

# A TEI Project

## Interview of John Bright

### Contents

#### 1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE APRIL 21, 1988

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO APRIL 21, 1988

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE APRIL 27, 1988

### 1. Transcript

#### 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE APRIL 21, 1988

CEPLAIR

Okay, Mr. Bright, if you can tell me when you were born, where you were born, and what your family was like.

BRIGHT

Yes. Well, I was born January 1, 1908. I had two sisters. My parents were very conventional, except in one respect: my father was a militant abolitionist. In other respects, he was a very conventional man.

CEPLAIR

Were they born in this country or did they come from Europe?

BRIGHT

No, they were both born in the United States. My mother being from Virginia and my father was born in Columbus, Ohio. I was born in Baltimore. Except for the fact of my father's abolitionism, which determined a good measure of my attitude, he was a very conventional man.

CEPLAIR

What sort of work did he do?

BRIGHT

He was a clerk for the American Radiator Company. My radicalism began with my father's abolitionism, which I was unaware of at the time, but which determined my attitude in respect to racism. Although he was an amputee, having lost an arm at a very young age—His attitude toward race and racism was very radical for its time and determined my attitude in that regard.

CEPLAIR

Was he a member of any organization or party?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

It was just a value or principle he held, his antiracism?

BRIGHT

Not particularly.

CEPLAIR  
The family moved to Chicago at some point, is that right?

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
How old were you when—?

BRIGHT  
I was in my early teens.

CEPLAIR  
Where did you live in Chicago?

BRIGHT  
I lived on the north side in a residential neighborhood.

CEPLAIR  
And you attended high school in Chicago?

BRIGHT  
Yes. I went to Nicholas Senn High School and the Stephen K. Hayt [Grammar School], which the kids all called "I hate school." [laughter] I went to Nicholas Senn for four years and graduated. I intended to go to college, but I was expelled.

CEPLAIR  
From college?

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
Which college?

BRIGHT  
Lake Forest [College].

CEPLAIR  
Why were you expelled?

BRIGHT  
I was expelled for reasons of protest, protesting hazing.

CEPLAIR  
The hazing of freshmen?

BRIGHT  
Yes, I was expelled shortly after my first year in college. I went to Europe then, intending to resume college, but I never did. I went to the New School for Social Research in New York.

CEPLAIR  
What year was that that you were in Europe, do you remember?

BRIGHT  
Nineteen twenty-seven.

CEPLAIR  
Did you go alone?

BRIGHT  
No, I went with another fellow.

CEPLAIR

Did you go to Russia when you were there?

BRIGHT  
No.

CEPLAIR  
You weren't interested in the Russian Revolution at that time, particularly?

BRIGHT  
No, my earliest radicalism was in relation to the Sacco-Vanzetti case, which I participated in very passionately. I was about sixteen at the time. The early radicalism that I had derived from the Sacco-Vanzetti case.

CEPLAIR  
When you returned from Europe, what did you do?

BRIGHT  
I went to the New School.

CEPLAIR  
In New York?

BRIGHT  
In New York, yeah.

CEPLAIR  
How long were you in the New School?

BRIGHT  
About a year and a half. I came under the influence of a teacher there, Harry Elmer Barnes, who interested me in the question of war guilt, which I took very seriously and incorporated in my first book, the [William H.] Thompson book [Hizzoner Big Bill Thompson: An Idyll of Chicago]. I devoted a chapter to that, which, although it was a satire, had a serious side to it. I remember writing it.

CEPLAIR  
Did you write that when you were in New York, the Thompson book?

BRIGHT  
No. I returned to Chicago briefly during that period. I worked in a drugstore with the man who became subsequently my partner, Kubec Glasmon, who had a Jewish bankruptcy at the time and burned down his store and put in with me. He subsidized me and the book that I was writing.

CEPLAIR  
Why did you decide to write a book about Thompson?

BRIGHT  
He was in the headlines, and I thought it was a good subject.

CEPLAIR  
Had you wanted to be a writer? I mean, had that been something that you thought about for a while?

BRIGHT  
All my life. All my adult life.

CEPLAIR  
Why? What motivated you to become a writer?

BRIGHT  
Well, I have a joke about that, which has a basis in fact. My parents, although they were conventional, made a liar out of me. So the joke I was very fond of telling, subsequently,

to classes in school: when asked the question of how I became a writer, I said, "Because I was a liar." Due to the fact that I had to make up excuses for my behavior, as alibi, that's how I became a writer.

CEPLAIR

Were you kind of a rebellious child?

BRIGHT

Yes. I was rebellious due to the influence of my older sister, who was very unconventional for that time and place. Together we read all the subversive literature of the time, including Lady Chatterly's Lover. My particular gods were Havelock Ellis, Anatole France, and the young Ernest Hemingway, who had just published his first book, The Sun Also Rises. I went to Europe, secretly to get laid, but officially to meet Ellis and Anatole France, and Ernest Hemingway. I was there several months. I actually did meet Ellis in England, in Cornwall. Spent the day with him, a charming man and a very brilliant man in my opinion. Anatole France was dead. He died when I was en route to Europe. Hemingway, I didn't meet until Paris.

CEPLAIR

What were your impressions of Europe? Do you remember?

BRIGHT

Well, I was a little bewildered, because I didn't speak French. I was just confused.  
[laughter]

CEPLAIR

Now, Mr. Glasmon, did he own the pharmacy at which you worked, the drugstore?

BRIGHT

Yes. He owned the drugstore.

CEPLAIR

And then he burned it down to get the insurance?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

And then what happened after that? What did you do?

BRIGHT

Well, I wrote the Thompson book and returned to New York to find a publisher, which I did.

CEPLAIR

Who published it?

BRIGHT

Cape and Smith. Jonathan Cape and Harrison Smith, which was a very respectable publisher at the time. Unfortunately, the book was published in 1930 and was not successful, except in England, oddly enough. It was a best-seller due to the celebrity of William Hale Thompson.

