Conversation: Hank Malone

Thomas Haroldson
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The following is an interview-rap with Detroit poet and sometime FIFTH ESTATE feature writer Hank Malone, conducted by another F.E. feature writer, Thomas Haroldson.

HAROLDSON: Hank Malone isn't exactly a household word, but John Sinclair said in one of his articles that you were on the scene long before he was. What was Detroit like back then?

MALONE: Things began for me about 1957. I spent a great deal of time at a place called The Westend Hotel. It was down on Fort and Westend, in the Delray area. It was an after-hours jazz place, probably a whore house too. Yusef Lateef and Barry Harris used to play there. Every jazz musician played there. Miles Davis and Kenny Burrell jammed there. The Detroit scene was all jazz then.

The first big turn-on for me was when Allen Ginsberg came to town in '57 and dropped off some peyote. He had just made it very big with his poem "Howl" and had bought himself an MG. He was going around the nation in his little MG with a trunk full of peyote.

After taking a massive overdose of Ginsberg's peyote, I went down to the Westend Hotel to listen to the music. It caused a fantastic personal reaction. I had no guru, no guide. No one knew how to handle the stuff, because Ginsberg had left town. He wasn't much of a guru in those days. It was great and it was awful. I thought I was going to die. Fantastically frightening. But most of my sensibility goes back to that experience.

Grass was so common in the jazz underground that I thought it was weird when people like John Sinclair came along and made such a big deal of it. Grass was a very common thing—it was like booze. Nobody made a big thing of it. There were no spiritual qualities associated with it. But peyote promised special things that booze and marijuana couldn't deliver.

HAROLDSON: I always thought of the pre-underground as sort of an art-for-art's-sake thing. I never thought of it as a drug scene.

MALONE: Drugs were very, very prevalent. A friend of mine was Lenny Bruce's manager. He told me that one night when Bruce was in Detroit, he was so desperate for speed he sent someone all the way back to Philadelphia to fill a prescription. Speed was just starting to be discovered. But everyone was getting high, and experimenting.

HAROLDSON: Things haven't changed as much as I thought.

MALONE: No, it was different then. At that time only a few artists, jazz musicians and creative types were turned on. Kids were still drinking six-packs of beer. At that time one was in a real underground. Now, everyone under twenty-five is into some kind of underground scene.

HAROLDSON: Weren't you a part of a commune-like group called Nick Beats?

MALONE: The Artists Workshop was nothing so very new in Detroit. Most of the artists who worked around Wayne University were involved in various kinds of communal life. "Nick Beat's Place", as it was called, was a convenient way of listing the communal house in the phone book. Obviously it was merely a reversal of "Beatnik." This was in '58—the year before Sinclair graduated from high school.

But the important thing is that there were a number of communes in Detroit back then. Most of the people saw their life style as finite, terminal, but they created the ground work for the permanent revolution in youth culture today.

HAROLDSON: Did these people ever get involved in politics or social reform issues?

MALONE: As far as I can recall, there was no involvement of any sort. They came out of a post-war, existential, very personal trip.

HAROLDSON: How did the Artists Workshop get started in 1964?

MALONE: A bunch of people, including myself, threw in five dollars each. It was the culmination of a lot of inputs. Sinclair, a lot of other people, Monteith College, all came together at the same time. There were so many impulses in Detroit—the poetry scene, the jazz scene, the folk music scene, the drug scene—that it was an ideal time and place to put it all together in one central location. It was meant to be a counter-establishment group, a commune, an army of artists, a real permanent communal revolutionary force.

HAROLDSON: Why is it that nothing really caught fire in Detroit until Sinclair appeared on the scene?

MALONE: The scene didn't really start in Detroit. Remember California? It was sort of like a tree bearing fruit. The underground was not born in Detroit, although people like Sinclair might lead you to believe that. The seeds were growing for years. But John was certainly the guy with the greatest amount of energy, with the greatest drive to pull it together, to explore the ins and outs of the new culture. And he had the personality and charisma to popularize what he found here in Detroit.

HAROLDSON: Wasn't poetry an important part of the scene back then?

MALONE: Poetry was very important to local artists. Most of the people I knew who were doing any kind of art—whether they were painters, sculptors, musicians, etc.—always wrote poetry. The poetry scene vanished when the people, who used to turn out by the hundreds for poetry readings, were absorbed by the poetry of the new underground music. Many poets, like Sinclair, stopped writing poetry and turned toward groups like the MC5.

A few local poets, like George Tysh, are more serious about their poetry today than they've ever been. Tysh edits a magazine of poetry out of Paris and Southern France called The Blue Pig. He's incredibly serious about his work, and he's a fine poet.

HAROLDSON: You continued writing poetry, didn't you?

MALONE: Right. I've never let my interest in poetry be absorbed by other things. I've published a lot, won a couple of poetry awards, and even managed to make a little money doing it—in the last four or five years I've earned between $3,000 and $4,000 from grants, readings, etc.

HAROLDSON: Why did you quit the Artists Workshop?

MALONE: Like a lot of people I was never totally involved in it. I really don't know why I wasn't more involved, or why I pulled out. I retained then, as now, a fiercely independent attitude toward my work and my life. I smoked dope before it was "in," I tripped on peyote before most people had heard of it. I tend to do things that avoid norms, and stereotypes, compulsively. Collectivism scares me.

