

**Transcript – Director Tom Thurman Interview**

**Subject: Upcoming Hunter S. Thompson documentary, “Buy The Ticket, Take The Ride”**

**11/22/06**

**Via Phone from New Jersey to Lexington, Kentucky**

*James Campion: I just finished watching your film for the second time, and having reviewed Wayne Ewing’s documentary on Thompson, Breakfast With Hunter, and subsequently discussing that film with him, and then, upon Hunter’s death, penning a eulogy for him, not to mention having met the man and being a huge fan of his, I must say, Buy The Ticket, Take The Ride is a fantastic overview of not only Thompson’s work but the unique perspective on the art created as a result of it.*

Tom Thurman: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate that.

*The theme of your documentary appears to begin by concentrating on the legend of Hunter S. Thompson and the films that grew from that legend, but then, I found, as it went along it became more of a homage to Thompson as a writer and an icon. Did you find that it went in that direction by sheer force of Thompson’s literary legacy or did you originally set it up to go in both directions at once?*

Well, I started out, prior to making the film, as a fan, and I certainly didn’t wanted it to turn out to be some kind of lightweight, superficial, valentine to the man. That’s why you have that section about two-thirds or four-fifths through the project where we discuss in a critical fashion how Hunter became a victim of his own persona, and how that contributed to his lack of productivity for quite a while. But at the same time we wanted to place him in some kind of historical context, to place him in some kind of literary context, and to bring together as many people from his life – family members, colleagues, friends, cultural critics who had never met Hunter, but knew him through his work – to try and place him in some kind of overall context for the general viewer. So one of the main venues we selected for doing that was to discuss in some kind of detail the two motion picture depictions/adaptations, *Where The Buffalo Roam* and *Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas*, because, as sad as it might be, there are a lot of people who have come to Hunter S. Thompson through the film adaptations, and they know more about Bill Murray and Johnny Depp than they know about his writing. So the real aim was to be able to discuss these issues and these themes and ultimately try and send many of these viewers back to what’s most important, and that’s his writings.

*I know that was Hunter’s main fear, having had conversations with him years ago and having watched the BBC piece from the late-seventies which you use in the film wherein Thompson talks about the Duke character from the Trudeau comics, and, of course, Ralph Steadman’s creations literarily forcing him to become this cartoon character. This became even more pronounced a fear when Hunter fired the original director of *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* because he wanted to use cartoons from Steadman’s drawings to describe the famous “Wave” scene from the book, which I know Hunter held sacred.*

Yeah, and I think some of those fears came true. To a dangerous degree, he was trapped by a persona that he himself created and felt he had to live up to. Many people, whether it was John Cusack, who knew him towards the last ten or fifteen years of his life, as well as people like Ralph Steadman, who knew him for 35 years, all agreed that that was a trap that he at least partially fell into.

*I thought your film, almost as metaphor, created a Gonzo style. Being a journalist, I noticed how the film has a punching lead at the top, you touch upon certain elements as introduction, and then you dig deeper. Was that something on your radar before you began filming, or did you script it that way? Or perhaps it came about as you were compiling the interviews and back-stories?*

No, we didn't script it out that way. As a matter of fact, it's just the opposite in my mind, in many ways. I did not want to try to be Gonzoesque in my creation. There is one essential creator of Gonzo, one practitioner, and that's Hunter, and no one can be Hunter. So one trap I wanted to avoid was mimicking his style. I simply wanted to gather as many varied and articulate participants together, people who knew Hunter for much of his life, and many who knew him towards the end of his life, and others in-between, and still others that hardly knew him personally at all, and try to come up with some kind of coherent, unified storyline that would help enlighten viewers as to who he was, what he was about, and hopefully send them back to his books. A more Gonzo approach would have tried to lean heavily into including myself as a major character in the documentary, which I avoid doing, thankfully.

*Right, but I was mostly referring to the Gary Busey bit that opens the film. It's hilarious in this cinéma vérité way, where he's completely off the wall trying to direct you to direct him and attempts to act naturally by putting on this show. It draws the viewer into the film the way Thompson would use a lead paragraph to draw the reader into one of his pieces.*

That's an interesting point, James, and in the introduction of my film I thought about Thompson's phrase, "It never got weird enough for me", and I was thinking of trying to please Hunter, if you will, by coming up with an introduction that would not only provide some kind of a segue into the overall perspective of the documentary, but also try to show people that this was not going to be one of these staid, somber, completely sober looks at the man, but would hopefully be a little bit of fun. After all, Hunter always wanted to be the Champion of Fun.