CEPLAIR

And then what happened after the book was published?

BRIGHT

Well, I took the advance and came to California. I arrived in California October 29, 1929, and the book was published in 1930. I arrived in California with twenty-nine cents in my pocket after having spent my advance in the various ports of call. I came by boat and took

thirty days to get here. And then I settled down with Glasmon, with whom I had a publishing arrangement. Together we wrote *Beer and Blood*, which became *The Public Enemy*.

CEPLAIR

You wrote it as a book, though.

BRIGHT

Yes. And it was never published, except in a bowdlerized version.

CEPLAIR

Had you written for a newspaper before you—?

BRIGHT

Yes, I did, I was briefly a reporter, a cub reporter, for the *Chicago Daily News*. But I got fired for telling the truth about department store advertising.

CEPLAIR

You mean you wrote a story about it?

BRIGHT

Yes. I got fired.

CEPLAIR

So you knew quite a bit about Chicago politics then.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

And *Beer and Blood* was a story about Prohibition based on what you had learned as a newspaper reporter?

BRIGHT

I got my information about Chicago from Glasmon.

CEPLAIR

And how did he know so much about it? Was he a bootlegger, among other things?

BRIGHT

Well, everybody was in those days. He had traffic with a lot of hoodlums. Went to nightclubs cheek by jowl with a great many gangsters and was quite sophisticated about the underworld.

CEPLAIR

Did you intend to become a screenwriter when you first came here?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

That wasn't the reason you came here?

BRIGHT

No. I was chasing a girl—[laughter]

CEPLAIR

That's a better reason, I suspect.

BRIGHT

Whom I subsequently made the mistake of marrying. We married, incidentally, in a "wee kirk of the heather," which is in a graveyard. And that was a presaging of the marriage.

CEPLAIR

Well, so when you finished *Beer and Blood*, you couldn't find a publisher for it?

BRIGHT

No. I was tinkering with a publisher at the time, because I promised him another book, a sequel, a second book. When *Beer and Blood* was finished, I negotiated with the publisher, who wanted the book edited by Morris Ernst, who was an American Civil Liberties Union lawyer at the time. I didn't want the book edited by a lawyer, but by another writer. We were in the process of negotiating when the book was purchased by Warner Brothers [Pictures, Inc.].

CEPLAIR

How did Warner Brothers hear of the book?

BRIGHT

Well, a man by the name of Rufus LeMaire, whom I knew from Chicago and Glasmon knew, who was a producer of *LeMaire's Affairs*, a musical show in Chicago, he was trying to get into the picture business. He took the manuscript to Darryl [F.] Zanuck, who immediately bought it. And that's how I got into the picture business.

CEPLAIR

So they hired you to turn it into a script, you and Glasmon?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

I'm just curious, how did you two work together? Did you each write separate chapters or did you write together the same?

BRIGHT

Well, it was rather complicated. He was, at best, semiliterate, and I was literate. And so I did the writing. But he supplied the material that I wrote about. That was the nature of the collaboration. He subsequently learned to be a screenwriter, but at the beginning he was not equipped to do it.

CEPLAIR

Well, did you know how to write a screenplay?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

So you just sort of learned as you did it?

BRIGHT

I learned as I did it. My teacher was Darryl Zanuck, who was personally an arrogant, tin-pot Mussolini. As a producer, he himself was a frustrated writer and wrote the *Rin-Tin-Tin* pictures. But he learned how to produce. He taught me. Everything that I subsequently found out about movies I learned from him, and that was the measure of my gratitude.

CEPLAIR

Well, did you get a contract just for *Public Enemy*, or were you given a contract as of—?

BRIGHT

I had a term contract with options. I started at \$100 a week and Glasmon the same. I banked the money in the Bank of Hollywood, which never opened. And I realized ten cents on the dollar, subsequently, years later. So I wrote to the—I worked for nothing.

CEPLAIR

Now, when *Public Enemy* was finished, they then picked up your option, I assume.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Because I think you wrote three other movies that year—didn't you?—you and Glasmon.

BRIGHT

Four.

CEPLAIR

Four.

BRIGHT

In one year.

CEPLAIR

So they must have liked your work at Warner Brothers.

BRIGHT

Oh, we were hot at the time!

CEPLAIR

Those were all [James] Cagney movies, weren't they, that you wrote?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Where did you get the ideas? Did Zanuck give them to you or did you just pick them up out of the newspapers? Because I know a lot of them were very topical. I mean, you wrote one about a taxi drivers' strike, didn't you, called Taxi!?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Where did the story ideas come from?

BRIGHT

The newspapers, public information, public domain.

CEPLAIR

Now, shortly after you went to work for Warners, you were one of ten writers who met to form the Screen Writers Guild.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

How did that come about?

BRIGHT

Well, our intention was, of the loosely formed ten men who met at my suggestion, which included—Nine of us are dead. The rest were haphazardly chosen on a social basis in 1933. It became the focal point of what became the Screen Writers Guild in '36.

CEPLAIR

What was the catalyst? I mean, what moved you to start to organize?

BRIGHT

Being exploited. I very quickly found out that I had been going to work for \$100 a week. This constituted exploitation, because I found out that a great many writers were making a good deal more than that. And so I organized a union.

CEPLAIR

Were you a communist at that time?

BRIGHT  
No.

CEPLAIR  
Were you at all politically active in any way at that time?

BRIGHT  
Well, I was sort of a left-wing person in general. There was no Communist Party at that time.

CEPLAIR  
In Hollywood.

BRIGHT  
In Hollywood. That wasn't until 1936, which was the year that I was instrumental in organizing the Screen Writers Guild.

CEPLAIR  
Now, Glasmon and you parted company over the union, didn't you?

