

*Studs Terkel*

## A Conversation With Studs Terkel

With Kurt Jacobsen

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Studs Terkel, born in New York City in 1912, moved at the age of eleven to Chicago where his family, among other things, ran a boarding house. He earned a law degree at the University of Chicago in the inauspicious year of 1934. Law did not appeal to him anyway; show business, beginning with the Chicago Repertory Theater, did. The Depression Era Works Progress Administration's Writers' Project provided him with his opportunity to get into radio. For more than four decade he worked at WFMT radio in Chicago as a disc jockey and as an interviewer. A lifelong champion of social reforms, he was blacklisted in the 1950s for refusing to name names.

His international reputation is based on his memorable "memory books," as he dubs them. These mesmerizing oral histories include *Division Street* (1967); *Working* (1970); *Hard Times* (1974); *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1980); Pulitzer prize winning *The Good War* (1984); *The Great Divide: Second Thoughts on The American Dream*; (1988); *Race: How Whites and Blacks Feel about The American Obsession*; *Coming of Age* (1995); *The Spectator* (1999), *Will The Circle Be Unbroken?: Reflections on Death, Rebirth and Hunger for a Faith* (2001) and now, *Hope Dies Last* (2003). He also scribbled a memoir, *Talking To Myself*. (1995), and a tribute volume, *Greats of Jazz* (1975).

Show biz credits include his pioneering but short-lived TV program "Studs' Place" over 1950-3, stage appearances in plays such as Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge," a creditable cameo performance in John Sayles 1989 film *Eight Men Out* as Hugh Fullerton, the Chicago reporter who broke the story of the 1919 Black Sox scandal; the narration of the *Good Fight*, a documentary on the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil war; and an appearance in a PBS television production of a musical based on his book *Working*. We first met at his WFMT office in 1992, several weeks after four police officers were acquitted of beating Rodney King, and race riots erupted in Los Angeles. I interviewed him again in November 2003 during his book tour for *Hope Dies Last*. Acquaintances say that Terkel, with his phenomenal memory, remembers everyone he meets. It's true.

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***When we last spoke, the LA riots of 1992 had just happened. Do you see any progress in race relations since your book *Race* appeared?***

Yes and no. The answer is ambiguous. Are we in some little ways better off? There is a black middle class that wasn't there before. But you pick up the magazines [catering to them] and it's just bullshit, the same as the others. Harold Washington's election played a role in changing Chicago but at the same time the [minorities] may be worse off now in that people are saying, 'you had your chance', you know? There are all the attacks on affirmative action. You go to Jackson, Mississippi today and you got black and white people in the restaurant. But the great many haven't got the buck - or the ten bucks or fifteen bucks - to go in. So the right is there to the toilet. The right is there to go into the hotel. But is the wherewithal there for the great many? No.

***Civil rights never meant you must be better off economically.***

We think that we made progress but are little better off so far as amenities are concerned. In terms of the economics, we're probably worse off. Now, we're not starting again from scratch. No. You know the hymn, "We are climbing Jacob's ladder"? Every rung is higher and higher - but there's two steps forward and one step back. Sometimes it's two steps forward and three steps back. It's a long haul. It's not an overnight thing. The racial situation is a rough one. When it comes to economics we've fallen down on the job.

***How do you compare Mayor Daley Jr. to Daley senior?***

Daley [senior] loved power. He bent toward powerful people and he had disdain for those who did not have power. That's why he was unique as a city boss. It wasn't the dough, it was power. Richard M. Daley - no more silver-tongued than his father - was elected Mayor in 1989. The manner of speech is similar but never would the son do what his father did. He uses power in

his own way but not in the outwardly brutish way Daley Senior did in 1968. It's different now although there still is police brutality as we well know.

He's not the same as his father because the situation is different. When the old man was Mayor it was the post-World War II boom period and any Mayor pretty much had it made at the time economically, you see. Now we come to Chicago. It changed overwhelmingly when Harold Washington won in 1983. Until then it was plantation politics. [Daley Senior] owned the black vote. He had an overseer named Bill Dawson, the [black] Congressman of the First ward. So there was Daley, head of the plantation. But then came Harold Washington. Harold died too soon. He would have been fantastic. If he were alive today the country itself would have been affected for the better by him. There's no question in my mind. Harold was brilliant, funny and heads above the others. Daley junior is not brutal like his father. I'm not saying he's nicer than the old man. The brutality is in the situation. Things have altered to some extent. So it's not the same and it's just the same. The trouble is there is no organized opposition. When the older Daley was Mayor there was a core of dissenters.: Len Depres and Dick Simpson, and others. Now there's no dissent; there's cooptation. There's a few who say no. [Chicago Alderwoman] Helen Shiller, who is in the book, has to make compromises to survive. Gentrification plays a role in her neighborhood and she has to allay the fears [of her incoming middle class residents] while maintaining her principles, and she is doing a pretty good job.

