

Composer goes classically Gonzo

Avant-garde look at Fear and Loathing

Len Righi, Morning Call

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When Hunter S. Thompson ended his life with a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head on Feb. 20, 2005, the famed gonzo writer's terrible act triggered two distinct reactions in avant-garde guitarist-composer Phil Kline.

"It jolted me when I first heard about it," says Kline from his home on Manhattan's Lower East Side, "but in a lot of ways, I knew he was already dead, even before he killed himself."

From 1965 -- when The Nation published Thompson's article Motorcycle Gangs: Losers and Outsiders, which became the 1966 book Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs -- until 1972 when he published the novel Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas and wrote a memorable series of articles for Rolling Stone magazine called Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail -- Thompson was "incandescent brilliance," says Kline.

"He was trenchant and funny -- and totally serious. He could be nihilistic and ridiculously immature, but (his writing) is not Animal House. He had an incredibly intense love of America in a most traditional way -- life, liberty, above all the others, and the pursuit of happiness."

But over the last two decades of Thompson's life, Kline sensed "a heartbroken feeling of being beaten down. Remember, he was in (Chicago's) Grant Park in 1968 during the Democratic convention. He was shot at, beaten and tear-gassed. I don't think he ever recovered from that. From that point, the darkness and cynicism kept rising. Later on, his (drug- and alcohol-fuelled) lifestyle weighed down on him, too. By the 1990s he was barely there."

Kline says Thompson's suicide gave birth to an idea for a "song journal" based on his writings and the "vacated promise" of the American Dream. He began working on it in 2006, and on April 3 at Connecticut College in New London he premiered Fear and Loathing accompanied by four other musicians and vocalist Wilbur Pauley.

Four of Fear and Loathing's nine songs are based on Thompson's Fear and Loathing works; the others from his essays, letters and unpublished personal writings.

"I used both the preface to The Great Shark Hunt (a 1977 collection of essays), which includes a mock suicide note, and his real suicide note, Football Season Is Over," notes Kline.

Kline describes the sound as "contemporary chamber music influenced by rock 'n' roll. I'm very devoted to both kinds of music."

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The 55-year-old Kline, who was born in Pittsburgh but grew up near Akron, Ohio, first started becoming "a total nut for rock 'n' roll," listening to Roy Orbison, the Everly Brothers, Lesley Gore and girl groups in the early 1960s.

And though he later latched onto the Beach Boys and the Beatles, he also listened to Stravinsky, "a total hero of mine."

He traces his interest in classical music to his Pennsylvania-born parents. His father, a research scientist for Goodyear, and his mother, who worked as a nurse, "had about two dozen classical records," Kline recalls. "And after they took me to see Fantasia, I wanted to know all about that 'dinosaur music,' which, of course, in the movie was Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring."

Kline arrived in New York City about 40 years ago to study English literature at Columbia University.

"I was gonna be a writer and teach," he says. "Halfway through, I realized a greater passion, music. . . . I had to sort of force myself to write in a way that I didn't with music."

After college, he became part of the downtown New York rock scene, first playing in Dark Day, a spinoff of no-wave pioneer band DNA, then co-founding art-punk outfit the Del-Byzanteens with filmmaker Jim Jarmusch and painter James Nares. He was also a member of Glenn Branca's guitar ensemble.

"There was something about that business I didn't really love," says Kline, "so in the late 1980s I started to (see) myself as an independent composer. I was working odd jobs, such as refinishing furniture, and did a fair amount of TV commercials -- I did the music and voice for Dove soap and Maxwell House coffee. I also did solo musical performances in the East Village."

In 1989 or thereabouts he began making music using 12 boom boxes and pre-cut cassette tape loops, and in 1992 he wrote his first big "orchestral" boom box piece Unsilent Night, which was accepted by the Bang on a Can music festival.

"That was my arrival," says Kline. "My career as a composer didn't start until I was 38 or 39 years old, but the timing felt right."

In presenting Fear and Loathing, Kline is pairing it with one of his most acclaimed works, Zippo Songs, a cycle based on the poetry and slogans that U.S. soldiers scratched into their Zippo lighters during the Vietnam War.

Theo Bleckmann is doing the singing for this portion of the concert. "Theo has an ethereal voice well-suited to Zippo's songs, while Wilbur Pauley has the outrageously expressive, deep operatic bass Fear and Loathing calls for," explains Kline.

When he married for a second time a few years ago, Kline says he and his bride honeymooned in Aspen "almost by accident."

"So we decided to drive over to Woody Creek Canyon (near where Thompson had lived), but when we got there, we found that there's just nothing, no way to tell what's what or who lives where. . . . A little further along, though, we found a driveway cordoned off with a fence, and we could see a line of oil drums riddled with bullet holes. We knew we had found the house."

Later, when Kline and his wife, who recently became the parents of a baby girl, were visiting in Louisville, "a friend took us to see where (Thompson) was born (in 1937). . . . So I've seen the house where he died and the house where he was born.

"He was a smirky, preppy thing," adds Kline, "in addition to wanting to be a revolutionary."