

Interview #10 6/14/00 Alfred Skondovitch
Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK

Like gangsters need a shyster lawyer, painters need a poet to articulate their work, to write their catalogs, particularly when they start out. They also in turn are supportive of movements in jazz. All painters seem to be connected in the beginning with a jazz musician that they admire who touches them, and they talk about his work, and go see his performances.

One day I was with Gandy Brody and Robert de Niro and we went to this restaurant on 6th Avenue in the Village. It was one of these all night spots that were frequented by painters and jazz musicians. We went there around two in the morning and the place was strangely quiet. The only person there was Joe Albany. Albany was an older jazz pianist who was revered by all the other jazz musicians, young and old. He would be an old man the way Pissarro would be an old man to Impressionists looking for a toehold, and someone who was a father figure, who could help them in a practical way and give them advice on their craft.

Albany that night really looked spaced out. And we said, "What the hell are you doing here? You should be playing."

He said I'm not paid up on my union card, and not this and not that and the business agent came by and shut down the gig and I don't know what to do. We said how much do you need to bring your union card up? He said 24 dollars, which is like saying this is really a lot of money, like saying 400 dollars right now. We said all right we'll get the money for you, Joe. Just wait here. The three of us went in different directions and were to meet back at the restaurant. We told the proprietor to keep Joe with coffee and food and not to let him out.

I got back there 20 minutes later. I borrowed the money off of a Mafioso soldier that was my neighbor on Thompson Street. The fellow didn't know anything about Joe, but he says you see that I get it back. I said don't worry. Of course you have to be very careful about that because money off of a Mafia guy, there's 20% interest or more. But he said there'd be no demand for the money—"You pay it back when you can, I want to see that guy work, you take me to his next gig," said Vito.

So I arrived back first, and Joe wasn't there. The guy says, "Well, he left with you fellows." I said, "He didn't! I told you to keep him here, and where did he go." "I don't know, for God's sakes." Then I had to wait for de Niro and Brody and they turned up and they also had money. We decided to go uptown and check the jazz places, but no one had seen him come by that way. Everyone knew of the incident where he quit playing because of the union rep.

Across from the Poindexter Gallery on 38th Street, there was the Comedy Club Theatre. And we had a three-day lease, this was the French National Art Theatre. Other people would enjoy these three day leases, that was the time-slot, and the previous guy left all his stuff on the stage. So I threw it all out. Throwing it out was kind of a circuitous thing, you actually threw it out of a high window above the alley. And the guy whose theatrical set I wrecked this way was Professor Blankenship of USC. I forgot all that I did to this man, and I was so happy when my own set went in and I met the schedule. **Got a job with Professor Blankenship of USC after throwing his sets out the window of the Comedy Club Theatre.**

Not long after, for reasons explained elsewhere I had to leave New York in a hurry. And somehow I had the idea if I could go to Los Angeles and go to USC, I could certainly get a job with Professor Blankenship. And incredible as it may seem, he gave me a job. I worked in audio-visuals at USC in the theatre department. Then I realized I'd never really spoken to people

in my life, and I was asked to give a lecture on the things that I did to these people who seemed so young. These were really the first college people I met, on these broad campuses. Of course you can say that Greenwich Village and Washington Square is the campus, and it is of NYU, but it doesn't seem that way. There's such a mix of people from dope addicts and they'd occupy different corners of the square. But USC was this city with a student body of 65,000 people as I remember, and four theatres and equipment I'd never seen: hydraulic equipment that raised the entire stage and lighting—it was incredible.

But anyway, before I took off to get a job from poor old Blankenship, and to avoid this lady who was giving me grief, Robert de Niro and Gandy Brody were saying, “Oh, my God, how are you going?” I said on the greyhound bus, it's quite simple. To them nothing existed outside of New York. There was a place called Hollywood and some of them had been suborned and were now traitors to their craft and working in that place. But Orange County, San Marino, these places didn't exist. It was as if it was a huge wilderness, the Midwest was cactus-tiled buildings, wandering cows, mad bulls. This was the anxiety that was conveyed to me, and talking as though a New Yorker could be found anywhere in this wilderness, they said, “we think that Joe left on a bus, so wherever the bus stops, Alfred, walk around and listen for his music, and ask, and you know who to ask.”