***Just six months ago it seemed that we were descending into an Orwellian pit where Bush had everything his own way. Now it looks like all the deceits are unravelling. When we last met, I asked if a Democrat could beat the Senior Bush, how about beating Bush Jr.?***

Ever since Reagan, the Democratic Party - thanks to that Democratic Leadership Council that has to be kicked out on its ass - has been moved to the Right. [Senator] Joe Lieberman is a case in point. If I were Karl Rove, the Rasputin of Bush, I would immediately draft Lieberman as my VP candidate to run with Bush. [Lieberman and Bush] agree on all the major issues. The Democratic Party is the story of the betrayal of the best of the Roosevelt administration, the best of the New Deal. It's been under attack ever since Reagan. Then, after those [Reagan-Bush senior] years, you thought, well, [progressive policies are] going to come back. But even before 9/11 there was

nothing much. The welfare reform program that Clinton put forth in 1995 was a complete cave-in.

I remember a gathering for an anniversary celebration of the 1960s. It was about a month after the welfare reform bill went through and Clinton was running for reelection against Bob Dole. Bella Abzug, Tom Hayden, Norman Mailer, and Vic Navasky were there. *The Nation* was sponsoring it. Bella Abzug said, Clinton's got to be reelected. It was my turn to talk. I said Clinton has to be criticized. But I didn't say all that I should have said then. Since Reagan and the counterrevolution there was a complete perversion of our language. Where going toward the Right is described as going toward the center, where Lieberman is described as a moderate. A Moderate! In fact, George W. Bush is described in some quarters as a moderate conservative. I wrote a little piece way back for FAIR, Jeff Cohen's organization. I called it *The Brass Check*. You know the Upton Sinclair book of that title in 1916 ?

***Don't know that one***

In the old days when a guy went to the brothel he paid two dollars and the madam or the pimp gave him a brass check and then he handed the brass check to the girl. At the end of the day the girl cashes in her brass checks and she gets half a buck a piece. And so Upton Sinclair was talking about the brass check artists where [he identified] the reporters and publishers. They were whores. Take Teddy Roosevelt, an overrated president. The trust-buster. Here we go again. Teddy Roosevelt loathed the muckrakers. It was a derogatory term used by him against Lincoln Steffans and Ida Tarbell. Later on, George Seldes came along, and Izzy Stone. With the exception of the muckrakers, there were these brass check artists who played a tremendous role in the language becoming perverted bit by bit by bit. As a result, the American public reads what, sees what, hears what? - [media] run by fewer and fewer people. We know the most powerful media mogul today is that Australian Neanderthal Murdoch, who's become a citizen.

***So where is the hope?***

Here's the optimistic part. I like to read letters to the editor. I said to [*Chicago Tribune* editor] Bruce Dole who edits the editorial pages: "I see letters there about Israel, and about the Middle East and about Bush and a

surprising amount are anti-Bush letters.” And he says, it’s fifty-fifty, and in fact it’s a little more anti than pro. And this is the Tribune [a conservative paper]! The tribune does not publish anti-Bush letters. They go the other way . There’s a turn taking place. Of course the tribune is not the same paper it was under colonel McCormick. They have these columnists who appear once a week. Molly Ivins gets the most mail. Con as well as pro, More pro than con.

So something is popping. There’s something underneath that’s happening, but there’s no umbrella organization. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio, the “leftist candidate” who is in the book, is the one who gets the least ink, is always the last one mentioned of the nine candidates. He has no money and the organization is all in a mess. We know he’s not going to win the nomination, but name recognition [matters]. Now only one in a hundred know his name. But if he runs third in Iowa, for example, name recognition would force the Democratic Leadership Committee to give him time at the National Convention that would be seen by multi-millions. That could be pretty exciting. So the big thing is name recognition.

***What about John Kerry?***

Here’s Kerry. Long ago when he came back from the Vietnam war I interviewed him. I had a whole series on Vietnam, including officers who returned and he was one of them. I have a tape with him but I can’t find it now. He was one of the officers opposed to the Vietnam and he was good. He was very good. But then he comes out for [Bush’s resolution after] 9/11. It’s a matter of guts. That’s the big thing, whether you have the guts. He didn’t.

***How do you figure Schwarzenegger in California?***

The victory of Schwarzenegger was not a Bush triumph at all. It was a vote out of frustration, out of anger, out of fury. They would have voted for W.C. Fields - who would have been wonderful, by the way. If the Democratic Party loses to George W. Bush, it must dissolve. The DLC have been urging it more and more toward the so-called center. Now the opposite has to be the case. I do run into all sorts of people, as you know, whether it be waitresses or

cab drivers or CEOs. And everyone says, "This guy has gotta go.' So it's a question of the Democratic Party choosing someone who is militant, who is against Bush. People know what's happening with the tax cuts. Enron and the corporate accounting.

