

DAVID HURLES

1944-

CALL HIM “OLD RELIABLE” BECAUSE HE IS

“Streetboys, ex-cons, and hustlers are my only hardon,” David Hurles says. It’s 1981 in Hollywood. We’ve been close friends for five years. He is internationally famous as the photographer and video director of his Old Reliable Studio. The art of his radical erotica is so much his personal vision that guys often refer to him as “Old Reliable.” “Nothing beats,” he says, “looking up at a tough young streetwise punk straddling my chest, flexing his muscles, and talking nasty to me. Sure, it’s dangerous. Nobody in his right mind should bring rough trade into his house and put himself in a compromising situation. I’ve been raped at knifepoint and robbed at gunpoint. I’ve been stripped naked by a 19-year-old blond ex-con who fucked me till he got off, and then duck-marched me around my apartment with the palms of my hands on my shoulders prison-style while he made me rifle my drawers for cash.”

Old Reliable is in his early thirties. He’s a cherubic brown-blond, blue-eyed junk-food addict who rarely ventures out of his Los Angeles apartment. He hardly needs to. In 1975 he invented the better mousetrap, and the world beat a path to his door. “Judy Garland and me,” he says. “This is the apartment-hotel where she used to bring the rough trade she liked to have fuck her senseless. Ain’t Hollywood grand? LA may not be the center of the universe, but it sure is the center ring of the circus.”

Reliable rises to pour more Coca-Cola. The Coke always goes in the glass before the ice: it foams less.

“I must be crazy to be in the business I’m in. If the Moral Majority, which is neither, doesn’t get me, then the hustlers will. But then my business is my pleasure. How many guys can honestly say that? To be perfectly real with you, in a world that grows increasingly unreal, I must tell you: Terror is my only hardon. I used to think this was weird; but lately the headlines and movies prove that terror sells. And what sells in America is always what excites people the most. America’s into terror. Think of the

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American hostages in Iran, movies like *Jaws* and *Halloween*, the election of any Republican. It's an axiom of art: the mix of beauty and terror."

Attractive danger is Old Reliable's product. He recruits tough street males to make audio tapes for mail-order sale to an international clientele of men who prefer, in their wise concern for the safety of their persons and possessions, not to hit the bricks themselves to pick up a piece of lower-class trash who will do anything they want—or he wants—for fifteen bucks on up. Enter Old Reliable and reality. Old Reliable refuses to script his authentic tapes. He turns his boys loose with a blank audio cassette. What they confess to and brag about is the stuff wet dreams are made on. Lots of gay men, with a yen for nasty talk, enjoy beating off listening to Old Reliable's straight men admitting, in slow southern drawls and "dude" street lingo, that they're fuckin' righteously into abusing fuckin' fags.

Once a man discovers the performance-reality that Old Reliable produces, he becomes a sucker for these hot social documentaries that ivory-tower academics would give their right nut for. Reliable realizes the socially redeeming value of his work. But that's accidental to his purpose. His reason for being, he realizes, happens when a guy listens to these tapes on his car stereo, on his cassette player next to his pillow, or on his Walkman while sitting in a sleazy neighborhood on a bus bench watching the danger-boys cruise temptingly by. Sex, Old Reliable figures, ought to have a verbal soundtrack.

"I'm an outlaw," he admits, "artistically, politically, even philosophically." Reliable is attractive enough to make a pickup in any gay bar in the world; but he frankly eschews sex with gays. He prefers sex with men. Not that he feels superior to gays. "It's ironic. Just as the media accepts the word *gay*, homosexuals realize that *gay* has reduced itself to mean little more than the lifestyles of the disco clone and the political activist. That does not, by any stretch, represent the extraordinary range of queerness." He smiles. "I think it was better before we divided ourselves into rich gays, poor gays, city gays, female gays, etc. I think it was better when we were all just outlaws."

Knowing the danger of Old Reliable's lifestyle, the very lifestyle that gives him access to a reality that is the heart of the contemporary young urban male American experience, one wonders about the chances of his longevity. Are his forays into the hustling *demimonde* a kind of living by the sword you die by?

"I'm homosexual," he says. "But like many queer men these days, I find homosexuality is more than designer jeans and Lacoste polo shirts. Maybe I'm reactionary."