*(laughs)*

And that opening seemed like the perfect vehicle for me to show that I didn't want to lose sight of the fun myself.

*So, in a way, just like a journalist, or as Hunter would approach it, instead of fighting the moment, you ease into it, become apart of it and let it go its own way, so as to best*

*capture it.*

I was doing a documentary once on the history of basketball in Kentucky for the PBS affiliate here in Lexington, and while shooting a segment on street basketball covering a street basketball tournament, I was setting up the chair and the tri-pod where we wanted to do some interviews courtside, and this young kid, about nine or ten year's old, would not leave me alone. Every time I turned around he was under my feet. Every time I turned around he was in the chair asking to be interviewed. And, you know, I shooed him away two or three times, but he kept coming back – he was just the sweetest little kid you could imagine, real bright – and finally, thank God, it dawned on me that the segment had presented itself to me. Here's this nine, ten year-old kid who wanted to play basketball, who loved basketball, and who was there to play that afternoon, and I realized that everything I set-up for in advance and planned meticulously was not going to be nearly as good as what dropped in my lap. So I ended up interviewing the kid extensively and made him the segment. So you have to be open to those possibilities, and that's what happened with the Gary Busey scenario.

*There are two key quotes early on in the film that I wrote down from two separate sources interviewed for the piece that I took as a set-up to a kind of thesis and then drive home throughout the film. The first one is the Bill Murray quote about what Hunter had told him while he was getting ready to portray Thompson in Where The Buffalo Roam, "It's always good to act crazy first, so later you can appear normal."*

(chuckles)

*And the other, in Tom Marksbury's narration, is how Hunter seemed to be at the center of all these things that happened in the wild sixties and seventies and remained in that center until the end. Your film does a remarkable job of setting about proving out these two observations.*

Those are two key quotes. Like most artists, whether you're a painter or a sculptor or a journalist or whatever it might be, you've got to provide some distance, you've got to create some space for you to operate, and I think Thompson did that throughout his life. He needed the peace and quiet of Woody Creek to retreat to, to have some kind of normal existence and connections with human beings to help temper the madness that was a part of his other world. And he really was this kind of central figure in the sixties and seventies. Joe Petro, the artist, called him the Dalai Lama of writers. People would flock to him. Really, Woody Creek became the center, almost like a salon in Paris, where people would make pilgrimages. Might be politicians, might be sports figures, might be filmmakers, might be other writers, he was a kind of sun around which other planet revolved. People felt the heat from Hunter. They knew there was something unique going on there, and they wanted to get a piece of it, to be influenced by it.

*Old friends like Harry Dean Stanton, Ralph Steadman, George McGovern, and some of his family members all have a voice in the film, but how did you come upon some of the other subjects interviewed for the film? For instance, Nick Nolte narrates. Why Nolte?*

*Was he a huge fan? Or was it merely his deep, gravelly voice, which sounds so perfect for the material?*

I approached Nick Nolte. He did not approach me. But when I did, he was very open to assuming that job. He was incredibly gracious and did a terrific job, and I guess I selected Nolte, not only because of the quality of his voice, but because Nolte is kind of the actor equivalent of Hunter. He's lived a very colorful life, he's created a great body of work, Nolte and Hunter were friends, and all of those qualities combined led me seek out Nick Nolte to do the job. And he does have that kind of three-o'clock-in-the-morning-four-packs-of-cigarettes-smoked-already-whiskey-driven-gravelly voice that is not completely the opposite of what you would think would parallel Hunter's stories, so I ended up being really pleased with that selection. He really came through for me.

*He certainly did. I was going to say, you've got all the bad boys here, Sean Penn, Busey, Johnny Depp, Nolte, guys whose pictures we've seen in the paper, mug shots, incidents of random violence and substance abuse, etc. They also parallel that side of Hunter that spark of mischievousness. And to hear them all speak so soberly, so reverentially of Hunter and his memory lends itself to both the Hollywood side of your film, the art concept, and also the literary one, because all of these men are fans of the work.*

I think so. Many of the people I selected to participate in this, very few of them are poster children for the wellness center.

*(laughs)*

And that's perfectly fitting for a documentary about Doctor Gonzo.