BRIGHT  
Well, it was a complicated reason. I grew up. Whereas the ten-year difference in our ages was decisive when I was in my late teens, it became far less decisive ten years later. I became increasingly assertive about my ideas, of which politics played a big role. I moved to the left and he moved to the right.

CEPLAIR  
So did you cease to be friends as well as collaborators?

BRIGHT  
Well, we were kind of cool.

CEPLAIR  
Because I know he was active in helping form the company union, the Screen Playwrights, wasn't he?

BRIGHT  
Yes. He joined the Screen Playwrights and I stayed with the guild.

CEPLAIR  
Were you blacklisted by the producers for your efforts to organize the guild?

BRIGHT  
Not really. They didn't take it seriously.

CEPLAIR  
Oh, I see. So you continued to work, you continued writing while you were—

BRIGHT  
I continued writing, yes.

CEPLAIR  
Did your salary go up?

BRIGHT  
Well, I went on a one-man strike and refused to work until I got well. [laughter] And so they quickly came around and—I was then a partner of Glasmon. It wasn't until 1938 or more that the Screen Playwrights was formed as an attempt to break the union, the guild.

CEPLAIR  
Did you like writing screenplays? Was that something you got enjoyment from?

BRIGHT



Yes and no. I was dissatisfied with the content of most of the stuff I did. It wasn't until I was blacklisted that I fulfilled myself as a screenwriter. I adapted two books of B. Traven and met him subsequently.

CEPLAIR

Were you still at Warner Brothers in '36 when the Screen Writers Guild actually took full shape?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

How did you become a communist?

BRIGHT

Well, it seemed to me to be the natural thing to do. I was always left-wing, and my joining of the party was the culmination of my radicalism. I had worked for Upton Sinclair in '34, and it was natural that I would graduate to the CP [Communist Party].

CEPLAIR

Were you one of the original members of the Hollywood branch?

BRIGHT

Yes. I was one of four.

CEPLAIR

Do you remember who the others were?

BRIGHT

I'd rather not say.

CEPLAIR

Okay. So '36 was an active year. I mean, with the guild and your joining the Communist Party and your screenwriting, it must have been a—

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Did you begin to collaborate with Robert Tasker in this?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

How did that come about?

BRIGHT

Well, we met when he was a partner of Samuel Ornitz, subsequently one of the Hollywood Ten, He was in the process of being radicalized at the time that I broke up with Glasmon, He was a logical person for me to collaborate—As an ex-convict, [laughter] He was a very close friend of mine. He became that. We continued friends until he went to Mexico in order to avoid the draft, which he looked upon as another prison. This was before the United States entered the [Second World] War. He committed suicide in Mexico.

CEPLAIR

Sad. So Warners—The two of you just worked together. They didn't assign you to work with other people in those days.

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

It was you and Tasker who worked together.

BRIGHT

Yes. He was the only collaborator I had after Glasmon.

CEPLAIR

So in those years you never wrote a screenplay by yourself, right?

BRIGHT

Oh, yes, I did. A number of them.

CEPLAIR

Did you prefer collaborating to writing alone?

BRIGHT

It was easier, because there was a good deal of conversation and you put it on paper. You had somebody to talk to.

CEPLAIR

Was the fight to get the guild recognized and against the Screen Playwrights a particularly ruthless—?

BRIGHT

Oh, God! We almost—We were saved by the Wagner Act [also known as the National Labor Relations Act]. They drained us down to a couple of hundred from five or six hundred and would have destroyed the guild had it not been for the Wagner Act. Our attorney, Thurman [W. ] Arnold, a big Washington attorney who volunteered to be the guild attorney—

CEPLAIR

So you got an NLRB [National Labor Relations Board] hearing?

BRIGHT

Oh, several hearings.

CEPLAIR

And that was the big turning point, right?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

I was looking over the Screen Writers Guild officers, and I noticed you weren't an officer. How come? You just didn't want to do that sort of thing?

BRIGHT

No, I didn't want to. I was engaged in CP work and the subsequent offshoots of the party. And I didn't have the stomach for the guild after having organized it.

CEPLAIR

Yeah. What sort of work did you do in the Communist Party? What kinds of activities?

BRIGHT

Well, various front organizations, including the Scottsboro case, which went back to my original abolitionism, and all kinds of left-wing front organizations, of which the less said the better.

CEPLAIR

Okay. Did you consider yourself a Marxist? Did you read Marx carefully?

BRIGHT

Yes. I did read Marx and carefully. I had doubts about the party, but I didn't voice them publicly.

CEPLAIR  
What sort of doubts?

BRIGHT  
Well, I had suspicions of Stalin, and it wasn't until [Nikita S. ] Khrushchev exposed him that it was sustained.

CEPLAIR  
You mean, the trials, for example, gave you pause.

BRIGHT  
Yes. I regarded the trials with great suspicion, especially in relation to the fact that these were all Bolsheviks. But I continued membership in the party despite that and rationalized the Stalinism. I was taken a little bit in by the party press.

CEPLAIR  
Did you admire Earl Browder?

BRIGHT  
Yes. I admired him considerably.

CEPLAIR  
Were you one of the higher-ups in the Communist Party in Hollywood? I mean, you wouldn't become an officer or an apparatchik. Or were you just a regular member of the party?

BRIGHT  
Well, I guess I was a person of considerable influence in the party. But within the party I had differences, which I voiced at some length within the party.

CEPLAIR  
Did you clash with John Howard Lawson, for example?

BRIGHT  
Well, I respected him, but I clashed with him.

CEPLAIR  
He was a difficult man, wasn't he? I mean, from what I've heard.

BRIGHT  
He was temperamentally a liberal and yet officially a doctrinaire party member. He was a big shot in the party.

CEPLAIR  
Now, were you employed regularly throughout the thirties?

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
So you never had to worry about unemployment. You just wrote screenplays regularly throughout that time.

