THE BEST SEAT IN THE HOUSE

Edward W. Huffstetler

. . . Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,
Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.
—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

RUNNING A MOVIE is really very simple. There are two projectors, each aimed at the exact same spot. Each movie has roughly six reels—each reel lasts twenty minutes or so. You light the carbons first, then start the machine. You focus, and wait twenty minutes for the bell to sound. The bell is your warning that you have two minutes until the change-over. When you hear it, you light the carbons on the other machine, and stand ready by the window. When you see the first cue (a small circle in the upper right hand corner), you start the motor. On the second cue (six seconds later), you open the shutter and simultaneously cut the other machine off. As long as you have it focused and framed right, the people downstairs will never notice a thing. Once the new reel has started, you change the carbons on the unused machine, and thread up the next reel. The whole change-over process takes about five minutes. It's simple, but there's an art to it. Everything depends on your timing—if you're too early on the change-over, the audience will miss a line or two of dialogue—if you're too late, they'll see the leader (big circles counting down 5,4,3,2, etc.). If it isn't framed right, the picture will suddenly be cut in half, with the top on the bottom, and the bottom on the top, and the people downstairs will be forced to become aware of the process of projection. See, the whole idea is to make the audience forget that what they are seeing is a piece of celluloid film projected on to a white peg-board screen. You want them to feel like they are in San Francisco, or China, or wherever the movie takes place. Everything you do in the booth has to be hidden. No mistakes. That's part of the deal. . . .

I remember the procedure well. Every day I'd be at the theatre at nine a.m. I'd pop popcorn, sweep the auditorium, thread the machines, then bum around Ocean Drive until noon when the first show started. Every day I worked from noon until two a.m. when the late show let out. I made roughly one hundred a week, a small fortune for a kid of fourteen. It wasn't unusual to work long hours at the beach, even at such a young age. Most kids worked from age ten on—as arcade flunkies, busboys, ice cream vendors, amusement park attendants, bell hops, etc. My job wasn't like that, though. I had a *real* job. It was year round (of course, in the winter I only worked two shows a night), it paid well, and gave me unlimited entertainment. I saw every movie in town at least thirty-six times. My record was M.A.S.H., eighty-four times—it was held over. I had many jobs before this one, and I had many after it. Most of my time at the beach, I remember being in a kitchen in one position or another. I worked as a busboy, a dishwasher, a waiter, and a cook—usually a cook—although I also remember a stint as a pump mechanic for the water department, and a short try at being the city dog catcher. But this was all years later. Of all the jobs I had, though, I liked being a projectionist the best. When I had to "work," it was only five minutes out of every twenty. Every hour and a half I got roughly a twenty minute break, and I had the whole upstairs to myself.

Old Man Johnson, the manager, wouldn't come up to the balcony because he claimed it still "smelt like niggers up there" (it had been built with a separate entrance back in the days when theatres were segregated in the South), but I knew he was lying. He had a bad heart and couldn't make it up the stairs; besides, he didn't know how to run the machines anyway. His son, Calvin, taught me, but by this time he had long since gone off to college. I was left with free run of the place. I brought in a mattress, a coffee pot, an ever-changing stack of books, and a couple of cushions so I could sit by the window over-looking Main Street. I loved that window. I could see everything that went on, all the way from Hillside Dr. to Ocean Blvd., and, of course, the ocean itself which was only a hundred feet away.

See, when I was fourteen, I thought I was a *real* insider—in on everything. I was dug in like a clam in the marsh mud; I was a local in a world of tourists. I was sure I had the straight poop, the untold story, the good goods. I had known for a long time that my mom was an insider, and I could never figure out how she did it, her being an older lady from a small mill-village in North Carolina. I couldn't understand how, but she knew *everybody*. If we broke down on the road in a little town I'd never heard of, in a place I'd never been before, she'd know

who to call. She'd say, "You remember Ester, Mattie's cousin? She lives here with her two boys. I bet they'd help us." This quality in my mother haunted me for a long time. Years later, long after I'd left the beach, I was in London during an interim session in college, standing by an exhibit in a museum talking with some friends from school, when a middle-aged man noticed my accent and asked me where I was from. I said North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and he said he was from Columbia. He asked me who my family was, and I told him. He said he knew my mother— he'd stayed at the Blockade Runner Motor Inn; ate in the restaurant—said she made one hell of a breakfast. All I could say was "I know, I know. . . ."