*How about the Murray/Depp parallels; both played him in the films we've mentioned, and both talk about the Hunter characterizations, his idiosyncrasies, how his mannerisms almost possessed them in many way. I've read several stories about Murray during the making of Ghostbusters and even during rehearsals for Saturday Night Live of fellow cast members and other actors chiding him for still having Hunter channeled into his performances. Murray even warned Depp of this, which Depp mentions in the film.*

The project originated with STARZ Entertainment, and they are, of course, a movie channel, and so early on in our negotiations our plan was to in some way incorporate both *Where The Buffalo Road* and *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* into this documentary, because on a pop culture level so many people have come into contact with Hunter's legend and iconography through those two films. On a serious and more in-depth level, of course, people have come to Thompson as readers, but as sad or unfortunate as it might be, more people watch films and go to the movies than they read. So it was a way to not only approach the people who know Thompson through what he's written but to also cast a wider net and go after those people who may have not read much of his stuff, certainly not all of his stuff, but they know about him through the film adaptations. That's the discussion we had early on in the project and something we wanted to pursue from the get-go.

*So it's a means to an end: You have this production company, they're a cable television outlet, but you want to do a serious depiction of a serious author whom you respect greatly, and you decide the pop culture/film angle would be best to get the film made and distributed. I would guess you knew some of these big names respected and loved Hunter enough to participate, which is not only good for getting the film made, but to give it a home for distribution.*

Yeah, that was essentially part of the package from the very start. And if you look at our discussion of those two films it doesn't comprise anywhere close to a majority of our on-screen time. We try to deal with those issues in a way that's commensurate with the entire story, but we didn't want to over-concentrate so much on those two film adaptations that we ignored Thompson's Kentucky upbringing, that we would ignore great relationships he developed over the years such as with George McGovern or concentrate on the films so much that we would ignore people like William F. Buckley Jr., who, although he was not a companion of Thompson's in any way, obviously had and still has great admiration for Thompson's work as a wordsmith even though they might come from pretty different political perspectives.

*I was actually quite surprised at Buckley's appearance and how complimentary towards Hunter he is in the film, although in some cases backhandedly, and not because of the political angle, which is severe, certainly, but because the week after Thompson's death in early 2005, Buckley wrote a scathing obituary in his magazine, almost to the point of referring to Hunter as a clown, a product of college drunken mentality. So it was actually quite refreshing to hear Buckley's more insightful comments, almost as if he had time to reexamine the worth of Thompson's influence and work.*

I think he did. He does have some critical comments to say in the documentary, which we, of course, include.

*And fair ones.*

Yes, but I think Buckley is drawn to him as a stylist, as a practitioner, as a wordsmith, and I think whatever qualms he had with him on a personal level, I think his admiration and respect for him as a writer was the overriding factor in his decision to participate in the documentary.

*Did you approach this project as a labor of love, as a proud Kentuckian? I know Wayne Ewing had come to his film as a proud Coloradian. Also, is it something you have always wanted to do since getting into making documentaries, maybe some years ago when Hunter was still alive? Or perhaps is it something you felt you needed to do in tribute after his death?*

I have for many years wanted to do a documentary on Hunter S. Thompson, but have never found anyone to partner with in order to produce it. So given my Kentucky upbringing, the fact that I was raised 30 miles from Louisville, the fact that I live just

right down the road in Lexington, 85 miles away, of course, contributed to my interest, initially as a reader and then as a filmmaker wanting to do a serious documentary about Thompson. And also combined with the fact that the television company I'm partnering with to create this film and distribute it, STARZ, is headquartered in Colorado. So both those things combined made Thompson a good type-fit.

*One of the more moving pieces in the film is an excerpt of something Hunter had written on Muhammad Ali, who Thompson was a fan of and covered, and is a fellow Louisville native, wherein he describes beautifully how Ali lived his life, pursued challenges, and took no quarter, which also, in every way, describes Hunter Thompson. Once again, it seems like a topic or angle you wanted to weave into the story, focusing on not only the sixties icon image, but the Kentucky roots.*

I wanted use Muhammad Ali, number one, as an example of Hunter's long-standing attraction to an interest in sports, number two, Ali, like Thompson, was born and raised in Louisville, and came to prominence, really, almost at the same exact time, and also to use that passage because it seemed to me, in a way, that Hunter was talking about himself when talking about Ali.

*Right. That's how I saw it.*

And it seemed like it worked on many different levels. And so you've got Thompson, the original creator of the passage, from Louisville, writing about Muhammad Ali, who was also from Louisville and was such a key cultural figure at the time, being read by Johnny Depp, who is also from Kentucky, and is one of the leading entertainment-industry figures in the entire world. So there seemed to be an interesting confluence of Kentucky connections there that I wanted to pull together and present in the documentary.