For example, I don't wear my hair long. But I've a mustache for fifteen years—this is a significant fact since I'm only 30 years old. Most of the influences on my life had nothing to do with the so-called local revolutionary forces, or the Artists Workshop, or John Sinclair's new culture, etc. I never had any strong ties to any group. I've always felt strongly, compulsively, individualistic.

But I've never felt comfortable in American society. I've never felt comfortable living like a WASP, because I'm not one. I've never felt comfortable as a freak. I've never felt comfortable as a member of any large, stereotyped group. I'm only comfortable doing my own things in my own way. Socially, I'm an anarchist.

Interestingly enough, I always find myself in some vanguard just because of that. Rather than being in the rearguard, I find myself, for some crazy reason or other, in the vanguard of what's going to be "happening" in a year or two. I don't plan it that way—it just happens.

HAROLDSON: What moved you to start writing for the FIFTH ESTATE in 1966?

MALONE: An interesting question. I think it was the result of a desire to write in a less formal manner. I had been writing so much poetry and short fiction that I wanted to loosen up. I found that the FIFTH ESTATE would let me write anything I wanted to write, any way I wanted to write it. It gave a writer like myself great freedom and

a great forum for saying what I wanted to say. Until then, publishing journalism, even in a paper like the VILLAGE VOICE, had always been too much hassle.

HAROLDSON: How did you get into radio'?

MALONE: It was absolutely on a whim. I approached WQRS-FM in 1962 with the idea of reading poetry in translation. Dick Hughes gave me a half-hour show on Sundays, but I later started getting restless and wanted to do something more exciting—something more alive, more vital, more into it all. As a result, a free form radio show, called "Migrations," evolved that I did from late 1962 to 1965.

An old friend of mine, Alex Pavlini, who had been killed in an auto accident two years before, had been doing a beautiful kind of radio program. Locally, Pavlini was without parallel. Everyone who was intrigued by the possibilities and potential of radio listened to him during the Fifties. He was on CBE in Windsor from around '54 to 1960.

He was a young man (only about 30 when he died) who had been evolving a kind of radio broadcasting that was really unprecedented. My impulse was, in some crazy way, to carry on the tradition that he represented—to play around with format; the idea of introducing imaginative material into radio; substance and content that didn't violate the intelligence of the audience. But I didn't copy Pavlini. I didn't even try. His style was too personal for anyone to copy.

I look at an hour of radio broadcasting as a sculptural or aesthetic form that can be shaped in an infinite number of ways. Since it's a sculptural form, there's no need to make any two programs alike. For example, "Migrations" didn't have a standard introduction or conclusion. The listener was presented with spontaneity—what John Cage called "indeterminacy." One literally never knew what was going to happen next.

It became a relatively popular show and received a good response from the Ann Arbor area—I even received mail from as far as 300 or 400 miles away, which is unusual in FM broadcasting. It was a very peculiar audience. The "Once Concert" people in Ann Arbor, who put on the first "happenings" in the country, were regular listeners.

HAROLDSON: I've always wondered why you or Pavlini are never credited with inventing underground radio.

MALONE: Underground radio has come to mean something very specific, and in my estimation something very narrow. It means a kind of musical format in which a relatively free-form announcing style is tolerated. One is also free to bring people into the studio and let them rap freely—except they usually only rap about the particular kind of music that's being played on the station.

Larry Miller's original underground radio program on WDET was terrific. I believe it was truly revolutionary in its total impact. But I think that Miller and others have neglected the wide range of the radio medium. They've selected, and stuck with, a relatively narrow species of broadcasting. They're beautiful at what they do, but after three or four years the form begins to pall.

HAROLDSON: Why did you leave radio in 1965?

MALONE: The owners of WQRS began to commercialize the station, and the staff didn't feel that it could remain committed to that kind of broadcasting. Ten people, including myself, quit simultaneously in protest.

HAROLDSON: After being off radio for five years, what made you decide to do "The Public Service Experiment" show for WXYZ-FM?

MALONE: It was a fluke. I was asked by Dick Kernan of WXYZ to join a bunch of my friends from the good old days to summarize the Sixties. We did a two-hour show last December. It came out on the show that I had done experimental broadcasting. Afterwards, Dick approached me (nudged by Harvey Ovshinsky) and asked me if I would be willing to do a new, updated version of my old show. I said I would, provided I could do the show more or less on my own terms, in my own way. So far it's worked out fairly well.

"The Public Service Experiment" is not meant to be an entertainment. It's directed toward a serious introspection of all kinds of public problems, public tragedies—and public triumphs. It's musical and often humorous, but it always tries to be a public service in the truest sense of the phrase.

HAROLDSON: Do you think that FM radio is finally coming of age and will eventually attract a larger audience?

MALONE: That's the question that can't be answered. At this juncture the best an FM broadcaster can do is try to reach the "secret" community. There's always a potential for a small, active audience in any creative field, no matter how esoteric it might be.

But if you start to talk and think in terms of a mass underground audience, you begin to blur the goals, the perspectives, the alternatives that creative people bring to a medium. With the growing number of FM car radios, etc., I see the possibility of expansion, but I also see the possibility of the bottom dropping altogether out of creative broadcasting. The more commercially successful a medium becomes, the less freedom you have.

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