When he was up, he was the evangelist of joyful rebellion, a politics needed more than ever here in the nervous ’90s. But when he was down, all the way down, ABBIE HOFFMAN couldn’t imagine living even one more happy day.

THE LAST INTERVIEW

By Mark Hertsgaard

IT WAS BARELY A QUARTER AFTER SIX WHEN THE BLEARY-EYED innkeeper knocked on my door and said there was an urgent telephone call from Abbie Hoffman. I had said good-bye to Abbie just five hours earlier, following a marathon twelve-hour interview at his home in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and I wasn’t supposed to see him again until ten that morning. I stumbled down the hall to the phone and mumbled hello.

“’There’s been a change of plans. You have to drive me to the hospital in New York,” he announced, his voice subdued yet insistent. “How soon can you be here?”

Abbie had been in pain the day before—a car accident ten days earlier had left him with broken bones in his foot and, having run out of painkillers, he could walk only by using a pool cue as a crutch—but he hadn’t let on how debilitating it
was. Certainly the pain had not inhibited his mouth; he had talked a mile a minute for hours—discursive, trenchant, often hilarious monologues that seemed to amuse him as much as they did me. To understand the sixties, he explained, “You have to laugh with us, at us, and take us seriously all at the same time or you’re going to miss the point.” The cocaine bust that drove him underground in 1974, he claimed, was a police ambush. “I’m not saying I wasn’t there, but both things are true—the police set me up, and I was there.” Recalling Watergate plumber G. Gordon Liddy, with whom he’d recently crossed swords on the college lecture circuit, he mused: “It’s interesting to debate someone who had a plan to drug and kidnap you [prior to the 1972 Republican National Convention]. Wheee, he’s got some problems! And some really quick solutions. Dammit, the trains are going to run on time!”

Bouncing over hilly, twisting country roads, I reached the converted turkey coop where Abbie lived, shortly before seven o’clock. Inside, I found him on the living-room floor, crawling around on all fours like an arthritic infant, gathering belongings for the journey. He did not greet me or thank me for coming, but sent me to the bedroom to retrieve some shirts, and told me to pack the assembled items into his travel bag. On the drive into the city, despite—or perhaps because of—the pain, Abbie was again a chatterbox, a bundle of nonstop verbal energy, who quieted down (somewhat) only while we listened to a tape of his recent stand-up comedy routine, which critics had panned. When we finally pulled up to the emergency-room entrance some two hours later, he motioned a white-coated orderly over to the car and blurted: “I’m Abbie Hoffman. You gotta let me in.” Within minutes, he was in a wheelchair being pulled back into the hospital, laughing and wisecracking all the way.

It was months before I understood what had really been going on that day in July 1988. Like most famous, driven people, Abbie Hoffman was used to the world revolting around him, used to having others do his bidding. He had been remarkably ill mannered during our interview, seeming to hear little but the sound of his own voice. By his own admission, Abbie had been in “performance mode” throughout our interview, but a force darker than celebrity was at work that day as well.

Abbie Hoffman was a manic-depressive. Manic depression is known informally as “the genius disease,” because the people it strikes are often distinguished by extraordinary creativity and accomplishment. Van Gogh, Lincoln, and Churchill are presumed to have been manic-depressives. So was one of Abbie’s key role models, Lenny Bruce. The disease is technically known as a bipolar disorder, because it manifests itself in violent mood swings, propelling its victims into bursts of frenzied, superhuman activity, then plunging them into paralyzing, unfathomable gloom. When Johanna Lawrenson, Abbie’s companion during the last fifteen years of his life, mentioned long after the fact that Abbie had been “manic as a hatter” when she finally met him at the hospital that day, his monstrous self-absorption during the previous eighteen hours suddenly made tragic sense. So, too, did his decision, nine months later, to end his life.

Abbie and I met again for extended interviews in October and December of 1988 and talked numerous times over the phone, but it was only during that first session that we spoke of death. He claimed to have overcome the fear of death while doing civil rights organizing in Mississippi in the early sixties, and said he was “absolutely convinced I’ll be fighting until I die.” Reasoning that to give up one’s life in order to change history was a small sacrifice, he argued passionately that “it’s an honor to die for what you believe in.”