Mom was a *natural* insider, a person at home anywhere. This quality was not something you could inherit; at least I didn't. I had to really work at it. I'd seen enough movies to know that one sure way of being an insider is to act cool—no surprises, don't get excited, take everything in stride, and above all, don't let anything get to you, at least don't let it show. You have to do everything you want to do, despite what people tell you, and you should never follow a rule unless it is in your own best interest to do so. This really was the code of teen-agers living at the beach in seventy-two; in fact, chances are it's the code of teen-agers living anywhere, anytime—I don't know. All I know is that it made for an extremely difficult situation between my mom and me. We didn't exactly fight, you understand, we just pretended we were strangers.

Every morning at six a.m., I would wait for mom to go to work. I couldn't do anything with her around. Even after she left, though, I still usually just lounged on the sofa. Sometimes, I'd call somebody up, and talk them into doing something—either fishing in the inlet, or swimming, or just getting high and watching TV—whatever I could get going. I called up Percy most of the time. Percy and I had been friends since he had moved down the year before, and our friendship had been extremely lucrative. He had taught me how to surf-fish, showing me the best way to cut up mullet for bait. He had taught me to scuba dive in the channel behind his house, and he even tried to teach me something about photography. In return, I wrote his English papers and drilled him for the tests.

He lived on the far side of the golf course, next to the back nine. I lived on the front nine, next to the highway. In order to get from his house to mine, he had to drive along a winding, sandy, service road that meandered through the golf course. Most people could do it easily at twenty to twenty-five m.p.h., but Percy liked it at forty or forty-five. He was good at it too, driving (he was a year older than me

and hence had a license) his dad Lefty's Toyota pick-up through the sand like it was a jeep or a dune buggy. As far as I knew, he never flipped it.

"Hey Bubba what's up?"

"Not much, Ed. I ain't feelin too good here lately. Lefty's on my case again—has me doin damn near everything around the shop. I already told him I'd cut some grass this mornin, and clean that shit outa the Sand Dunes. I can't stay long."

Lefty was in real estate, renting beach cottages to tourists for a week at a time in the summer. Percy worked for him when he could fit it in around the other job he had busing tables.

"Let's go to Pop's pier and go swimming."

"Aw right."

Once I had the word, I could throw on my cut-off jeans and grab a towel in no time. Percy would already have on a pair of baggies (standard gear in the summer). He would crank the truck and head toward the pier. All the locals liked to swim at Pop's because it was close to the *action*, and also because a lot of tourists hung out there. If you were fourteen and a local, you always wanted to swim where there were tourists. See, tourists, usually mill workers from the Carolinas or Georgia, were basically scared of the water—kids especially. They would wade out until they were about waist deep, stand there, and get pounded by the waves. A local, on the other hand, only liked to swim around waves if he were body-surfing, or board-surfing (a rarity in those days). If he wanted to swim, he would go out past the breakers and swim in the calmer swells behind the waves. A tourist would never do this. He would be afraid of sharks, afraid of being over his head, afraid of that vast horizon of water. A local would know the water was only fifteen or twenty feet deep at the end of the pier, no matter how "vast" it might look.

Because of all this, it was very impressive to the tourists, especially the girls, to see someone walk out to the end of the pier and dive off, considering the pier went out at least two hundred feet, and considering that you had to dodge the swells in order not to be slammed into the pilings, which were covered with sharp barnacles. To them, it was certain death, but to a local, it was just a great place to show off.

As we walked out to the end of the pier, Percy would usually spot a couple of girls our age "swimming" in a few feet of water next to the pilings. When he'd climb up on the railing and start to jump, he'd shout at the top of his lungs something like YEEEEE! HIIII! to get their attention. Then I'd climb up and dive off belly first. Having always been big, I was deluded into thinking that the sound of a fat belly striking the water from that height was very impressive, even

powerful.

"That was a hell of a splash, Ed."

"Yeah. Let's go see if it worked."

We would swim leisurely toward shore. You could ruin things if you looked too anxious. Once we got to the breakers, we would wait until we saw the right wave, and then ride it in almost right up to where the girls were swimming by the pier.

"Hey dollin," Percy would say, or "Hey Babe-a," depending on how the girls looked.

"You two are cra-azy. You coulda been keeled jumpin off thar like-at." Sumter girls. I could catch that accent a mile off. Percy always knew how to pick them. Sumter girls had a reputation at the beach, but not in the fifties sense of being "loose." We thought of them as hick farm girls who just loved locals. They always liked to show us off to their girlfriends. They had a desperate need to be "in" at the beach, to be insiders, but of course they didn't stand a chance. Most locals thought they were dirty and stupid and talked all the time, although that never prevented anyone from trying to pick them up anyway. It's funny but years later I became very close to some people from Sumter who tried their best to convince me that it was we, and not they, who were dirty and stupid and talked all the time. By that time, I was ready to believe them.