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
At Warner Brothers? Or did you change studios?

BRIGHT

Well, I subsequently was sent to work for Paramount [Pictures, Inc. ], Ben [Benjamin P. ] Schulberg. I wrote my first—The day after I was fired from Warner Brothers, I went to work for—

## **1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO APRIL 21, 1988**

CEPLAIR

You said you had been fired at Warner Brothers. Why were you fired at Warner Brothers?

BRIGHT

Well, it was an inadvertence. I was fired and Glasmon was kept on. And then he retired to the reading department, which he subsequently quit. The purpose of Darryl Zanuck was to break us up. There were rumors that we were broken up subsequently, anyway.

CEPLAIR

What year was this?

BRIGHT

Nineteen thirty-three.

CEPLAIR

Which means Zanuck fired you just because he wanted to break up the writing team?

BRIGHT

Well, he fired me out of spite. The background of the thing was pure spite on his part. I was subsequently commandeered to show up at eight o'clock in the morning: unheard of! He left word before he went to work, the day before, that I was to be awakened early, which was pure spitefulness. The reason for the dispute was this: I had criticized his casting. He wanted to break up Cagney and [Joan] Blondell. He had Loretta Young under contract for a final picture, and he wanted to use her for Taxi! The idea of Loretta Young as a cab driver's wife in Brooklyn seemed to me to be unthinkable. So I criticized him, Zanuck, through the means of a man that he respected, unlike the guttersnipe that I was. This was a very celebrated writer working on another picture at Warners. I thought that he had Zanuck's respect and would be listened to, whereas I was, as I said before, a guttersnipe from Chicago and not a celebrated Pulitzer Prize-winning author. So this man, whose name escapes me at the moment, very politely voiced my criticism and gave me credit for the idea, which infuriated Zanuck, who had an imperious dislike of anybody criticizing his casting. And so I tried to throw Zanuck out of the window, even though it was the first floor. The second floor? But I was overpowered by his secretary, a male secretary.

CEPLAIR

You mean, he attacked you?

BRIGHT

Oh, yes! He called me a stool pigeon, which I disliked intensely and told him so. He took a poke at me, and so I tried to throw him out the window—subsequently, got fired.  
[laughter]

CEPLAIR

And then you were picked up by Paramount.

BRIGHT

Picked up by Paramount and for that reason! He was hated. My agent was Myron Selznick, who hired me, or arranged for my getting the biggest assignment of the year, [laughter] She Done Him Wrong.

CEPLAIR

That was a Mae West movie.

BRIGHT

Mae West.

CEPLAIR

Was that your first comedy?

BRIGHT

Well, not exactly. First full-length comedy, but there were amusing scenes in all of Cagney's pictures.

CEPLAIR

Was the grapefruit scene in Public Enemy your idea?

BRIGHT

Yes. There's been a lot of controversy about it. Subsequently, Zanuck took credit for it and [William A. ] Wellman, the director, took credit for it. Actually, it was in the book.

CEPLAIR

It's a terrific movie. I mean, it holds up very, very well over the years.

BRIGHT

It's a pretty good movie.

CEPLAIR

Yeah.

BRIGHT

I didn't think it was as good as critics said, but it was a pioneer effort and—

CEPLAIR

Did you get along with Wellman? Because he was kind of a maverick type, wasn't he?

BRIGHT

Yeah, I got along with him all right.

CEPLAIR

Was Paramount a better experience than Warner Brothers had been for you?

BRIGHT

No. Warners was unique on account of Zanuck. It was unique in the sense that they made topical pictures, which were very good, on the whole.

CEPLAIR

What kind of movies did Paramount make?

BRIGHT

You mean, in addition to She Done Him Wrong Wrong Wrong?

CEPLAIR

Yeah. What were they assigning you to work with there? What kind of movies?

BRIGHT

Oh, crap, mainly.

CEPLAIR

I see. Did you ever think of leaving screenwriting and going back just to writing books or novels?

BRIGHT

Often. [laughter]

CEPLAIR  
But you didn't.

BRIGHT  
But I didn't. It was always another picture.

CEPLAIR  
The money was pretty good then, wasn't it?

BRIGHT  
Yeah.

CEPLAIR  
Being a communist and being a screenwriter, did that ever cause you any problems or any contradictions?

BRIGHT  
Yes and no. I was intensely busy, and that interfered with my work as a screenwriter. But ideologically, no. Well, my work in the party was left-wing liberalism in the main. And so there was no interference there.

CEPLAIR  
Did you have any hopes that you could, that enough people could, change the way movies were made or make better, different kinds of movies?

BRIGHT  
No. I was pessimistic. I knew my country.

CEPLAIR  
And you knew your producers, right?

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
Weren't you active on the Motion Picture Democratic Committee?

BRIGHT  
Yeah.

CEPLAIR  
Was that the main front work you did?

BRIGHT  
It was one of the main ones, yes.

CEPLAIR  
So you must have been involved when the Nazi-Soviet Pact came along and sort of started to break up all of those front groups.

BRIGHT  
Yes, yes.

CEPLAIR  
What did you think of the Nazi-Soviet Pact?

BRIGHT  
Well, I thought that the pact between Stalin and the Nazis was logical and inevitable. It was broken by the Germans. I had no misgivings about that.

CEPLAIR  
What about the Communist Party decision to call the war an imperialist war and stay out of it? I mean, did that bother you?

BRIGHT

No. It was.

CEPLAIR

You didn't think that Hitler was much worse than Great Britain, for example.

BRIGHT

Oh, yes, I did. I was sympathetic to England, and there's an enormous difference between England and the Nazis.

CEPLAIR

So why didn't you want to support England, then, in the war, or had the United States entered on England's side?