What do I do, stumble up to some maverick steer and say, “Have you seen Joe Albany?”

I remember that first ride out of New York. I suppose I should have been subdued with terror, but I wasn't really, the adrenaline was running, it was as if I was home and I'd see my brothers in the morning at the bomb shelter. We went into these little Pennsylvania towns, and there were people with beards, Amish people, plain folk. I'd see them at night and I was doing sketches for the first time in the bus. I never do work outside the studio, it's not like hauling a

camera about. So I'd get off the bus and listen and think, well, these bearded people won't know anything about Joe Albany. I couldn't hear his music. The bus stations in those days were in the poorer parts of town. So we went all across the country this way. I didn't find hide nor hair of Joe, and I felt I'd done everything to look for him. This is the route, the trail he took and yet there was no evidence of his coming or going.

But going back to my lecture to college students about theatre sets, I felt the settings (in those days, I don't think this way now) should be an accidental process, a happening, in which actors participate. They find things and bring them in and create an environment. I found that I couldn't talk to people, but I had an idea. Blankenship said you can talk about this, "I mean, hell, you're the only one who *can* talk about it." So they dressed me up as the tin man and I felt secure behind the tin man prop, and I began to talk. And I thought, God, I'm having a wonderful time here, before Ursula turned up. The chancellor of the school was visiting the facility, of course the arts you'd better watch. Theatrical arts was their showcase, an entrée to Hollywood and the chancellor spent quite some time there. And he listened to me lecture and he said to Professor Blankenship, "What the hell is this guy doing? I thought I'd be listening to something about the Wizard of Oz."

He said, "Chancellor, he's never spoken to people before, so we came up with this device."

The chancellor was angered by this device and said, "Get rid of him."

So I should have been upset, but within 24 hours I had to go and move fast because of the young lady (Ursula) who was pursuing me. Blankenship chose this moment to tell me about the sets that I wrecked, and I told him I felt terrible about that. But he loaned me money to go on to Claremont.

So a friend drove me there, and there were these beautiful, engaging, charming people, talking about art and not being able to comprehend the struggle. Imagine describing to these people the shrapnel from rockets spread out among blossoms of fireweed, how beautiful that sight was: of the pink and then these flashing silvery tongues of the rocket skins. But at 10 o'clock in the morning, they would corrode because of dew. So this vision of the dawn hours after a bombing attack would be gone until the next air raid. How do you explain this? Do they start a war? Certainly an artist named Adolf Hitler started a war, he might have wanted to create these aesthetic things. I thought, God this is wonderful.

And then everything that you needed was available. They said, where are you going to sleep tonight? I said I don't know. So they found a house in which I could sleep. People came from all over the place, they had ukuleles and guitars and they were singing folksongs. In those days Pete Seeger was the nonconformist musical jingoist, and Claremont was the home of that wonderful songstress who was in her teens, but sand that night—who was that—Joan Baez whose daddy was a doctor and whose mother was a teacher or vice versa.

I thought, what can I do for these charming people—children in the land of Beulah as that author said—Joyce Cary. I thought, I'm in the land of Beulah, and what can I do? One of the hosts said, "We live just near Baseline Road, and if you walk along there, you'll come across a liquor store. You'll see a blue light which indicates the boundary, because liquor cannot be sold in a university town." Others wanted to come, but I said, "No, I have to walk along because I have to listen." They thought this was strange, but then this is a guy who's in his early 30s and possibly in dotage.