"Why no dollin, I wusn't gonna be killed. I knew what I wus doin," Percy would say, "the only time I ever really got scared wus that time. . . ."

And off he'd go. It was usually at this point that I'd make my excuses and leave. See, whereas I've always been big, Percy was always tall and lean for his age. He had a dark tan, and a moustache, something I couldn't grow for at least another three years. The girls went wild over him. Of course, I couldn't say it bothered me too much, though. There were always more Sumter girls, for instance, than there were local guys (they tended to group together, like mullet). Besides, Percy wasn't really that interested in them anyway. He went after them the same way he did a mackerel, or a bluefish. He was in it strictly for the sport, that's all. As for me, I never was one to sport fish. I went for stuff you could eat, like flounder. Besides, I had to get to work.

I was usually running late getting to the theatre. Chris would already be behind the screen popping popcorn. I would hurry upstairs, change into my work clothes, then go down and help him. Chris ran the projectors at the Surf Theatre down the street. Both the Surf and the Ocean Drive were owned by the same company and both

were run by Old Man Johnson. Chris had to pop his popcorn at the Ocean Drive because we only had the one machine—something he hated doing, and something which generally made him run late too, no matter how soon he got started.

"I'll finish this for you, Chris. Go get your movie checked in. You can pick this stuff up later."

"You're such a sweet asshole."

Chris was grumpy (especially in the mornings), but he was without a doubt my best friend on the beach. He was one of the first people to introduce me around. We were the first in our class to get high, and we did it together using some stuff we'd gotten from a friend of his brother's. I was so close to Chris that I didn't even have to talk to him. One hand gesture, or a single phrase, and he'd get the whole message. We had the same continuity of memory, mainly because we did everything together. For instance, as soon as I got the job running projectors, Chris would be hanging around upstairs with me practically the whole time. He was up there so much, and learned so much about the machines, that when the projectionist at the Surf quit, Chris was the natural person to replace him. And although I had learned the machines first, Chris could actually run a movie better than I could. He was a natural projectionist—he had perfect timing.

"Er you bout finished in there, Chris?"

"He's gone, Mr. Johnson. I'm the only one back here."

"Bout time yus gettin here, boy."

Old Man Johnson was probably the oldest person I knew, or had ever met before, aside from my grandfather who died in sixty- eight. Unlike my grandfather, though, Old Man Johnson was always smiling and laughing. He got a big kick out of everything, usually at somebody's expense. For instance, he walked with a slight limp, and every time someone would ask him about it, he'd tell them a different story, and every time it'd get more and more outlandish. Half way through a story about stealin chickens, or wrestling an alligator, and you'd start to see you were being made fun of. Then he'd laugh and laugh at how you'd been stupid enough to go along. Actually, he'd probably been born with a game leg, since he never told any story that seemed true, and since nobody I knew had ever seen him walk straight.

"Mr. Johnson. How you feelin today?"

"Not bad, boy. Not bad a tall. Sumthin wrong son, you look a little pale."

Old Man Johnson had an unusual fascination with people's health, and he tended to worry a lot about it. This was probably because he

had so many old friends, but he worried just as much about the young people he knew, too.

"No, no. I'm fine. Little sleepy is all."

"Son, you'd better be gettin some sleep. I promised yo mamma you'd go straight home ever night after the show let out. Now she can't be stayin up all night waitin on you. She got to trust you, you understand that?"

"Yes sir."

"Now when you took this job, I told her I'd make sure you did right by her. You ain't been out tom-cattin insteada goin home, have ya? Come on, now, tell the truth."

"No sir. I just have trouble fallin asleep sometimes."

"Well, I don't know. You at that age when you start wantin some of these cute little things round yere to start diggin round ya root."

"What?" I'd usually stop listening to him when he got to the part about tom-cattin. That's where he would generally go into one of his many stories about the good old days on the farm before the tourists screwed things up.

"Ya root, boy, ya root!" He would grab his crotch as he said that word and jiggle it up and down. I would usually be caught not knowing what the hell he was talking about. That split second of indecision was all he needed to mistake hesitation for naivete, and he'd laugh at me the whole time he walked back toward the front of the theatre.

Once I was finished downstairs, I'd go to the projection booth. I would be alone up there. The only thing I had to be concerned with was the machines, and my own thoughts. After I'd started the movie, turned down the house lights, and checked the carbons a second time to make sure they weren't arcing, I'd go sit down by the window.