BRIGHT

Well, I didn't think that either one—Until the Soviet Union got in the fracas, it was an imperialist war. And the Germans were one-half of the business until they conquered half of Europe. And then they made the mistake of turning on the Russians.

CEPLAIR

Were you drafted during the war?

BRIGHT

Well, I volunteered for every branch of the service until finally I got into the coast guard. I felt that all my friends were in the service as officers, and I was an officer in age, but I was turned down consistently for officers' training. That's why I got into the coast guard so late. I had been turned down by the marines, the navy, the army, and on political grounds.

CEPLAIR

Where were you stationed when you were in the coast guard?

BRIGHT

New York.

CEPLAIR

You had to resign from the party—didn't you?— when you went into the service.

BRIGHT

Yes, at their suggestion. I intended to rejoin, but then, in the course of the war, my misgivings about the party persisted. I subsequently— Well, it was one incident of censorship that was arbitrary on their part, by Lawson. I was offered [Norman] Mailer's novel *The Naked and the Dead* for review when it was published. For review by the party—controlled monthly. This was the prize assignment. So I wrote a review praising the book, but with a paragraph that said, in effect, that if certain things were not done, and I predicted that they wouldn't be done, namely, the—Well, I wish I had a copy of the thing. The key paragraph in the review was a qualification that was pro-democratic, but it was a threat to the reader that—Well, at any rate, the key paragraph of qualification was taken out arbitrarily, because it was pessimistic and a prediction of McCarthyism, which I thought would wreck the party and the whole liberal movement, as subsequently happened. I predicted it and said so in that review. It was taken out arbitrarily, without consulting me at all, just lopped out as being opposed to the party line. That was decisive: I decided I didn't want any traffic with the party officially, although I continued sympathetic to its purposes. I refused to be disciplined by it.

CEPLAIR

Was that your first experience with censorship by the party of anything you had written?

BRIGHT

The most flagrant.

CEPLAIR

There were smaller examples?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Did you approve of Browder's changing the party into the Communist Political Association?

BRIGHT

No. I had many misgivings about that.

CEPLAIR

And you still had misgivings about the Soviet Union and what Stalin was going to do, I assume.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

So when you came back to Hollywood, did you start writing again, screenwriting again, without any problem?

BRIGHT

Yes. I wrote a picture for Hal [B. ] Wallis, which I signed up for while I was still in uniform, but anticipating severance from the thing. It was a picture for Kirk Douglas and Burt Lancaster called I Walk Alone.

CEPLAIR

Was postwar Hollywood a different place than prewar Hollywood had been?

BRIGHT

Yes. It was the beginning of the breaking up of the monopolies. The five studios who controlled the town became fifty independents, a situation which persists now to the present day.

CEPLAIR

Were you politically active? I mean, now that you were no longer in the party, did you still maintain politically active—?

BRIGHT

Yes, I continued active in the party, despite the fact that I was not a member.

CEPLAIR

What sorts of things were you involved in? Do you remember?

BRIGHT

Oh, the fight for the Hollywood Ten and various progressive things.

CEPLAIR

Were you active in the [Henry A. ] Wallace campaign?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

When the Hollywood Ten occurred, did you think that you were next on the agenda? Did it occur to you that you were a target, or going to be a target?

BRIGHT



Well, I found out about it through an inadvertent conversation with a man who was a fan of mine, Bob [Robert] Fellows, who told me that I had written for him a very distinguished picture, which subsequently wasn't made, called Dynamite. He confided to me that he was leaving Paramount and putting in with John Wayne. So my heart sank, because I knew that Wayne was a reactionary. Yet, he said, "Wait a minute. Wayne likes you as a writer. He wants to have you as a writer. You won't have to do anything. You won't have to name anybody, except people that are already named. " Here's the reason why: the emphasis in Hollywood had been anti-Nazi. He said, "Forget about this. And the reason that you should forget about it, according to Wayne, is that J. Edgar Hoover showed up unexpectedly at our Wednesday meeting. " He admitted that he was a civilian employee of the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation]. And the reason was that the emphasis in Hollywood should be forget about the campaign against the Nazis in Hollywood and concentrate on anti-Soviet. Why? The Battle of Stalingrad had just been won by the Russians. And he said, "That's the enemy. " I said, "Well, what has that got to do with me?" He said, "Well, you've been picked as one of several to build Wayne's new staff. " I said, "But why? Why me?" I was well known as a left-winger. He said, "Wayne told me to tell you that you would not be named as a left-winger, except secretly. " So I gulped and made up my mind to leave for Mexico at once. I was one of the first to go to Mexico.

CEPLAIR

When was this?

BRIGHT

Nineteen fifty.

CEPLAIR

Okay, I guess I'm a little confused. The Battle of Stalingrad was in 1943.

BRIGHT

The Battle of Stalingrad was not 1943. I forget the exact date of it [September 1942-February 1943].

CEPLAIR

Well, it was during World War II. So I guess I'm a little confused, because you said that as a result of the Battle of Stalingrad, you were going to stop being anti-Nazi and start being anti-Soviet.

BRIGHT

Yes. The whole emphasis had shifted in those years.

CEPLAIR

Yeah. Well, now, who is this Bob Fellows?

BRIGHT

He was a producer.

CEPLAIR

At Paramount?

BRIGHT

At Paramount.

CEPLAIR

And you think he worked for the FBI as well?

BRIGHT

Well, he told me he was.

CEPLAIR

Oh. And so what they were saying is that they had your name, but they wouldn't expose you if you went to work for Wayne.

BRIGHT

That's right.

CEPLAIR

And you just decided the heck with this. Let's see, Gordon Kahn also— Didn't he go about the same time to Mexico?

BRIGHT

Yes. He went at the same time—

CEPLAIR

Where—? Go ahead.

BRIGHT

Oh, we went on the same train.

CEPLAIR

And where did you go in Mexico?