*And of course the filmmaker is a Kentuckian.*

Right.

*I thought your use of the clips from the Murray and Depp films was an extremely clever way to illustrate or underline what subject you were touching upon at that point in the documentary. It was the most interesting twist for me – the use of the visuals, the cartoonish, almost iconic vision of Hunter Thompson – juxtaposed with the words and sentiments of his friends and colleagues, along with his striking text.*

The aim all along would be not to create some random series of sequence between interviews and participant bites and film clips, but to create some kind of sophisticated, evocative interplay between the film clips and the interview participants, to have one feed into the other, for there to be some kind of energy between the people on camera and the film clips that I can use to illustrate people's attempts to bring Hunter's work to film, to try to bring his personality to a general audience and to carefully study the films themselves, and to carefully conduct these interviews to give me the widest potential possible for creating some kind of sophisticated evocative interplay between the two

elements so then I can maybe educate people and hopefully entertain them and let them have a little fun at the same time.

*Is there a part of your film that excites you as the artist creating it? In other words, is there a moment when, perhaps when cutting it, you're sitting there and saying to yourself, "You know what, I nailed this thing"?*

Well, there are so many terrific interviews that I was very lucky to get. Of course I realized I was lucky to get them not because of my previous work, my resume, or my winning personality, I got them because these people were so committed to Hunter. So I don't have any delusions on how I got these interviews. But I have to admit that the one that surprised me the most was Nick Tosches, because I went to New York, and I knew I wanted to interview Tom Wolf, and I knew I wanted to interview William F. Buckley, but I'm a *fan* of Nick Tosches. Certainly my writing partner, Tom Marksbury, who wrote all the voice-over narration, has been a bigger fan of Tosches than I have been, and he recommended we talk to Nick. And he was so elegant, and he had such a great feel to him, and he was so articulate and poignant in his comments, that I knew during that interview session that even though he was not intricately involved in Thompson's life or world that he would play a major role in the final cut, just because of what he brought to the party. Then, of course, it made perfect sense when I later found out that Nick Tosches and Johnny Depp are close friends. So you learn a lot about people, and a lot about their scenarios the deeper you get into them, and it was just my luck the subject matter was something as rich as Hunter Thompson.

*How many films have you done now?*

Independent documentaries? Ten.

*This is your latest one, and it's coming out in a couple of weeks, so I'm sure you are excited and anxious about its release, but what are your overall feelings about the film now that it is completed and about to be seen? How long did it take you to make the film, by the way?*

Fourteen months.

*So after all of that, on the eve of its release, are you excited that all the hard work and planning and compilation of this material on a favorite subject will finally see the light of day, or are there nerves jangling inside?*

Well, at this point, this close to its premier, I have that unique combination of intense excitement and extreme dread.

*(laughs) Of course. At least you don't have to worry about the box office stuff, which is so tough for documentations. But I have to say, I saw the Bukowski film a couple of years back, Live Through This, which was compelling for sure, Wayne Ewing's film following Hunter, which was great, but I think Buy The Ticket, Take The Ride, is right up there*

*with them. I thought you truly captured Hunter's essence, the soul of his persona and work, which many times intercede with each other, and it was an interesting film in and of itself.*

Well, I appreciate that. You know, it was the best omelet I could make with a chainsaw.

*(laughs) And having spoken to Hunter, as I said earlier, a few times later in his life, you truly nailed that playful, impish thing he possessed that really was lovable despite his overt wackiness, so great job, again.*

I really appreciate it. You know, for a documentary filmmaker to be given this freedom with this subject matter and be able to cut loose and somehow get William F. Buckley Jr., Sean Penn, Johnny Depp, Nick Tashi and Nick Nolte all crammed into one film, and have someone like Ed Bradley...I've thought about Ed a lot this past week.

*Sure, with his recent passing.*

It was so noble of him. He's sitting there on camera and he's just had open-heart surgery, and he's a little frail, still looking good, and sounding good, and then he makes statements such as "We were lucky to have Hunter as long as we did." And then now to know that, of course, he'd been struggling with Leukemia for years and *had* to be thinking about his own mortality at the same time he'd be giving me time for the interview. So there's a lot of moments that you experience that are poignant, and then later you find out they were even more meaningful and poignant than you even realized. You know, you learn a lot when you keep your eyes open, you experience a lot of things that you'll take with you for the rest of your life.

*Which pretty much defines being a documentarian, a writer, and certainly a journalist. Best of luck with the film.*

Appreciate it, man.

