

This is an excerpt from a new memoir by Don Lattin, the longtime religion reporter at the San Francisco Chronicle, titled "Distilled Spirits -- Getting High, Then Sober, with a Famous Writer, Forgotten Philosopher, and Hopeless Drunk." The print edition is scheduled for an October 2012 release by University of California Press. The e-book was published by Lattin and is available now on the Kindle platform. For more information, visit donlattin.com.

By Don Lattin

For as long as anyone can remember, the offices of San Francisco's premiere newspapers have been conveniently located just one block from Skid Row.

Today, the *Chronicle* is at Fifth and Mission streets, just a block from Sixth Street, the current boulevard of bad luck. Back in the old days, long before I hit town, the *Examiner* and *Chronicle* offices were near the corner of Market and Third streets, just a block from the old dive bars and flop houses of "Three Street."

One of the last of the really seedy dives to close down on Three Street was called "Jerry and Johnny's." It was an old newspaper tavern. By the time I started working at the *Examiner* in the 1970s, the newspaper had moved to Fifth Street, but Jerry and Johnny's was still open over on Third. The wall behind the bar was covered with ancient black and white photos of all the old guys I was just getting to know – back in the day before they were old, bald, fat, and/or almost dead from drink.

Most of the buildings around the bar had been abandoned, awaiting a redevelopment project that would eventually turn the neighborhood into a glitzy convention center with luxury

hotels and expensive restaurants, but Jerry and Johnny's hung on until the last wrecking ball swung its way. By then, the *Chronicle* had been over at Fifth and Mission for decades, and the *Examiner* had been there for some fifteen years.

One of my first assignments at the *Examiner* was to go collect the newspaper's three top editors over at Jerry and Johnny's and bring them back to the City Room. It seemed they were too plastered to make it back on their own. They still preferred Jerry and Johnny's on Third Street to the M & M Tavern on Fifth Street, which had become the preferred watering hole for *Examiner* staffers. I was in my early twenties and working as the Berkeley stringer, a part-time job covering news from across the Bay. But I happened to be in the main office that day and was dispatched to go pick up this trio of missing editors. There was, after all, a newspaper to put out.

They were so drunk and disorderly that they couldn't be trusted to walk two blocks, so I drove my old VW bus over to Third Street, rounded them up at Jerry and Johnny's, and gently shepherded them into the back of the bus. Then I drove two blocks and poured them out onto the sidewalk near the Fifth Street entrance to the *Examiner*.

It was my introduction to big time journalism in San Francisco, and I loved it. In a few weeks, one of the editors I'd rounded up at the bar offered me a fulltime job.

There were still guys around with flasks in their pocket and bottles in their desk. One reporter carried .45-caliber Colt pistol around with him. He was a decorated Korean War vet who'd worked a few years as a vice cop in L.A. He'd swagger into the newsroom in the morning, pull the forty-five from his waistcoat and drop it into his desk drawer with a loud "clank."

Adding to the Wild West feel were a few spittoons that had yet to be removed from the City Room.

At times, the place seemed more like a frat house than a newsroom. Back in the 1960s and 1970s, the *Chronicle* was infamous for its stable of freewheeling, hard-drinking columnists. One of them, a rock music and pop culture critic named John Wasserman, had a series of run-ins with my predecessor on the religion beat, the Rev. Lester Kinsolving.

Lester was a conservative Episcopal priest who wore his collar in the office and took it upon himself to enforce religious orthodoxy in San Francisco – not an easy job. The Rev. Kinsolving didn't drink, but he could be just as exuberant and abrasive as the rest of the gang.

One day, Kinsolving came back from an assignment to find that the entire contents of his desk, along with his telephone and typewriter, had disappeared. He immediately suspected Wasserman, who sat next to him in the City Room and did not exactly share the same values as the religion editor. John was a popular staffer remembered for, among other things, inviting a squad of strippers from a North Beach nightclub to a *Chronicle* Christmas party. Lester's suspicions about Wasserman were confirmed when the Right Reverend waited for rock critic to go out on assignment and did the same to his desk. Yes, it turned out, Wasserman was the rascal who'd cleaned out the priest's desk.

Kinsolving would go on to make a name for himself as right-wing commentator and radio talk show host in the Washington, D.C.-area, where he achieved some infamy asking provocative questions at White House news conferences. Wasserman would die in the winter of 1979 in a horrendous car wreck on a rainy night in South San Francisco. He was forty years old. John was driving the wrong way on Interstate 280 when his silver Volkswagen Rabbit collided head-on with a bright red Karmann Ghia. The two occupants in the other car also died. Wasserman,

who'd just left a party, reportedly had a blood alcohol level that was nearly three times the legal limit.¹

There but for the grace of God...

Over the next twenty years, God knows how many times I drove home drunk across the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. Through sheer luck, I never killed anyone and never got a D.U.I.

One of our rituals at the *San Francisco Examiner* was "the Shirtsleevever." We would get up from our desks without putting on our coats, like we were just heading to the men's room or the coffee pot, then proceed down to the M&M, located just a quick stumble down the sidewalk.

Some memories of those days are forever lost, but I do recall tripping down the sidewalk one afternoon and being stopped by an old *Examiner* photographer, one of the guys who still wore a hat whenever he left the office. Looking back on it, I'm sure the guy was a recovering alcoholic, a "friend of Bill." He gave me a steely look and said, "Watch out for yourself down there, kid. Those stories don't always have happy endings." I didn't realize it at the time, but he was warning me about my habit of hanging out with the old drunks at the M&M, where I loved listening to their stories about the good old days almost as much as they loved telling them.

San Francisco newspaper lore is full of stories about drunks who missed the big story, or more triumphant tales about rummies that got totally shit-faced yet still got the job done. When I first started working at the paper, it seemed to me like some of the biggest drunks were also some of the best reporters.