BRIGHT

Mexico City. Pedro Armendariz was an old friend of mine. He was sympathetic to my views and admiring of my talents. He got me the Traven job.

CEPLAIR

So you just sort of picked up and just left. I mean, sort of on the instant, practically?

BRIGHT

At once.

CEPLAIR

At once.

BRIGHT

I knew it was coming.

CEPLAIR

You weren't married at the time.

BRIGHT

Yeah. I was, yeah.

CEPLAIR

Did your wife [Josefina Fierro Bright] go with you?

BRIGHT

Yes. My wife and two kids, who were then tiny.

CEPLAIR

How long did you stay in Mexico?

BRIGHT

Ten years.

CEPLAIR

Did you work pretty consistently when you were there?

BRIGHT

Well, I worked rather consistently, but at bargain prices. And I couldn't—I was subsequently deported from Mexico.

CEPLAIR

Aren't you one of the few people who has ever met B. Traven?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

What sort of person was he?

BRIGHT

Dreadful. He was a man of unquestioned integrity, but impossible to work with.

CEPLAIR

What were the two books of his you adapted?

BRIGHT

Rebellion of the Hanged was the first one. That's the one Armendariz got for me. And Mexican Trio, which is a collection of Traven's short stories. That took the better part of two years to write two of them.

CEPLAIR

You wrote alone then? You didn't have any partners?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

Was this in Mexico City, or did you go to Cuernavaca?

BRIGHT

Mexico City.

CEPLAIR

Did any other blacklisted people join you in Mexico City?

BRIGHT

Well, all of them subsequently, but I guess there were maybe six or seven of them—of the Ten—and they drifted back through Hollywood.

CEPLAIR

Did you like living in Mexico?

BRIGHT

Oh, yes. Yes, indeed, that's for me. Corrupt and inefficient and— Well, I offended some of my Mexican friends by saying that Mexico was like a syphilitic maiden aunt who gave me my first bicycle. [laughter]

CEPLAIR

Why were you deported from Mexico?

BRIGHT

Oh, I was deported as a red under the influence of the FBI, although I hadn't been a party member for several years. But the fact that I went to Mexico to avoid subpoena proved to them that I had party membership. Why else would I do it?

CEPLAIR

So that was when? That was in 1960 that—?

BRIGHT

Nineteen fifty.

CEPLAIR

No, that you were deported from Mexico.

BRIGHT

Well—What was your question?

CEPLAIR

When were you deported? What year were you deported?  
BRIGHT

Nineteen forty-nine to fifty.

CEPLAIR

No, that's when you went to Mexico.

BRIGHT

Yeah.

### **1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE APRIL 27, 1988**

CEPLAIR

When we talked last week, you said that your sister had been unconventional for her time and had been an influence on you. I was wondering, did she herself become a radical?

BRIGHT

No, she was a left liberal. She died of cancer.

CEPLAIR

Okay, I also would like to know the title of the [William H. ] Thompson biography. I don't think we mentioned that.

BRIGHT

Hizzoner Big Bill Thompson: An Idyll of Chicago.

CEPLAIR

Okay, when you were in Europe, did you go to Germany?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

So you weren't particularly aware of the rise of fascism at that time or its problems?

BRIGHT

It was endemic only in Italy under Mussolini.

CEPLAIR

And you didn't go to Italy either?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

I wonder if you could maybe tell me a little more about Robert Tasker, his background, etc. You know, people don't hear much of him and yet he did—You and he were very close I know.

BRIGHT

Well, I wrote a whole book about him.

CEPLAIR

You did?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

But was it published?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

What was the title of it?

BRIGHT

It's Cleaner on the Inside.

CEPLAIR

Who published it?

BRIGHT

A British publisher. It was published only in England. I forget.

CEPLAIR

Okay. So as far as you know, unless it was a very big library, it might not be available in this country.

BRIGHT

Yes, I think so.

CEPLAIR

Okay.

BRIGHT

I have a copy of it here, but I can't lay my hands on it at the moment.

CEPLAIR

Okay. Both you and he married Spanish women, is that right?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

So that you spoke Spanish before you went to Mexico and knew a lot about it, I assume.

BRIGHT

Yes, I had a Mexican wife, Josephine [Josefina Fierro Bright], who is my favorite wife.  
[laughter]

CEPLAIR

How many were there?

BRIGHT

Four.

CEPLAIR

My goodness. Was she the one with whom you went to Mexico?

BRIGHT

Yeah.

CEPLAIR

And I assume you learned to speak Spanish when you were married to her?

BRIGHT

Yes. I learned Spanish—well, what I know of it— through her and living in Mexico briefly.

CEPLAIR

When you were in Hollywood, you know, oftentimes people talk about a writers' community. That is, you know, the writers spend time together at Musso and Frank [Grill] or Stanley Rose's Bookstore or at the writers table. Was that something that you partook of?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

What was it like in the writers' community? What sort of community was it?

BRIGHT

Well, it's hard to capture in a phrase.

CEPLAIR

I'm sure.

BRIGHT

I don't know. What it was like is sort of a tricky question. It could mean anything. The answer could mean almost anything. I hung out, largely, at Musso and Frank and Stanley Rose's Bookstore next door. I used to have informal meetings with a number of fellow writers. We talked about almost everything under the sun, mainly our problems.

CEPLAIR

As writers?

BRIGHT

As writers.

CEPLAIR

Did the writers consider themselves a kind of a group apart from the other Hollywood workers?

BRIGHT

Yes, and superior. [laughter]

CEPLAIR

You believe that your job is probably the most important in movies?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

And no one else did.

BRIGHT

[laughter] No, except writers.

CEPLAIR

Except writers, yeah. You mentioned that Darryl [F. ] Zanuck was a good producer as far as you were concerned. You didn't like him, but you respected him as a producer. Were there any other producers or directors whom you respected?

