

● Hunter S Thompson's monster booze'n'drugs binge and epic social commentary, *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*, captured the madness of early-'70s America like no book before or since. Now it's available in spoken-word album form. The record's creator, LOU STEIN, and narrator, HARRY DEAN STANTON, talk to TOMMY UDO.

WHEN HUNTER Stockton Thompson wrote *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* over a quarter of a century ago, he annihilated the boundaries between literature, journalism and rock'n'roll. Of course, those boundaries got hastily re-erected, but for years the damage was done. Every pasty-faced beer-gutted little non-entity from Hicksville who came to work at the *NME* thought that instead of writing about pop groups, they were on a drug-fuelled road trip to the heart of darkness. And yes, reader, *mea culpa*.

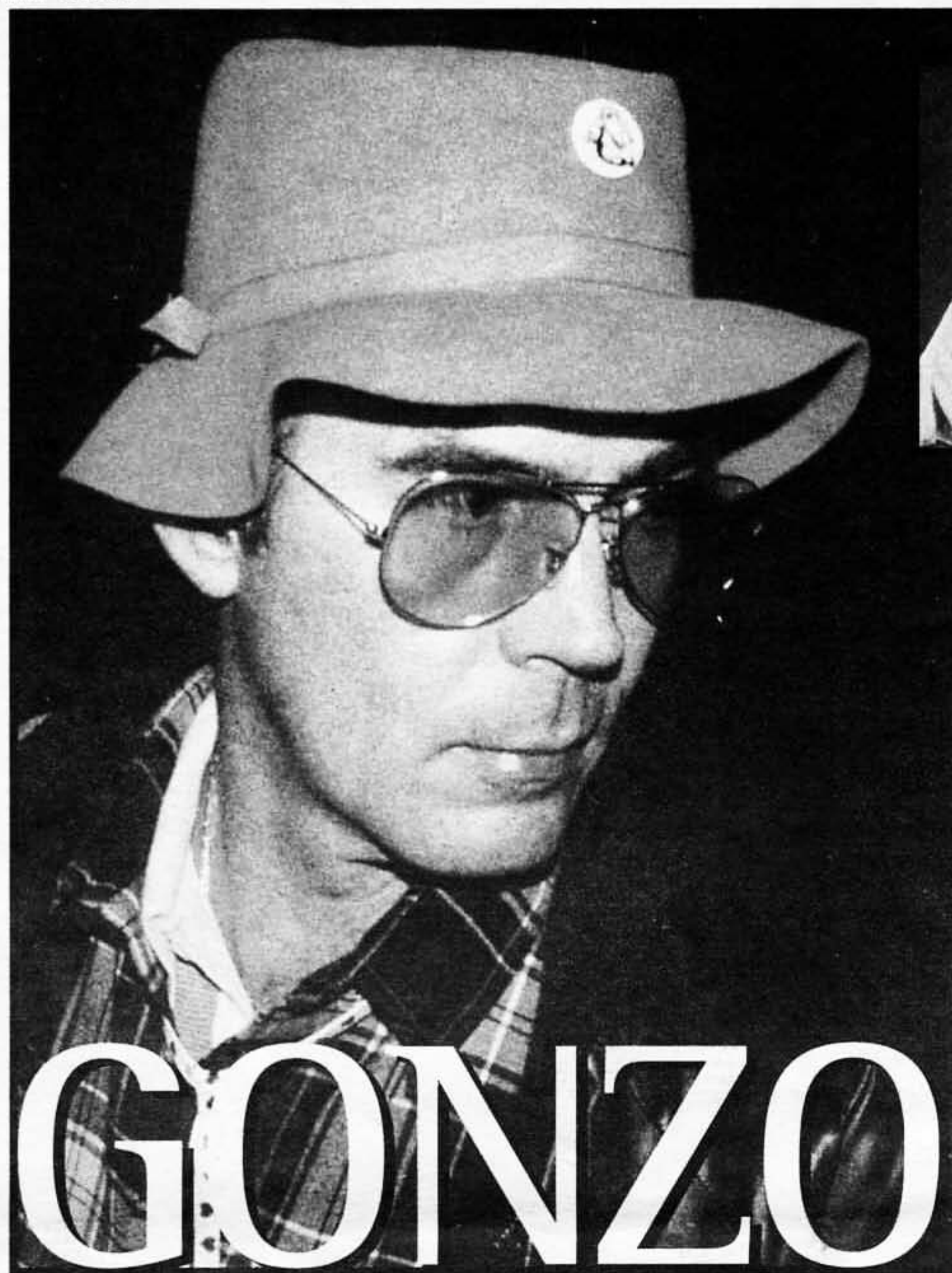
Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas was originally published in *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1971, at a time when that journal was at the cutting edge of what was then termed the New Journalism. Thompson, along with Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer and others, revolutionised magazine feature writing; traditional journalistic ideas like objectivity, conciseness and having a point went out of the window. The journalist moved from the role of neutral observer to being a central character in the article; often rules of grammar and even facts were ignored. Often hard drugs were involved, making objectivity something that happened to other people.

