

**WAYNE EWING INTERVIEW
TRANSCRIPT**

3/25/04

Conducted over the phone lines from his Unfortified Compound in Aspen, Colorado and The Desk at Fort Vernon.

jc: First of all, bravo.

Wayne Ewing: Well, thank you.

Excellent film. It totally hits home my point refuting all the Hunter Thompson things that always paint him as merely the clown prince of literature, and I think this one took us 180 degrees, and as a fan of the man's work, I really appreciate the effort.

And I appreciate your comments, because that was really my intent with the project to present a homage to Hunter as a writer and a great figure in American literature, and also, obviously, a very interesting personality.

(laughs) Right. In fact, I was wondering before embarking on this documentary if you ever had the chance to preview a BBC documentary from the 70s' that is currently part of the Criterion version of "Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas" in which they have Hunter and (famed English artist Ralph) Steadman go back to Las Vegas.

Sure, I've seen that, and I actually use a piece in the film that was done earlier by Thames television in the 70s', about Hunter's run for sheriff of Aspen.

The reason I bring it up, that was the closest depiction of Thompson I'd seen, and this is mainly because Hunter fought them tooth and nail throughout the thing, to present him as not over the top, despite their best efforts. And it was reminiscent, I thought, of a compelling moment in "Breakfast With Hunter" when Hunter is seen arguing vehemently with the doomed first director of "Fear & Loathing" not to make a goofy cartoon of his work. And in the BBC thing Thompson actually says, "It would be better for my work if I were dead. I get in the way."

In a way it is difficult to be true and honest to Hunter, in a sense to define your audience right away, because there are a certain number of people out there who are looking for the cliché, the cartoon character that has nothing to do with Hunter.

Well put. Now to the film itself; this was started in '96?

I'd been shooting off and on with him since '85 on, but what's primarily in "Breakfast With Hunter" is from about '96 to 2001 when I started shooting in digital video.

What kind of camera did you use?

I used the very first prosumer mini-digital camera that SONY put on the market, the VCR-VX 1000, and I used two of them. Very often I shot with two cameras by myself. (laughs) One in a fixed position, of course, so I could move around with the other.

What would be equivalent to that camera today, and what would have made your life easier with all the advances in digital video technology since the mid-90s'?

I guess what I would have wished for, which digital video didn't have the capability of doing back in the 90s', was 24-P, which is a frame-rate of 24 Progressive, the frame-rate of film. It would have been a lot easier to have made the conversion to making a 35 mm film print for theaters in the end, because that matches the true frame-rate of film at 24 frames per second. And it matches the other film I have in the documentary, for instance the Thames piece and the later scene, the segment of the credits at the end from the 80s'. So what you have to do is do a frame-rate conversion to make the 35 mm print. You have to pull the video back from 29.7 frames-per-second to 24, and you pick up some odd artifacts sometimes in pans and movements, but I think it came out pretty well in the end.

So that's the one thing that would have been great. Also, cameras with better low-light capability exist now, and I'm not sure I wouldn't have wanted to shoot it in high definition, which is about to be available in camcorders. I know JVC has had one on the market for over a year, but SONY is about to come out with their own mini-high definition camera.

How did you mike the subjects? Was that the mike on the cameras most of the time and you had to sync it up? Or did you use a boom, or maybe lav Hunter from time to time?

All of the above. It depends on the scene. Sometimes it's just the camera mike when I'm really close to people and a larger microphone wouldn't have gotten in the way and impeded things. Generally in the kitchen at Owl Farm (Thompson's home in Colorado) was a combination of a planted mike which is right in front of Hunter by the typewriter, Norman Cartiode mike that I just experimented with and found reproduced Hunter's voice the best of any mike I tested. And that has a big cardioid pattern. For instance in the argument scene you mentioned with Alex Cox, all the audio pretty much comes from there, until they're all the way by the refrigerator in which case I'll use the camera mike on them. And then sometimes I'll use lavalieres. In the scene on the DVD extras when (Rolling Stone writer) P.J. O'Rourke is interviewing Hunter, P.J.'s coming off a radio mike while Hunter is coming off the Normal in front of the typewriter. And finally, there was a shotgun mike I mounted on the camera.

