

INTERVIEW: NORMAN MAILER

LEGS MCNEIL

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IT WAS A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON and I was sitting in Elvis Costello's room at the Sherry-Netherland talking to him and his manager, Jake Riviera, about some new tapes by Shrapnel, the group I manage. It was a real quick meeting because they were going out to dinner with their girl friends. Afterward I was feeling kind of sick. I ran downtown to visit a couple of writer friends, jukebox experts John Tybell and Martha Thomases, and sat down. I hadn't eaten anything for three days, and the drink Elvis had given me made me feel terrible. Suddenly Martha came in and asked me if I wanted to meet Norman Mailer. I said, "Okay, give me a minute," got up and walked into the kitchen, where Mailer was standing by the fridge. Everyone was watching us because I'd been compared to Mailer in a cover story in the Village Voice a few weeks earlier.

"I'm sure you've never read anything I've written, and I've never read anything you've written, so, just to set the record straight, we're even," I began. He laughed and we had a great conversation about war for an hour, pulling beers out of the fridge every few minutes. Before the evening ended I casually invited Norman to come see Shrapnel play the following week. I thought he'd like my guys because they wear army uniforms all the time; even at home my lead singer walks around with a belt of grenades strapped across his chest. I really didn't think he'd come, so I was surprised when his secretary called a couple of days later and said Norman wanted to come to the benefit we were playing at CBGB for a fund to buy bullet-proof vests for the New York police.

That night Norman pulled up in front of the club in a Checker cab and jumped out escorting a scorching redhead, Martha's friend Norris Church, a real hot number whom only a real man like Mailer could catch and keep. Every-

one looked at Norman, but then everyone looked at Norris and they didn't bother to look back at Norman. We had to lead him around the back of the club through a dark alley full of broken glass. It seemed appropriate.

We sat down at a table with four or five beautiful girls and ordered drinks. Norman really seemed to enjoy himself in the smoke-filled, tightly packed ambience of the tiny rock club. It was so crowded he had to stand on a chair in order to see the band. Halfway through the concert he elbowed his way to the front of the crowd.

Afterward we all went back to Joey Ramone's loft to continue the party. Norman told me we had to talk alone, dragged me into a side room, and we had a big talk. He said he was the Godfather and I had to listen to him because I was just like him. He told me that he'd fucked up his life and I shouldn't be a fuck-up. Then we decided to do a big interview together and talk about everything on tape.

So the next day at noon I found myself pulling up in a cab outside Mailer's home in Brooklyn Heights. As I walked into his apartment Norman was talking on the phone, so I sat down with Norris, who was feeding her baby, who was wearing a bib with "United States Infantry" written on it. I was real hung over, so I didn't eat my lunch, and I was really glad I didn't because Norman spent the whole time describing how a friend of his had gotten a knife stuck in his arm and how Norman had pulled it out and tried to sew it up. After two hours trying, and sticking all this needle and thread in the guy's arm, they gave up and called a doctor.

Norman's apartment is enormous. At one end, big windows overlook the East River and ships parked like they were in his backyard. The room has 20-foot-high ceilings, and a series of ladders and ropes stretch throughout it leading across various catwalks to different rooms. He has an enormous plastic Erector Set scale model of what he thinks Manhattan should look like against one wall, and he explained to me how you could get around the city transported on a whole system of really complex electric cable cars or something, I didn't completely understand. When I started asking him questions about it he said it hadn't been perfected yet. As we walked away he knocked off a corner section of one of the model's apartment buildings. "You just wiped out 50 people!" I screamed.

"Aw, they shouldna lived there in the first place," he said. "That was a dangerous part of town. That was the slums."

I followed Norman out of his apartment downstairs to a small office he maintains in the building, a scene straight out of Raymond Chandler. He pulls

out a set of keys, unlocks a door with a glass panel, and I feel like I'm in a cheap private detective's office like in The Maltese Falcon. Piles of newspapers and books everywhere. A small hot plate. A broken swivel chair. Norman plugged in his tape recorder, I plugged in mine, and we began to talk. Throughout our conversation the distant cries of men working on the ships and the whining of the engines of enormous cranes played in the background. Mailer is a mesmerizing storyteller. His impish eyes never left my face; they glowed at me all the time. He's so articulate I wanted to laugh all the time, because no one can talk as good as Norm.

—Legs McNeil

Legs: I guess we should start off by talking about your views of masculinity, because much of what we discuss in this interview will revolve around those opinions. What is masculinity? What is power?

Norman: Well, I think there are two kinds of masculinity, and maybe we could start with that and separate them. The women's movement always talks about masculinity as if it's synonymous with power. They talk about men having power and using power, and they equate that to masculinity. Well, there's another kind of masculinity altogether, there are a lot of dudes that you really do respect who have no power at all. They want freedom. And they just don't want anyone ever to be able to fuck them over. And they live their lives that way. Sometimes they have a certain moral authority, say a certain moral power over their friends. Their friends will tend to do what they suggest. But they don't have any interest in dominating people. They just don't want under any circumstances to be dominated themselves by anything or anybody. That kind of masculinity is interesting, because it carries you into deeper and deeper games that end in your own death ultimately.

Now with the other kind of masculinity, we're talking about guys who look for power. That means a lot of creeps are seen as masculine, for half of the people who run the world are creeps. They have an awful lot of power, and they know how to get power. Getting power in the world has very little to do with being masculine. In fact, very often it consists of the opposite, of assiduously sucking up and at the right time biting the ass that's been feeding you.

Legs: Are you a good example of the first type of masculinity you describe?

Norman: I try to be that, but I think I'm a poor representative.

Legs: What do you think of gay rights and homosexuality, as it relates to your theory of masculinity?

Norman: I don't know what my ideas would be if I were growing up now. I grew up in a part of Brooklyn where certain things were demanded of you, incumbent upon you, and being a faggot was a fate worse than death. I grew up with every negative attitude you could have about homosexuals. I never was the kind of guy that believed in going on parties to find them, catch them, beat them up. I never got into that sort of life, and none of my friends did, but even to this day I notice that with my sons and their friends, "fag-got" is still a real term of abuse.

