

NEW YORK

A City Built of Clay

An exile from Webster Groves, Clay Felker saw a town of power mongers, status seekers, yipsters, bagels, art birds, and hot pants. New York would never look at itself the same way again.

By **Tom Wolfe** Published Jul 6, 2008



Felker at a *New York* party in 1967.
(Photo: David Gahr)

I took a second look—I was right the first time. The man’s shirt had a button-down collar ... and ... French cuffs with engraved gold cuff links ... *a boy’s lolly boarding-school collar ... and ... a set of cuffs from a partners meeting at Debevoise & Plimpton ...* This shirt had to be custom-made ... had to be. Likewise, the man’s jacket ... Catch the high armholes and the narrow cut of the sleeves. They clear the French cuffs by a precise eighth of an inch. They’re just short enough—*just so!*—to reveal the gold cuff links and not a sixteenth of an inch shorter. *Check out the shoes!*—brown leather cap-toed English oxfords custom-fitted so closely to his high-arched

feet, they look absolutely petite, his feet do, as if he were some unaccountably great strapping Chinese maiden whose feet had been bound in infancy to make sure they would be forever tiny at teatime ... I could not imagine how a man his size, six feet tall and 200 pounds at the very least, with a big neck, a burly build, a square-jawed face, could possibly rise up from his chair here in a little bullpen slapped together out of four-foot-high partitions in the sludge-caked exposed-pipe-joint offices of a newspaper not long for this world, the *New York Herald Tribune*, and support himself, no hands, teetering atop that implausibly little pair of high-arched bench-made British cap-toed cinderella shoes.

Yet rise and stand he did. He introduced himself. His name was Clay Felker. He had a booming voice, but it wasn’t so much the boom that struck me. It was his honk. The New York Honk, as it was called, was the most fashionable accent an American male could have at that time, namely, the spring of 1963. One achieved

it by forcing all words out through the nostrils rather than the mouth. It was at once virile ... and utterly affected. Nelson Rockefeller had a New York Honk. Huntington Hartford had one. The editor of *Newsweek*, Osborn Elliot, had one. The financier Robert Dowling, publishers Roger Straus and Tom Guinzburg had the Honk, and so did Robert Morgenthau, who still does, as far as that goes.

Unfortunately, Clay Felker didn't even rate being in the same paragraph with toffs like them. Custom-made toffery he was clad in, but he was also pushing 40 and jobless, on the beach, as the phrase went, panting, gasping for air, a beached whale, after coming out the loser in a battle for the editorship of *Esquire* magazine ... not to mention the corner suite with north and east views of 1963's street of dreams, Madison Avenue in the Fifties, that came with it.

Yet in less than six months from that same day, in that same jerry-built eight-by-ten-foot bullpen at a doomed newspaper, he created the hottest magazine in America in the second half of the twentieth century: *New York*.

In our story, the shirt (Turnbull & Asser of Jermyn Street, London), the suit (Huntsman of Savile Row, London), the shoes (John Lobb, also of Jermyn Street, London), as well as the accent, are not thrust into the reader's face idly. All provide microscopic glimpses into our story's very heart. And the duplex apartment Clay Felker lived in at 322 East 57th Street—well, from up here the view becomes what has to be termed macroscopic. The living room was a 25-by-25-foot grand salon with a two-story, 25-foot-high ceiling and two huge House of Parliament-scale windows, overlooking 57th Street, each 22 feet high and eight feet wide, divided into colossal panes of glass by muntins as thick as your wrist. There was a vast fireplace of the sort writers searching for adjectives always call baronial. Fourteen status seekers could sit at the same time on the needlepoint-upholstered fender that went around it, supported by gleaming brass columns. When you arrived *chez* Felker and walked out of the elevator, you found yourself on a balcony big as a lobby overlooking the meticulously conspicuous consumption below. Guests descended to the salon down a staircase that made the Paris Opera's look like my old front stoop. Standing on the gigantic Aubusson rug at the foot of the stairs to welcome you, on a good night, would be Felker's wife, a 20-year-old movie actress named Pamela Tiffin, who had starred in the screen version of *Summer and Smoke*. She had a fair white face smooth as a Ming figurine's. She was gorgeous. She had something else, too, a career that was taking off so fast she had not one but two personal managers, Irwin Winkler and Robert Chartoff. She could afford them and two more like them, but there were no two more like them. Fifteen years later Chartoff and Winkler would win an Academy Award for a movie they produced called *Rocky*. For a man on the beach, Pamela Tiffin was a lovely helpmate to have. Clay Felker was broke.



From left: Jimmy Breslin, George Hirsch, Tom Wolfe, and Felker at a *New York* party in 1967.
(Photo: David Gahr)

So what inna nameagod *was* all this? He who had staged this style of life, Clay Felker, was a Midwestern boy, from Webster Groves, Missouri, which always made me think of Grover's Corners in *Our Town*. Like the two great American magazine founders of the first half of the twentieth century, Harold Ross of *The New Yorker*, a real Colorado boy, and Henry Luce of *Time* and *Life*, born to

missionaries in China, Felker grew up far from the magnetic pull of New York's much-vaunted glamour and excitement. His obsession with New York seems to have begun so early in his life that no one, not even the man himself, can remember what set it off. Introducing him many, many years later at a fund-raiser for the Felker Magazine Center of the University of California, Berkeley, I claimed his sister had told me Baby Clay's first complete sentence was "Whaddaya mean, I *'don't have a reservation?'*" At the time I thought I was only making a little joke.