So you really aimed to be unobtrusive in many ways, from hotel rooms and inside Owl Farm where it doesn't look to be roomy enough for too much roaming, and you don't want to be intimidating either. And that's the great thing about your film, not only does it stay true to presenting Hunter as one of the greatest living American writers, and I think he is, along with (Kurt) Vonnegut, the idea that these people could act freely as if you are actually a fly on the wall.

Yes, especially when you are using a cinéma vérité style, and that's always been my goal

in film. I was very much inspired by the original P.A. Pennebaker films like “Don’t Look Back”. Have you seen that?

I did. It’s brilliant. I have it on DVD. I love it.

When I was at film school I stole a print from the local film society when they had it for the weekend and analyzed it on the workbench and was just totally intrigued. And that’s what got me involved in film in the first place, was hearing a lecture when I was at Yale by Richard Leacock, who was Pennebaker’s partner in the early cinéma vérité films. In fact, in the beginning I shot my first film on a twenty-pound camera they used to shoot Woodstock. (laughs) So with the evolution of digital camera it makes the problems involved with making cinéma vérité truly possible – to become the fly on the wall. If you have that kind of persona, that you can become egoless and just disappear amongst people, and I got lucky that I was able to get among the people around Hunter and spent that amount of time.

And it goes to show you how difficult it must have been for the Maysles’ Brothers to do that Beatles documentary they did on the train from New York to Washington during their first U.S. visit in ’64, a film I think they originally called “What’s Happening”, but is out now on a DVD called “The First U.S. Visit” or something or other. And I think that film actually inspired “A Hard Day’s Night” and even Pennebaker’s work later on.

I’ve got to get that.

So how did you pitch this film idea to Hunter originally? I understand you worked on some of his last few letters books with him.

I wasn’t the primary editor, but I helped with the editing on *The Proud Highway*, compiling the letters from 1968 on, and pretty much helped out on every book since then. And that was somewhere around ’96, and then I helped with *Fear & Loathing In America*, the second volume of letters, also *Kingdom of Fear*, the last one that came out a year ago. I worked a bunch on *Rum Diary*, the resurrection of his first novel, and a zillion columns back in the 80s’ when Hunter worked for the San Francisco Chronicle, and finally his latest columns for ESPN.com called “Hey Rube”.

Which I understand there is a compilation of those coming out.

In July, yes.

So would you say you gained his confidence through friendship and then you pitched the idea to him, or you did you just keep filming? Because he seems comfortable throughout the thing. His former girlfriend and producer of the finished “Fear & Loathing” film, Laila Nabulsi says something revealing about Hunter in your film, something to the effect that “What would Hunter do without an audience to play to?” Which is why I love the periodic metaphoric shots of the peacocks on Owl Farm throughout the film in between some of Thompson’s more showy moments. I’m going to assume, and set me straight

if I'm wrong, that you appealed to that part of Hunter that likes to have the world be a voyeur to his celebrated lifestyle.

In part, but the other thing is that Hunter describes Gonzo journalism as “a reporter with the eye and mind of a camera” and he has literally obsessed with documenting what is going on around him. So, in a sense, I became an instrument for this great ongoing experiment in Gonzo Journalism, and was able to do what he has always wanted to do. An example would be the video footage of Hunter setting fire to the Christmas tree and jamming it into the fireplace. (laughs) And that was something he did himself! (really laughing) I think maybe he realized it was good having someone like me around to do a better job of documenting that kind of mayhem.

So that's how I came to know Hunter, as a documentary filmmaker. I met him briefly on the road, but really got to know him during a long weekend in San Francisco we spent together at the O'Farrell Theater. And I made contact with him about the idea of doing something with him for (PBS Show) Frontline. And I had a little rise out of David Fanning, the executive producer, on the basis of that weekend. So I spent my own money to go out to Owl Farm and spend a little time with Hunter, but by the time I got back from San Francisco (laughs) Fanning was like, “Are you crazy? If PBS supported a film about Hunter Thompson as the night manager of the O'Farrell Theater, the Carnegie Hall of public sex in America, congress would go crazy.” (laughs) So they pretty much told me not to call again. And that was the basis of the friendship and it sort of evolved from there.