“You’re not planning to do that anytime soon, are you?”

“Well, I don’t exactly get a choice in the matter,” he replied, emitting the same high-pitched, frantic gurgle that punctuated so many of his sentences that day.

But he did have a choice, and on April 12, 1989, he exercised it. Alerted by a phone call from Johanna back in New York, whose calls to Abbie had gone unanswered, Michael Waldron, his friend and landlord, entered Abbie’s apartment shortly before 7:00 p.m. and found him lying on his side under the covers of the bed, fully clothed, hands folded beneath his cheek like a dreaming child. According to the coroner’s estimate, Abbie Hoffman had swallowed some 150 phenobarbitals—enough to kill ten men—and washed them down with alcohol.

The body was cremated. The ashes came to rest in a brown plastic box, which Johanna keeps atop the television set in her tiny Manhattan apartment—a spot where Abbie, with his fascination with the media, would doubtless feel at home. Next to the ashes is a bag of the black licorice sticks that Abbie craved and a photo of him with his brother, Jack, taken on Thanksgiving Day 1986. On top of the ashes, completing the shrine, is a hand-carved figure that Abbie had purchased a year before in Mexico, the land where he and Johanna met and traveled early in his underground period. Small enough to cup in one’s palm, it is a haunting icon: a hooded skeletal-faced figure stands astride the front of a black dugout canoe, relentlessly poling it downstream, while, in back, a shoeless man in a white shirt and blue pants sits placidly, awaiting deliverance to his final resting place.

Especially after a Suicide, it is easy to focus so much on the death itself that the life that preceded it gets shortchanged. That would be a real mistake in Abbie Hoffman’s case, for he was alive on the planet in a way that few people ever are. Back in the sixties, the poet Allen Ginsberg used to urge Abbie to learn to sit still and gain meditative wisdom, but it was a hopeless venture: “He had respect for it, and he actually sat once, but he didn’t really take to it,” Ginsberg recalled with a smile. Anita Hoffman, Abbie’s second wife and the woman with whom he spent the high-profile years of the late sixties and early seventies, remembers a country stroll with friends one weekend when suddenly Abbie skipped to the side of the road and began tightrope walking along a murderously steep precipice. Anita was terrified,
but Abbie merely laughed and merrily tiptoed on. There was no point in trying to rein in such impulses. "That's just the way he was," she told me.

Abbie told me he wasn't sure that he believed in destiny, but he did see life as a cosmic play in which he shared the stage with other archetypal characters, acting out the eternal themes of good and evil. "There's always going to be someone who is the naughty judge, someone who's going to be the governor who double-crosses the people, and there has to be a me. If there isn't a me," he laughed, "we're in big trouble."

As he did with most things in life, Abbie saw the humor even in his disease. According to Jonathan Silvers, who collaborated with him on his last two books, Abbie used to joke that, "If I weren't a manic-depressive, I'd probably have been just another salesman in Queens." David Fenton, a friend and public-relations expert who handled Abbie's emergence from underground and who has observed manic-depressive behavior within his own family, thinks it "pretty unquestionable that some of his sixties genius and superenergy were linked to the illness."

National recognition first came to Abbie Hoffman in April 1967, when he and a dozen other free spirits hurled dollar bills from the gallery of the New York Stock Exchange. Later that year, Abbie, Anita, and a cast of fifty thousand surrounded and sought to levitate the Pentagon in order to exorcise its evil spirits. In 1968, while leading street protests against the Democratic National Convention, Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, and five others were charged with conspiracy to incite riot; the Chicago Seven case subsequently became the most famous political trial of the decade. Sentenced to jail for wearing an American flag as a shirt in 1969, Abbie solemnly informed the court, "Your honor, I regret that I have but one shirt to give for my country."