I think there's something fundamental involved, very difficult and very tricky, and I don't know that I want to even approach answering it in an interview. I'm 56 now. I'm just saying, when I grew up it was so different from the way it is now. The homosexuals were so underground that you'd literally have a guy who'd be your friend for years and then find out he was a homosexual. It was almost like that. And homosexuals in those days were people who wrote assignation notes on bathroom walls.

I was in the army for a couple of years. I never knew, to my knowledge, one homosexual in the army. I never heard it ever discussed. In prisons, it's a funny thing, you can go in, on the outside, go in as a reporter as I have, and the one thing you can't ask convicts about is homosexuality in prisons. They look at you blankly like, oh yeah, yeah we got a queer down in cellblock C. It's the same code that existed in the Brooklyn streets when I was a kid. They may all be willy-nilly one way or another having to practice some form of homosexuality, two-thirds of them are, but they're not talking about it on the outside and it's absolute undercover.

So this world where a young man has to make out as a homosexual or he can't make out at all is foreign to me. I can't begin to know what I would feel and that's why I evade answering. I don't know whether I'd be highly indignant, or whether I'd be tolerant. I don't have a clue. Politically, I'm for gay rights just as I am for women's rights.

Legs: You are?

Norman: Yeah, I am. I just don't like the idea of the government or the state dictating anything to people that isn't absolutely necessary.

Legs: You've had a few battles with the women's movement, and they seem to have picked you as their number-one scapegoat for a lot of their frustrations or anxieties. How do you feel about that?

Norman: I think I was selected because I'm a reasonably large target and I'm a soft one. I doubt if I'm their number-one enemy.

There's nothing remarkable to me about women wanting to have independence in their lives or wanting to be able to express themselves. And in fact I'm even for women's liberation in one way. Society forces us to become cowards, and we want to be brave. And I would say a woman has absolutely the same right to be brave as a man, and anything that does squash them and encourage them to be cowards is bad.

Legs: What else bothers you about the women's movement besides what they say about Norman Mailer?

Norman: They think they're increasing the amount of liberty for all people, and I think they may be advancing what may end up being the worst totalitarianism of them all, which is a technological incarceration of this whole attitude that there are no differences between men and women. I think they're working to that kind of tyranny. Unconsciously, but they're working for it. Because to the degree that we make men and women more and more alike, we're making it easier for the machine to function.

Everything in the world is narrowing down into a computer. By the time they get one computer that can handle everyone's affairs on earth they got it made. Then there's total control. So at that point if you have to deal with just one kind of unit, to wit a human person, how much better off the computer is than if it has to deal with men and women. And that is what I think is the most dangerous element in women's lib. They're not saying, look we may be a profoundly different species from men, but we have the same right to say what our rights are and fuck you. But they're saying there's no difference between men and women. I think they're demented, then.

You see, women's lib is like everything else. You get people who are serious representatives of their point of view and who are willing to live by it and die for it, and then you got a bunch who are making a career for themselves where otherwise they would not have had it.

Legs: Did you want to be a great writer?

Norman: Yes, when I was young. Now I just want to go 15 rounds.

Legs: But when you started off you had a romanticized vision. You wanted to kayo Hemingway.

Norman: Yeah, you don't remember when Hemingway wanted to kayo Tolstoy? He gave an interview many, many years ago where he said, I forget how he put it, it was roughly, I went 15 rounds with the best, and I took so and so, and I took so and so, and five years ago I beat Charles Dickens, and so on. He said, now I'm going after Tolstoy. Something of that sort. It was an interview. He did it with Lillian Ross in the *New Yorker* many years ago. It got him into an awful lot of trouble and he sounded like an asshole.

And I have had my days when I've had my large ambitions, but as you get older you get a sense that that is all to the side. The size of your ambition and the top of your head have very little relation. It's not how big your ambition is at the place where you can recognize it, it's how big that ambition is in your guts. Because the last place the ambition dies is in the guts; so you can think your ambition is dead, but it'll still be stirring. In other words, at a certain point it may be too much of a luxury to keep the ambition alive in your head. As long as it's functioning in your guts and you're doing your work, then maybe the ambition still exists at the level permitted to you. We all go around and we fuck our brains out and we drink our eyes out and by the time we're ready, by the time we learned enough to write great books, our fingers are arthritic and our will is gone. And that's everybody's sad story.

So what you're trying to do is, you're hoping that you kept as much as you can. In other words, you kept enough intact to be able to do the big stuff at the end. Cus D'Amato, the guy who managed Floyd Patterson and Jose Torres, said the real difficulty in getting a fighter into top shape to fight is that if the man's in top shape and loses, he's got no excuse. So a guy likes to come in at 90, 85 percent of his top form. Then if he loses, he's got his copout. But if he's in top shape and he's licked, there's no out for him.

The same is true of writers, only more so, because they're not used to getting in shape to begin with. But as long as a writer is fucking his brains out or drinking his eyes out he's got his excuse. You know, "I wasn't enough of

a man to lick drink.” Bullshit. I wasn’t enough of a man to write a big book, that’s what it was. So I don’t know what my ambition is. It isn’t in my head every day these days.

Legs: Is there one big one that you’re going for?

Norman: Yeah, I’ve got 800 pages done on a manuscript, and it finally will be about 3,000 if I ever finish it.

Legs: Who are you going to lick if you finish it?

Norman: Myself.

Legs: You’re not looking to kayo anyone else?

Norman: When you get older, you stop thinking about: is so and so better than me? It doesn’t really matter. These days, when I hear some guy around my age has written a very good book, my feeling is hey all right, okay. Because I know what it means by now. There are writers I haven’t spoken to in 20 years; I feel more brotherhood for them now than I felt 20 years ago when we were supposed to be friends and were envious as hell of each other. Because I know what it means to write a good book. If they can do it, maybe there’s more hope for me.