And it comes across in the film. And that, I think, is the nut. Because I think if you had been simply a documentary filmmaker, and this is why I keep harkening back to that BBC film, you can tell Hunter is putting on his show for them. For instance, when I first met Hunter in the early 90s 'and I hadn't been a published author yet, immediately there was a different feel, a different approach to his demeanor. It was more how he is portrayed early documentaries or films, like the one with Bill Murray (“Where the Buffalo Roam”), but when I gave him a copy of my second book about a year and half or two years ago, I could tell immediately how much his persona had changed. He talked with me far more seriously. And having had that experience, I get that side of Hunter from your film. You can tell that the guy trusts you. Not that Hunter trusted me, but I think he feels a certain bond with fellow writers or those who joined him in busting their ass to be published.

That's true. It's earning your stripes with Hunter. It takes a long time to earn the kind of trust I needed to complete a film like this. So for every night I filmed, there might be 15 that I wouldn't, when I would just work on books with him or hang out or watch ball games.

So you became part of the furniture in a lot of ways. So when you did turn the camera on, you were always there anyway.

(laughs) Exactly.

I guess that would be a good vehicle for access. Judging by Hunter's notorious mercurial

personality, was there ever a time where he turned on you? Or was he on board the entire time?

I'd say he was on board pretty much the entire time. I watched him like a hawk. So I could tell if he was irritated or didn't want to be filmed, but that was rare. There would be a few times when he didn't feel like doing anything. In fact, more so, he would get upset with me because I wasn't filming. I seemed to get him going in terms of getting ideas and writing, the idea that something important is happening right then, I guess.

I liked the scenes where he's watching bits you see earlier in the film. You're watching him watch himself and getting a kick out of it, a reverse cinéma vérité in itself.

(laughs) A "Gimmie Shelter" trick.

(laughs) Another Maysles' Brothers classic.

Right.

That reminds me. What was conspicuous by its absence, I thought, and the only disappointment I had with the film, and I'm thinking you may have had a deeper agenda for leaving it out, was there were no real shots of Hunter writing. Now someone might argue, and that someone might be you, "Well, who wants to watch footage of someone typing?" But I would have liked to see some snippet of that in the film.

Yeah, it's true. And actually I have quite a few shots of him sitting there at the typewriter, trying to write. (laughs)

Send it to me!

(laughs) I was trying to think of how to best use them, really. Maybe it's something for the second edition DVD, because actually we're still shooting all the time. I actually wanted to shoot the whole lifecycle of a "Hey Rube" column, a little scene of Hunter writing a column. So we might have something like that in the next edition. But yeah, (laughs) the only thing about Hunter is watching him write is a little like watching paint dry.

(laughs) Yeah, I'll assume he doesn't apply the same kind of machinations Johnny Depp invented for "Fear & Loathing", rocking back and forth like a mental patient. But I have seen bits from other news things and documentaries of Hunter in front of the typewriter plying his trade and its inspirational for me as a fan and also as a fellow scribe having pained over columns and manuscripts before, to see someone I respect immensely, like I say, plying the craft.

No, it's true. There should be more of that in the film.

Are you serious about doing a sequel to "Breakfast With Hunter"? Or is it nuts to think

you'll spend the rest of your life following this man, although you'd do a great service for the rest of us who love him.

(laughs) Thanks. Yeah, well I do a lot of other things too. I've made a lot of other films along the way over the past ten years, directed a lot of television, and I'm actually about to start another film, a sequel to my very first film that was called, "If Elected", another cinéma vérité film. But with Hunter it is always an ongoing process. We shoot for fun, really, with the idea being that there will be a second edition coming out in the next year or so with some more extras.

You know what would be great? I don't know if he's talked about this at all, and I know he's bailed on national politics since the publishing of his last overtly political book, Better Than Sex, but there's an obvious polarized electorate now, and I wonder if Hunter would want to go back and cover in any extensive way the 2004 presidential election. Perhaps not to the extent of the '72 election, but just getting back into the mix, and try and get that on film.

That's possible. He's real involved in local politics; at least until he was delayed a bit since he broke his leg in December while covering the Hawaii marathon. It was a freak accident. In fact, he's just getting the cast off now. But he's heavily involved in politics, and writes extensively about it in the ESPN.com columns. And he's talked about trying to revive the voter registration effort that revolved around Freak Power, under another name at this point, because the name doesn't apply to our times, but still, there is a great deal of disenfranchised youth who don't bother to vote or think it is a waste of time or stupid to vote instead of getting involved. But as far as him going out on the campaign trail again, I doubt it, because starting after '72, Hunter's presence on the trail became the story itself. So it became harder and harder for him to cover it.