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Actually, his erotic tapes are an art form reminding gay men of the kind of men they originally came out for—before studios like Colt laundered masculinity into a spruced-up parody of mannikins and modelles.

“Few men alive, I dare say, ever came out to go to bed with gays. Men come out to bed other men. Heterosexual is not better than homosexual. Yet if you check out, and really listen to, the so-called gay values of who’s so-called *hot*, you see that the straighter the guy’s appearance the bigger the throb. That says everything about what gay guys deep-down want. That says everything about the deep-down levels at which I mine my work. Sometimes guys buy my tapes and get scared.”

Old Reliable believes in being careful of what you wish for, because he finds you usually get it.

“When I was a kid in Cincinnati, I wrestled with tough kids and didn’t get hurt. They respected my brains. I respected their strength. I could watch fights without taking sides. Boys told me their secrets. Today they still do. I was free back then to not be one-of-the-boys while enjoying all the protection and privilege of being with the tough guys. Sounds like my situation now. I used to get my pals to wrestle. Crotch-to-crotch. Stripped to shorts. Twelve-year-old cocks curiously against each other. One guy, when we weren’t wrestling, was always strutting and telling me how tough he was, and how he could really whip me if he wanted to. When I think about it, those experiences were like a dry-run for the way my sex life and my art life are today. Maybe that’s the point and secret of my tapes: LA reality isn’t too far from Cincinnati fantasy.”

Old Reliable is generous to his boys. Sometimes to a fault. They call him “Dear Old Dad” and he melts. A hustler gets fifteen to twenty-five bucks for sex, another ten or fifteen for the sixty-minute tape, another twenty or so for photographs. That’s sort of the standard package. It varies greatly with the look and talent of the toughie. Some guys return for free. Some, for bigger bucks.

“These young men serve themselves up *à la carte*.” Old Reliable spreads some of his distinctive camera-verite pix across his blond-veneer coffee table. His eye sports a small mouse: a black eye. His lower lip is slightly puffy. “Kenny, last night, for instance, came over for twenty bucks’ worth of fun. Let me say that Kenny was my type and cheap at twice the price. I offered him during the scene another ten for some attitude-posing. Another five for his fancy presentation of his butt for some fancier rimming. And so on.” Old Reliable smiles like a cat accustomed to eating canaries. “By this morning, Kenny had earned himself \$85.”

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Old Reliable hardly minds paying for it. His auditions of these boys assures Old Reliable customers that they're getting "The Real Thing." No wonder he keeps a refrigerator stacked full of liter bottles of nothing but Coca-Cola. For every true artist, his work must also be his life.

"Hollywood," Reliable says, "is the city of performances. Everybody here is paid to perform. I pay to go to a stage play where actors strut their stuff for a group. So what's different about paying my little street actor Kenny for a one-on-one performance? It pays his rent. It keeps him from robbing somebody." He looks around his apartment.

Outside, a Southern-California fountain, reminiscent of grander Hollywood times, babbles under a motionless palm. "Of course, they always sooner or later rob me. That's one of the reasons I rarely go out. Everything in my apartment turns over, through burglary, at least once a year. Am I complaining? Hardly."

Old Reliable's fifth-floor apartment is early St. Vincent de Paul. Fans of his photography can watch his possessions change as they study the backgrounds of the pix of his young studs. The lamps, the couches, the chairs, the sheets are all familiar.

"This place is not exactly my choice of style," Reliable says with no apology in his voice. He's not a queen living the designer life. "Most of my customers live in very nice middle-class homes. I had," he confides, "three address changes from my customers in Washington, D.C., for instance, just as President Carter left office. Anyway, if a man lives in a comfortable home, he can't bring back a street hustler where everything they see is temptation. This Salvation Army junk hardly tempts anybody. This illusion keeps me safer, although there is the constant problem of the camera, the tape recorders, the tape duplicator, the color TV, and the video camera and recorder. My work requires electronic equipment and, of course, that is high on the burglary-robbery hit list. So far I haven't gone down in a hail of hot lead."

One wonders if Old Reliable's customers realize the extent of the dangers he faces to produce his erotic art. That knowledge that the danger is as real as the tapes, that none of his work is scripted, might add to the erotic, exotic intensity of smoking a joint, greasing up the palm, and turning on the tape cassette.