***There's no end of rubbish spilling out of this administration.***

You know I'm a hambone, a ham actor, and I ramble pretty good up on a platform. I go to a town in DuPage county, which is the only county in all of Illinois to vote for Goldwater in 1964. There is an audience of Republican women there from the Opera House and I'm talking about Bush. I start off, laughing, of course, "I'm 91 and I have my two martinis a day and I ask my cardiologist about it. He says, "At your age your cholesterol count is as relevant to you as truth is to George W. Bush." They erupt in laughter.

I go on in the same vein. I say I'm an alumnus of the University of Chicago. My fellow alumnus was John Ashcroft, and although I preceded him by 30 years he is considerably older than I am. I figure he is about 320 years old. You saw him in Arthur Miller's play "The Crucible." He was the Reverend way up there, the Reverend Parris. I'm telling this to the women. Remember Salem, Massachusetts? The witch hunt? Those old women living in the town considered witches by the hysterical girls: they were the terrorist of their day. And here is this prosecutorial officer, the Reverend Parris: "If you're not with us you're against us. If you challenge me, you're consorting with the devil." That's John Ashcroft.

I also have great difficulty with my hearing. The volume [of my hearing aid] goes up but the clarity does not. So I say, "during our triumph in Iraq when we finally democratized the country" - the women are chuckling - I hear the phrase "embedded journalists" continuously. But with my bad hearing it comes out "in bed with journalists." Of course I'm in the opera house and you know Puccini's *Toxca*, the story? And so I say my hearing is so bad when I hear "Justice Scalia," it comes out Scarpia.

***Scarpia being the wicked villain of the opera.***

At the end of that I get a standing ovation. And this is a Republican community! Next day I pick up the DuPage county paper, "Studs wows

them. “ and they quote the stuff in that Republican paper. Something is going on. Of course Bush can be beaten. Who ever had a president who had a war and a depression at the same time? See it was the Second World War that ended the depression even though the New Deal – the WPA and everything - saved millions of lives. There were eleven million unemployed up until the [war started]. So then women get jobs in defense plants and guys go in the army. It was the depression that knocked off Hoover. Now we have a president with a depression and war, or I should say, wars, since he speaks of an axis of evil. Who’s next, after Iraq? So if this guy would win, it’s a one party country. All I want Dennis Kucinich to do is keep on going. In any event, we come back to reality. I’m pretty certain the Democratic Party will win. If they don’t, then they must dissolve.

***Have we shaken off the “me” generation, the yuppie hype?***

Young kids now are so taken with trivia and with self. But they’re bright; they’re not dumb, many of these kids. That guy named Eminem, there’s a remarkable article about him in the *New York Review of Books*. The kids are up on a lot of this stuff but there’s no one organization - meaning a political party - that can really hit it. The Democratic Party is not really doing a damn thing but despite that there’s more [recognition]that things are unravelling. It’s clear even to people who can’t spell “cat.” So despite everything I have said I feel hopeful. My old friend Pete Seeger says he sees crazy movements all around the world. You know with all the violence and the horrors, things are happening. Just picking up a fascinating article on Bolivia this morning, and look at what happened at Cancun with that WTO conference. So it’s a question of finding the spearhead - what I call the umbrella that could cover these groups. I think the Democrats will win but I want them to win in a way that the country itself will know has a meaning. The key thing should be the United Nations which, of course, was the hope of the world. We are part of it. We are the strongest part, but only part of it. We have to blast this whole idea of unilateral action.

***Our leaders’ paranoia, or ulterior motives, decides what we as a nation do abroad.***

In the book one of the most revelatory things is one of the most modest interviews, one with former Olympic winner Adolf Keefer. Keefer’s a Bush

man. I have these people in to mix it up. But it's his wife who says, "Why are we in so many countries today?" She represents, I think, the great, great many. What the hell are we doing in these places? And then there's Enron and those revelations. Who do you most mistrust? In the old days it was always car dealers and lawyers. Now it's corporations. In the polls big business is up there at the top. So these are the hopeful signs. My own feeling is one of what I call guarded hope. The key word is guarded. This sounds crazy to say, it sounds goofy and romantic but underneath there is a stirring.

***A suburban lawyer once said to me, "isn't Studs an old fashioned New Dealer peddling obsolete ideas?" She herself was a Republican spouting market rhetoric straight out of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Like many people, she doesn't know a new idea from an old idea from a good idea. People are very confused. I think Arlo Guthrie talks about that kind of confusion in your book.***

We're suffering from a national Alzheimer's disease. There's no yesterday. Those who are against "big gummint" in health, education, welfare - not the military - are the ones whose very asses were saved by 'big gummint' in the '29 crash, and how they pleaded, please save us. So this woman suffers from national Alzheimer's disease. We live by the clichés of the day.