Legs: Is writing romantic?

Norman: No.

Legs: Not at all?

Norman: Not at all. Not in the act. It’s romantic before and after. It’s romantic in that it makes you more romantic. Women look at you more romantically, yes. You can feel romantic about yourself when a book is done. Or the best part of writing a book is when you’re thinking about the book. The ideas begin to come. The book is beginning to open. You certainly feel good about yourself. But the daily grind is deadly. It’s killing. It’s why people don’t write.

There’s something about going in every day and facing that empty page. The amount of character you need over the years to do it. I know by now if I’ll be writing for the next four or five months, my weight is going to balloon up. My health is going to go. I’ll start coming down with gout and arthritis, which I do every time. It’s like the act of thinking that hard that many hours

a day produces poisons in my system that hit my joints and my bones. You live in tension. You live the same kind of harried life a businessman does. He's got 18 things in his head. He's got to worry the whole day. He can't quit his job at five o'clock. He stays with it all the time. You're hard to get along with. All that. And then you go in every morning and every morning you got to get yourself in shape to face that page.

Legs: How do you overcome the mental obstacles?

Norman: I do it because I'm a pro. The one thing I can say is I'm a professional. You give me a job and tell me how long I have to do it, and I'll do it.

Legs: How do you pick your subjects? Do you feel your reputation is at stake because you picked pop subjects like Marilyn Monroe and Gary Gilmore?

Norman: A lot of it is economic. Every year I've been getting deeper into debt. Each year a book has come along that offers temporary alleviation to that crisis. The Marilyn Monroe story because I was invited to do a preface for a book of photographs about Marilyn Monroe and I was going to get 50 grand for the preface. And I thought this is the best thing that was offered to me in a long time. I always loved Marilyn Monroe. The thought of sitting down and studying all her movies and then writing a preface and getting 50 grand for 10 or 15 or 20 thousand words struck me as terrific.

So of course what happened is I went on to write a biography of her. And I have a hunch it's one of the three or four books I'll be remembered by. But it all happened by accident. I didn't sit down and say, my aesthetic purpose now is to write a biography about Marilyn Monroe. Only a preface.

And the Gilmore book started the same way. It looked like an awful lot of money for 100,000 words and 300 pages, and it ended up being 1,700 pages and 400,000 words and got me deeper in debt.

Legs: John Holmstrom in *Punk* magazine did a review of *Superman*, and I took this quote from him, which I feel really sums up America. I was wondering if you want to comment about it. I quote: "The film goes right over critics' heads. Critics hate comic books. Comic books are trash. But as we all know, America's glory is in its trash. America produces more trash, better trash, than anybody else. And if it can't be thrown away, it's useless."

Norman: Maybe I'm a little conservative, but I think the problem is getting rid of the fuckin' trash.

Legs: Why?

Norman: Because if you don't, you choke in it. That's what's happening now. TV. I think the American disease is TV. You got people watching shit six hours a day. There's nothing life-giving about that shit. Why the fuck do I have to have my attention interrupted by a commercial?

Legs: So they can be on the air and sell something.

Norman: Bullshit. They can be on the air another way. Those commercials are part of the waste. America has become a garbage economy. Those huge resources given to armaments are pure trash. It's not a way to be serious about war but to keep a trash economy going. Why, about the time they start getting serious about war, and start having war games between nations, they will need one-tenth the size of the present-day armies.

Legs: Why?

Norman: We've gotten to a point where you can't have a major war any longer because it will destroy everything. However, the creeps keep acting as if they are going to have that major war, so they have armies that are very, very large.

Legs: Yeah, but they have small wars now.

Norman: Let me get to my next point. The reason they have those large armies is because as long as they have a large army they can run the machine their way. Everything has to be run to support that fuckin' large army. That large army becomes a third of our national economy. You see, they're so pious. They all say: Well, war is horrible; we're trying to avoid war. As you say, there are small wars all the time. If we could agree that there's nothing wrong with a small war . . . That there are worse societies than societies in which men die for their country. That's not terrible, to die for your country. What's terrible is if you die for your country in a time of horseshit. It's terrible if you die for your country for the wrong reason, for a war that shouldn't have been fought, that didn't need to be fought, that didn't involve the country's destiny but just involved various power plays by various power brokers. From the First World War on, that's what's

been horrible about war. The Second World War wasn't completely horrible. There was something going on. There was a real philosophical battle of large dimensions.

Then, after the Second World War, it looked like we're going to have a war with Russia. All during that time we didn't have any politics, all we had was anti communism. That served as a smoke screen for the corporations in America to take over America. I'm willing to say that in the ten years following the Second World War, the American corporations got five times more powerful than they had been in the '30s. And by now they're ten times more powerful than they were 40 years ago. They run everything in this country. Now they don't run it as a fascistic totalitarian dictatorship, in that they don't get together and they don't have a leader, but they have created a community of opinion that's terribly single-minded and very dull. Very stultified. They created a kind of boredom for the center of American life that's hideous.

You look at those goddamn superhighways, they're the dullest fuckin' roads in the history of Christendom. They create a world in which you drive on these highways at 55 miles an hour. Drivers get cancer from fighting to keep from falling asleep. Does anybody ever measure that? So there are 5,000 less people killed on the highway every year because we go 55 miles an hour. But how many people die of cancer who used to go out and get in their car and drive 80 and get their rocks off and have a little self-respect for themselves? Now they can't.

I'm exaggerating to make a point, but they sicken a little bit. To go out on a highway now and take a drive is to sicken a little bit.

Legs: You're saying everything is dull.

Norman: They're taking the zip out of everything.

Legs: But communism is so much more boring. At least in America you can go and make your own zip. You won't make too much money off of it . . .