See, Ocean Drive is laid out like a big T. The horizontal line is Ocean Blvd., with Pop's pier being the farthest thing north, then the Helms Motel, the White House (a local flea-bag for runaways), the Spanish Galleon (a beach music bar), Pete's Porch (a bar on the beach), and Fat Jack's (another beach music place). Then there was the Pavillion, the rock music bars like the Back Alley, The Pad, and the Whiskey River Saloon. The vertical line of the T was Main Street, where you had the t-shirt shops, the ice cream places, the fast food restaurants, Hardwick's Cafeteria, and the two theatres. I could see all of this, except the rock music places, from my window. I loved to watch the people on Main Street—I could do it for hours, and nobody'd know I was even up there. From my window I could see the tourists milling around, going from shop to shop. I could see the old

men in their bermudas, their fishing hats, white socks and sandals, the old women in their floppy beach hats, young girls in skimpy bikinis with maybe a cut-off t-shirt over them, young boys in baggies and surfer sandals, with big St. Christopher medals hanging from their necks. I could see big Sam, smoking a cigarette outside the back door at Hardwick's cutting up with the black boys. I could see John Slaughter at the Dairy Cream. I could see the Chief at his torquoise shop; I could see The Kid playing foosball at the arcade for money, conning the tourists into one more bet. I could see the bikers at the Spanish Galleon with their red bandannas and sunglasses. It was all there. I'd see people I knew and I'd yell at them and they'd wave back to me. I felt as if I were a part of the street, more so than anybody else who came there.

My days during the summer went pretty much along these lines. Sitting with the projectors, making sure to do the change-overs, keeping up with the carbons—and watching things go on outside the window. And, of course, I'd watch the movie sometimes, especially if it was just coming to town. Usually though, the films the OD got were repeaters, since nobody would see them but tourists anyway. The audiences we had were really crazy. If anything went wrong—say a bad splice ran through and broke the film—the audience would start yelling and screaming and throwing popcorn up at the balcony. I guess they thought I was running the movie by hand and had fallen asleep or something. I don't know; I couldn't understand what made them carry on that way, except that I'd somehow broken the spell a movie puts over you. If the film broke, they were suddenly whisked out of the African jungle and back into the cold, damp auditorium of the Ocean Drive Theatre. It usually made them madder then hell, too.

The late show was typically a horror film, or an R-rated show. When a new one would come in, Chris would make a special trip over to the Back Alley to tell Alvie. Alvie was his cousin who played guitar for a rock band called "Crazy Quilt." They were a local legend. They played at the Back Alley every other weekend. Chris and I had a standing arrangement with Alvie. He'd get us into the bar and buy us beer, and we'd agree to show the late show after hours for the band. It was a great deal for us because these guys were nearly twenty and would otherwise have never been seen partying with us.

After we locked up for the night, we'd stand around while Mr. Johnson would fumble around for the keys to his truck.

"Now you boys go straight home. Eddy, I know yo mamma worries bout you being out so late. Now I promised her you'd go right home,

you hear?"

"Yes sir, I'm heading that way now."

"Aw right, now. I'm holding you to it. Night boys."

As soon as he would go, Chris and I would head for the Back Alley. Even though we came over fairly often, Kenny, the guy at the door, would always give us a hassle about getting in.

"Hey, man, you dudes too young to get in here."

"Go ask Alvie."

He would come back in a little while, all pissed off because he had walked all the way back there for nothing.

"Yeah, okay, you go in, but go round the back where the band is, and don't buy no beer."

Anything can happen in the Back Alley. Chris and I would try to act cool, act like we belonged, but we were always real excited to be in there. And even though we tried not to show it, we had that giddy feeling you get when you're really in on something big, really on the inside. The band would be playing a standard tune, like "Stairway to Heaven," or something corny like that. We would make our way past the people playing pool, or darts, or foosball to where the tables were and take the best seat in the house, near the front, next to the band. Otis, the roadie, would get us a beer (it was part of the deal), and we'd sit and watch the people in the bar.

Everyone there considered themselves hippies. That's an awful word—hippies. They weren't really hippies, any more than a supply sergeant stationed in Georgia during the war is a war hero. For them, the front was far off, some mythical place where they had heard of great battles (Kent State), or great celebrations (Woodstock), or great shrines (Haight-Ashbury). These things weren't real in South Carolina; they were legends. We were too far removed, in both space and time, to ever really be a part of the sixties. We would occasionally see someone from the front, and we would point to them and say that *they* were one of *us*. We felt like hippies, whether we were or not, and were treated that way by the local rednecks from Conway or Loris. They strengthened our belief, in much the same way that lions strengthen the belief of Christians.