So I left believe it or not to listen for Joe Albany. I walked about three miles to the blue light, and it was just wonderful, a fragrant night in a lovely little college town. And then I heard

music here abroad at night, and I thought, “These people know where Joe Albany is in Claremont.” I walked towards the sound, so now I’m completely lost. The only thing I had was the music. I had to wait sometimes when the fellow would finish his riff, and then he began playing again, and there were people accompanying him. Finally I found this house and walked in there. I wasn’t challenged, so I sat down and the people continued with their music. And when they got done playing, I said, “Where is Joe Albany?”

They said, “Man! Do you know Joe Albany?”

I said, “Yes, I do. He’s a friend and we’re looking for him. Lots of people are looking for him.” They wanted me to smoke pot, as a check to see if I was a cop. I told them I don’t mess with that stuff. I’m not really a straight person, but I teach boxing, I was a boxer, and I can’t mess with that. I could knock you all out, want me to do that? So I jollied them up and their suspicions were over and they said they’d take me to him.

He was playing at a nightclub in Laguna Beach. Laguna Beach is 140 miles away from Claremont, and I didn’t know this. I’d been to the liquor store and I still had this bottle. The favorite drink of the kids on campus was Christian Brothers brandy, always remembered that. So here we are with this bottle, and I get in the back of this old beat up Buick. There were four people there. There was a young lady who was also a musician but she remained behind, they had a little baby. And they drove. And they wondered if they could smoke pot and I said, “I don’t care what you do, just get me to Joe.” So we drive through the night, and I thought how am I going to find that house again, but it’s more important to find Joe. We drove to the back of this establishment at Laguna Beach and we got in through the tradesman’s entrance, and they sat me down at a table where I could see Joe and where he would see me. And I thought, well, there he is. And what a beautiful place. I remembered these pigsties where he’d played like the Five

Spot, the Blue Note, and they were really horrible places with an alley way outside where people could urinate because they wouldn't want to wait on the john being clear. The music was the only thing that existed in these places, and great music it was. You would be transformed by the music. But here was this incredible environment. It was built on a slope and overlooked the Pacific. It was the first time I'd seen the Pacific Ocean.

The pianist who I was with, who was playing in the style of Joe, approaches Joe during a musical break, and he whispers in his ear and he's obviously saying, "Joe, there's this guy, and his name is Alfred from New York. He's looking for you. He's over there."

And Joe looked toward me and made this [hostile dismissive gesture]. The guy hurried back to me, and said, "Man you really know Joe Albany!"

I said, "I've got to go back to Claremont."

(He didn't want to talk to you?)

No, and that was the gesture he made. I never warranted this. I really loved that guy. It may have been something for Gandy Brody or Robert de Niro. They may have stiffed him emotionally one way or another. Always boils down to that.

Anyway, these kids took me back to Claremont. They said, "Wow! You really know Joe Albany!: They mentioned some other dignitaries that were treated in this fashion by Joe.

So now the problem was to find out where the house was. We're now back in Claremont at a familiar hour to me, when I'm awake and alive, the moon is out. I've seen great things. We methodically came back along Baseline, we found the blue light. They had said it was 2.5 miles away, so we figured that out. I looked for the house, and there it was. I remember this thing on the lawn. The house was dark and black and I thought, well the party is over. I hope the people

are there who had a place for me to sleep that night. The musicians were saying, you can stay with us, don't worry about that.

Then as I approached the house, I smelled gasoline. J. R. Cooley appeared out of the dark (the guy who brought me to Claremont and eventually took me on to Houston, Texas) and said, "That girl was here and she's coming back. She's threatening to come back and burn down the house!"

"God damn!" I said. How did she find out about this?"

He said, "She went by my mother's house in Brentwood." His mother said my son is visiting Claremont, his alma mater.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut. We've got to get out of here. Do you have any ideas?" Putting the guilt trip on him, you see.

(You smelled the gasoline. Was it ignited? Had she poured the gasoline?)

No, but the lights were out; everyone had fled this woman who came in there. Once again, this was not someone whose constitution had anything to do with happiness. She was someone born of the German Nazi regime.