Norman: Yeah, there's more freedom here. I'd never say there isn't. I think we have something nonexportable in America, to the degree that American capitalism is serious as an achievement. I don't give a damn about the communist countries. This is the only country I know and I've lived here all my life and I think to the degree we have freedom we're a great country. But I think that we're having less freedom every year. And that

worries me much more than the communists taking over the world. Because I think it's meaningless to take over the world as such. We're talking in 19th-century terms. The more the communists take over the world, the less they'll be able to manage it. I've been saying this for 20 years. The moment the communists get power, they have to fight against themselves because they're cannibalistic. Wherever you have a totalitarian vision of existence you cannot permit the differences of opinion that a democracy can accept.

Legs: How are we losing our freedom every year? I don't see it.

Norman: Let me just finish on communism. I want to nail that down. The reason I think the communists are winning all over, as you put it, is not that they're winning but they are able to fill a vacuum that we're not able to fill. We do not have a capitalism that's exportable. We have a degree of capitalism that works well because we have had 100 years of training people to work in industry, to learn techniques. We're a highly skilled country. That's the one thing you can't export. Besides, we're not prepared. We do not have the kind of vision in our people to go out in foreign countries and teach what we learned. It means not spending three years over there and teaching the natives how to work their factories, it means giving your life to it absolutely, and we're not that kind of country anymore. We just aren't. We may never be again.

So I think that the communists will take over the world to a great extent. I don't think it will mean a damn thing. Because I don't think they will ever take over this country unless this country is there to be taken over. So I don't think the defense of this country is a huge military system that swallows everything and affects everything we do. I believe the last thing the Russians would ever want is to occupy us. It would be a nightmare for them. It would be the destruction of communism forever if they would try to occupy America. They cannot take us over that way. They just simply can't in my opinion and they never will try to. I think that a large army is a lot of horseshit. I think that atom-bomb stuff is a lot of horseshit. I don't think we need any more atom bombs. We need to defend ourselves if we're attacked first. Beyond that it's all horseshit.

Legs: It seems to me our culture is our best weapon and if we played rock 'n' roll we could take over China.

Norman: In 50 years we would certainly put a dent in them with our music. Yeah, our music and our painting have had a huge influence on the world. The only things that have.

But you asked me what I think is killing things in American life. All right, I think that television is destroying everything. One of my ideas is that bad aesthetics creates bad governments and bad people. The artist has a huge responsibility, because every time the artist does something that's cheap or shitty it affects a lot of people adversely. Art doesn't just improve people, it also deteriorates them. And what we have on TV is the worst art in the history of civilization. It's being given out on television every night.

It's bad because the corporations don't want anything good on TV if they can help it. It's bad because whatever we do have that's reasonably good is interrupted constantly. These interruptions are terrible.

Legs: The commercials are great. I sit around with friends and they look at one commercial and everyone just shakes their head and goes, no not that one. But then when the Charlie commercial comes on, everyone's jumping up and down. People who know good television watch stuff like "Green Acres," which is so much better than Ionesco, so much more absurd than Ionesco could ever be.

Norman: Look what you're saying. People are sitting around all evening sometimes, sitting around for two or three hours to wait for that one good commercial. Boy, that's a hell of a way to spend a night.

When I was a kid I used to sit on the stoop and wait for a girl with beautiful knockers to walk down the street. We'd spend hours all night waiting for that one girl with beautiful knockers to walk down the street. She'd walk by and they'd jiggle and we'd all go wow. I submit that as a better way to waste three hours than watching a TV set for the one commercial to come on.

I got a kid who's 13 watching TV all the time, and he does just what you're talking about. He'll go wow, and he'll get up and do a little dance. But he's a very bright kid who can't think nearly as well as he would like to because he's used to being interrupted. It's very hard for him to keep his mind on something for more than 10 or 12 minutes. Every 10 or 12 minutes he's got to get up and do a little war dance.

Legs: But that's good, though.

Norman: No, that's bad.

Legs: It teaches you to skim . . .

Norman: No, that's bad. It's good if you've got an instinct not to spend too much time on the wrong subject, to know to get up and move to something else. But it's bad if you can't spend time on the right subject. What if there comes a time in your life where you've got to spend 42 hours in a row regarding the same subject? Because a lot of other people depend on you to be able to do it. These kids are being raised to be physiologically incapable of that. They're punch drunk from commercials.

When you think of the money that's put into making commercials, they're really abysmal. Trash economy.

Legs: I like a lot of them. The one where they grow the spaghetti. That's great. Everyone in America thinks they grow spaghetti now.

Norman: My kids think I'm demented, sometimes I'll walk in the room, they're watching TV and suddenly I'll go into my act. And I'll say, look at those fuckin' idiots on the screen, look at them, they're all hysterical. I say, you fuckin' idiot kids, you sit here and you watch that shit hour after hour after hour, you ought to be hung up by your heels, you're insane, you're maniacs. They look at me like, oh God, there he goes again, can't even watch TV in peace. But in fact I find it a kind of blanket hysteria.

There it is, that little screen with the colored dots. There's never a deep somber moment on TV. There's never anything truly restful when you're watching TV. There's never aesthetic satisfaction in TV. There's always, as I say, this hysteria. I've come to believe that the people who own TV all have this feeling that they're living in a kind of purgatory. There's something about people on TV that inspires guilt, because it's a hollow sensation.

If you're speaking in a theater and you step onstage, that's an extraordinary sensation. You never have to worry about your reason for being there when you're on the stage of a theater. It's animal. But you get in a TV station, it's a little bit like you're going to visit a doctor to get X rays. It's hollow. It's a tremendously hollow sensation. And everybody who's on TV is hollow. All the entertainers are hollow people. They're the oddest people. They can be

nice people, or unpleasant people, but they're hollow. You really feel as if you're talking to a sort of stainless-steel cylinder that's empty on the inside. I think it's partly because they're doing something that's not life, that in the deepest, ethical, moral sense they are vitiating human existence, just eating it away from the inside.

