and the *Voice* grew, and the *Voice* grew, and it grew and I was out of it. In a way, I didn't care because I felt I was going to drown in it if I'd won. You see my feeling was that if I'd win, I'd lose because when would I write novels. It takes all your time . . . and this thing, losing and winning was very satisfying, and so we became friends again, in a manner of speaking. Not for a long time and not closely, never as close again, but the gap was closed to a degree.

JML: And you wrote a series of pieces for them over the years.

NM: Oh yeah. It wasn't as if I was now saying, 'Drop dead.'

JML: And they were important pieces, "An Open Letter to JFK and Fidel Castro" [April 27, 1961].

NM: No, it was my organ; it was an important organ. It was perfect for America. We really did something for America. It made a huge change in America.

JML: It certainly did.

NM: You know, looking back on it now, a guy like Fancher, who was not a talented man, in the newspaper sense. But he had one quality that was extraordinary. He was like a lineman in football who could take fifty hits in a game and still be standing at the end of the game, still ready to tackle anybody who was trying to come though his hole. And so he had that kind of strength. Dan had the wiliness of a great quarterback who never wanted to be intercepted, never wanted to hand the ball off to anyone wrong, who never wanted to call a play that wasn't going to work. Very cautious, but occasionally daring. So the two of them had skills that complimented one other. There was Ed for defense and there was Dan for subtle offense and also there was Dan's sense of neighborhood. Once he saw the real picture in the Village, that the Village was open and angry and wanted stuff, once he saw that my notion of it had not been incorrect, he went with it, and probably proceeded with vastly more wisdom that I would have. I would have wrecked it all over again in a few months because I was a wild man. I wanted the revolution to come; I wanted blood in the streets; I wanted the whole thing to start and of course Dan would have been opposed and we would have been fighting all over again. So I never look back at it and say, "Oh, there went my chance to become a newspaper mogul." On the contrary, I was quite happy to retire to Adele [Morales, Mailer's second wife], to the joys (chuckles) of marital pulchritude, to writing my own books, to be able to be on the sidelines, to be a novelist.