The standard line about boys from Missouri is, "I'm from Missouri. You've got to show me," meaning, "Don't you glib city slickers try to slick-talk me. You've got to prove it." But to Clay Felker it was a Dionysian cry of a Midwesterner who had come to New York to swallow America's great City of Ambition whole, slick talk and all. "You've got to *show* me!"—all of it, the very process of status competition, the status details, the status symbols, the styles of life, everything that indicated how one ranked. The posh details of his private life were the reverse, like the reverse surface of a silk *le smoking*, an inside look at his obsession with status as the drive that runs the world—certainly the New York part of it.

At *Esquire* our man had produced an article comprised mainly of elaborate illustrations of the interiors of Manhattan's most fashionable nightspots—'21,' El Morocco, Sardi's—carefully designating where the social ringmasters, the maître d's, seated VIPs ... and where they stowed very unimportant people, the nobodies, usually out of sight in the rear of the room. At '21' they took no chances. They put the poor devils up on an entirely separate floor. Either way, these dead zones were known in the business as "Siberia." As soon as Felker published it, the term spread like a smell to swell restaurants all over the country. To this day unsteady souls enter such joints in a state of dread, resentment on the hair trigger, fearful lest the wardens, i.e., the maître d's, icy smiles of welcome frozen on their faces, lead them straight to the gulag. Such are the status details that intrigue the human mind and,

once inside it, never leave. They get under your skin—so much so that there would come a day when one author would write in *New York Magazine's* pages that Clay Felker had “Felkerized” New York.

At *that moment*, the moment I first saw the big man accomplish the improbable stunt of standing up and balancing himself on two elfin feet, the *Herald Tribune* was trying to pull itself together after a four-month-long American Newspaper Guild strike. The sheet had brought our Whale in from the beach as a consultant in a total revamping of its Sunday edition and especially the Sunday supplement, whose name had been changed from *Today's Living* to *New York*. A ... *Sunday supplement!* The Sunday supplement was the lowest form of newspaper journalism in America at that time. With the single exception of *The New York Times Magazine*, Sunday supplements were cotton candy for the two areas of the brain (Broca's and Wernicke's) that process language.

New York's first editor, Sheldon Zalaznick, had a mandate to turn it into a serious enough sheet to compete with *The New York Times Magazine*. He arranged to have Jimmy Breslin and me do an article for *New York*, both of us, every week, in addition to our daily chores for the City Desk. Zalaznick proved to be serious enough, all right. The *Trib* had recruited its most famous literary alumnus, John O'Hara, who certainly didn't need the work, to do a column for *New York* once a month. His first contribution was so sloppy, not to mention surly, it was obvious he had dashed the thing off during some quick fit of pique or other. Zalaznick rejected it, and O'Hara piqued into just as quick a fit and quit—to the profound consternation of the *Trib's* advertising department. They were using O'Hara's name as their lead lure for the renovated Sunday edition. Right away I could see this was a very different sort of Sunday supplement. I was good enough to write for it, but John O'Hara wasn't.

After no more than six weeks, Zalaznick was promoted to editor of the entire Sunday edition. At that point the newspaper's maximum editor, Jim Bellows, brought Clay Felker on staff to edit *New York*.

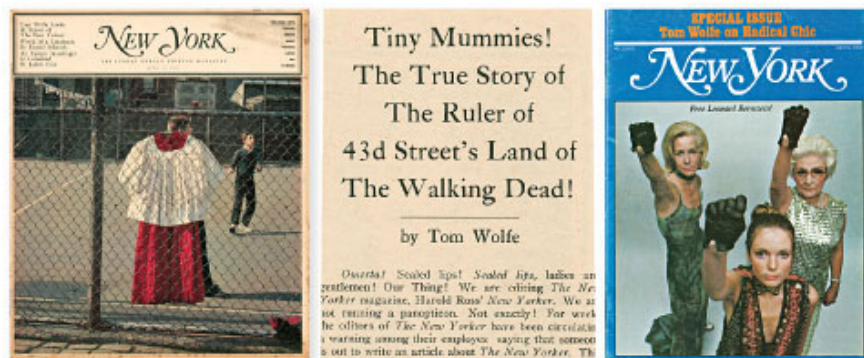
Not long thereafter Clay was sitting in the bullpen with his staff. *Staff ...* The staff, the entire staff, consisted of one full-time editorial assistant, Walter Stovall, and two part-time writers, Jimmy Breslin and myself. What with two metal desks taking up more than half the space, you couldn't have fitted more than four people in there, anyway.

