

ART BUCHWALD

Interview by John DeBellis

Art Buchwald had looked death in the eye and not only laughed at it, he heckled it. When his kidneys were failing he refused the last hope of dialysis, and kept the laughs coming while defiantly repeating his mantra, "I have death on hold," or as I suspect sent the over-matched death running with its sickle between its legs. What else would you expect from a man who in nearly 50 years has written more than 8,000 newspaper columns, 30 books and has won the Pulitzer Prize. And who commenting on his place in society said, "If you attack the establishment long enough and hard enough they will make you a member of it." I was lucky enough to speak to Mr. Buchwald shortly before death had returned to take his life, but not his spirit which will live on in his work and in the hearts of all he met. On the day I spoke to him I found the fires that fed his satirical soul were burning hotter than ever.

Photo by Getty Images



PERFECT 10: I'd like to wish you a happy birthday? How old are you?

ART: Eighty-one. I've had a wonderful life.

PERFECT 10: My dad's eighty-six. I think your generation was very special. What gave you guys that strength?

ART: Brokaw called us the greatest generation. We fought in the war, came out, we were ready to take on the world. Went to school, got our education. And then we went out, the whole thing was a wonderful experience. I would say we weren't spoiled. We raised our kids to be spoiled because we didn't want them to find out what life was really like.

PERFECT 10: I grew up spoiled but not rancid, not yet anyway. I also grew up appreciating wit. That's why I loved reading your work. You have the ability to say something smart and funny and say it so concisely. Did writing that way come natural to you?

ART: Yeah, my background is that I was a foster child, I was in three homes. And I found out the first time I could make people laugh. I decided that this is a good way to live. Instead of getting angry and being a bad kid, I found I could get all my love from being a good kid.

PERFECT 10: You had a very difficult childhood to say the least.

ART: Yes I had a difficult childhood, but I turned it into humor. I fantasized about a happy childhood.

PERFECT 10: After the war you went back to Paris and became a columnist.

ART: I was the editor of my humor magazine. I wrote a column for the *Daily Trojan*. I didn't take journalism. I just loved to write. I found out that I could get paid for being funny. When I started on the *Herald Tribune* they paid me for making people laugh.

PERFECT 10: What did you do to get the writing job with the *Tribune*? Did you have to show them some of your humor columns from college?

ART: I got a job with the *Herald Tribune* by selling them on the fact that I could write about restaurants and nightclubs. It was a hard sell, but they finally hired me for \$25 a week.

PERFECT 10: How did you get the job, did you know anything about restaurants?

ART: I told the editor that "I was a wine taster in the Marine Corps."

PERFECT 10: You write so funny. I heard you described as a humorist, but I think it falls far short.

ART: I like the description, when I see it in print — a satirist. I'm a satirist. I'm not a stand-up comic. I don't do jokes. I do situations and try to persuade people. It's funny and also serious.

PERFECT 10: There's definitely weight behind your words.

ART: Yeah, I think so.

PERFECT 10: I see a lot of today's comics who think wit is now a four letter word.

ART: Yeah, that's not my style. Being in this business you study these people, and you notice that the big laugh is a four letter word. I saw it last night, one of the *HBO* comedians. When he says, "I hate my mother, fuck. The joke is fuck!"

PERFECT 10: Sometimes I think comics start writing with the word "fuck" and then work around it.

ART: Did you use the word?

PERFECT 10: No, I never did. I found that if I needed to use the word "fuck" then the joke wasn't strong enough.

ART: From that they go on about condoms, body functions. They have a dictionary of all those things. They can get away with it on cable TV. They don't understand or maybe that's just what their audience wants. I don't know.

PERFECT 10: I think they're substituting anger with shock value. It's a shame, anger can be a great tool for writing. Most funny comics and comedy writers are often their funniest when they're angry.

ART: Yes, I write better when I'm mad. I

learned that people want to laugh, and most of the readers want someone to say, "This guy is full of it. This is not what it's about."

PERFECT 10: There's kids out there who want to learn, but there're no real classes on comedy.

ART: You can't teach them to be funny, but you can teach them what not to do. Early on I found that I was doing a joke, with the punch line in the middle of the line, after that I always put the punch line at the end.

PERFECT 10: You're sharp, often self-deprecating wit, and attitude reminds me of a close comic friend of mine, who passed away, Rodney Dangerfield.

ART: He was great. There was this other comedian who was a comedian's comedian... He'd say, "Take my wife... Please."

PERFECT 10: Henny Youngman.

ART: The thing that you loved about both of those guys was that they didn't worry about if it didn't go or not, the jokes.

PERFECT 10: Do you still write every day?

ART: Yeah, most of the day, I'm either reading, or at my computer writing.

PERFECT 10: You have a new book coming out? I love the title.

ART: It's "Too Soon to Say Goodbye."

PERFECT 10: You'd certainly have a lot of people to say goodbye too. I'm amazed how much you've done and how many famous influential people you met.

ART: I just thought, wow, it was coming to me.

PERFECT 10: Who was the most charismatic person you met and why?

ART: The most charismatic person was General de Gaulle. He was very tall.

PERFECT 10: You have a great line about Richard Nixon. You said that "you worshipped the very quicksand he walks on." Who was the funniest politician?

ART: The funniest politician, and when you say funny I assume you mean the easiest one to satirize, was Richard Nixon, with George W. Bush coming around the turn. The Bush Administration? It's a very

rich vein. It's like discovering gold. The people around Bush — Rove, Cheney and the rest of the Administration — lie to you. Unfortunately, it's scarier if they don't think they're lying.

PERFECT 10: Before W., Richard Nixon was clearly the worst President in my lifetime.