(Another question: The last time I heard you say anything about her, the way you told the story was that you had arrived in Los Angeles and gone to the British Consulate and got a job, and they'd referred you to the British owner of an antique store. You were there one day and then some guy, a stranger, comes by, and you strike up a conversation, and somehow you learn he's going to leave town and he takes you to Houston. Can you clear this up?)

I needed a job after the Chancellor said he didn't want non-academic people in there. So in desperation I called the British Consulate in Los Angeles from an apartment building that

adjoins the campus of USC. These were private apartment buildings that housed students and I was staying with the Fergusons, who were schoolmates of Elliot Budd Hopkins in Wheeling, Virginia. When I lost the job in the theatre department, I thought I'd better find something fast. And in desperation I called the Brits. And they said, yes we have a job for you. It's tomorrow in the morning.

I said, "When do I see the guy?"

"You don't see the guy. You will check in at Ruddleston's Antique Store in Brentwood."

Colonel Ruddleston supplied tables for the movies which arrived in Los Angeles during the era of Errol Flynn and swashbuckling movies where they'd eat a whole leg of a co, things like that.

He was desperate for help because it was July 4, and he said it's like Guy Fawkes day in England. "These Yanks celebrate their independence and kicking us out." The colonel and his wife were both from Yorkshire.

"You see that black cannon out there? You paint that. You go out there with lamp black and you hoist the flag. And the flag here is the Union Jack. We don't have the Stars and Stripes above it or beneath it. And if anyone gives you a hassle—"

As if anyone would give you a hassle in the land of Beulah. There were people who came by that day who supported his notion and understood the humor of it. Katherine Hepburn, who was a charming lady, and was looking for things to give her fellow actors in a movie. It must have been the African Queen or something like that, because she bought skull's head for Humphrey Bogart. And Lloyd Nolan lived down the street, and he sort of approved of the cannon polishing, etc.

I worked there a couple of weeks and lived up at the end of an alley. You have these wonderful concourse, marvelous avenues, and you have these connective alleys. Not like any city alley in, say, London. There'd be trees and grass. This was where J. R. Cooley lived. He would come down the alley, and encounter the cannon on the corner of the main street. The business across from Ruddleston's Antique Store was a farmer's market. It was wonderful because they had Jewish delicatessens, for obvious reasons, for people in the industry. You could see stars there quite anonymously.

I took a lunch break with J. R., and I told him "I gotta get out of here," and explained to him about this girl.

(Need for clarification about where you are living/working—Claremont or L.A.?)

Claremont is about 40 miles outside of Los Angeles and to Angelinos this is not really a distance. This is like saying, we're going up the to University [here] and that's three or four miles. There's a degree of difficulty in winter and stuff like that. But in Los Angeles at that time there was lots of traffic, but it wouldn't be difficult.

(So you lived there and worked in L.A.?)

I worked at USC and lived in the apartment building with the Fergusons, who knew Elliott Budd Hopkins. Ferguson was the son-of-a-bitch responsible for bring Ursula to America. Now he is marrying his childhood sweetheart, and she is finishing work at USC. So this is really kind of a mess, you see. When Ursula turned up, I feared she might set fire to their apartment building—and she is made enough to do it. The funny thing is I had a sympathy for her. She was brought up to believe that Jews were sub-human.

(More questions trying to get the chronology of jobs and moves straight)

I met J. R. Cooley by the cannon while working at Ruddleston's. He would walk out of his alley and come by there and we talked. I told him what the problem was. He seemed to be a sympathetic person, someone I could talk to. He looked like one of these people with a Bohemian patina as if he'd come from New York. He offered to get me out of there. I said I can't sweet talk this girl. I know that Ferguson will keep her under control, but I've got to get out of here. Out of Los Angeles, out of USA, and the place I was living. USE is a private school, the largest private school in the world.

(So she has by now showed up, and you need to get out of town?)