BRIGHT

Yeah. John Ford? Howard Hawks, who directed one of my pictures? William Wyler? and half a dozen others.

CEPLAIR

In those days, directors couldn't change scripts, could they, when they were shooting? Is that true?

BRIGHT

It wasn't true of Zanuck pictures. Zanuck respected writers, but not directors. He got to respect them later, but so far as I know, he was in a minority of producers.

CEPLAIR

So the only one who can change a—If you worked for Zanuck, only he could change a script, right? No one else could?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Now, you mentioned that one of the reasons you didn't want to go back into the Communist Party was because of that censorship of the review, the Norman Mailer review, you had written.

BRIGHT

Yeah.

CEPLAIR

Was that about the time when Albert Maltz had written his article ["What Shall We Ask of Writers"] and was forced to—?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

Were you involved in that discussion about Maltz's article?

BRIGHT

Well, I took part in it. I was on the side of Maltz.

CEPLAIR

You mean his first article.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

What did you think when he wrote the second one recanting? Were you upset with that? Angry with him for doing that?

BRIGHT

Yes, I was. I don't think that he should have recanted, nor did he. Later on he regretted it very much. His capitulation to the party was little short of disgraceful in my view.

CEPLAIR

Although I guess at the time he didn't have a great deal of support. Most everyone seemed to turn against him as soon as it became clear that the party didn't like the article. It seemed a lot of writers, although they may have agreed with him quietly, publicly they seemed to have turned against him.

BRIGHT

Well, it was a difference of opinion.

CEPLAIR

Was there pressure on you to rejoin the party?

BRIGHT

Oh, yes indeed. And I was about to do so when—I was about to resolve the differences that I had with the party until the Mailer incident.

CEPLAIR

Did you lose friends when you didn't rejoin? I mean, did people stop talking to you because—?

BRIGHT

No, no.

CEPLAIR

So you didn't become a nonperson just because you decided not to go back into the party.

BRIGHT

No. [laughter]

CEPLAIR

Now, I heard that you and Tasker were fired from Paramount because you wrote a script that B. [Benjamin] P. Schulberg didn't like in 1941.

BRIGHT

No, that's not true.

CEPLAIR

That's not true? Oh, okay. Because I noticed when I looked at your screen credits that between 1942 and 1948, you only had one credit, which was for a documentary called We Accuse.

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

How come you didn't have any credits between 1945 and 1948?

BRIGHT

I wrote consistently, but I didn't get screen credit for anything.

CEPLAIR

But you were constantly employed during that time.

BRIGHT

I was employed, yes.

CEPLAIR

What was We Accuse? What was that?

BRIGHT

Well, that was an investigation of the war guilt, principally Nazi responsibility for instigating the war. I did a pretty thorough job, I received praise from no less than Walter Winchell for my efforts in that. That was in New York.

CEPLAIR

Who produced the film?

BRIGHT

It was produced privately by a man with the name of Levine, but I rather suspected that the Soviet Union had a good deal to do with that.

CEPLAIR

Let's see, then, in 1948 you had four credits according to the records. And then in 1949 you had one credit, and I guess that was in 1949 that you decided that it would be a good idea to go to Mexico. Is that right?

BRIGHT

Well, that was the late fifties.

CEPLAIR

That you went to Mexico. The last credit, then, was The Brave Bulls. That was the last script you wrote?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

And that was for Columbia [Pictures Industries, Inc. ].

BRIGHT

That was for [Robert] Rossen.

CEPLAIR



I guess you didn't have much confidence that Harry Cohn would back you up?

BRIGHT  
No.

CEPLAIR  
Now, when you were in Mexico, you said that you had done the two [B. ] Traven screenplays. Did you do any screenplays for Hollywood producers when you were in Mexico?

BRIGHT  
No, I was blacklisted.

CEPLAIR  
Not even under an assumed name or—?

BRIGHT  
Not even under an assumed name.

CEPLAIR  
Because weren't some people in Mexico writing for the black market, as it was called?

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
But you didn't?

BRIGHT  
No.

CEPLAIR  
Did you have to take any other work in Mexico to keep body and soul together, as it were?

BRIGHT  
[laughter] No.

CEPLAIR  
Your writing kept you going.

BRIGHT  
My writing kept me going.

CEPLAIR  
When exactly did you return to the United States?

BRIGHT  
In 1959.

CEPLAIR  
And you said that the Mexican government had decided to deport you, because they thought you were a communist.

BRIGHT  
Yes.

CEPLAIR  
Did they treat you respectfully or did they just sort of—?

BRIGHT  
No, no, no, on the contrary.

CEPLAIR  
What did they do?

BRIGHT

Well, they beat me up.

CEPLAIR

Really?

BRIGHT

Yeah, treated me rather roughly. I never did learn why I was deported, although many of my friends tried to investigate it. The nearest thing to an explanation was my close association with [William] O'Dwyer. I was ghosting his biography, My Brother Bill, ostensibly a biography of William O'Dwyer by his brother. And I got paid \$5,000 for work on that book, which I abandoned when I ran into the incontrovertible facts of O'Dwyer's corruption, which I couldn't see my way clear to pretty up. But we quarreled amiably about that. Bill O'Dwyer was in favor of abandoning the whole thing, and eventually that was done. I wrote four chapters of the book, bringing up through his activities as a policeman. The book sort of dwindled out when I refused to alter the facts, to pretty them up. I still have some regrets about that, because I had a very fancy contract with Doubleday [and Company, Inc. ] for the book and I would have made a lot of money. I had the lion's share of the profits of the book. Well, I devoted a year to that and received, as I say, \$5,000 for the book, for the down payment advance on the book.

CEPLAIR

You did the two Traven movies and you did this. What other writing did you do while you were down there?

BRIGHT

Well, I commenced work on the Tasker book, the Tasker novel, a novel based upon his life and ending with his suicide.