ART: Yes, but there's a difference between Nixon and Bush. One of the things that I get so upset about is that they use the religious right. They suck up to the religious right. And I get scared that this country can become completely Christianized.

PERFECT 10: You never made it on Richard Nixon's enemies list.

ART: And my standing as a serious journalist in this town went down.

PERFECT 10: Maybe you were left off Nixon's list because you made him laugh, if that was possible.

ART: I'm reading the Times right now. First of all, what's going on in the world is one thing. Lying is another thing. And all of the candidates now lie. They should tell the audience they're lying. They're all lying. They're not telling the truth.

PERFECT 10: What would happen if politicians suddenly couldn't lie?

ART: If politicians couldn't tell lies they wouldn't be able to move their lips.

PERFECT 10: Their lies will only get worse if no one calls them on it.

ART: The media now should reinsert what's going on in Iraq. They're not facing reality. Iraq is out of hand now. It was probably slated to be out of hand because they didn't really understand the religious extremes of those people.

PERFECT 10: You were asked by Time Magazine if you believed in God and you gave a very profound statement. You said, "I believe there is a God, but he's not the one all the religions claim. The Christian religion, the Jewish religion, the Muslim religion—if you believe in their God, other people will say you're an infidel. There's a God out there, but not the one that causes all the trouble in the world. The people who fight all the wars now—not just Iraq but all over—believe that their God told them to." It's hard to beat people who believe that God is on their side.

ART: That's one thing. The other thing is that books are starting to come out now with all the different blunders that people made. There is a series of books now. Did you see the President on TV? He's just talking about that the goal is the same. Then you say what goal? He's going down. He's going to go down. He's going down as the

worst president we ever had.

PERFECT 10: Do you consider yourself more of a Democrat or a Republican.

ART: I'm not a Republican, or a Democrat. I'm just against anyone who's in power. And I'm for the side of good against evil. I am a good person.

PERFECT 10: I agree with you on all counts. Speak about evil, have you ever seen Congress in worst shape than this?

ART: I used to go up the hill. but I don't go there any more.

PERFECT 10: I guess that explains it.

ART: It's different then when it was ten, twenty years ago, because the lobbyists didn't have the money they have now. And also that the money has gotten so big now, that people are in debt before they even start.

PERFECT 10: What can we do to take back our country from big business?

ART: I have no idea what Americans can do to take back the country from the lobbyists and corporations. Neither does anybody else.

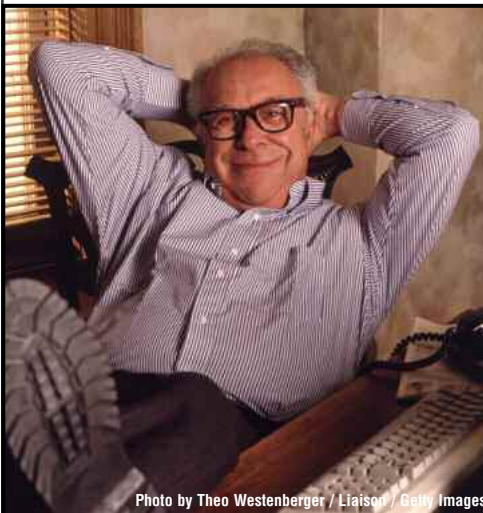


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PERFECT 10: That fits in with your description of an economist, "as a man who knows a hundred ways of making love but doesn't know any women." Why do you think the gap between the rich and poor keeps widening?

ART: What's happening in our country now is that people are either getting laid off, because companies aren't making money, or making too much, and we're outsourcing to other countries. I know somebody will figure it out.

PERFECT 10: When did our political leaders become more loyal to their party than to the country?

ART: People always were more loyal to their party than their country.

PERFECT 10: Why aren't more young people voting?

ART: Young people don't vote because they

don't think their vote counts. Maybe they are right.

PERFECT 10: Do you think the United States has seen its better days?

ART: Has the US seen better days? It's the best of times and it's the worst of times. But it's the only time we have.

PERFECT 10: One of my favorite quotes of yours is, "The best things in life aren't things." What is the real American Dream?

ART: A tank full of gas for your car, someone who is in love with you, and a job.

PERFECT 10: I guess it all comes down to the basics. Is there any question that anyone hasn't asked you before, that you'd like asked?

ART: No, because since I got into this situation with the hospice and all that, I heard a lot more questions than I ever heard before.

PERFECT 10: That makes sense.

ART: Life is sad but you have to turn it into humor.

PERFECT 10: Which you have, especially when you thought you were dying. You were quoted as saying, "Dying is easy, parking is impossible."

ART: People are afraid to talk about death. The hospice made it possible to talk about dying.

PERFECT 10: I read somewhere that you said, they kicked you out of the hospice because you broke all the rules.

ART: Yeah.

PERFECT 10: After the hospice you went to Martha's Vineyard. I love your line where you say, "I want to be cremated and I want my ashes to be spread over all the cocktail parties on the island." I hope that doesn't happen for a long time. In fact how are you doing today?

ART: Very well.

PERFECT 10: You're bucking all the odds. You've certainly "put death on hold."

ART: Yup.

PERFECT 10: Doctors can do tests and prognosis but there's some ingredients that they don't take into consideration. I don't know if it's the human heart or what it is.

ART: Well, I'll take it.

PERFECT 10: If you could do one thing over in your life, what would that be?

ART: If I could do one thing over I would stop lusting after women.

PERFECT 10: One more question. You've speculated on the hereafter by saying, "I have no idea where I'm going. The real question is: What am I doing here in the first place?" Why do you think we were put here on earth?

ART: We have to be somewhere. ■