I remember Clay saying, “Look ... we're coming out once a week, right? And *The New Yorker* comes out once a week. And we start out the week the same way they

do, with blank paper and ink. Is there any reason why we can't be as good as *The New Yorker*? ... Or better. They're so damned dull."

At first I wrote that off as brave bluster. *The New Yorker* was also so damned solid. They had long ago established themselves as the very embodiment of New York sophistication. You could make the argument that it was the most prestigious magazine in America. College-educated souls all over the country subscribed to *The New Yorker* to be ... *with it*. High-end retail companies loved all these people above the B.A. line. They were positively stoking the magazine with ads.

At *The New Yorker* they had not an inkling of what was about to hit them, namely, Clay Felker's new kind of news.



Wolfe at the door: Two of the author's collaborations with Felker.

As I recall, the first assignment Clay gave me was a story on the promenade *les chic* and *les chic-lettes* took every Saturday morning through the art galleries along Madison Avenue from 57th Street to 79th. I was totally unaware of any such custom. Fortunately for me, Clay assigned a photographer, Freddie Eberstadt, to the story, too. Freddie knew his way around in that world already. The next Saturday morning we set out on the promenade and ran across half the *what's happ'nin'* population of Manhattan, everyone from Greta Garbo, looking as inconspicuous as possible in the Wildenstein gallery—but Freddie recognized her immediately—to Tiger Morse, a flamboyant fashionista of the time, walking along the Avenue and gaily waving ... to Freddie. When the piece, entitled “The Saturday Route,” came out, people thought of me (not Freddie) as an ingenious reporter capable of sniffing out all these icons and novoscenti on a single Saturday-morning stroll. They were also astonished ... and thrilled ... that any such promenade took place ... and now *les proto-chic-lettes* came skipping and screaming onto the Madison Avenue Saturday-morning gallery scene, pretty young things in short skirts and jeans molded to their pelvic saddles. They became known as the “art birds.” As late as 1989 Japanese art collectors liked to have these pretty little

American girls by their sides in the front rows for the “important” auctions at Sotheby’s and Christie’s. They loved the pretty things’ lithe young legs with their epidermi of sheerest ravage-me nylon shimmering up to the most tumescent swells of their thighs as they crossed and then re-crossed and then re-re-crossed and then re-re-re-crossed them *shimmer shimmer shimmer shimmer* beneath the downlighters.

As I say, I had never heard of this Saturday-morning art promenade before, but Clay had. He made it a point to hear about such things. I had never worked with an editor who generated so many story ideas himself. He was his own best reporter. He always kept a small pad of paper in the left-hand inside pocket of his jacket. At dinner, even a formal dinner in some swell private home, as soon as he heard a wisp of conversation that gave him a story idea, Clay would draw the pad from his pocket and draw it fast, as if he kept it in a shoulder holster, slap it flat on the table, and write his inspiration down with a fourteen-karat-gold ballpoint pen. The pen inevitably created a flash in electric light. I saw him do it many times.

One afternoon I came by to see Clay at his Xanadu on 57th Street and found him sitting at a desk going through a date book to put together some income-tax data.

“Look at this,” he told me, riffling through the date book, “I only ate dinner at home eight times last year!”

I don’t think I can adequately convey the pride he took in this discovery. He had developed night vision for detecting new styles of life. “Style of life”—*Lebensstil* in German—was a term invented a hundred years ago by the German sociologist Max Weber, the father of status theory itself. All new styles of life, he said, were created by “status groups,” like-minded souls who try to create spheres of their own, insulated from the opinions of people outside. The socialites of the Saturday route had their style of life in the 1960s ... and hippies had theirs. It was not until the late 1950s that the terms themselves, “status,” referring to social position, and “style of life,” referring to the manners and mores of status groups, emerged from academic sociology and became part of everyday language.



From left: Felker with his second wife, Pamela Tiffin,

I don’t think Clay even knew who Max Weber was or what “status,” let alone “styles of life,” meant in sociology. But his *Show me!* instincts led him directly to the same line of thought and toward styles of life that made big news. When Clay edited *New York* as

in 1963; with Dolly Schiff (the New York *Post* owner who sold the paper to Murdoch).

(Photo: (L-R) Corbis; Courtesy of Gail Sheehy)

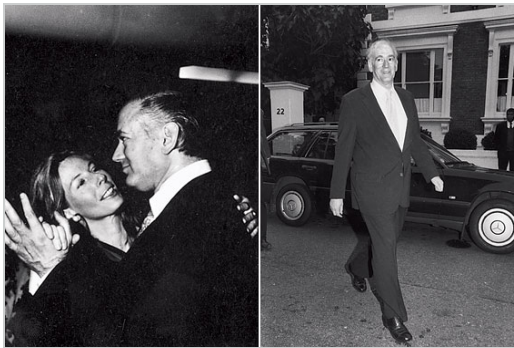
a Sunday supplement and when he turned it into the magazine you can buy on newsstands today, the range of exclusives, of scoops, as it were, was extraordinary, looking back on it.