Hunter does mention the old adage that "politics is local" in your film, and certainly he once made his way by running for sheriff of Aspen, the details of which you cover in "Breakfast With Hunter", and I think it was Ken Kesey who said "once you reach some level of fame as an author it is harder to be the observer when you're the one being observed." And this is the problem I have with seeing Hunter speak over the years or at a book signing with these yahoos screaming and throwing joints at him, and you can see him getting more and more aggravated. So the idea of him becoming the anonymous Gonzo reporter anymore is ridiculous.

That's certainly true. Actually, he's really involved in, and writing a great deal right now about the case of a young girl named Lisl Alman.

Right. In Denver?

Yes. And he's just finished a piece that will appear in the next Vanity Fair with another writer, Mark Seal, about Lisl. The Colorado Supreme Court right now is considering her final appeal. They had oral arguments this past January. It's a fascinating case, because it's this felony murder law that takes the concept of conspiracy as far as infinity. I mean,

here is the case of this young girl sitting handcuffed in the back of a police car when a guy that she barely knew, who was going to help her move out of her apartment, killed a police officer while she was in custody. Now she's in jail for life with no parole for the charge of murder in Colorado.

And that's been three years running, I believe.

Yeah, we had a big rally in 2001 on the steps of the Colorado capital down in Denver that Hunter put together. So he's been real involved over here, and that's just as a result of that girl. He gets letters from people in prison all the time and he was thumbing through them and found hers. And it wasn't the usual, "I'm innocent! Get me out of here!" (laughs) In fact she wasn't even complaining about her case. She wrote him because they didn't have any of his books in the prison library.

(laughs)

And when he spoke with her she mentioned her case. And now it's a huge political fight in Denver that's had serious legal ramifications. He was able to pull together some great legal talent behind her appeal.

I think you mention in the commentary for the DVD that Johnny Depp helped with the film, as well as actor, Benicio Del Toro and the late George Plimpton. They along with Depp are depicted quite a bit in "Breakfast With Hunter" when Depp was researching the role of Raul Duke for "Fear & Loathing" and traveling with Hunter on one of his last book tours, but was their contribution at all financial or in helping in getting a distributor?

Well, just allowing me to film was a huge help. (laughs) For Johnny Depp to allow me into his home to film between four and six in the morning, where no one had ever filmed before, was incredible, and he even volunteered to carry my equipment for me. He was really such a gentleman. He really was. And Benicio too. Just allowing me to be around and hang with them, and to be unaffected by it relatively. And obviously there is a panache that comes in having their names attached to the film, and yet we don't have mainstream distribution, we're doing it ourselves.

The reason why people are buying the DVD is primarily because of Hunter, but, of course, it makes it more interesting to see Johnny and Hunter together in a fairly personal, intimate way. So that's what I mean by help. Nobody helped me financially except my brother, Andrew Ewing, who is executive producer. Other than that it was all my own resources.

How many years would you say you poured through all that footage to edit this thing, and getting to the final edit, if there ever really was a final edit, or did you just ran out of time and say, "I guess this will be the movie." (laughs)

Well, it was always evolving. I was cutting on it as I shot it. But in the end it took me about a year and a half, working pretty much full time, to cut it into the final form. I

would always want to finish it up at certain points, but Hunter would say, “Well, then, what would we do, Wayne?” (laughs) He didn’t want the process to be finished. And the only reason I was able to finish it in a timely manner in the end was I injured myself playing polo when a horse fell on me and broke my leg. So I couldn’t shoot, and I was working on a television show called “Crime and Punishment” at the time and all I could do was edit. (laughs) I had to sit down finally and edit. So it was a fortuitous accident.

Hunter never did finish that mysterious manuscript for “Polo is My Life” did he?

No, and that’s part of the reason why I got back into polo. (laughs) I used to play when I was a kid. We’d read the unfinished manuscript of “Polo is my Life” to sit and work on it. Someday it will be done, and it’s just incredible. It truly is. It’s the best analysis of the sport I’ve ever read with the hilarious Gonzo storylines and flourishes thrown into it. So it will be done one day.