TV isn't like bad movies or bad theater. When you go see bad theater, there are people next to you, there are smells in the place, there's a human odor to the joint, there's a mood of the audience, there's a reaction between actors and yourself. You can get up and you can walk out. You can learn something from the experience. But TV is alienated from existence. On top of everything else you never even see the thing that happens. The moment TV went from live TV to canned TV something fatal crept into TV. I believe that. You see, it's one thing if you get on TV and you're saying something and there are 500,000 people listening or 50 million, and the moment you say it they hear it. They hear it in relation to the time of day. But when you can it and it comes out a week later at a different hour of the day, there's a warp.

Legs: Are there any taboos left to write about in American society?

Norman: Taboos? I think there are things that are expensive. I think it's very difficult to be against the women's movement in America today. A couple of other taboos. It's very difficult to be anti anything ethnic at all. Name any ethnic group—Jews, blacks, Italians, Irish—it's very difficult. No, there are no taboos the way there were. The problem is, it's not taboos at all, really. The problem is how to make sense of the chaos. It used to be that you had the idea my enemies were over there and my friends were over here and we're going to meet and battle at 14th Street and Third Avenue on Saturday at 11 o'clock. And it was all very simple; there were barricades.

Legs: There was clarity.

Norman: Yeah. Then there might be arguments about who won the battle and how it took place and who's a hero and who's a villain and all that. But that was relative clarity. But now if there is a battle, you don't know when it's going to take place, you don't know who the heroes are, you don't know who the villains are, you don't know whether you yourself are a hero or a villain, you don't know where the enemy might be found. You don't know if there is such a thing as an enemy even. We're living in a chaos.

We're living in a garbage can now, which is allowing all those bright remarks about trash.

Legs: When we were talking the other day, you said you considered yourself a fuckup. Do you think your actions court disaster?

Norman: A fuckup on my own terms. There are a lot of guys that are bigger fuckups than me.

Legs: Do you feel you have the right to commit artistic suicide, to deliberately fuck up?

Norman: No, that doesn't appeal to me.

Legs: Not at all?

Norman: Quite the contrary. You know, my parents during the Depression were very respectable middle-class people, working very hard. My father was out of a job, that kind of thing. Security meant a great deal to them, and I was brought up with the idea that you've got to do a very good day's work. That was instilled in me. So I'm really apart from this generation, who considers fucking up an interesting way to express yourself, a way to do things.

Legs: How do you consider yourself a fuckup?

Norman: Oh, I think I've lost a couple of books over the years I could have written, but I've been too absorbed in myself and my problems. To be an artist you've really got to be able to rise out and above yourself and stay above yourself long enough to get the work done. And there were years when I just sort of swam in my own self-pity for too long.

I think I'm a fuckup for having gotten into debt. There was no reason for that.

Legs: Did you ever go to dry out?

Norman: I never was that kind of drinker. I could drink mighty amounts when I was younger, but then the next day I never found any great need to drink. My head would be no good for 48 hours, but my body . . . I would just have a rosy day, not do any thinking and just idle along. I could afford to in those days. The only time I ever drank heavily day after day was when a marriage was breaking up. All men do at such times. It's the weirdest thing, but

men who almost never drink would be drinking all the time if they break up with their woman. It's that rupture of habit that just drives you up the wall. So, no, I never came close to drying out.

Legs: You were committed to Bellevue.

Norman: Yeah.

Legs: What was that like?

Norman: Well, that was very interesting. You see, I had stabbed my wife, so I had a criminal lawyer that my regular lawyer had gotten in a great hurry. I met the guy and we shook hands and said hello, and before I knew what he was doing he was getting me assigned to Bellevue. I spoke out against it at the time; I was very upset, because my feeling was I committed a crime. All right, let me go to prison, and he wanted to get me into Bellevue. I didn't know the ropes then, but that's the way you get somebody out. You put them in Bellevue. You see, at that point, no one knew if my wife was going to die or not. He was thinking as a criminal lawyer. If the wife dies, let's save this guy's ass, let's have him in a mental hospital. That's the way the legal mind works. So there I was in this mental hospital. My feeling was, if I don't get out of here, I am going to go crazy. There's no way not to if you're in a mental hospital. If you're sane in a mental hospital and you stay there for a year and you're at all sensitive to your environment, as I am, you adopt your environment. I'm a chameleon. If I'm around 20 psychos, I would pick up psycho mannerisms very quickly.

Legs: I was committed.

Norman: Well, you know what I'm talking about.

Legs: They keep everyone on drugs. As long as you don't take any of the pills that they've given you, it's kind of interesting to watch everyone.

Mailer: I stayed off everything.

Legs: The same with me.

Norman: In fact, I hadn't been smoking when the thing started; when I got into the trouble I was about six days out of not smoking, and I stayed off cigarettes all the way through. I was in Bellevue for 17 days. I wouldn't take any Thorazine. And I remember I was walking a tightrope. But the main thing

was getting out. I mean, it was fascinating because you had to be not too much of anything. I've never been in a situation like that ever in my life. You couldn't be too friendly. And you certainly couldn't be too aggressive. You couldn't be cooperative. And you absolutely couldn't be uncooperative. You couldn't be too concerned with your case. You couldn't be indifferent to your case . . .

Legs: Why did you stab your wife?

Norman: That, I don't like to get into. Someday maybe I'll write on it.

Legs: That comes back to women. I mean, do you hate women?

Norman: No, I don't hate women. I get very irritated with women in a way different than the way I get irritated with men, but I don't believe I hate women.

Legs: Did you when you were younger hate women?

Norman: No, no, I had a life where, to begin with, I was surrounded by a lot of women. I had a lot of aunts, there were my mother's sisters and my mother, and they were all very close and they all loved one another. They were very nice ladies, my aunts. I had three aunts in particular who were really terrific women. And they had daughters. So I grew up with all these relatives, a lot of female relatives, very few male relatives. And I always remembered women as sweet and loving; I was spoiled. I would say I wasn't ready for marriage in the sense that I just wasn't ready to realize that women can be as tough, demanding and insensitive as men. I was used to women who gave you what you wanted all the time.