Yeah. He said, "Why don't you call the police?"

"I can't call the police," I told him. "I'm not where I'm supposed to be, I'm in this country illegally, but I'm an artist and we get into these kinds of jams." And somehow he had heard of me. He had heard of the show *Ten Americans*, and he had heard of de Kooning, who was the senior painter, and I assured him he was talking to the young guy. And de Kooning too had jumped ship here—we're like that I told him. So he became very protective. He said he was negotiating for a Cadillac convertible. He told me he could pick me up quietly at the USC apartment building, or maybe Colonel Ruddleston would let me sleep in the garage where we did all the polishing. I said, "No, I don't have the heart to tell the old boy I'm leaving, because he likes me. And I don't want to explain my problems to Edwin [Ruddleston]."

So for three days we were locked into this situation. I kept saying, "When are we gonna leave this goddam place, or why don't you take me to the highway and let me hitchhike my way out of here!" He fought me off, what about your clothing?

"I'm not worried about my clothing. I'm worried about my life, and other people."

He was negotiating with some former silent movie star, living up in the hills who had this fire engine red Cadillac with cream leather furnishing, and he bought it off of her. I thought, oh no, how can we leave in an anonymous fashion in this love boat. But when I saw the car, my heart sang. Oh well, this is California. Get used to these goddam things. And this wonderful thing cost him all of \$500. Finally in my work clothes do I jump into this Cadillac convertible and we head for Claremont where I was to live in peace. And then Ursula turned up at the store. They said there was this fellow from down the alley. So she spoke to the mother of J. R. Cooley who told her that her son had gone with a friend to Claremont.

After she found me in Claremont, J. R. Cooley took me on to one of his friends in Houston, Texas. Percy David Bell.

We were heading for Texas, and I felt it was terrible to be in retreat, but I thought nothing can stop us now.

(So you stayed 2 or 3 days in Claremont, when the incident with Joe Albany occurred and then you had to leave.)

Yes. In California—I'm not going off on a 180 now.

There is a distinctive brushstroke, sometimes it's a miniscule thing, but it's like handwriting. Like signatures. There was a painting that always impressed me because of its brushstroke. It was of an eagle with wings spread above a landscape, by a primitive painter. The work was a gift of Nelson Rockefeller to the Museum of Modern Art. I had admired the painting, wondered what Rockefeller was like, since he was targeted to buy our paintings [we artists] and now he was one of the directors of MOMA and was supporting this new movement secretly with hundreds of thousands of dollars.

(The art school, is that what you mean?)

Artists, individual artists, de Kooning principally. He became the godfather of de Kooning's daughter born out of wedlock. De Kooning was on an alcoholic binge for eight years, and he made him promise to attend Alcoholics Anonymous on Long Island the he went there with them until he remained with it. And he commissioned him to do Merritt Parkway which was the painting which took him out of that alcoholic trough. \$100,000 for that.

But anyway, of all the paintings I'd seen, the one of the eagle caught my attention. I thought, man the signature of this guy, he would use a half inch brush and turn it like this, turn it like that. It was like composing something out of clamshells, this signature. There was no actual signature on the painting, but there was a line of a pansy-like flower.

So, we were on our way out of town and Cooley said, "I gotta see my grandma."

And I said, "Did you tell your mother about this?"

"No."

Can't you just get her on the phone? Where is she?"

She lived in some place like San Bernardino. One of these small prosperous southern California towns, and I thought, "Oh, shit, now we're gonna spend time with this friggin' grandma."

So we drove by these modern buildings with stainless steel facades with all the clues of a very active Chamber of Commerce. And then we came to this Clapboard house with corncobs drying on the porch. There was a lady sitting in a rocking chair, of course. The only things she lacked was a gun, but the gun was propped up against the door. I thought, who the hell is this.

He said, "I want to explain something quick. She owns the downtown so they leave her along. I have to go talk to her before we leave."

"Okay, okay, it's fine with me. Fine."