

aperture



**SIXTY YEARS OF
MAGNUM BY
GERRY BADGER**

**VINCE ALETTI:
PHYSIQUE
MAGAZINES**

**MARY ELLEN MARK
& FRANCINE PROSE
GO TO THE PROM**

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FLORIAN MAIER-AICHEN,
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GONZO: HUNTER S. THOMPSON



Hunter S. Thompson once wrote: "Absolute truth is a very rare and dangerous commodity in the context of professional journalism." The quote is emblematic of the subjective "Gonzo" journalism genre that Thompson pioneered. Legendary for his toxic madness, fueled by a steady cocktail of speed and hallucinogens, he was an astute observer of the American

political scene, as fond of firearms as of heaving vitriolic criticism on rotten politicians. For Thompson, journalism could not be a neutral transmitter of information, especially during a tumultuous moment when claims to authority were viewed with skepticism, if not hostility. But what then did he think about photography—that mechanical art that has had a conflicted relationship with truth since its invention?

While *Gonzo* (Ammo, 2006) might not reveal that Thompson had a profound interest in photography, it does tell us that he had fun with cameras over the years. It is essentially a scrapbook—though lushly produced and retailing for \$300—that is chockablock full of photographs (and a range of ephemera) that Thompson took throughout his career, as well as some images of Thompson and his scene that are credited to others. The book begins with his short-lived stint in the air force in the 1950s and closes with the time preceding his suicide in 2005, but it is the years in between that are represented here by the most arresting images.

These are the same years during which Thompson was writing his most original books—including *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*, the 1966 publication that first put him on the map. Danny Lyon's 1968 *The Bikeriders* may be the most familiar photographic document of motorcycle gangs of the era, but Thompson's color images of gang members riding in the California sunshine, popping wheelies, or having tense exchanges with highway patrolmen are fully as vivid as the scenes he describes in *Hell's Angels*. Thompson would later remark that before he met the Angels he "had never seen people this strange" and that "after fifty or sixty beers, we found common ground, as it were . . . crazies always recognize each other." This common ground, however, would not always insulate him: once the Angels realized that they were making a name for Thompson without much in exchange, they decided to give him an Angles-style stomping, which took place on

Labor Day in 1966. Thompson would document his bruised and swollen face in a series of photographs included in *Gonzo*.

A few years earlier, Thompson worked as a groundskeeper at Big Sur, a place known for its natural splendor and lively bohemian culture. Joan Baez, Robert Rauschenberg, and John Cage all appear in Thompson's photographs taken during his time here. This experience would provide fodder for an article published in *Rogue* magazine that would result in his being fired. Although this article and letters from the period demonstrate that life at Big Sur among "jabbering Buddhists in the trees and whores in the canyons" tried his patience, his photographs of scenic headlands and sunbathing women have a quiet and idyllic atmosphere uncharacteristic of Thompson's usual brand of crazed adventurism. Images of him breathing fire or shooting at all manner of targets—a portrait of J. Edgar Hoover, the ocean (ostensibly to fish), his typewriter—are more in tune with the maniacal persona that, for better or worse, his name conjures.

By 1980—almost twenty years before Johnny Depp's portrayal of the mescaline-warped, incoherently mumbling journalist in the 1998 film version of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*—Thompson was already bemoaning the fact that "somehow the author has become larger than the writing. And it sucks."

In an obituary in the *Wall Street Journal*, fellow "New Journalist" Tom Wolfe wrote that Thompson belonged to a lineage of American writers who "mined the human comedy of a new chapter in the history of the West, namely, the American story." That engagement with the American story comes through in the images and ephemera in *Gonzo*. Two chapters are devoted to road trips taken around





1960 when Thompson was in his early twenties, one to the West Coast and another to Tijuana. In the square-format photographs of him wearing his signature aviator sunglasses, a cigarette burning between two fingers, the young writer appears already to have hit his stride. The images call to mind stories by Jack Kerouac, whose writings Thompson read vigorously in the 1950s, as well as the work of Robert Frank, the photographer most associated with the Beats, whose gritty images punctured a comfortably inflated American mythology.

There are of course precedents for writers using photography in various ways—as many have done since cameras became compact, affordable, and ubiquitous. Allen Ginsberg is well known for his shots of the Beat scene; Wright Morris famously brought the two media together in his 1948 *Home Place*; and Eudora Welty worked as a photographer in Mississippi for the WPA during the Depression. Lewis Carroll's photographs of children, skeletons, and luminaries of his day provide an example from the nineteenth century. Thompson may not have been as serious a photographer as Carroll was, but he, too, was interested in what resided on the other side of the looking glass, a place where, for him, the weirdness of normalcy came into focus.

As a visual biography, *Gonzo* will not remedy the issue of the author becoming larger than the writing. Thompson, however, was involved with the conception of the project, one that ultimately helps us to better understand the roots of an eccentric vision defined by fear of what might come, and loathing of what we are already facing. ●

—Michael Famighetti

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM: From *Hell's Angels*, 1965; ABOVE: From *Big Sur*, 1960–63.