If such high jinks caused some to dismiss him as a lighthearted prankster, Abbie himself saw them as potent strategic strikes in a war for the U.S. consciousness, a war of symbols and images fought through the media. He properly regarded television as magic, and quickly learned to make it do tricks. He intuitively recognized the medium's requirements for sound bites, action pictures, and minidramas well before the Roger Aileses and Michael Deaverses of the world began using such devices to elect Republican presidents. As Tom Carson observed in the L.A. Weekly, Abbie "made the antiwar movement the TV show that everyone watched. If this sounds shallow, think of what might well have happened if the antiwar movement had not become a TV show."

Abbie did love an audience, but the critique that he was more interested in self-promotion than in social change overlooks his actual history as an activist. Abbie was doing the decidedly un-glamorous work of the local political organizer—campaigning for civil rights in the South and against the war in his hometown of Worcester, Massachusetts—well before the cameras arrived, and he kept at it for the rest of his life, most remarkably in his incognito efforts in the late seventies to prevent environmental desecration of the St. Lawrence River. "I have never seen myself as anything more than a good community organizer," he later wrote. "It was just the Vietnam War that made the community bigger, that's all."

Though unabashedly a man of the Left, Abbie distrusted isms, seeing them as reflections and enforcers of dogmatic and anachronistic thinking. Rooted in Jewishness, he grew up in a working-class, anti-Semitic neighborhood, where he learned fistfighting and pool-hall hustling and developed an enduring empathy with the underdog and outsider. Disobeying rules seems to have been gut instinct; his father was but the first of countless authority figures with whom he clashed. (When a reporter asked him in the sixties, "What are you rebelling against?" Abbie cracked, "Waddaya got?") Yet for all his militancy, he was at heart almost naively idealistic and patriotic. He loved his country despite its faults, and expected it to live up to its ideals. He insisted on personal responsibility. "We are here to make a better world," he wrote in his autobiography. "No amount of rationalization can avoid the moment of choice each of us brings to our situation here on the planet. I still believe in the fundamental injustice of the profit system and do not accept the proposition there will be rich and poor for all eternity." Like all romantics, he was doomed to ultimate disappointment. In a letter written a few months before his death to Anita, with whom he remained close, he sounded tired, and frustrated by the slow progress and lack of support for some of his projects: "I just want to do what has to be done so much. I'll never understand why everyone else doesn't feel the same way."

For Abbie, opposing the status quo was not simply morally right, but intoxicatingly exciting. Perhaps his most important contribution to politics was the wholly original, charmingly American notion that revolution could be fun. Fun was not the same thing as pleasure; obviously, making revolution took hard work and sacrifice. But why not have some kicks along the way? After all, the prospect of a good time promised to attract more people to the movement than the dour-faced appeals of the traditional Left. What's more, to laugh in the face of authority was itself a subversive act.

"We were hedonists together, as opposed to the puritanical, dogmatic lefties," said Anita. She recalled her seven years with Abbie as the happiest of her life. "He had this homey, romantic side to him with the women in his life—cooking and gardening—that was private and nice." Still, it wasn't easy living with such a public person. Although he doubtless loved his kids, Abbie was not exactly a hands-on kind of father, nor a great provider. As a full-time organizer, he had neither the time nor the inclination to work a paycheck job. He had two children, Andrew and Amy, with his first wife, Shelia. He and Anita had a son, america, in 1971. All three of the kids and both ex-wives spent time on welfare. Yet Anita emphasized that she always saw Abbie as generous, noting that when he sold the movie rights to his life story, he divided the proceeds among his three wives, which gave her $38,000 to relocate with america to Seattle. "I didn't want him to go get a job," she added. "I wanted him to do what he does best... which is to turn people on and organize them."

"He's a strange archetype to have as a father," america told me the summer before his father died. Although america clearly respected his dad's political work and principles, he also seemed frustrated by the paucity of personal time he was able to spend with him. During his annual visits, he usually found Abbie so busy that "there might be an hour or so that I really get to talk to him." America, who is now attending a technical college in California, bears a striking physical resemblance to his father, but does not plan to devote his life to full-time political protest.