Old Reliable founded his cassette mail-order trade in the middle of the night. This was before home video. Erotic films in the 1970s were silent, and he thought to give sex a voice. He sat up in bed, sort of like movie star Al Jolson saying the first line of dialogue in the first talking movie in 1927: "You ain't heard nothin' yet!"

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“Actually,” he says between answering the constantly ringing phone, “I always got turned on at the baths back then listening to men fuck and moan in the next room. I jerked off hearing my roommate getting into S&M and fisting. I loved the panting, crunching sound of myself and my partner wrestling. And I could, and can, cum listening to a hustler or straight man tell about his exploits: fighting, doing sex, rough-housing, keeping cool in the slammer. Sex isn’t silent. Sex involves all the senses. I like the sight, taste, and smell of action. So why not the fucking sound of it?”

Old Reliable’s style is the style of men he recruits: a direct drive to real, painful, penetrating, curled-toe orgasm. The men he photographs and tapes are from the lower class: outlaws, young men from broken families, reform school, prison, drug addicts, bikers, all of them living day to day, often on the street, or with whoever will take care of them, male or female. Most identify themselves as straight.

Old Reliable’s style is also the style of the men who buy his tapes, men reacting, perhaps subconsciously, to their privileged upbringing. Like Old Reliable, who dares to extend himself out into the mean streets to front for them, they have, if their purchasing power is any statement, similar tastes. “I like,” Old Reliable confesses, and the truth of all this is in his work, “the smell of sweat, armpits, cock, asshole, and balls. I like muscular, hard bodies. I like men doing things that our middle-class parents always thought of as dirty: spitting, cussing, even fucking women. Sex is beautiful and compelling, but I prefer it on the seamy side. I would rather sniff the armpits of a tough young Mexican boxer after a fight than climb between clean sheets with a Colt model.

“For my tapes, I basically use men who haven’t grown up with middle-class restrictions. I encourage them to be as honest as they can. I let them say whatever spills out of them—from nice to nasty. They tend to tell secrets and spill their guts all over the tape. Most of it is what some people regard as seamy, not just sexual. Some talk of violence and hate and prejudice, of sins venial and mortal, of omission and commission. Most of them are pretty worldly whether they’re 18 or 38, What is *dirty* changes a lot and keeps changing.”

What Old Reliable ends up with on his erotic tapes is something really important and unique in contemporary American popular culture.

“What you hear on my tapes is more than suck and fuck and rim. It’s also sweat, piss, hardcore masculinity, strength, attitude, lack of pretension. These men haven’t been conditioned the same way as their listeners. Most of them love the chance to say anything they want, and for money,

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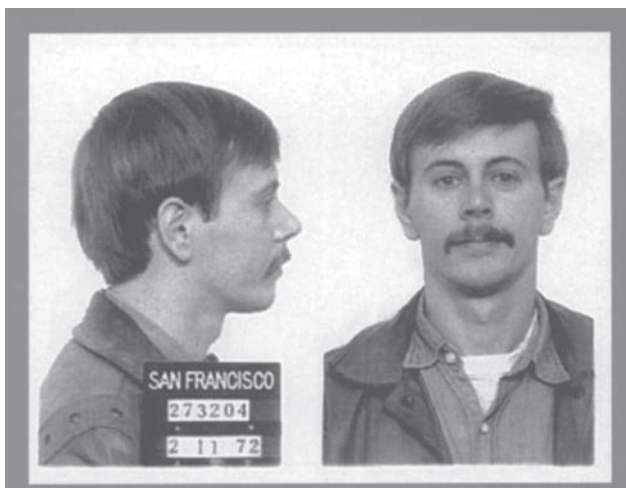
and they come off with a seething intensity that can't fail to move the listener."

Old Reliable knocks down neat the last of his glass of Coke.

"How often," he says with all the passion of an artist with a vision, "do we get to hear someone say what he really thinks and feels? The men of these tapes can do just that—because I release them from any judgment on what they say. After they leave my apartment, after I get a little ripped and listen to the tape, I just share the street-gifts life sends to me."

He smiles his deceptively boyish smile.

"I'm sharing people who don't always wear clean underwear," he says, "with those who do."