He published an astonishing report by Gail Sheehy on prostitution in New York. She had taken to the streets herself in hot pants that came up to *here*, white vinyl Courrèges boots, and an areolae-oriented top in order to mingle with the “working girls.” What she brought back to Clay at *New York* was not only an eyewitness account of the trade, which was remarkable enough, but also an analysis of prostitutes as a status group with six distinct social gradations. He published the first account of how the mega-wattage of newspaper, magazine, and television coverage, abetted by PR resources of the fashion industry, had created an entirely new kind of socialite, who so outdazzled the old capital-S Society based on Protestant family lineage that it was reduced to obscurity. He even published the first report from inside a hippie commune at a time when hippies were still called acid-heads. The material was hot—but how could you expect readers to *thrill* to the lives of people called acid-heads? For that matter, he published the first account of life within a California surfer commune, “The Pump House Gang,” and the first account of life among the student radicals who stormed Columbia University and took it over for a week in 1968. These three styles of life, the hippie, the surfer, and the radical, would change the lives of American youth and with them American life in general in ways beyond imagining at the time.

Clay’s magazine brought to life the inner emotional lives, not just the financial adventures, of the boom-time financiers in the voice of Adam Smith, the pseudonym for George J.W. Goodman, an investor who had made a modest fortune, set up an investment fund, lost several modest fortunes, his own and the investors’, before making what was to be his real fortune by creating an irresistible new approach to business news. His stories for *New York*, reworked only slightly, became the best-selling book *The Money Game*. Jimmy Breslin wrote a priceless piece for Clay, “Namath All Night Long,” about life as lived by the first Bad Boy professional athlete who became the prototype for all the Bad Boys, the John McEnroes, the Jimmy Connorses, who were to follow. Clay published Mark Jacobson’s bizarre account of “the hip fleet,” the world of the Dover Taxi Garage’s nighttime cabbies, a superiority complex of professors, former priests, artists, musicians, M.A.’s, D.J.’s, and others who classified themselves as intellectuals, padding out their miserable livings by driving at night—and whose greatest fear was working the day shift, which would mean the worst had now happened: They had become real cabdrivers. He published Nik Cohn’s “[The Tribal Rites of the New Saturday Night](#),” depicting a world of lower-middle-class, lower-IQ youths in

Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx in the mid-1970s who *lived* for Saturday nights in disco joints. Cohn's piece was the basis of the movie *Saturday Night Fever*, starring John Travolta. The white suits Travolta wore throughout created a sudden effulgence of white suits in the men's clothing stores that made my own look trite ... until the travolting faddists found out how much trouble and expense they require to maintain, and the *Saturday Night Fever* whites vanished as fast as they had appeared. He published a remarkable account of 1970s hangover of all of New York's young hipsters and yipsters and granolas who had based their status dreams completely on one "Counter Culture" style of life or another. And he published Gael Greene's reprise in 1970—"How Not to Be Humiliated in Snob Restaurants"—of Clay's own "Siberia" piece in *Esquire* a decade before.

Up against work of this sort, based on reporting this solid, *The New Yorker* never had a chance. In its "Talk of the Town" column, the magazine began to fling zingers obviously aimed at us, always omitting the name of the magazine, *New York*, that was already making them look second-rate. We were working for an old newspaper, the *Herald Tribune*, that was all. This culminated in a full-blown parody in the body of *The New Yorker* of Breslin's work for *New York* and mine ... without mentioning *New York*. (To tell the truth, it was pretty clever stuff, that parody.) So they wanted to play. That much they made clear, as Clay and I saw it, and we certainly didn't mind obliging them. Why should we?



From left: Felker with Gail Sheehy; going to David Frost's annual garden party in London in 1990.
(Photo: (L-R) Courtesy of Gail Sheehy; Marina Garnier)

We were sitting in Clay's office one afternoon grouching about and begrudging all the outrageously worshipful rose petals and laurel wreaths other publications were heaping upon *The New Yorker*. The damned thing was easier to praise than to read ... right? Right ... They're really heaping all this praise on the dead body of Harold Ross and the way the magazine used to be when he ran

it in the old days ... right? Right ... That was when we had an inspiration. What about the man who runs it now, the Sandman who puts everybody to sleep these days? William Shawn was his name. Ross had handpicked Shawn to succeed him, which he did, in 1952. That was it! We'd do a profile of William Shawn. That would be rich, wouldn't it? The "profile" was a genre *The New Yorker* itself had dreamed up and named. Nobody had ever written much of anything about William Shawn. From what we soon learned about him, it wasn't hard to guess why. Shawn was a

very apprehensive little man, a regular homunculus, and a claustrophobe. The thought of getting on an elevator petrified him. So did the idea of appearing in public, let alone speaking in public. So did the idea of being photographed, never mind submitting to an interview. There was only one known photograph of William Shawn as an adult. He had commissioned and paid for it himself and executed total ... and very wary ... control over who could use it.

The more Clay and I talked about it the funnier the idea became. This presumed-to-be Dr. Johnson of Urbanity, Wit, Sophistication, Glamour, and Excitement in New York was a gnome who apparently had no life outside his office on West 43rd Street and a building on Fifth Avenue, where he lived *quietly quietly quietly* with his wife and child in an apartment on the second floor ... and therefore easily accessible without enclosing anybody's body in the windowless metal coffin called "elevator." He was as close to a hermit as a man could be and still hold a day job.