***There are new clichés coming out every minute***

The other big obstacle is the trivia itself, the overwhelming trivia. It leads to Schwarzenegger again. Here's Oprah Winfrey with the largest women audience ever probably in the history of TV, the most powerful sales force. She has a kiss-kiss hour program with Schwarzenegger and his wife, Shriver's kid, during the campaign. And [Oprah] says we never talked about politics, it was only a good family show. An hour! No one of the opposition was on at all so no one can contest Schwarzenegger. It was just assumed [that it was okay]. He's on an hour and hundreds of thousands of women are watching. I see that most white women voted for Schwarzenegger.

***Isn't this confusion—maybe a carefully cultivated confusion—again?***

But the big thing is how it is so one-sided - even in the case of Oprah who undoubtedly would vote against Bush. Of course she will, but it doesn't matter. And talk about perversion of language. Talk about Liberal media? Liberal media! [A term] which is an obscene assault on our intelligence.

***That's a strong theme through many of your books***

9/11 was an obscene, horrendous event. But the far bigger assault is on our native intelligence, the assault on our innate decency. This I know about the intelligence of the so-called "ordinary person" - a term I dislike because it is patronizing - the anonymous many are capable of extraordinary things. We know there is an intelligence there. It's a question of the information coming through to them. There's a great quote Tom Paine comes up with that fear causes you not to think. He didn't write those books just for freedom-loving Americans but for thinking people. It's always good when you make the audience aware that it is thinking. You know, "It is thinking Americans such as yourselves, such as yourselves . . ."

***But aren't many people in your book talking about just holding steady? Not losing more ground?***

It's more than holding steady. I think, despite ourselves, the changes are there and ready for action. The voices are there but again there's no umbrella. Take the word "activist" - to act, to do, to take part, to participate. Like this one writer in the book, she's a good writer. She says, "I'm not moved. I don't take part in those demonstrations. They don't hit me." And then she says, "I don't know why I have these headaches all the time."

Well, something I forgot to include in the book is a news item from England. A psychiatrist there says taking part in an action is therapeutic. When you take part in something, whether it is a peace march or a rally somewhere, it actually is medicinally good. It's good in that it lifts your spirits but it also makes you physically feel better. He had proof of it. So I'm saying to her the reason you have the headache is because you don't take part in these things. (laughter) But it's true. I wish I had that item now. I'm a slovenly guy, you know. I tear these things out of the papers and save them but I lose them. I don't know where it appeared now. It was wonderful. It was a health piece.

It's there. It's just waiting for more voices to be more articulate and more outspoken. And those who are in the book should be reaching more and more people. There has been such an unraveling of the deceit. How do you feel when you are being lied to regularly every day? I think there is hope provided there is this opposition that has a kind of umbrella and at the same time principle, backbone and some guts and has nothing to lose. And humor. Try to put humor in there if you possibly can.

***You talk to a lot of young people in your new book. Do you think they are representative?***

I'm not saying they are representative. I think they represent what could be, not what is. When Ralph Nader ran for President [in 2000] who do you think went to Nader rallies? They weren't old lefties; they were young people, So Willie Nelson and Eddy Veder from Pearl Jam were there, but would the kids have paid ten cents a head to hear Bush or Gore? The Illinois Coliseum was jammed. But they didn't vote. They didn't vote. It's a question of them [getting to turn out].

***I wonder what they would make of an Abbie Hoffman today? A few years ago, a well-intentioned but very badly written film about him, called Steal This Movie, flopped.***

I think Abbie killed himself because he was a romantic but a romantic in a good sense. He wanted to build a New Jerusalem. All his dreams, his romance with the future, were being shattered. Along come the MBA kids, you know? He didn't live long enough to see the streets of Seattle and things of that sort. The sixties is always being put down because it was a moment when kids had causes outside themselves. A woman I know says the sixties is put down by those who delight in the failure of dreams. That's a wonderful quote.

***Did you have to leave out anyone you really wanted in the new book?***

Recently, four guys were pardoned by [Illinois Governor] George Ryan from Death Row. All were so obviously innocent it wasn't funny. Only one of them is in this new book. I wanted a couple more in there. Like Merle Haggard. This rough, gruff guy is changing. He has got this new song: "This is the news." I got a hunch he would have been very interesting. But it was too late to get him for this one. I love to get people in transitions, like that klansman [in "Race"] who changed. They're the ones who attract me the most.

***Rumor has it you have another book under way.***

It's about musical artists I've had on my show. Opera and jazz and folk. It'll be the other aspect of my life. The musical aspect. I'll call it *They All Sang* and it's subtitled: *Guests of an Eclectic Disk Jockey.*

***When do you expect to bring it out? Next year?***

Oh who knows? I'm 91, you know. I'm working on a great presumption (laughing). A great presumption.