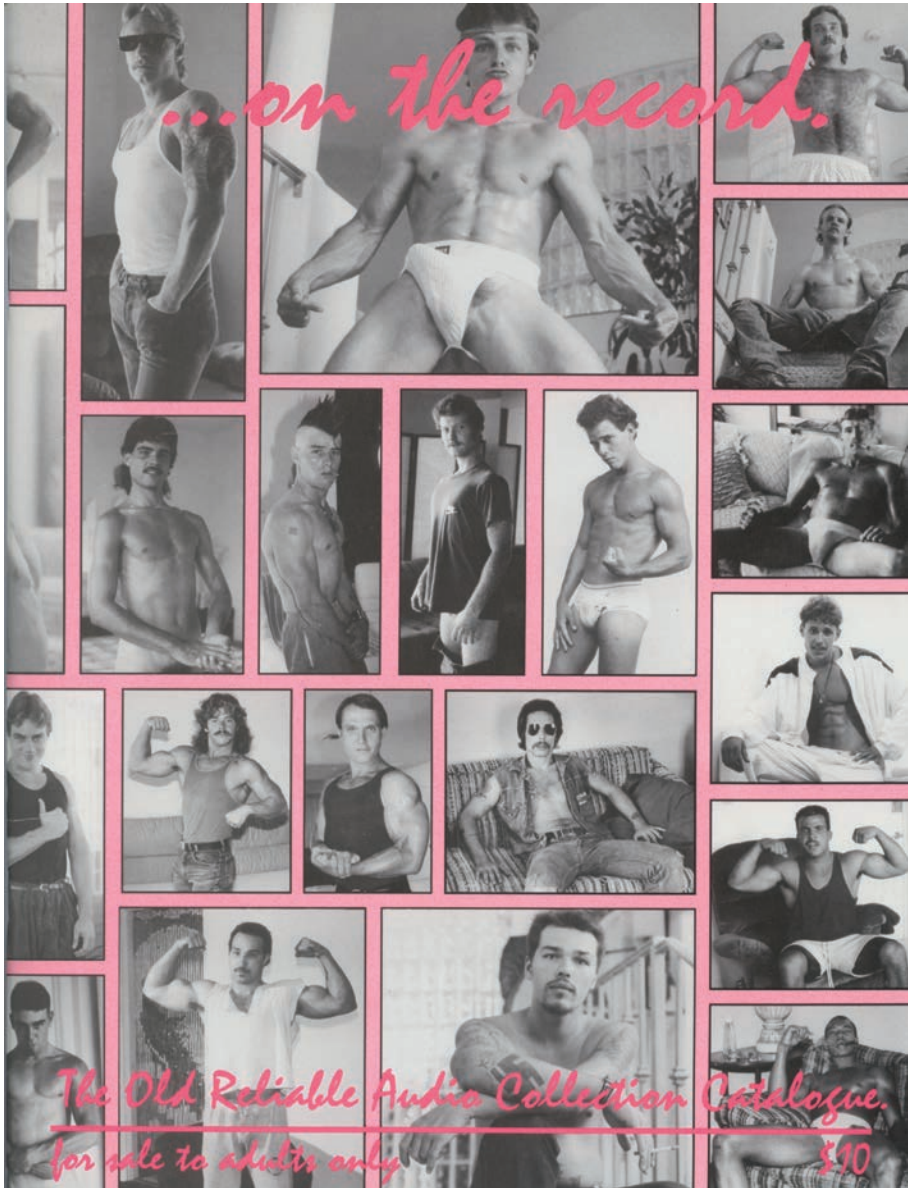
After David Hurles' second 1972 arrest (four times in one week) by the San Francisco police, he used his mug shot to score "street cred" with his hustler ex-con models.

Jose del Norte, Old Reliable model photographed on set at David Hurles' studio for the Palm Drive Video shoot, *Illegal Alien Blues*, Hollywood, 1986. Photo by Jack Fritscher published in *Drummer* 155, May 1992.



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David Hurles carefully curated his actors and videos in his annual Old Reliable catalogs which in themselves are art objects documenting the gay history of Old Reliable Studio. The cover shown is *The Old Reliable Collection Catalogue: On the Record*, September 1994.