There, in sum, you have the Editor Shawn I presented in a two-part profile headed "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead." I didn't accuse him of doing anything other than being himself. But you've heard of "bloody murder?" That was what greeted my playful profile—screams and howls of bloody murder such as you've never heard in your life! Shawn himself wrote a letter to the owner of the *Trib*, Jock Whitney, and had it hand-delivered. He called my "Tiny Mummies" more than libelous, at the same time making it clear it was that, too. No, it was worse. It was "murderous." And *they* were the ones who had wanted to *play* ...

Bloody murder! Somebody at *The New Yorker*—the asphalt jungle drums said it was one of the magazine's oldest and best writers, Lillian Ross—marshaled the troops, drafting every writer who had written, was writing, or sure would like to write for *The New Yorker*. Godalmighty there were a lot of them! Famous, too! J. D. Salinger, who was even more of a recluse than Shawn and had barely uttered or written a public word in seven years, popped up out of his hole in rural New Hampshire like The Groundhog and sent Whitney a telegram accusing him, our former Ambassador to the Court of St. James's, of having destroyed his own and the *Trib*'s reputation, *forever*, with a single "poisonous" article. Among the angriest sure-would-like-to-bes (a yearning we would learn of later) was one of the two most prestigious political columnists in the country, Joseph Alsop. Alsop said I was part of the Ho Chi Minh—loving America-hating madness now sweeping a generation of young Americans into the arms of the totalitarian Left. Guess what newspaper was Alsop's home office ... the *Trib*! The British writer Muriel Spark at least added some balance by calling me a Joe McCarthy-style bully. So what about the other of the two most prestigious political columnists in America, namely,

Walter Lippmann? You won't believe this—but *he checked in too!* Lest he be seen as shading his meaning in any fashion, Walter Lippmann wrote, "Tom Wolfe is an incompetent ass." You won't believe this either but his home office was ... the *Trib* too! That was how bad it got.

Our little magazine was suddenly lit up lurid with publicity. *Time*, *Newsweek*, the press all over America—they couldn't get enough of this "murderous" Manhattan magazine feud. A lot of the coverage was negative, but *le tout America* now knew that here was a magazine called *New York* that had become a major player.

In 1966 the *Trib* had folded after yet another suicidal strike. Two other stricken newspapers, the *Journal-American* and the *World-Telegram & Sun*, anted up along with the *Trib* to stay alive with life-support in the form of a now mercifully forgotten, stillborn sheet called the *World Journal Tribune*. It lasted eight months, and the three comrades-of-convenience said good-bye to the business forever in 1967. I bade a sentimental good-bye to the *Trib*, which I had loved working for. Such wild and crazy, lovely times ... like the time a mob of Cuban refugees burst into the City Room wanting my head—my *head!*—and I—

—but Clay didn't have time to listen to my old war stories. I doubt that he wasted five seconds reminiscing. He knew immediately what was to be done: breathe life back into the corpse of the dear departed Sunday supplement and resurrect it as an independent national weekly magazine called *New York*.

Getting a weekly publication rolling from a dead start has been compared to slicing a wrist to find out how fast you can bleed. It had taken Time Inc. half a dozen years and massive transfusions of money to bring *Sports Illustrated* to the point where it began to turn a profit, and Clay Felker and Time Inc. didn't belong on the same page, much less in the same paragraph. Jock Whitney had agreed to sell the name *New York* for \$6,500, but Clay couldn't even come up with that. He finally borrowed it from a writer, Barbara Goldsmith.



Superstar. Arbus's notorious photo of Viva.

Ironically, it was probably the intense coverage of the set-to with *The New Yorker*, bad as much of it was, that enabled Clay to raise the small fortune required to start up a slick-paper weekly magazine like this in less than a year. *The New Yorker* Affair, as people called it, had sunk Clay's name and *New York's* into everybody's bean. I remember the day in April 1968 that *New York*, the freestanding magazine, made its debut. The scene was a breakfast at The Four Seasons for 1,000 advertisers, potential advertisers, media folk, PR people ... in short, the cast of characters needed most by a magazine as a bottom-line business. The first 1,000 *New Yorks* to come off the press were to be presented to the guests as they arrived. Start-ups have their problems. The most interesting was the sight of one of the country's best-known illustrators and designers, Milton Glaser, now art director for Clay, desperately trying to add a decorative black bar above the logo, new york, with a straight-edge and a drafting pen—upon each of the 1,000 copies—at a rate faster than the guests could come in. Somehow the bar had disappeared in the printing process. There in the grand luxe Four Seasons a desperate man was trying to show Fate what for.

New York's first offices were on the top floor, the fourth of Glaser's Push Pin Studio's loft building on East 32nd Street. The building was a walk-up all the way, but who cared? Oh, to be young and in New York! Still in a blessed state of rude animal health! With virgin optimism and brand-new shrink-wrapped ambition! So it was up on the fourth floor at 207 East 32nd Street ... as *New York* published right on time its second issue ... and then the third ... and then—

I was up there in *New York's* new office when Clay came over to me and said, "Take a look at this. The advertising department says if we run it, we'll lose every advertiser we have on Madison Avenue."