These rednecks would tend to lump everyone with long hair who got high together as "hippies," but as with everything else, hippies came in many varieties. There were what we called the "glitter" hippies. They wore sequined shirts made in India, hip- hugger jeans, millions of bracelets, anklets, and rings. Their hair was always electric and wild. They listened to music like Deep Purple, Iron Butterfly, Cream, Atomic Rooster, and Jimi Hendrix, most anything with an

electric guitar.

The "classical" hippies were another group. Their hair was the same as the glitters, but they dressed differently. They wore mostly their parent's clothes—pleated pants, paisley shirts, and long cotton dresses. Their music was generally stuff like Yes, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Frank Zappa, and the Who— always the Who. They didn't hang around bars like the Back Alley much. Their place was on the highway, a place called John's. Most of them were older, and could drive.

The "country" hippies stayed next to the Back Alley at the Whiskey River Saloon. They were the main group, at least down South. They were jean-jacketed biker-types who listened to Rare Earth, Steppenwolf, and "down-home" rock like Lynard Skynard, Marshall Tucker and ZZ Top.

Chris and I didn't belong to any of these groups. We had long hair, but it was generally straight and clean. We wore flannel work shirts and brogans in the winter and work shirts (rolled up at the sleeve and unbuttoned) or t-shirts, and flip- flops in the summer. Flip-flops were my favorite thing to wear. They protected the sole without binding the feet—always cool and light to the step. We were the working man's hippie—proletariat rockers. Our music came from people like Bob Dylan, Woody and Arlo Guthrie, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, bluegrass, and Joe Cocker—especially Joe Cocker. We liked him because he sweat.

These differences probably sound ridiculous to someone not of that time or place, but at the time they were crucial. We took pride in the fact that we weren't faddish like the glitters, we weren't elitists like the classicals, we weren't drunks like the down-homes. We were *of* the people. We liked to work, and we liked being workers. We liked all music—country, bluegrass, black gospel, jazz. We were democratic, in a Whitmanesque sense, although we didn't read Whitman until we had long since left the beach. It wasn't a conscious effort to emulate anyone, in fact; it was all just circumstance—the things we were able to filter from the stuff around us.

After the band stopped playing and the bar closed, we'd sit around and get high while Otis locked everything up. The people with the band would ask us what the movie was about, and Chris would sit up on the stage and give everyone an elaborate plot summary. He was good at that; he'd have them all worked up, ready to see even the worst movie. It wasn't only the way he described it, it was also the way in which he'd warn everybody of the danger in watching it. Don't turn on any lights; don't make a lot of noise; if someone hears anything, tell

the guy in the projection booth and lay down behind the seats. Chris was in love with the possibility of getting in trouble.

And it was Chris who would usually lead us around to the side door; Chris who would go on ahead and look out for cops making their rounds. I'd bring up the rear, making sure no one saw us file through the door.

Once inside, we'd go up the back steps to the balcony and everybody would find a place to sit down, either in the seats, on the steps, in the aisles, or on my mattress. I'd go into the projection booth and start getting things ready for the show. Somebody would light a joint and pass it around.

I loved running movies for the band. It always felt good, sitting with them, hanging around a real rock band without having to be subservient to them. I wasn't a groupie, or a roadie; I was an equal. I was a dealer, a trader of goods—I was trading one movie for a couple of hours of being included, being on the inside.

Sometimes I'd get so wrapped up in the scene on the balcony that I'd miss the bell. All of a sudden the screen would go white, and I could hear the film flapping in its case. I'd jump up and run to the booth, and Chris would try to keep everybody entertained. While I was starting the other machine, I could hear him telling them about the time he did this very thing with a full house downstairs. He was trying to keep them occupied, but they would be moaning and bitching.

"Come on, man!"

"Where's the damn movie?!"

"You better not leave anything out!"

They were no different; they were just another audience, just another bunch of tourists there to see a show. When the movie had gotten started again, I'd lose interest in sitting out on the balcony. I'd usually just grab a book, or maybe I'd open a window and see what was going on out on Main Street. Late at night, when the neon lights had been cut off across the street, and the lights of the marquee were out, the window seemed like a porthole in a big ship. I could imagine myself entering some strange port, someplace where I didn't know the language. The hum of the projectors would sound like the idle of shipboard engines, and it would really seem like I was inside the ship— inside looking out.