Abbie himself had mixed feelings about fame. Clearly, he enjoyed being the center of attention. "Modesty," he told me, "is a WASP trait." Besides, being famous opened doors to new experiences and other high-powered people. It wasn't every antiwar activist who palled around with John Lennon. "I thought I was famous until I hung out with him," Abbie laughed. "It wasn't
just that he was a Beatle. He was the one who had the Japanese
wife, so you could really spot him easy.” According to Abbie, it
was not fame alone that drew him to John, however. “I knew
wanted to be a working-class hero. He had a very strong sense of
struggle,” he argued. Pointing to a photo on his wall that Anita
taken of Abbie and Jerry Rubin with John and Yoko Ono in
1971, he cracked, “You don’t see me up there with McCartney,
do you?”

As heady as fame was, it eventually began to wear, even on
Abbie. “When I went underground,” he explained, “it wasn’t so
much that I was tired of being Abbie Hoffman as that it was
impossible to live up to the expectations of the people I came in
contact with. They weren’t looking for a human being. They
wanted something more.”

IN HIS BEST-SELLING CLASSIC, STEAL THIS BOOK, Abbie
Hoffman warned fellow freaks that, “If you ever have the
slightest doubt about the person with whom you’re dealing—
DON’T.” So how could he have been foolhardy enough to par-
ticipate, in 1973, in a major cocaine deal with people he didn’t
know, some of whom turned out to be undercover cops? Abbie
danced around the question in his autobiography. In interviews
with me, he essentially complained that the cops had played him
dirty—he, who as a street fighter from way back, had always
fought as dirty as necessary. He didn’t tell me he stood to make
about $2,000... for bringing together two parties who didn’t
trust each other.” If convicted under New York’s newly tightened
drug laws, he faced the possibility of spending a good fifteen
to twenty years in Attica. Even Abbie, a notorious judger of
truth, calculated his odds of beating the rap at only slightly better
than fifty-fifty. So he decided to make a run for it, dropping out of
sight in February 1974.

Suddenly one of the most famous people in the United States
had to become anonymous. He got his hair straightened and
dyed. Posing as an aging Canadian TV personality, he had his
face made over by a plastic surgeon in Los Angeles. He as-
sembled documents and background stories to support a variety
of new identities. Behavior had to change as well. “I had to train
myself to talk with my hands tied behind my back, to not look
people in the eye, to not give fascinating answers to questions,
to not draw attention to myself in any way,” he recalled.

He headed for Mexico to lay low. Settling in Guadalajara un-
der the alias Mark Summers, he taught English to schoolchildren
by having them read one of his favorite books, Anne Frank: The
Diary of a Young Girl. (The Anne Frank House, in Amsterdam,
was sacred to Abbie, one of only two places where he signed his
real name while underground; the other was Mexican revolu-
tionary Emiliano Zapata’s birthplace.) Glancing through the
newspaper one day, he read that an international fashion model
he’d once met at a party in the Hamptons was in Mexico City on
a photo shoot. He decided to telephone her and, impersonating a
magazine photo director, offer her a second assignment in
Guadalajara. “At some point in the conversation,” he recounted,
“I break voice and say, ‘I’m someone who’s in trouble who you
met at a party in Long Island.’ And something in her click; she
knows exactly who I am, and says, ‘I will be there in five days.”
He had her meet at the airport and driven to a resort outside
of town. As she stood waiting to check in, he slipped into line
behind her and murmured, “How nice to see you, Mrs. Sum-
ners. Everything will be taken care of.” As they talked in her
room upstairs, his intuition that this woman could be trusted
grew. He told her that, reddish hair, mustache, and eyeglasses
notwithstanding, his real name was Abbie Hoffman, thus con-
firming what she already strongly suspected.

Meeting Johanna was a godsend; it was not for nothing that
he came to call her Angel. Years later, loved ones would say that
without Johanna, Abbie would have been dead or arrested long
ago. He himself told me, “She was the perfect running mate for
me. She was tall, big, and immaculately beautiful, so everybody
was always looking at her instead of me.”

