

A Fly Goes to the Funeral

By Dennis Knight

It was a chance to be present and up close for the unfolding of a famous event with absolutely no part in the process and no stake in the outcome. I was the fly on the wall.

Hunter S. Thompson, “Gonzo”, was a writer who jumped in the middle of world and national events, politics and social change. He was the original and ultimate gonzo journalist, a brand of reporting where the reporter becomes part of the story.

Among other famous things, he wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the journal of a drug and alcohol binge to end them all. Later, in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*, Gonzo chronicled the Nixon–McGovern presidential campaign of 1972. He was played in the movies by Johnny Depp in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and by Bill Murray in *Where the Buffalo Roam*.

He had a love affair with guns, and on February 20th, 2005, at the age of 67 and facing health problems, he used one on himself. Years before the suicide, he publicized in a documentary film, *Breakfast with Hunter*, his own desire that his ashes be fired from a cannon in the form of a tower to be built on his Woody Creek ranch. It would be a large and rich expression of his sense of irony, not to get the final shot, but to be the final shot.

I hadn't given the matter much thought until my sons Thomas and Robert mentioned in April that their Japanese drumming group, Denver Taiko, was asked to perform at Hunter Thompson's funeral in August. I was impressed but thought it a pretty fat chance that it could ever happen.

But August 20, 2005 did come and the invitation was quite valid. I tagged along to help with the drums and other odd jobs. We arrived in the late morning to see the tower in a shroud, already pointing a hundred fifty feet up from Thompson's Woody Creek ranch. I spent the afternoon helping the drummers some but mostly watching the production come together. One young man who was busy all over the grounds turned out to be the actor Johnny Depp. He had paid the bill for the funeral and obviously had some say so in the affair.

Slightly uphill was the tower, and below that was parked Thompson's vintage Pontiac convertible made famous in *Fear and Loathing*. A pathway led from the tower to a huge tent of about 1000 square feet with the front side completely open. A circular bar in the middle was surrounded by groupings of sofas, chairs lamps and memorabilia, apparently arranged to feel like Hunter's living room. The quirky setting looked out to the tower, the Pontiac and a stage.

The timing of events was exact, starting at 5:48 p.m. when Denver Taiko took the stage and played continuously until precisely seven, as chauffeured guests, about 280 of them, arrived from distant places and filled the tent and grounds. I spent most of that hour observing them as they meandered from the living room to the tower. There were among them a great many celebrities whom I should have recognized but mostly didn't.

Right at seven, the drumming ended and the guests massed in for the service. Well, it wasn't really a service, just a series of tributes. The first was Ed Bradley, of CBS News, who told very funny stories of Thompson and their friendship. There were talks by the publisher of Rolling Stone and others,

including George McGovern, Nixon's opponent in 1972, who spoke of his personal, sometimes tumultuous relationship with Hunter. Like the others, McGovern shared several humorous personal memories, and delivered what struck me as the best line of the evening, saying that Hunter Thompson as a journalist did not always get his facts right, but he always got the truth.

After the speeches, the audience turned towards the tower and, as Norman Greenbaum's classic *Spirit in the Sky* blasted the night air, a crane slowly lifted the shroud to reveal Hunter's famous logo, a two-thumbed fist clutching peyote.

A Thompson confidant who was an expert on Tibetan Buddhism then took the stage and revealed that Hunter had become interested in the philosophy. He spoke some phrases in the Tibetan language, and then segued in English to the meaning of the drum in Buddhist thought. He ended with the simple words, "and now we have the Drum", at which moment Denver Taiko instantly roared into a powerful piece that started loud and fast, and increased in cadence and volume to an incredible crescendo, culminating in fireworks blasting from the ground on both sides of the tower.

Then, with my sons, Thomas and Robert, at opposite ends of the largest drum, the Odaiko, the group delivered a perfect drum roll of 10 seconds and POW!, more fireworks, a second drum roll, faster and louder, and POW!, more fireworks, then a third, at an unbelievable pace and volume and, with a POW! POW! POW! Hunter S. Thompson EXPLODED in ashes from the top of his tower.

A party ensued, and my boys were invited. I was one happy fly on that canvas wall.