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Appreciation: Thompson went his own way

By Michael A. Stusser
Special to The Seattle Times

To be honest, most of us never figured he would make it this far.

Creator of the wildly inebriated gonzo style of journalism (and always far more sober than he let on), Hunter S. Thompson turned a gun on himself and took his own life this week at age 67.

(The man lived hard and was reportedly sick of his aching bones and failing liver. ... Better blaze out than fade away, eh?)

With a trademark cig in his mouth and Jack Daniel's atop his typewriter, Thompson was the best of the liberal lot, unafraid of the long arm of the law (in fact he once ran for sheriff of Aspen, Colo.) — or the drunken, dark truth he often stumbled upon. Inserting himself into the mob at events such as the '68 Democratic National Convention, Altamont with the Hell's Angels, and Saigon after the fall, Thompson used journalism to crank out uproarious diatribes on modern life and the underlying truth behind the cash-laden spin cycle that is now politics.

Most of his works were dope-addled first-person accounts, including his masterpiece, "Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas," and on-the-road journals from the presidential campaign trails in '72 and '76.

While critics called his new and irreverent style "a breakthrough in journalism," he likened the success of his stream-of consciousness copy more closely to "falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool of mermaids."

I was first introduced to Thompson's work in Berkeley, Calif., where "Fear & Loathing" was on the reading list alongside "Absalom, Absalom," "The Great Gatsby," and "For Whom the Bell Tolls."

In addition to capturing the hallucinogenic experience in a way the sci-fi "Naked Lunch" and the trying-too-hard "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" could not, "Fear & Loathing" takes a serious look at the hell that was Vietnam, our country's jury-rigged system of maintaining order for the wealthy, and each and every person's unhealthy obsession with the American Dream.

Not to mention the thing is flat-out hilarious. Who else would drop acid to properly cover a district attorneys' anti-drug conference, and wind up writing a groundbreaking novel about it? Thompson was an unwitting mentor to thousands of writers who wanted nothing more than to get loaded, scribe late into the night and bring down the hypocritical maggots in office. His use of language was a brilliant asset: depraved inebriates, mutant perverts, hype-mongering jerks,



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Hunter S. Thompson killed himself Sunday.

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intellectual cripples, freaks and right-wing swine — he bashed them all without mercy.



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Hardly a one-trick pony, the Doctor of Gonzo was a writing machine for more than 40 years, producing lengthy tomes of baked brilliance.

His collected letters ("Fear and Loathing in America," "The Gonzo Letters") detail prolific correspondence with hundreds of assorted colleagues, enemies and even disgruntled readers (whom he took particular joy in responding to and berating).

They also illustrate a tireless work ethic, a mad obsession with connecting to others from the safe distance of his fortified compound in Woody Creek, Colo., and an apparent lack of need for sleep or sustenance.

That's not to say he wasn't a bad influence — he was. I never would have tried mind-altering drugs had it not been for the scene he painted in "Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas" of stumbling around the Circus Circus Hotel, unable to exit a rotating bar while nubile gymnasts flew overhead, while seeing insane images of his dead grandmother crawling up his leg with a dagger clutched in her teeth.

Writing for Rolling Stone, Thompson grew famous during a time of turmoil after Vietnam and during the height of Watergate. At Rolling Stone, Thompson was the class clown on the press bus, the pit bull in the room for the strange and irreverent.

Though never a hippie himself (more a beatnik, but also a member of the NRA), he chronicled the sad loss of '60s ideals, and the beginning of an era of corporate greed — hoping the suited bastards would be "beaten like gongs."

In a letter to his Random House editor in 1970, he described the government as a group of mean-spirited idiots who "made democracy work by beating us all stupid with a series of billion-dollar hypes they call Defense Contracts, Special Subsidies and 'emergency tax breaks' for anybody with the grease to hire a Congressman." Sound familiar?

Larger than life, Thompson was portrayed by cartoonist Garry Trudeau as the zonked-out expatriate Duke, and his film incarnations were performed by the likes of Bill Murray and Johnny Depp. He was a public nuisance and — to put it bluntly — rude, compulsive, loaded and often belligerent. He was also smart as the dickens. He rode with Hell's Angels, partied with Gary Hart, President Carter, George McGovern and Warren Beatty.

Though his attention span waned in later years (as did his output), his writing was sharp as a shiv, lampooning the Bush juggernaut, cultural trends, even sporting events for ESPN.

I saw Thompson in person only once, in 1985 at the Student Center at Berkeley, where each of us paid \$15 to hear him speak and take questions. We waited over two hours before a blotto Thompson arrived.

As instructed, a bottle of Wild Turkey was propped on the podium, along with several vials from the chem lab. Thompson took a few swigs and grumbled for a while until the boos rained down. He then berated a few students who had had the guts to ask him questions.

"Have you read my books!?" he yelled at one underclassman. "Well, what the hell did you expect?"

Worth every penny.

The man's excess was about freedom — the freedom to spew obscenity-laced tirades at war-mongering politicians, the freedom to shoot golf balls with your AK-47, the freedom to live off the grid, on mescaline, counter to the culture, three sheets to the wind — and ultimately to live large, and even take your own life, if need be.

Salud, Good Doctor. I'm sure it will be weirder and to your liking on the other side.

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