Although much in demand on both sides of the Atlantic
throughout the sixties—Man Ray, for example, asked to
photograph her in 1962—Johanna Lawsonson was hardly the
stereotypical airhead fashion model. Her family background
was, in fact, both literary and left-wing. Her father had helped
found the National Maritime Union; as a girl, it had been Joha-
nia’s job to scoop her dad’s copies of I. F. Stone’s Weekly off the
coffee table when the FBI agents dropped by for their semianual
visits. Her mother, Helen, had authored five books, as well as
two famous Esquire articles: “Latinos Are Lousy Lovers” and
“How Now, Fellatio! Why Dost Thou Tarry?”

Over the next three years, Abbie and Johanna spent most of
their time traveling around Mexico and Central America, falling
in love with indigenous Indian culture and each other. “In many
ways, the time underground was the easiest part of our lives,”
Johanna recalled. “We didn’t have to fake the factor to deal with,
and he was still the creative, dynamic, political guy that he al-
ways was.”

Then, in August 1978, Abbie and Johanna decided to take a
chance. They had returned from Europe to live in a remote part
of upstate New York, in a cottage her great-grandmother had
built on one of the Thousand Islands dotting the St. Lawrence
River. Abbie was calling himself Barry Freed (as in free-ed), a
former television scriptwriter. A local carpenter came by one day
with pamphlets describing a plan by the United States Army
Corps of Engineers to dredge the river to allow winter transport.
The billion-dollar undertaking looked like an economic boon-
doggle of mammoth proportions, not to mention an ecological
nightmare. The shoreline would be ruined, the wetlands devast-
tated, and all so that U.S. Steel could acquire its own aquatic
driveway, courtesy of U.S. taxpayers.

“We took the pamphlet upstairs and had a long discussion
about it, what it would mean to take this issue on,” Johanna told
me. “We knew it would greatly increase our chances of getting
called, but we decided to take that risk.” Along with a few
friends, “Barry” and Johanna founded Save the River, a citizens’
group that eventually succeeded in blocking the project. While
the FBI continued searching for Abbie Hoffman, newspapers
were publishing photos of concerned environmentalist Barry
Freed testifying before lawmakers in Albany and Washington,
D.C. He received a letter of commendation from Governor
Hugh Carey and public praise from Senator Daniel Patrick
Moynihan. It was, by necessity, a private joke, but it tasted very
sweet.

Life underground was not all goals and good times. The psy-
chological stress was enormous and constant. Abbie told me that
every political fugitive he knew eventually cracked from the
strain of the schizophrenic life-style. Abbie’s first breakdown
came in April 1975 in a Las Vegas hotel room. Recovering from a
ghastly hemorrhoid operation while racing with Johanna to
keep one step ahead of the law, he suddenly came completely
unglued. He was sure the television set was talking to him, cer-
tain that the surgeons had implanted a transmitting device during the operation, convinced that people were watching him through a two-way mirror.

Like an earthquake, the Las Vegas crack-up had aftershocks. Although he was not formally diagnosed a manic-depressive until early 1980, most people close to Abbie thought it was his going underground that activated the depressive side of the disease. In 1976, convinced his cover had been blown by a carefree reporter from Playboy, he flew into a manic rage of energy that sent him crisscrossing the country, taking dangerous chances just for the hell of it, as if he wanted to get caught. "He threw a birthday party for himself at a very fancy Chinese restaurant in New York, and he was just bouncing off the walls," recalled David Fenton. "He insisted on inviting a reporter from the New York Post. And we were horrified. Thank god Johanna finally got him out of there."

Abbie eventually spun out of his manic cycle, only to plunge into darkness. "I cried uncontrollably," he later wrote, "realizing that I had chased away everyone I loved and prepared for self-annihilation... I craved death but lacked the energy or initiative to do the deed."

Abbie finally turned himself in to the authorities on September 4, 1980. He couldn't stay under forever, and with the country apparently moving to the right—the election of Ronald Reagan was appearing more and more likely—he figured he'd probably get a better deal from authorities if he acted quickly. In typical Abbie Hoffman style, he announced his return via a nationally televised interview with Barbara Walters.