This was no small thing. The new *New York* had been ably sold to high-end retailers on Madison Avenue and elsewhere with assurances of what a high-end magazine it would be and how much people flush with high-end boom money would love it.

Clay handed me an article entitled “La Dolce Viva,” by Barbara Goldsmith, the very one who had lent him \$6,500 to buy the name *New York* from Jock Whitney in the first place. With it was a photograph.

I was standing up when I started reading—and found I was unwilling to interrupt myself long enough to sit down. What I had in my hands was dynamite. *Tout le monde* knew about the famous Andy Warhol and his famous Factory full of helpers and hangers-on. But Barbara Goldsmith’s was the first story to capture the campy creepy K-Y vaseline-y queasiness of it ... the Warhol style of life—a classic example, incidentally, of what Weber meant by a status group generating a style of life ... (Not only that, for an even 40 years now St. Andy’s has remained the dominant style of the lives of the artists in New York.) I looked at the photograph. I had never seen anything like it. It was a portrait of one of Warhol’s “superstars,” as he called the unknown actresses in his high-camp movies. She went by one name, Viva, the same way real celebrities such as a Liz (Taylor), Jackie (O.), and Andy did. In the photograph, Viva was reclining nude upon a ratty version of a Récamier sofa. This vision was not what one would call arousing. She looked like a hairless rabbit. You could see her entire rib cage beneath her skin except where a pair of tiny shrunken breasts were in the way. Seems she was a sometime model. She had rolled her eyes up under her skull, as if she were stoned, as being high on drugs was called at that time. Somehow the defining touch was an empty milk carton on the coffee table in the foreground. Not a syringe, not a stubbed-out reefer, not even an empty liquor bottle—but an empty milk carton. Somehow that milk carton was the perfect objective correlative, as the literary critics of the 1950s and 1960s used to say, of the mental rubbish the picture captured. The photographer’s name was Diane Arbus.



From left: Felker in 1969; at the premiere of *Bright Lights, Big City*, in 1988.

I looked up at Clay and said, “I don’t see how you can *not* run it.”

“That’s the way I feel,” said Clay. And he ran it, story and photograph, in *New York*’s fourth issue.

Dynamite! Dynamite this story and this photograph were! So where did

(Photo: (L-R) Courtesy of Gail Sheehy; Marina Garnier)

that leave the advertising department? Had they been a bunch of panicky philistines and Mrs. Grundys? As it turned out ... no. *New York* lost every high-end retailer on Madison Avenue and beyond. This precipitated a crisis. The board, made up of the big investors, summoned Clay to a meeting at the Park Avenue apartment of one of them, a much respected elder statesman of Wall Street named Armand Erpf. I came along, too, since technically (and technically only) I was a vice-president of the magazine. Erpf's apartment was nowhere near as grand as Clay's, but the living room was lined—*lined*—with paintings such as I had seen before only in museums or Skira art books, Impressionists and the like. In terms of current prices, there must have been a billion dollars worth of pictures hanging on those walls. The directors weren't looking at the pictures. They were hopping mad over this "Viva" business. They could see their investment sinking without a bubble after only four issues. They were ready to can Clay then and there and probably would have, had not the elder statesman and maximum art collector, Erpf, exercised moral suasion.

"Look at this," Clay told me, riffing through the date book, "I only ate dinner at home eight times last year!" I don't think I can adequately convey the pride he took in this discovery.

Incidentally, Diane Arbus is today the St. Diane of photography as an art. An original print of *Viva* would fetch \$500,000 and possibly much more, judging by the latest auction prices of her work. Clay's writers could only admire him for the risk he had taken, for brushing aside all the business types and seeing to it that a great story and a great photograph got published. *His* writers ... for by now, quite without intending to, he had cast his own spell over New York's writers and editors and illustrators, graphic artists, photographers—in short, the entire creative side of the operation. Soon we were all breathing Clay's own mental atmosphere of boundless ambition, his conviction that we were involved in the greatest experiment in the history of journalism. Even back when his platform was nothing more than that miserable little bullpen at the *Trib*, he had a way of convincing you that his dream was as good as an *action accompli*. What we're doing with this magazine is ... Big League stuff! ... If you put everything you've got into what I'm asking you to do ... "I'll make you a star." According to the fast-accumulating Felker lore, that was the way he always put it, "I'll make you a star." I never heard him utter those very words, but one way or another he imparted that heady prospect to me and everyone else who worked for *New York* ... *He'll make me a star*. He wasn't just blowing smoke, either. He did exactly that many times. And now that *New York* was a magazine on its own, more and more writers ... *believed*.

This ... is ... Big League stuff. And most of them—once they got a look at Clay’s Xanadu on 57th Street, they surrendered all doubts. Either this is the Big League ... or there is no Big League. The only grandeur missing from Xanadu was Pamela. She was spending more and more time acting in movies in Italy, and by and by she and Clay went their separate ways. Years later he married Gail Sheehy.

