

## Preston's Point-of-View

Movies Review – *The Rum Diary*

October 2011

I think the reason *The Rum Diary* starring Johnny Depp is getting panned by the critics is the fact those critics didn't take into consideration Hunter S. Thompson's style/approach to this story...Gonzo Journalism. And, if you didn't know that much about the man...the person, this movie didn't do much for you. Thompson's writing style – Gonzo – was based on interjecting himself into the story as part of the story but trying not to make that obvious. A first-person point-of-view but with actual facts, not opinion. Confused? Many an editor were...

In 1980, while a young TV journalist in San Francisco, the late Ed Moose, owner of the original Washing Square Bar & Grill in North Beach, introduced me to this "unique" individual. And in turn, Hunter introduced me to a Negroni – a shot of Gin, a shot of Compari, a shot of Sweet Vermouth, and a splash of soda with a lemon twist on-the-rocks – several, in fact.

Hunter was writing sports for the San Francisco Examiner at the time, if I recall. When Ed introduced us, Hunter asked me what I knew about writing and I never got a word in edge-wise after that. He was very engaging about talking about his perspectives...always anti-establishment and for that matter, anti-everything. He was indeed a product of the 60's and had ingested, in one form or another, alcohol, drugs, free love and a little rock-n-roll thrown in. Dr. Timothy Leary made him smile!

The story involves a journalist named Paul Kemp, (Johnny Depp) who moves from New York to work for a major newspaper, *The Daily News*, in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Set in the late 1950s, the novel encompasses a tangled love story of jealousy, treachery and violent alcoholic lust among the Americans who staff the newspaper.

Thompson himself traveled from New York to San Juan in 1960 to write for an ill-fated sports newspaper on the island. Thompson had unsuccessfully applied to work at the larger English-language daily called the San Juan Star while novelist William J. Kennedy was the editor. While in Puerto Rico, Thompson befriended many of the writers at the *Star*, providing the context for *The Rum Diary's* fictional storyline.

Although Thompson was only 22 when he wrote the story, it deals extensively with a fear of "going over the hill" and growing old while still in your prime. Never amounting to anything...living in the world of almost. The prominent characters are typical of Thompson's work; violent, maniacal and alcoholic, stumbling through life. It is written in a highly paced and rather exciting style, also typical of his work

I'm not sure there was enough character development of Thompson's persona? In 1980, Bill Murray starred in *Where the Buffalo Roam* a satire/comedy more or less depicting a period-in-time when Hunter was at his "best." While I liked the movie then and thought Murray did a great job – he's an actor with great breath, it had him acting more like the SNL/Ghostbusters character than Thompson. But the quirky, eccentric, disheveled wild man Thompson was, came out in that movie. Perhaps if the producers would have given us more background on Kemp (Depp) and we got to know him as we did the Murray character, the movie would have received more pluses than it did?

Depp played the Thompson character a little more subdued than the man himself but with the right tone and dialogue delivery that reminded me of him. Someday, I'd like to spend a cocktail hour with Johnny Depp, I like his acting and I think he'd be a very interesting character to know! Did I mention Hunter was a chain-smoker, a nuance Depp captured? In many ways, the Giovanni Ribisi character may have depicted Hunter by later afternoon on any given day.

I thoroughly enjoyed the movies but I knew about the man. All the acting was well done and the locations were all real. The production took into account all the period elements and was well shot and well paced. My rating system is one to five Reno arches...I'm giving *The Rum Diary* five arches for Johnny Depp's performance to honor Hunter S. Thompson.

**FOOTNOTE:** When Thompson died in February of 2005 at the age of 67, it was one shot to the head, self inflicted...Hemmingway...shot to the head at age 61....Gonzo?