Abbie served about eleven months behind bars, most of it at a halfway house in Manhattan, where he fulfilled his remaining obligation to the state by working in a drug-treatment program. This experience led him to write, with Jonathan Silver, Steal This Urine Test, a politically courageous book that attacked the current antidrug hysteria without whitewashing the problem. He hit the college lecture circuit, speaking out against U.S. policy in Central America and encouraging opposition to CIA campus recruitment. And throughout these years, he was deeply involved in efforts to halt nuclear development of the Delaware River, the struggle that drew him to settle in the Pennsylvania town of New Hope. Abbie said it made him feel patriotic to fight for land and water and that he liked battles that taught people how democracy did and didn't work. And here was a struggle taking place in the very heart of American democracy. George Washington made his famous crossing of the Delaware just miles from where the Philadelphia Electric Company now wanted to build a huge water pump. Moreover, it was in the nearby town of Solesbury that Thomas Paine, Abbie's favorite American revolutionary, had written Common Sense.

At the No Regrets Day memorial service held for Abbie in New York last June 17, he was eulogized as "the Thomas Paine of our era." Like Paine, Abbie was a gifted propagandist and internationalist who lived the life of a permanent revolutionary. Just as Paine had gone on from the American Revolution to defend the revolution in France, and later, to agitate against the crown of England, so had Abbie dived back into full-time political mischief making after the sixties movement faded away. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, he refused to accept that an active social idealism was incompatible with adulthood.

"I don't know why that is," he told me. "I'm as fascinated by the psychological aspects of it as anybody. Looking back on some of the sixties documentaries, I think that Abbie Hoffman would have been one of the first to sell out, because he was creative and funny. Hollywood or an ad agency would have swallowed him up. But I think it's the underground period. Everyone went through changing identities during the seventies, but I had to do it in a much more dramatic fashion. And as I searched for the real me among these twelve or thirteen different identities, I noticed that each one kept the politics."

In the eighties, Abbie repeatedly passed up opportunities to make lots of money and, in keeping with longstanding habit, gave away much of what he did earn. At the same time, he was uncomfortable being cast in the role of moral yardstick. Not only did it romanticize who he was, but it was a misreading of history that allowed people to justify their own apathy in the present. In 1988, he attended the Toronto film festival, where the documentary called Growing Up in America was screened. The film contrasted what certain radicals had done in the sixties with Where They Are Now. "To the average viewer," Abbie told me, "a lot of these radicals are going to look like they, quote, sold out, while there's Abbie still chauvinizing himself to fences, going on trial against the CIA, et cetera. So when the movie ends, there's a thousand people from all over the world applauding me. And I get up and say, 'Wait a second. Everyone in this movie went to jail for what they believed in, and that wasn't true of everyone in that generation.' I was trying to get that audience to think, Before you throw stones, what are you doing now?"

Abbie made a similar point to those who approached him to trash Tom Hayden, despite his ambivalent feelings about Hayden's political trajectory as a California state assemblyman. "There were eight thousand people in Chicago on the climactic day in '68, but over the past twenty years I've met eighty thousand people who swear they were there," said Abbie. "But I know who was there, and he was."

When it came to his old compatriot Jerry Rubin, however, Abbie's feelings were both more intense and more complicated, perhaps because of the Lennon-McCartney type of relationship the two of them had dating back to their glory days. Their differences erupted in public during the "Yippie vs. Yuppie" debates of 1985. Abbie called Jerry a (Continued on page 48)
No one can know why Abbie Hoffman killed himself; he left no note. In all probability, however, it was his disease that killed him. In a taped message to the No Regrets Day service, William Styron, himself a victim of depression, explained: "He put himself to sleep not out of any failure of courage, nor out of any moral dereliction, because the pain of his suffering was simply more than he could bear... Suicide in such an instance... arises out of blind necessity."

During my last face-to-face conversation with Abbie, over a Japanese dinner with Johanna in December 1988, I was struck by how tired and beaten down he looked. His conversation was as spirited as ever, but he moved like an old man. Ponderously climbing the five flights of stairs to Johanna's apartment after dinner, he grumbled about the "foot doctors, flu doctors, ass doctors" now running his life.