If Clay was crazy about some story a writer had done for him, then he couldn’t do enough for the writer. The ultimate case was Gloria Steinem. Glo-Glo, as Clay called her, had done some great pieces for *New York* on the subject of feminism. So when she founded *Ms.* magazine, Clay gave her a hoist and a half. He printed the entire first issue of *Ms.*, featuring a piece by Glo-Glo herself entitled “Sisterhood,” as a pull-out within an issue of *New York*. That was her start-up: a debut under the aegis of the most talked-about magazine in the country. It reminded me at the time of the way NASA used to carry rocket airplanes such as the X-1, the first ship to break the sound barrier, up to an altitude of 10,000 feet in the belly of a cargo plane. Then they would cut the little beast loose on its own so some pilot like Chuck Yeager (and there *were* two or three other pilots like Chuck Yeager) could take it “booming and zooming” up into the thin atmosphere on the edge of space. That way they didn’t have to use up most of the rocket fuel overcoming gravity. Likewise, Glo-Glo didn’t have to burn up a fortune in start-up money getting the perfect audience to look at *Ms.*—and the novelty of the stunt generated publicity money couldn’t buy.

Clay made sure I got a great ride, too. Late in 1969 I came up with the idea of writing a non-fiction version of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* about New York, a “non-fiction novel,” to use the label Truman Capote had stuck onto *In Cold Blood*, as if to say, “Let’s get one thing clear: This isn’t journalism, this is literature.” (Even Solzhenitsyn ... even he ... stuck a label on *The Gulag Archipelago* reading “an experiment in literary investigation,” that being its subtitle.) So one day I was hanging around a hallway at *Harper’s* magazine. *Harper’s* had a knockout of an art director named Sheila, and I got the bright idea of maybe asking her out for lunch, which was marginally more serious than *wanna go get a cup of coffee*. While I was waiting for her to finish up whatever she was doing in the art department, I wandered next door into the office of David Halberstam, who wasn’t there. Nosily I noticed a rather fancy card on his desktop ... I couldn’t believe it. It was an invitation from Leonard Bernstein and his wife, Felicia, for a reception at their apartment at 895 Park Avenue, corner of Park and 79th Street, in support of the Black Panthers. Now, there was a match made on Donkey Island for you ... Leonard Bernstein gives a party for the Black Panthers on Park Avenue, in the Seventies, no less. If this wouldn’t make a chapter in a non-fiction *Vanity Fair*

about New York, what *would*? You were supposed to RSVP to a certain telephone number. So I called it, using David Halberstam's telephone, and said, "This is Tom Wolfe, and I accept." On the other end there must have been a functionary working for some sort of Panther defense committee, writing down acceptances on a yellow legal pad or whatever, because that was that.

When I reached Leonard Bernstein's apartment on the appointed evening, there was a security check at a desk outside the door. I said, "Tom Wolfe," and sure enough, there he was, Tom Wolfe, listed on a yellow legal pad. Inside, I could see immediately that the entryway hadn't begun to reveal the scale of the place. It was a thirteen-room penthouse duplex, not nearly so swell and overwhelming as Clay's duplex, but it had its own swell touches. In the living room, near the windows, there was a pair of grand pianos, the indisputably *grand* sort of grand pianos. One look, and you couldn't help but imagine sublime evenings *chez* Bernstein ... playful yet magical piano duets with Bernstein himself at one piano and some other not merely sophisticated but *knowing* artist at the other piano trying to out-descant one another with great garlands of notes in elliptical orbits only barely and yet always subject to the gravitational pull of the cantus firmus ... Like any boy who has been instructed at cotillion to pay his respects to the host and hostess first and then be gracious and circulate, I sought out Leonard and Felicia Bernstein and introduced myself. I kept my National Brand shorthand pad and ballpoint pen in plain view. I mention that because afterward I can't tell you how many people accused me of perfidiously turning on my hosts. Bernstein's sister wrote a letter enumerating my sins in an ascending order of perfidy. Serving the forces of oppression wasn't the worst and ultimate. The worst and ultimate was sneaking a hidden tape recorder into her brother's home. I took that as a great compliment, since in this life one should take his satisfactions where he can. It meant that my shorthand recording of the evening's dialogue, which I did quite openly, must have struck Leonard Bernstein as a bull's-eye. The evening's cast of characters ... leonine Leonard Bernstein and his beautiful blonde former actress wife, Felicia, three fiercely-turned-out Black Panther dudes and "the Panther women," as they were referred to, a couple of organizers in gray suits who had Engineers on the Freight Train of History written all over them, the two dozen or so celebrities (e.g., Barbara Walters, Otto Preminger), socialites (e.g., Jean vanden Heuvel, Cynthia Phipps), and "intellectuals" (e.g., Robert Silvers, Harold Taylor) ... this cast would have been pure gold for any writer. The sight of the rich, the famous, and the brainy kowtowing to a band of black radicals from Oakland, California, in Leonard Bernstein's living room, baring their soft white backs the more poignantly to feel the Panthers' vengeful lash, then imploring them not to kill their children—no writer would have ever dreamed of a bonanza quite this rich. It was all too much for me to try to keep penned up in a shorthand pad until I was ready to fit it in as a

