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The prototype of the Super Marine Spitfire made its first flight 69 years ago this week, in 1936. It was one of the most beautiful aircraft ever to grace the sky. Lovely lines. It probably saved the Brits, who had been reduced to throwing ice cream and furniture at the Wehrmacht.

As schoolboys we had two heroes. Both were RAF pilots. Both flew Spitfires. One had no legs, the other had no skin. Douglas Bader had his legs amputated in a crash and was fitted with two special "tin legs" which he parked by his bed. We loved that image. Then he went back to flying.

The second hero was Tom Gleave, who became one of the first "Guinea Pigs" – burns patients of Sir Archibald McIndoe, the RAF's celebrated wartime consultant in plastic surgery. Gleave arrived suffering from "standard Spitfire burns" meaning he was practically burnt to a crisp.

A German cannon shell had ignited the right fuel tank of his Spitfire as he attacked a formation of bombers over Kent in 1940. He was engulfed in flames. He tried to find his revolver to commit suicide, but then rejected the idea and struggled to escape.

His leather helmet had melted and was now stuck to the cockpit canopy. He tore the helmet off. Then an explosion ejected him more suddenly and forcefully than he would have wished. With his clothes in flames, he chose not to open his parachute in case it caught fire, and fell for at least 600 metres before deciding to pull the ripcord.

He came around from an emergency operation to find himself not in, but under a bed. Air raid. Shortly afterwards, his wife arrived. Confronted by her husband bandaged like an Egyptian mummy with slits for his eyes – the lids were burnt – she asked him: "What on earth have you been doing with yourself?"

"I've had a row with a German," replied Gleave.

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Hunter S Thompson's great legacy was not the drugs, although "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" still remains the most stolen book in history. It was, I think, that you didn't have to play by the establishment's rules to get ahead in this world. Open the

pages of one of his books, and you'll know how and why.

He was the first journalist to really spot that a story becomes truer when the reporter honestly chronicles his or her own idiosyncrasies and admits that those foibles act as a prism between real life and the page. This realisation changed the face of journalism, giving generations of writers licence to put themselves - some might say too much of themselves - into their stories. What gave Thompson such lasting appeal was his wholeheartedness, the conviction behind all the posturing that still feels genuinely revolutionary. For me, his best writing has, beneath the frenzied surface stream of consciousness, a very precise construction.

He breathed the oxygen of dissent into the stuffy conventions of his time, to the ultimate benefit of press freedom. There was at the heart of his journalism a visceral hatred of corrupt bullies, serial crooks and raging hypocrites, the very people he felt had taken over the government of his beloved country. "We cannot expect people to have respect for law and order until we teach respect to those we have entrusted to enforce those laws." A wonderful idea.

His acerbic off-the-wall point of view will be missed, especially in these times of spineless and slavish obedience to the holders of power.

In his "Devil's Dictionary", Ambrose Bierce, who could perhaps be seen as the grandfather of "gonzo" journalism, defined "mad" as "affected with a high degree of intellectual independence".

Perhaps then, the greatest memorial to Thompson would be for journalists everywhere to aspire to that same intellectual independence that he embodied, even if they have neither the desire nor the constitution to imitate his industrial intake of dangerous substances.

And he had humour.

Buckets of it. In 1990 Thompson was accused of assaulting a former porn-film actress who had come to his house to interview him. A police raid on the house turned up white powder, marijuana, explosives, a 12-bore shotgun and a .22-calibre machine-

gun. Claiming he was a victim of a revitalised police state unleashed by the Bush administration anti-drug hysteria, Thompson suggested a newspaper headline: "Police raid home of crazed gonzo journalist. Eleven-hour search by six trained investigators yields nothing but crumbs".

He led a remarkably singular life. A man who was not afraid to be human and who was also not that proud to be either. So God bless him for expressing the truth, without fear and loathing. An image to treasure, a writer to celebrate. We'll miss him.

Writing about music is (as they say) like dancing about architecture. Although Hunter S Thompson was his usual perceptive self when he wrote: "The music business is a cruel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There's also a negative side."

Meanwhile, there's an affable debate going on about the verb to "nurdle". In fact, it has been in common usage among musicians for years, and it perfectly describes what happens when a soloist, usually playing lead guitar, finds that his "noodling" (rather aimless, melody-light fretwork) begins to curdle.

Writing about art is even harder. I have met abstract artists with very abstract talents, and once interviewed a guy in a beret who described himself as a "figurative artist". Asked to describe what exactly a figurative artist was, he replied that he didn't paint anything for less than half a million bucks, and just sat there threatening to order absinthe.

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