Things seemed to look up with the coming of the New Year, however. He spent January resting, healing, having dental work done, as if he was planning to be around for a while. He was less distracted by his work, and seemed to respond to people on a gentler, more personal level. But he also began saying things he'd never said before—telling his mother how much he loved her, telling Anita that she had done a good job of raising americans—all apparently settling emotional accounts. At the time, recalled Johanna, "I thought I was getting a vision of what the next twenty years would be like."

But during February, Abbie's newfound mellowness gradually disintegrated into depression. In a letter to Anita in early April, he wrote: "I've been in an acute depressive episode for almost two months. This is the most I've written, and I don't read. I'm scared to cross the street without Johanna."

Yet Abbie was a keen student of his disease and not the type to succumb without a fight. He had stopped taking lithium in 1985. The physical side effects were bad enough—weight gain, diarrhea, drowsiness—but above all, he felt it sapped his creativity and hindered his political effectiveness. During the intervening four years, he used a combination of diazepam, the generic version of Valium, and occasional antidepressants to keep his moods in check. This seemed to work well enough. But in mid-February, feeling himself slipping further and further into the gloom, he had asked his doctor to prescribe something else. He was given Prozac, which he took for a couple of weeks with no apparent effect. The doctor advised him that Prozac sometimes took four to six weeks to work. Abbie couldn't wait that long.

None of the loved ones I interviewed were surprised by his suicide. "Abbie was predictably unpredictable," said Johanna. "I remember hanging up from the phone call with Michael, numb, but thinking, Oh, you did it. I was surprised and I wasn't surprised. It was just one more thing that he did. I still haven't accepted it."

The coroner had no sooner issued his ruling than the press delivered its cheap and breezy verdict: Abbie Hoffman had killed himself out of despair that the sixties weren't coming back. It was in keeping with the media's penchant for quick and formulaic answers that it refused to grant that Abbie Hoffman, besides being an emblematic historical figure, was also a human being with human frailties, and that these frailties may actually have been what brought him down.

Clearly, Abbie was discouraged by the right-wing ascendency of recent years, especially among America's youth. "Students went three to one for Bush," he said. "That was the most depressing part of the election for me." Abbie had remained a student organizer all his life, working hard to keep up on what musical groups and slang were current with today's college kids. But he didn't really fit in anymore. Some activists found him arrogant and dated. Most kids merely found him a curiosity. "He was not thrilled about doing the college circuit," said Anita. "He was going there to rouse them, and they were writing term papers on him as an historical artifact."

"Who was his constituency now?" asked Jeff Nightbyrd, an old organizing buddy. "People who remembered the sixties. Not students; they're not likely to be what we used to call one of the 'agents of change.' I think it depressed Abbie not to be able to put his hand on the little wheel that turns the big wheel anymore."

These days it's fashionable to sneer at the sixties as a time of simpleminded, self-indulgent excess, a historical aberration to be ripped off in TV commercials but not repeated in the streets. In such a climate, someone who continued to press for social change as insistently as Abbie Hoffman did was bound to be regarded as a bizarre anachronism. Yet it is a measure of the man's inner strength that he refused to temper his idealism, despite the dully indifferent silence of a society hurtling headlong in the opposite direction.

In his final public appearance, on April 6, 1989, at Vanderbilt University, he spoke eloquently about what had actually been accomplished during the sixties. The lesson of that tumultuous decade, he said, was that people who cared enough to do what was right could change history: "In the 1960s, apartheid was driven out of America... We didn't end racism, but we ended legal segregation. We ended the idea that you can send a million soldiers ten thousand miles away to fight in a war that the people do not support. We ended the idea that women are second-class citizens. Now it doesn't matter who sits in the Oval Office. Even George Bush has to talk about child care, the environment... The big battles that were won in that period of civil war and strife you cannot reverse. We were young, we were reckless, we were arrogant, silly, headstrong. And we were right. I regret nothing!"

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