

EARLY BIRD SPECIAL

The Sun magazine's Sy Safransky muses on life's brevity before dawn in *Many Alarm Clocks*

BY FRED WASSER

WHEN I LIVED IN WASHINGTON, D.C., I KNEW ONLY ONE THING ABOUT CHAPEL HILL. It was where *The Sun* magazine was published.

Wherever I sat in my girlfriend Sally's apartment, a back issue of *The Sun* was always just an arm's length away: on the kitchen and bedside tables, next to the toilet and on the coffee table in the living room.

The magazine looked a bit stark, probably because of all the black-and-white photos, but I quickly came to appreciate its intimate and revealing true stories, fiction, poetry, interviews and essays.

I was especially attracted to a regular feature at the end of the magazine, "Sy Safransky's Notebook." Here were the thoughts and observations of the magazine's editor. He covered a lot of ground: relationships, writing, day-to-day life, getting older, dying. The entries were quirky, intense and funny. For example:

"The weekend is too short. Life is too short. Do I face that fact squarely, or pretend that I can trick life by hugging Norma more tightly and stealing one more kiss? Do I think I can escape my fate? I can't know how many more weekends we'll have together—only that the number is finite, and my appetite isn't."

Safransky's new book, *Many Alarm Clocks*, is a collection of these "Notebook" entries written during the last 15 years or so.

He'll read from it at Quail Ridge Books & Music on Tuesday. The title is taken from a quote by spiritual teacher G.I. Gurdjieff: "A man may be awakened by an alarm clock. But the trouble is that a man gets accustomed to the clock far too quickly and ceases to hear it. Many alarm clocks are necessary and always new ones."

Safransky is originally from New York ("I'm from Brooklyn before it was Brooklyn," he says). He's a graduate of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, and he was

a general assignment reporter in the late 1960s at the *Long Island Press*. He co-founded *The Sun* with The Community Bookstore owner Mike Mathers, peddling the first issue in 1974 on the streets of Chapel Hill, charging 25 cents or, Safransky says, just giving it away. Now, the magazine's subscriber base is more than 70,000. *The Sun* carries no advertising, although early on, it did.

It's seven o'clock on a weekday morning at Sy and Norma Safransky's home. He's been up since five. It's when he writes.

INDY: This is a serene spot. Where are we?

SY SAFRANSKY: We're in the screened porch looking out on the garden. Norma's garden, I call it, since she's the one who gardens. What are we looking at? A fig tree, a Japanese Maple, a Chinese Maple, all sorts of flowers that are finally starting to come up in this late spring.

Do you write here?

I write either here or a little farther down on the porch, or, if it's too chilly, upstairs in my study.

You told me you did a little writing this morning.

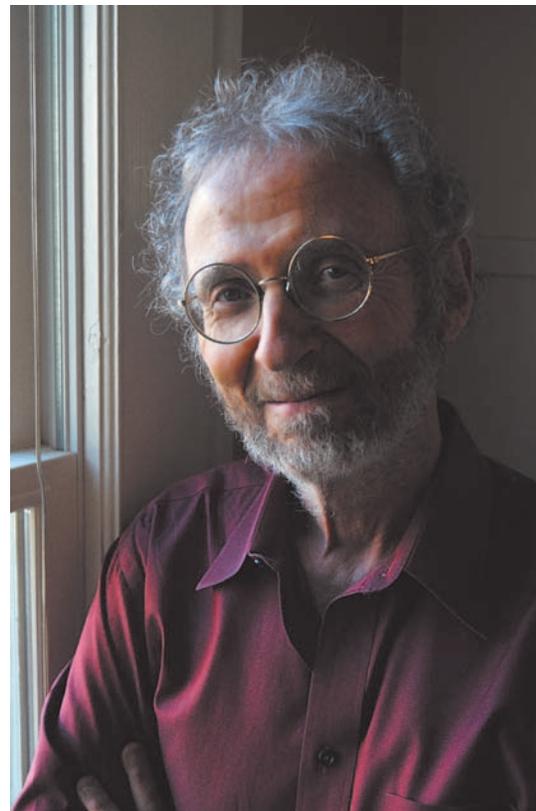
I wrote, "Fred Wasser will be here soon to interview me. I hope I'll rise to the challenge of answering his questions in a way that won't embarrass Sy Safransky."

Your 1993 collection of essays was titled *Four in the Morning*. Are you getting soft?

Yes, I'm getting soft. [Laughs] I decided at some point—but I haven't stuck to it—that I'd get up at four in my 40s, five in my 50s, six in my 60s, seven in my 70s. But the notion of sleeping until seven in the morning is totally unacceptable to me. Even six. So I get up before five. It's my time of day.

You just had a 70th birthday.

Turning 70. I'm not sure what it means to me except that it's a big number. All those numbers with zeros after them are big.



Sy Safransky PHOTO BY RACHEL J. ELLIOTT

was able to eat. I didn't want to go back to newspaper work. I didn't want to go back to New York. I felt like I was done with that.

How much did the first issue cost to put out?

It cost the \$50 it cost to buy the paper. But I was unable to pay bills regularly. I asked people to be patient. Within a few years, we had maybe 1,000 subscribers. I paid myself \$100 a week. I lived very simply. It wasn't really a problem for me because it sort of fit with my politics. Seeing the first issue, you know that it was the seed of what *The Sun* is today. And I do think that similar themes have run through the magazine all these years, or a similar spirit.

What was the theme or spirit?

What I wanted the magazine to do, personally, was to bring together my political passions and concerns—my, for lack of a better word, spiritual seeking. I don't like to use the word "spiritual" because it divides the world into what is and isn't spiritual, which is about the least spiritual thing you can do. Nonetheless, it's effective shorthand, I suppose. I also wanted a place to publish my own writing. When I started the magazine, I was just asking friends and relatives and people who had no credentials as writers to write something. So it was very rough-hewn, I suppose, and amateurish. I figured that if we kept putting it out, eventually, we'd attract writers, which we did. ▲

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SY SAFRANSKY

Tuesday, May 12, 7 p.m.
Quail Ridge Books & Music
3522 Wade Ave., Raleigh
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www.quailridgebooks.com

In your book, this comes up often: the brevity of life. Has this always been a concern of yours?

I think so. I think some of it has to do with growing up with the family that I did. The fact of mortality never seemed far away. My grandmother, who lived with us, was chronically ill. It seems so self-evident to me that what we all have in common is that we're born, we live, and we die. The fact of death—reflecting on that—can seem morbid to some people. I think it can also remind us that we are here briefly. Poe Ballantine, whose work we print regularly, once called me a death-obsessed worrywart.

What was the spark for *The Sun*?

I found myself living here in Chapel Hill, having moved to North Carolina to be part of an intentional community, which didn't work out. I moved here with my first wife. Our son was born prematurely and lived only three days. We split up not too long after that. I didn't know what my next step was, and had no money. I guess I had a few dollars. I