chapter of a “non-fiction novel.” That scene cried out for *New York Magazine*—*now*. Just about any magazine other than *The Nation* and *Mother Jones*, who would have raised their forearms to shield their eyes from the light like werewolves shrinking from the dawn—just about any magazine would have published material like that. But only Clay would understand how potent it was. Only Clay would give the writer his head and publish it down to the last detail, no matter how many pages it took. It took 30 pages, it so happened. He devoted almost the entire June 8, 1970, issue of *New York* to “[That Party at Lenny’s](#),” as the headline read.

“Down to every last detail” ... Again, this was mainly instinctive, I think, but Clay realized the importance of detail as metonymy to bring alive the scenes that illustrated new styles of life. The new styles of life in turn revealed new status groups, some of which have proven influential enough to change life not merely in New York but all over the United States. “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s” was a herald—or an early warning, depending on one’s take on the matter—of what is well known today as “political correctness.” Political correctness today transcends or is blithely oblivious of ideology. It has become an intellectual fashion, just as membership in the Baptist Church once was, believe it or not, essential to establishing one’s spiritual enlightenment. Dignified, prominent, fashionable people dread being asked their opinion of, say, soft-porn photographs of the bare haunches and school-of-bare breasts of vulvacious young things with *I gotta have it* leers on their lips ... in fashion ads in the most elegant magazines. They shudder. Honest answers might strip them of their socially compulsory spiritual enlightenment.

Clay’s eye for styles of life and the status groups that created them, his journalist’s awareness of such things as hot news, profoundly changed magazine and newspaper publishing in the United States and, for that matter, England. So-called “city” magazines doing their best to imitate *New York* cropped up all over the country. Newspapers created sections called “Style,” “Lifestyle,” or using the new corporate jam-bam style of logo, “LifeStyle,” all to try to capture some of the *New York* mojo. The *New York Times* would seek to duplicate *New York* by slipping a multitude of new sections into the newspaper daily and on Sunday—the jumbo Sunday *Times* might contain three or more of them—with titles such as “Styles,” “City” (more styles), “Escapes,” “Arts” (consisting of two subsections, one for the Fine and one for the Fun), “Dining Out,” “Dining In,” “Circuits.” But the city magazines, the newspaper jam-bammers, and the *Times*’s one-a-day magazine (if not two- or three-a-day) quickly degenerated into coverage not of styles of life in the Max Weber sense but styles of living in the Martha Stewart sense, the right

kitchenware, the right party planning, the right trips abroad, the right décors, neighborhoods, nanny services, iCommunicators, fitness programs, and “parenting.”

Throughout the thirteen years he ran *New York Magazine*, Clay Felker oversaw sociological studies of urban life that academic sociology had never even attempted: the culture of Wall Street, the culture of political graft in New York, cop culture, Mob culture, youth cultures in California as well as New York, New York’s self-aborting, dysfunctional, deconstructed power structure, capital-S Society and its discontents. And yet no one ever thought of it as sociology. That was thanks to one of Clay’s finest instincts. He demanded—or, better said, inspired as well as required—such depth of reporting that his writers came up with the same sort of scenes, status details, and detailed dialogue that in the past had rarely been found except in novels, short stories, and the most outrageous form of fiction, as Orwell put it, which is autobiography. (Autobiography is like Wikipedia: Some of it may be true.) And although it remains controversial, Clay’s writers often used the other favorite device of fiction writers: namely, putting the reader inside the skin, inside the head, behind the eyes of characters in the story. The New Journalism, *c’est moi*, Clay could have easily claimed.

One could argue—and I don’t hesitate to do it—that in those thirteen years, 1964–1967 and years 1968–1977, Clay produced a huge sprawling *Vanity Fair* himself ... only having it written, chapter by chapter, by his writers ... all of them absorbed in, exhilarated by, a Missouri boy’s wide-eyed obsession with New York as the Rome, the Paris, the London of the twentieth century, the capital of the world ... the radiant City of Ambition.

In 1977 Clay, in his early fifties, at the very zenith of his creative powers, proved to be still an innocent Missouri boy beneath his heavy baggage of sophisticated knowledge. He looked on helplessly, utterly baffled, as a handful of what today are called “activist investors” euchred *New York Magazine* right out from under him. If you know the type, you can imagine their peculiar *hee hee hee* viperous glee.

The look on his face! It was so easy, the gang had to chuckle. Such Big Talk ... the poor chump. The gang stared at the magazine for a while, and then they looked at each other. Why the hell wouldn’t the damned thing lay those golden eggs it was supposed to be so hot at doing? Presently they sold it, at a loss. But hey, that’s business. You take the bitter with the better. Looking back on the whole thing, though, you couldn’t help *hee hee hee* laughing again. The big talker with the big apartment and the big ideas—they sure had cooked his goose!