Now, as far as animosity toward women goes, that's another matter. I think there's not a man alive who doesn't have a profound animosity toward women, because women are in possession of a secret that we don't have. Just as women have a profound animosity toward men. You can't find a woman alive that doesn't feel a deep animosity for a man because men are able to do certain things more easily than women. So I think men have this animosity in return toward women. I think it's a part of the human condition. I think the fact that women are closer to existence is something men never get over. It's a fundamental shock. They're one step closer to God than we are. They continue the human race through their bodies.

Legs: I think they're closer to the devil.

Norman: Well, if you were the devil, wouldn't you get closer to anything that's closer to God? I mean, if I'm a good hard-working devil, I'll make it my business to get anywhere that God is, I'll make it my business to get closer.

Legs: Do you believe in the devil?

Norman: Oh sure. I believe he exists.

Legs: What does he do? How does he haunt you?

Norman: The devil? If I were sure, I probably wouldn't tell you, because why give him road maps. Haven't you ever noticed if you put something on the air, it hits you. Did you ever have that feeling you told somebody something, you don't know why . . .

Legs: I don't know, I like to throw myself into those situations sometimes.

Norman: I do too. I love to throw myself into situations. And when I was younger I did an awful lot of it. And most of it when I was drunk. When I'm drunk I have no fear of the devil.

Legs: When you wrote "The White Negro" in 1959 your theory was that since we're living in an atomic age with atomic bombs hanging over us and we could die anytime, we should live in the present and enjoy ourselves like the Negro did. Everything is just so fucked up, so live in the present. Has that changed now? Would you revise "The White Negro"?

Norman: You have to revise it, because after all, the black revolution took place in the '60s and blacks and whites have a vastly different attitude now than they did then. At that time blacks and whites were still coming together. They came together and took a good look at each other and each were blown back by the other. And now they're slowly maybe beginning to take another look at one another again. But it's different. So in that sense you couldn't write "The White Negro" today, because I think white kids now have a very sophisticated attitude about blacks. That is, we will take from black culture that which we can use, but the idea that one loves the black man is no longer present the way it was.

But I still think there's an enormous sense of the present around today. I don't know much about rock and punk, but what you see is something else. It's the apotheosis of the present. When has there ever been a music which made so much insistence on what the present instant is?

Legs: Did you like the Shrapnel and Ramones show?

Norman: For me it felt like I was an old car and I was being taken out for a ride at 100 miles an hour, and I kind of liked it because I was really getting rid of a lot of rust. I don't know if I'd like it night after night, and I'm not sure it isn't absolutely killing. You've got to be superhuman to play that stuff night after night and not have your senses wiped out by it. But that it has a powerful impact I've got to admit. I liked it more than I thought I would.

Legs: You did?

Norman: Yeah, it's great. It was crazy. There was something going on that I had to respect. What I felt was that the revolution that I saw starting in the late '50s is still going on. The same statement. What you big people out there are doing to try to destroy us isn't working. We're taking it, we're eating it and we're spitting it back out again. It made me feel all over again there's going to be a revolution sooner or later in this country, whether from the left or the right or up or down I don't know. But there's something stirring. The more totalitarianized it gets through the corporations, through conforming, through all that horseshit, the more there's going to be that pulse beating way down in the cellar. And that's something that's coming right up out of the cellar, because you can't fuck with American life. You can squash it and distort it, but it just erupts.

Legs: Do you think rock 'n' roll brings it out?

Norman: Yeah, I think it kind of energizes them. The kids have a deep sense of rebellion while they're hearing it. That's something they're with. They're against everything else. While they're hearing it they're with that, and nothing else counts. It's like a religion.

Legs: Yeah, it is.

Norman: Listen, what's that chant, that gesture . . .

Legs: That's during "Blitzkrieg Bop" . . . A, O, let's go, A, O, let's go.

Norman: What's the A O mean?

Legs: It's just a sound. It's like gabba gabba hey . . . it doesn't mean anything. It's like in the '60s you used to hold up peace signs and . . .

Norman: Well, the thing is that, the hand, you see, that of course is the fascist salute [*thrusts arm forward and out*]. And this is the communist salute [*thrusts fist up*]. Here's the thing . . . it's very funny. It's *not* funny. The Ramones' gesture is in there in between the two and it has connotations . . .

Legs: Well, it gets everyone going. It's like, yeah you know.

Norman: It's so funny, you know. It really is. It's like it's trying to be a popular movement. I mean, it's sort of like a beast with no eyes. You know that poem of Yeats's? "The Second Coming." A very famous poem about some rough beast that is yet unborn . . . slouching toward Bethlehem. A great poem. It's almost like this is the rough beast.

Legs: Where do you think it's going to go?

Norman: I don't know where anything is going. One thing we haven't even talked about is the idea of economic depression in the next few years. There's almost got to be one, because our production in this country is slowing down. We just are not competitive any longer with foreign countries in any real deep way. Nobody here wants to work anymore.

People in this country now sort of see through the things that other people are willing to live and work and die for. There's not much belief in that anymore.

Legs: Do you believe in it?

Norman: Not the way my parents believed in it. My kids are important to me. I got nine kids . . . eight and a half—I rent him and his father owns him. Yeah, they're very important to me, but the difference is, I think my parents probably were willing to die for me, to die for me in the sense of working themselves into the ground for me. I may end up working myself into the ground for my kids, but not because I think that's the most important thing on earth, I just feel it's a commitment. When everything else is falling apart there's a tendency, if you're at all pro, to hold to your commitments. You fig-

ure, well I may not know what I'm doing but I'll hold to it because at least I know if I hold to the commitment, there is at least a certain grim satisfaction, and there are times in your life when you say, I'll hold things together for the grim satisfaction. Why not? A grim satisfaction is better than no satisfaction at all.

Legs: What about the family in society? Is it breaking down? Is it still important?