When it was bad it was embarrassing, but in a few cases, such as Tom Wolfe's history of the early San Francisco psychedelic scene, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, and Michael Herr's tripped out reports from the Vietnam war, *Despatches*, it was brilliant.

But Hunter S Thompson was the mad daddy of them all.

Fear And Loathing... grew out of another story he was working on at the time; he was writing an investigation of the killing of a Chicano writer and his source was Mexican-American radical lawyer Oscar Acosta. Thompson and Acosta took a road trip to Las Vegas to discuss the story and to attend the Mint 400 off-road race. It degenerated into the paranoid booze-and-dope-addled nightmare immortalised in the book. We're talking hallucinations of giant bats in the desert, amphetamine psychosis, setting off cans of mace in hotels, suicide attempts, machete attacks and a climax in which our anti-hero gatecrashes a convention full of narcotics police.

Thompson walked it like he



GONZO BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

talked it; an eccentric, a drug enthusiast and a ferocious libertarian, his life is as interesting as any of his own stories. He once met Richard Nixon and interviewed him in the back of a limo, but was only allowed to talk about football. When he stood on a radical ticket for Sheriff of Aspen, Colorado, near his long-time home in Willow Creek, Thompson shaved his head so that he could refer to the crew-cut conservative incumbent as "my long-haired opponent".

There have been numerous attempts to film the book over the years; now, at last, it looks as though Alex Cox will start directing the movie, starring Johnny Depp, next month. The project has already been fraught; Thompson is reported to have thrown Cox off his property when the *Repo Man* director went to discuss the project. Apparently he took exception to Cox's idea of using animated inserts based on the Ralph Steadman cartoons used to illustrate the original

magazine version, which perfectly captures the strung-out grotesquerie of the book.

But now he has approved of it and is happy with the choice of Depp for the lead.

The screenplay is by Lou Stein, a stage and TV writer currently living in London who also adapted his stage version of the novel for a spoken-word album released this week.

"I did the play that went on in the West End, also John Cusack directed the stage version in

books
EDITED BY STEPHEN DALTON



On Route 666: Thompson (left) and Stanton (above)

Chicago in 1989," says Lou Stein. "And then Island commissioned me to redo it completely for the spoken-word CD. What got me excited was the idea of creating a movie for the ears. It's meant to

"I want to do more. I think there's a whole market of young people who don't want to hear Juliet Stevenson reading Emma." – Lou Stein

be listened to with earphones so that you can hear the different layers of sound."

Cult director Jim Jarmusch reads the part of Duke, the Thompson character, and Maury Chaykin is his attorney Dr Gonzo.

Harry Dean Stanton narrates.

"I don't know if I'm going to be involved in the film," says Stanton laconically. "It all depends on a situation that I'm not at liberty to discuss at the moment. But the spoken word thing worked well, I do a kind of *film noir* voiceover."

The album has music and sound effects and manages to convey a real sense of the novel; two f—ups on the road, listening to 'Sympathy For The Devil', getting the fear in motel rooms,

teetering on the brink of madness, all the while commenting on the horror at the heart of pre-Watergate America. This most definitely ain't the Summer Of Love.

"When I looked at the screenplay, it's very visual. The book is very visual," says Stein. "I had to cut out a lot of visual gags. But like when they go into the hotel and everyone turns into alligators, that was great for sound, because you can do all those sounds in the mind. But the bit in the bathtub when he's high on acid, that was hard to do on record because you've got this big fat guy with a big hunting knife."

In the novel, you can almost feel the scene where Dr Gonzo demands to commit suicide by having Duke throw a radio into the bathtub when Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' reaches its climax, thereby electrocuting him. But despite such limitations, Stein is currently involved in an attempt to do a similar project, this time Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*.

"I love it. I want to do more. The Kerouac estate people came to the launch of 'Fear And

Loathing...' in New York and they loved it. I think there's a whole market of young people who don't want to hear Juliet Stevenson reading *Emma*," he quips, citing Irvine Welsh as another writer whose work would adapt well to the format.

Thompson himself apparently heard the album and approved of it; according to Stein, he's in good spirits.

"The first time he heard it he was like, 'What the f— is this shit?'" says Stein. "But no, he liked it."

Where Thompson still wins out over his wannabe rock journo imitators is the fact that, despite all the drugs and the mayhem, he still delivers slick, professional copy; where he wins out over his contemporaries – Mailer is a flaccid undisciplined parody of his former self, Tom Wolfe is too mellow and respectable – the fact that he's survived this long into a cantankerous and still-psycho-after-all-these-years middle age proves that he remains the Keith Richards of literature.

● The 'Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas' LP is reviewed on page 57.

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