CEPLAIR

Cleaner on the Inside. That refers to that he thought jail was less corrupt than being out of jail?

BRIGHT

Yeah, it was used ironically. The title is the idea of my mentor, William Blake, who had an enormous amount of influence over me.

CEPLAIR

The poet William Blake?

BRIGHT

No, he was a novelist, married to Christina [E. ] Stead.

CEPLAIR

Where did you know him?

BRIGHT

I knew him in New York, an incredible man. An encyclopedist of substance who had read everything that was published and remembered everything almost verbatim—he had that kind of memory. An extraordinary mind. I've got several books of his around here, none of which was successful.

CEPLAIR

He was a novelist, you say?

BRIGHT

Yeah.

CEPLAIR

Was there a blacklist community in Mexico City? Did a number of Hollywood people come there to stay as long as you did?

BRIGHT

Yes, all of them eventually came to Mexico and returned to here.

CEPLAIR

Did any of them stay as long as you did?

BRIGHT

Only Gordon Kahn, and I think that's all. But everybody—Hugo Butler, whose widow is Jean Butler of the [Writers] Guild [of America], Ring Lardner [Jr. ], Dalton Trumbo, inevitably.

CEPLAIR

Would you have stayed in Mexico if the government had allowed you to? Would you just have lived out your life there?

BRIGHT

Yes, I would have stayed. My official explanation, for the few people who didn't know that I was deported, was that I left Mexico because of inability to make a living. But that wasn't true.

CEPLAIR

You couldn't be politically active, could you, in Mexico? I mean, could you get involved in Mexican politics?

BRIGHT

No, it was forbidden as a foreigner.

CEPLAIR

From the Mexican perspective, what did it look like in the United States, with [Joseph R. ] McCarthy and everything else?

BRIGHT

Pretty bleak.

CEPLAIR

You thought fascism had arrived?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

How did you react when you heard about [Nikita S. ] Khrushchev's speech about Stalin in 1956? Did that just—?

BRIGHT

Well, in a way I had anticipated it. I welcomed it, of course, and then deplored it when he was kicked out. It wasn't until [Leonid I. ] Brezhnev was succeeded by the present one [Mikhail S. Gorbachev] that my faith in the Soviet Union was restored.

CEPLAIR

When you came back to the United States, you came back, I assume, to Los Angeles?

BRIGHT

Yes.

CEPLAIR

What kind of work did you try to get? How successful were you?

BRIGHT

Well, that's the basis of my present dictation. Hollywood underwent an enormous amount of changes, but one thing was unchanged, and that was, "What did you do lately?" Well, I hadn't worked in Hollywood for ten years or nine years, and so I had to answer negatively—I hadn't. Meantime, these monumental changes had happened in the production schedule of— Scenario about Hollywood. But one thing was unchanged. That was "What have you done lately?" So I had a difficult time. I tried to get into television, but that didn't work out. And so that's true up to the present.

CEPLAIR

You never could put your writing career back on track?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

Well, what did you do? I mean, how did you manage to sustain yourself? What sorts of work did you do?

BRIGHT

Well, largely through borrowing and I had my sons, particularly my older boy, who has been supporting me for several years now.

CEPLAIR

Nancy [Lynn] Schwartz in her book on the writers [The Hollywood Writers' Wars] said that you had worked for Bill Cosby productions [Campbell-Silver-Cosby] for a while.

BRIGHT

Yes, I worked for Cosby. He had two partners, [Bruce] Campbell and Silver. The very fancy office was plundered and eventually went bankrupt and closed. I was with them for about a year and a half.

CEPLAIR

What did you do for them?

BRIGHT

I was a screenwriter and a story editor. I helped pick the various projects that never got made, but that I recommended. Including Trumbo's novel.

CEPLAIR

Johnny Got His Gun.

BRIGHT

Johnny Got His Gun, which I recommended to Campbell, and he ran with it. Has a sordid story. He married Trumbo's daughter, and it was pretty ugly.

CEPLAIR

You mean their divorce or their marriage?

BRIGHT

They were divorced, yeah. But I was in the middle on that one.

CEPLAIR

Did you have any other jobs in television or movies, aside from that one?

BRIGHT

No.

CEPLAIR

Did you try to write any other novels or books during that period?

BRIGHT

Well, I completed the Tasker novel, and then I continued writing—and unsuccessfully.

CEPLAIR

Did you feel bitter about it?

BRIGHT

Yes. I felt that the blacklist was indefinite—it went on and on and on—due to the fact that—"What have you done lately?" And as time went on, why that period lengthened.

CEPLAIR

Did you try getting the Tasker book published in this country?

BRIGHT

Yes, I did.

CEPLAIR

Did you think that there was a blacklist operating there?

BRIGHT

No. That was due to the error of Blake, who sold the rights to the British commonwealth. For that reason I didn't get an American publisher. They looked upon the Canadian and Australian rights as important, and they were sold to England. And so I never did get published in this country.

CEPLAIR

Did you become, in any way, politically active when you returned to the United States?

BRIGHT

Oh, in a way. Not very, in contrast to what I had been before.

CEPLAIR

Are you in the process of writing your autobiography at this point or your memoirs? I think I had heard someone say that you were doing that.

BRIGHT

Well, I have written and so far been unable to get a publisher for my memoirs. Arsenic and Old Faces is the title. It is subtitled Memories of Old Hollywood by John Bright. So far I've gotten nowhere with the publication of that. I guess if it's published, it will be published posthumously.

CEPLAIR

I hope not. Well, that about ends the questions that I have. Is there anything, any question that I should have asked you that I didn't? Or anything you'd like to say for the record?

BRIGHT

No, I don't think so.

CEPLAIR

Okay.

---

[Parent Institution](#) | [TEI](#) | [Search](#) | [Feedback](#)

---

*Date:*

*This page is copyrighted*