Norman: I think the whole thing is breaking down. Socially speaking we're entering a time of entropy. The forms are all breaking apart. I'd say the corporation is the great adulterator. You know what an oxymoron is? Two things that are absolutely opposed and cannot be put together. Say a purple and yellow, that's an oxymoron. An attractive odium. That's an oxymoron. But a corporation breeds oxymorons. It says, strive and be individual, right? At the same time it says, the only way you can do it is to work in huge organizations. What they're doing is, they are creating conditions in which people work for huge organizations that get larger all the time. Yet all the time they're selling American freedom of enterprise. It's the biggest single piece of bullshit on the shelf today.

Legs: Has the nuclear age affected the quality of life?

Norman: That's a perfect example of the kind of horror we're in. Somebody called me up the other day and said he signed something forbidding nuclear plants forever. I said I don't know the answer to that. I thought, so we stop all nuclear plants. As far as I'm concerned, the nuclear people are full of the same old horseshit that all the others are full of, which is that they don't really know what they're doing. That is, so far as they can figure it out, they have prevented anything bad from ever happening, and nothing bad will ever happen. They give you their statistics—22 nuclear plants are no worse than one dentist's X ray, and all that—and they'll have charts to show you. But what they don't know are all the things that they don't understand in the nature of fission. Every day they discover a new subparticle in the atom. All they can do is measure the subparticles that they're able to measure. What about the subparticles they have not been able to measure?

And on top of that you get that damn thing on Three Mile Island. A valve didn't work. The guy who came along and saw that valve was supposed to

turn another valve to the right but makes an error and turns it to the left. All right, they got a failsafe built in for those two, which all of a sudden doesn't work either. In other words, the mushrooms got poisoned, and so the dishwasher failed to start, which resulted in the bannister breaking in the house two doors away. A string of events that are not supposed to be connected suddenly were connected. Maybe something was going on. Maybe there are occult forces working in nuclear plants. How do they know? They don't know. They're playing with very dangerous stuff.

So, sure I'd be against nuclear plants. What's the alternative? Say you threw away all nuclear plants. Immediately the oil companies take one more huge gobble out of America. The Arab nations are not terribly in love with us, they're a bunch of rich fuckups and they're so lucky they've got to be on the side of Satan. You know, having to be shitting on that desert sand for 5,000 years and suddenly be rich people. It violates every single thing.

Anyway, there they are. They are going to get huge power, those fat suck-asses in Houston, who got sort of three congenital idiots, three generations back in the family, and one of them went out to take a crap one day and an oil gusher hit him in the asshole and now they're the wealthiest people in River Oaks . . . they're going to be controlling all the world and you know what that means. That means there'll be more plastics everywhere, because the oil industry now makes half its profits on plastics that come from the crap they can't do anything else with; they make the plastics that our children play with. Of course the other alternative is, we build up the coal and the air will be full of smog again. And they'll be stripmining the face of America. So we're up against it. We're at a point where if you go out and march, you're marching right up your own hole.

Legs: You've used pot and amphetamines . . .

Norman: Amphetamines I haven't used much. Bennies a little bit. Never used amphetamines.

Legs: . . . and claimed it caused irreversible damage to your thought process.

Norman: Yeah, I think it did.

Legs: How do you feel about kids smoking pot now?

Norman: I always tell my kids—I don't know if they listen or not—that what I think is, get their education first and then start smoking pot. At least there's something to run downhill with. Because what I find is that pot puts things together. Pot is marvelous for getting new connections in the brain. It's divine for that. You think associatively on pot, so you can really have extraordinary thoughts. But the more education you have, the more you have to put together at that point, the more wonderful connections there are to see in the universe. If you don't know much, then the connections you can put together are limited. You get that oh wow, or oh man, I'm going to get into that, and I'm going to get into anthropology, and I'm going to get into legal machinations, fascinating stuff, I'm going to get into comic books. And so on. Or pyramids, yes. So the trouble is, there you got to stop and idle your mental motor because you don't have the culture to put together at that point.

So I'm always giving my kids this pep talk about, get it together and then take your ride. Whether they listen to me is another matter. It's a rare kid that's going to listen to his father.

Legs: Have you done cocaine and other drugs?

Norman: Once in a while. I don't like it.

Legs: Why?

Norman: It doesn't do much for me. It's very much like on a speed trip. I've had pure cocaine and that's just a little less than a speed trip. It puts me in a very ugly mood. It brings out something ugly in me I don't like.

Talking about hating women . . . I think most guys that take cocaine steadily have a lot of animosity toward women. At least the only time I feel a deep animosity toward women is on cocaine.

Legs: What about heroin?

Norman: Never taken it.

Legs: Any reason?

Norman: Just never ran into it. I mean, there was a period in my life when I was thinking about taking it out of curiosity. I'm not sure, I think I might have been a little scared of it.

Legs: Would you want to survive a nuclear war?

Norman: Probably not. The thought is beyond my imagination. It's like saying, would you like to survive a deep cancer operation? Maybe, maybe not.

Legs: What are your ideas on cancer?

Norman: Well, I used to feel that it was a punishment given to those who didn't have enough balls to live their own life—going back to talking about what is masculinity—if there was a failure in masculinity. I'm beginning to think that was too simple. A lot of people get cancer because they were too responsible with their lives. They led lives that were more responsible than they really wanted to be. They lived their lives for others more than for themselves. Denied themselves certain fundamental things, whatever they were.

Schizophrenics tend to die of cancer much less than the average population. I think the reason is that cancer is what I call a schizophrenia of the cells. I think there's a choice at a certain point. Either the mind goes or the body goes. I think we all, when we get into the crux in our lives . . . Do you know what the crux is? When you're going through the single most difficult moment in rock climbing. And if you can get through that, you probably get all the way to the top if you have enough strength left. I think everybody goes through a crux in their lives. And in the course of going through that crux I think we get driven very near toward this insanity of the mind and the flesh. And at that moment certain fundamental decisions may be made. Certain people opt for letting the mind go, other people opt for letting the body go. The cancer comes with that.

Cancer is a revolution of the cells. . . .

Legs: Do you think we're heading into an age of religious wars, with all these cults?

