

# Heroes, Influences, and Then There's Hunter

An installment of The Vagabond Notebook, editorials by Gregory O'Toole; and The Gadabout Letters being generated by the new media application The Graphagromaniac Blog. This missive was written on 02.21.05 Denver

I was walking across campus in the cold sun to work this morning when I got a text message from my brother in Chicago, it said this: "HST commits suicide. MSN headlines this morning. Haven't yet read the article." As seriously few things are capable of doing, the message stopped me-as they say-dead in my tracks. I realized, after what was, most likely, a full two minute stare down, that I'd been standing there on the sidewalk perfectly still, holding the small LCD of my mobile phone in front of my face, and that people all around me were walking right past, dodging the mannequin without pause.

I told my good friend Bob Bartusiak many years ago, at the birth of our gadabout obsession with the free-wheeling live music scene creeping up all over America, just after a few good Allman Brothers shows somewhere in the Midwest US, that it's weird to think that all these heroes and influences we have right now-whom we have come to know somewhat, and refer to by their first names like friends or loved ones-are going to die in our lifetimes. It is not an 'if', I said to him, but a 'when', and every one of them is eventually going to go. Countless days are ahead of us, I continued, of waking up to the early morning media headlines, feeling stunned, shake off the misty eyes and goose bumps, get stuck ruminating for days or weeks to come, and later figuring out the magnitude of what these people have done, the effects they've had on our cultural thought processes, if we haven't already been mindful enough to do just that.

The big one, of course, came in August of 1995 when my girlfriend at the time woke me up in a state of minor panic as I slept in my room in my parent's home after college. "Jerry's dead." was all she said, and went running back out of the bedroom, down to the living room, where the sad details were being broadcast, louder than what was necessary, across an FM frequency I've long forgotten. I'd heard what she said to me a minute before, but the radio disc jockey somehow made it more real, and the effect was a powerful roundhouse kick square to the unsuspecting abdomen. I had to sit down. I felt

sick all day. My legs were weak and I cried a little bit at a Grant Park vigil later that night. Lots of people were crying and lighting little candles. Then the cops came through on horse back, broke up the instantaneous commemorative pow wow, and pushed all the hippies into the Chicago streets. It's a conditioned societal response, I think, to oppose being moved en masse by uniformed and mounted law enforcement, but no one argued, no one smarted off, we just left.

I remember in the late summer of 1997, two days after my birthday, when the pager I carried around at the time, which emitted textual CNN updates on the hour, alerted me of the violent, accidental paparazzi death of Dianna, Princess of Whales. I was driving the old pickup (new at the time) to see a different girl, drink some wine probably, pick up my friend Mike, smoke cigarettes at the park. That was what we did: hang out, talk about being big artists, and talk about living in the woods. I didn't know much about Dianna, other than the fact that she traveled a lot and spent her time in philanthropy projects and seeing that sick children were ultimately looked after and well taken care of. I liked her, I thought. I think she used what she had to do some good in this mad world, I told my friends at the time. Then we went back to our wine and smokes, and talking probably about Bob Dylan.

Earlier that year, in April, Allen Ginsberg died of heart failure due to terminal liver cancer. I didn't know his work at the time, and, in fact, had just barely cracked the cosmic literary floodgates more commonly referred to as *The Duluoz Legend* by Jack Kerouac, however, Allen's quiet passing in his Lower East Side NYC apartment was certainly a main event. "He had cancer for a while," someone told me sometime later. It was about then when I started thinking that smoking wasn't such a good idea. HST smoked. Kerouac smoked. Ginsy smoked his whole life. I kind of doubt Dianna smoked, but maybe she had a few drags behind closed doors when the stresses of global compassion and living in royalty just got to be too much.

Maybe the stresses of living like an ardent, valiant American poet, holed up on the Owl Farm compound, and shooting double-aught buck at Titleist ProVIXs got to be too much

for Dr. Thompson. Maybe he thought his proverbial time was up. Maybe he'd just been diagnosed with cancer, or some other potentially fatal dilemma and didn't quite know how to deal with it in a subjectively realistic realm. Maybe, if he wrote a note before he shot himself like Hemingway we'll know, but maybe not. I don't really have to know. But, strangely, even though I'd never once seen the man in the flesh, I'll miss him. I already do.

I don't smoke any longer, but if I did, while running amuck in this crazy world, I'd use one of those long funny antique cigarette holders once in a while, laugh at myself, and think about Hunter.

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Graphomania [psychiatry] Morbid and excessive impulse to write. Origin: Grapho-+ G. Mania, insanity Agromania [psychiatry] An obsolete term for a morbid impulse to live in the open country or in solitude. Origin: G. Agros, field, + mania, frenzy Definitions from the Dept. of Medical Oncology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne © Copyright 1997-2004 The CancerWEB Project. All Rights Reserved.