You also have the late, Warren Zevon in the film, and in the extras writing a song with Hunter that later ended up on his “My Ride’s Here” record, which features lyrics by several writers. The two became close during the last ten years of Zevon’s life, and I know that sometime about six months after he was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer Hunter visited him in California. Did you film any of that? And if you did, was there a reason you didn’t use it?

I think you’re right about that. Hunter did get out to California to see Warren right after he was diagnosed, but I wasn’t with him on that trip. I was off on another assignment. But we did get that great footage you mentioned in the extras where they’re writing the song. It was more than a year or so before at Owl Farm.

Hunter lost a few of his compatriots over the years. I’ve mentioned two, Zevon and Plimpton, both of whom, again, are in the film. But I wonder if that sense of mortality has slowed Hunter down at all. I don’t see it in “Breakfast with Hunter”, but I guess I’m curious if in quieter moments he mentions it, or if he is still as hard charging and uncompromising as ever. You’d like to think so, but then you’d hope he could stay around longer, so we can get to read the finished “Polo is my Life”. (laughs)

You know, Hunter has lived his life to the fullest, but yet he does take care of himself. You know he had spinal surgery last summer. He was just recovering from that when he went out to cover the Hawaii marathon. And he was doing great physical therapy every day and joking about writing “Doctor Thompson’s Guide to Physical Fitness. (laughs)

(laughs) Yes, he mentioned that in “Hey Rube” last year.

(laughs) He’d go down to physical therapy with a scotch in one hand and a cigarette in the other on an exercise bicycle.

(laughs) The living anomaly. Hey, he also got married around then too, right?

Yes, last May.

Did you get a chance to shoot any of that?

I was unfortunately out of town. (laughs)

Damn! So do you know how that went down?

Actually the sheriff married he and Anita, sheriff Bob Braudis, who's a great friend. They went down to the courthouse and had the sheriff marry them. They did not want to make a big deal of it.

Well, beside the storytelling in the film, which I found compelling and very well done, especially his recent battles in Colorado with a DUI, coupled with snippets of his previous battles with the law and political battles, what really gave me the chills is a scene that is very rare in the annals of Hunter S. Thompson, because he prefers for other to do it, and that is read his own work. The way it is shot with the cigarette smoke wafting between he and the screen, sitting at the bar at the Woody Creek Tavern and reading an excerpt from probably my favorite of his work, Fear & Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72. To me, if they were to show something at his funeral that depicted him the way he should be depicted, as a serious satirist and commentator of our times, that scene hit it on the head.

Oh thanks. I really got lucky on that shot. I didn't even discover it until we got later into production – the little sign in the upper right hand corner of the screen that says “Drink” and his drink in the foreground with the endless stream of cigarette smoke. (laughs)

It's a great shot! It almost looks phony or staged; too good to be true for a documentary. It belongs in some kind of film noir. If it were in black and white it could be from another era.

Well, it shows that the trick for a documentary filmmaker is to pick the right angle, because it's always there, that really interesting visual shot. And you don't have to have a crew of 50 people and take six hours to shoot it. And believe me, I've worked with crews of 50 people and spent six hours shooting lighting stuff. But so often the real magic comes out of moments like that when you didn't do anything to plan it.

It speaks to a long-running fantasy of mine to finally get out to Woody Creek and hit the tavern and sit in the corner, have a pop and have Hunter walk in and slip next to me to sit and talk about writing for hours. (laughs)

(laughs) Yeah, that happens sometimes.

I've heard. Maybe I should spend a summer out there. Before we part, could you encapsulate what it was for you to make this film? If you hit the marks you wanted to? Perhaps a moment you remember from the experience that you'll take with you and that

will inspire more work with him in the future for the second volume of "Breakfast with Hunter".

I was incredibly lucky. For a documentary filmmaker to have that kind of access is just extraordinary. It would be like if I'd been able to spend 20 years with William Faulkner.

So you would say that ultimately the film expounds on what we talked about at the top, and that is presenting one of the great living literary figures of the last century in his idiom.

Yeah, for me it's a culmination of a career of trying to make a true cinéma vérité film, and I think this is. I think it works as well as any cinéma vérité film possibly could, and about an important subject at the same time.

And it depicts that subject in how you have come to know him as a friend.

Oh yeah, he's my friend.