¹ "The Report on Wasserman's Car Crash," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3/17/1979.

George Murphy was by his own description “the world’s best rewrite man.” That’s a key player in a deadline-driven newsroom, the guy (or gal) who takes notes over the phone from various reporters out there on some big story, simultaneously weaving all these feeds into one fine yarn.

Murphy was also one of the better reporters at the *Chronicle*, with at least one notable exception.

On the afternoon of September 22, 1975, Murphy was supposed to be at a Union Square hotel covering a speech by President Gerald Ford. A few hours later, red of face after a few drinks, Murphy breezed back into the City Room like a man without a care in the world. He walked up over to the City Desk to check in with Carl Nolte, one of the editors working the desk that day – and one of my main drinking buddies at the *Chronicle*.

“Hello, George,” said Nolte, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “As you know, someone tried to assassinate the President of the United States while you were covering him at the St. Francis Hotel. I assume you are all over this story.”

Murphy stood at the desk in stunned silence.

“No?” Nolte asked. “No!? Jesus fucking Christ! Well, don’t you worry, George. We’re all over it -- even if *you* are not.”

Murphy was not on the scene when a woman named Sara Jane Moore fired a revolver at the president as he was leaving the hotel, missing Ford but nevertheless making news. The unlucky newsman had headed straight over to the M&M as soon as Ford ended his speech, missing all the action.

Earlier that month, Murphy had been all over the story when Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, a follower of Charlie Manson, tried to shoot President Ford in Sacramento. Murphy later explained how he let himself miss this second assassination attempt on the President of the United States, asking, “Who would have thought lightning would strike twice?”

Murphy stopped drinking before he died, but not long before. His passing came at one of his favorite North Beach watering holes one day in 1980. He sat down at the bar and ordered a bottle of mineral water. He laughed at someone’s joke, then quietly laid his head down in his arms and passed away.

Carl Nolte wrote the obit, calling Murphy “one of the best of the old-time San Francisco newspapermen...a reporter of the old school – smart, witty, hard drinking, self assured.” He was 52.

Cocaine appeared in the newsroom in the late 1970s and became popular with a relatively small group of editors and reporters, myself included. In the mid-1980s, when I working in the *Examiner* City Room, a veteran reporter named Paul Avery was assigned to sit next to me.

Avery had been one of the hot shots at the *Chronicle* in the 1960s and 1970s, and was attempting a career comeback at the *Examiner*. He was most famous for his earlier reporting on the Zodiac case – a series of still unsolved murders that terrorized Northern California in the 1960s. His stories got the attention of the Zodiac killer himself, who sent a letter to Avery warning, “You are doomed.” That missive inspired everyone at the *Chronicle* office – including Avery – to start wearing campaign-style buttons with the words “I am Not Paul Avery” printed on them.

Paul would later be immortalized in the 2007 movie “Zodiac,” in which actor Robert Downey, Jr. depicts both Avery’s doggedness as a reporter and his love of cocaine. Downey was perfect for the part, having had his own real-life struggles with the seductive nose powder.

By the time I met Paul his love affair with cocaine had become a nightmare. Paul was one of the first guys I knew with a serious coke problem. We sat in the back row of the *Examiner* City Room. Avery would come into the office reeking of booze and looking like he hadn’t slept all night.

There was a small private bathroom near our desks where you could lock the door behind you. There was a wide stainless steel shelf below the mirror and above the sink. Over the years, I took drugs in countless bathrooms, but this one was the perfect place to snort coke. Paul was a frequent visitor to that little room, and he’d snort so much coke that I could sometimes sneak in behind him, pull out a credit card, and scrape together a decent line just from his leavings.

It took me many years to get to Paul’s level of abuse. By then, he was dead from pulmonary emphysema. My last memories of Avery are drinking with him at the M&M, watching with alarm as he’d take a hit from his oxygen tank, then light up another cigarette. Paul died in 2000. He was 66.

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You might think that seeing the decline of a fellow journalist would scare me away from cocaine. You might, but that’s because you don’t understand the mind of an addict. I used to tell myself, “You have to be smart to be a drug addict,” and I came up with all kinds of smart ways to control my daily dose of cocaine.

There's an old saying about cocaine being "God's way of telling you you're making too much money." Well, God must have had a plan for my life. He convinced HarperCollins to pay me way too much money as an advance on my second book.

Great writers from Hemingway to Hunter Thompson consumed copious amounts of drugs and alcohol while they worked. They also both blew their brains out, literally, but I preferred to not remember that part of the story.

My coke problem started getting out of control around the dawn of the new millennium. I was between wives. I was working on my second book, home alone, with a pile of cocaine at my side. But, like I say, you have to be smart to be a drug addict. The piles of cocaine kept getting bigger and disappearing faster. One of my more brilliant strategies was to buy a very strong lockbox. I'd go out and score an Eightball (an eighth of an ounce) of coke. To make it last more than one night, I would neatly divide the white powder into two piles, lock half of it in the lockbox, and then mail myself the key. That way, a day or two later, I could open the box and enjoy the rest of my little treat.

It worked for a while, but they just don't make lock boxes like they used to.

It took a long time, but I finally realized that the drugs and alcohol just weren't working anymore. One of the countless clichés that you hear at A.A. meetings is "my worst day sober was better than my best day drunk." Not for me. I had a great time getting high. It worked for many years, but at a certain point it just stopped working.

Getting loaded began as a way to get out of the house and onto the dance floor. It made me the life of the party, the funniest guy in the room. In the end, getting loaded was just about hiding in my basement with a bottle of vodka and a pile of coke, hoping no one would bother

me. It wasn't fun anymore. It hadn't been fun for years, but I kept doing it over and over and over and over...