Norman: I think as the chaos increases, and the entropy, I think there are going to be more and more local sects and local armies and gangs and everything. And people will look for groups. There's no question about it.

If you're part of the garbage and say, I'm an orange peel, look there's another orange peel over there, you know us orange peels got to stick together. Yeah I think that'll happen. Sure. I think within every entity there's a tendency for form to reassert itself at a local level. So you will have all these groups and cults. As the great religions begin to deteriorate—the truly great religions like Catholicism and Muhammadanism perhaps—the cults will grow and grow and grow in strength. And they eventually will have a large

historic effect, and maybe coup d'états and all. Cults fighting cults in the streets and cults taking over the seats of power in government. But not right now. Not for some years.

Legs: There's one thing that we didn't get into at all. Can war be glorious? The last chapter of Phillip Knightley's *The First Casualty*, the book about war correspondents, was entitled "War Is Fun." Some war correspondents said things like, where else can you go and shoot a rocket and then play with a bazooka and drive around on a motorcycle and drive around in a tank. Yes, this is fun. I mean, everyone knows from Vietnam about the horrors of war. But do you think it can be fun, and can it be glorious?

Norman: It's just like everything else in life. Most people don't have fun in life. Most people don't have fun in war. War is an extension of life. You can have more fun in war than anyplace, obviously. Everything else being equal, you can screw the most ordinary girl in the world and if while you're doing it the artillery is firing over the whorehouse, it's pretty exciting. You got to face it. You're more likely to fall in love with the girl on that night than you would back home. In that sense, yeah, of course war can be fun.

Legs: Did you have fun?

Norman: No, that was my gripe. I didn't have any fun in the war. I was mad as hell. I wanted to go over to Europe and live in the Paris whorehouses, and instead I ended up getting yellow jaundice in the Philippines.

High Legs: If you were mayor of New York City, if you and Breslin had won, how would you have changed the city?

Norman: There's no telling now. I think we would have gotten into all the trouble that Lindsay got into, that Beame got into. Everybody would have said it's those idiot amateurs we elected. If we had a couple of real pros in there, all this trouble could have been avoided.

Legs: Why did you run?

Norman: I told you I'm a religious man. I thought God came down to me and he said you've got to work for your sins, you're going to run for mayor of New York and you will be elected and you will never have an easy day again. You'll work for the rest of your life. So I really thought I was going to

get elected. I think it was only a week before the election I realized I was not going to.

Legs: Was it funny to you, the idea of you running for mayor?

Norman: That was the newspapers' idea. There was nothing fun about it. It's the hardest, most boring work I ever did in my life. First of all, Breslin doesn't like to work hard any more than I do, and it meant getting up at six in the morning and shaking a thousand hands before breakfast, which probably was the best part of the whole job. Because you could feel better at the end of it than when you started, and what that meant was there was more goodness than evil in the thousand hands you were shaking. It was a phenomenon. Nine days out of ten you'd shake a thousand hands and feel better. That part was okay.

I had to make the same speech ten times a day, however. You get awfully bored hearing your own voice. To this day I can smell and taste my own spit because of running for mayor ten years ago. And you get bored with yourself, very bored with yourself. It's terrible.

Legs: Are you glad you didn't win?

Norman: No, I wanted to win. You don't like losing. It does something funny to your ego forever. And there was a kind of, what can I say? You worked from six in the morning till midnight, two in the morning. At the end of the day you're stuck with your staff that you looked at every day for two months. You're sick of looking at them and they're sick of looking at you. It's airless and boring and very hard work. I'd never run again unless I was ready to die for the idea. And that's the only reason to get into politics if you're not a pro. Be ready to live in the very center of your idea.

POSTSCRIPT: PUNK ROCK MEETS THE GODFATHER OF LETTERS

MICHAEL L. SHUMAN

WHEN PROTO-PUNK LEGS MCNEIL FIRST MET NORMAN MAILER in Martha Thomases' apartment in 1979, Legs had no idea that he would be curating a new audience for the iconic author who had just published *The Executioner's*

Song. Mailer, whose norm-defying literary work has a punk attitude all its own, accepted McNeil's invitation to see the buzzsaw guitar band Ramones along with Shrapnel, a group McNeil managed, at The Policeman's Bullet Proof Vest Benefit, a charitable event at the raucous New York City punk venue CBGB. Mailer showed up at the club in the memorable way that McNeil describes in his prefatory note, apparently drawing attention away from the regular leather jacket and safety-pin crowd and toward a middle-aged author and his stunning companion and later wife, Norris Church.

Mailer attended the after-show party, too, and as the gathering grew increasingly inebriated, Mailer asked Legs to interview him at his Brooklyn Heights apartment the next day. McNeil's website, *Please Kill Me* (<https://pleasekillme.com/norman-mailer-legs/>), describes his interview arrangement with Mailer a bit differently, decades later, than McNeil recounts here, in his original *High Times* headnote. McNeil, in a moment perhaps defining the punk-rock lifestyle, woke up the next morning with a hangover and some girl but no memory of the serendipitous interview appointment. His afterparty friends remembered, though, and pestered him to reschedule. The resulting interview, a wide-ranging dialogue illuminating Mailer's thoughts on important issues and milestones in life, was published in the September 1979 issue of *High Times*, a magazine intended for an audience usually expecting mind-expanding features of a different type. McNeil soon became a frequent visitor to the Mailer's household, and *Rolling Stone*, a countercultural magazine covering the punk scene and appealing to the *High Times* audience, printed snarky "Random Notes" entries about Shrapnel's performances at Mailer parties and Mailer's impromptu wrestling match with McNeil.

The Executioner's Song spent 25 weeks on the bestseller list and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1980. What small amount of this success resulted from that brief exposure to the *High Times* pot-head audience is a matter for insoluble conjecture, but Mailer's appreciation for punk rock music and a new base of fringe-culture friends is undeniable, lasting experiences he could draw upon while producing his later genre-bending works.