

William Friedkin Loves Howard Stern: On Working as Friedkin's Personal Assistant

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William Friedkin is a terrifying man. He is also an unassuming man. The reason that he is both, I assume, is to fuck with you.

I got a job working as his personal assistant on a film for Cinemax called *Jailbreakers*. It was part of a series of remakes of Sam Arkoff movies called Rebel Highway that Debra Hill produced. Yes that Debra Hill.

I wish I could say I got the job because I loved *The Exorcist*, but the truth is that I got the job because I had a decent car. My roommate was an office PA and when he heard they were looking for someone to drive Friedkin to the set, he called me. I got to the office in six minutes. I had a decent car. I got the job.

My responsibilities were to pick up Friedkin at his "home" (read: estate) he shared with Paramount's CEO Sherry Lansing, hold onto his glycerine pills in case he had another heart attack (just like Father Merrin!) and get him tea or whatever he needed at any moment. Most of the time, it turned out to be tea and sports scores. "Please, call me Billy," he instructed. And I did. Breathlessly.

During the weeks I was with him, I managed to discuss William Peter Blatty ("That fuckin' nut!"), shot-listing (which he'd do in the car on the way to set): "If you spend too much time, you'll have stupid ideas," and music (as he picked up a cassette in my car): "The Cramps. Yep. I really like these guys."

I also witnessed him yell at or fire a few people in a terrifying saber-toothed manner and although it was never me, I was waiting for it the whole time.

When he was still on free radio, I would listen to Howard Stern in the morning, but would turn off the radio before Friedkin got in my car. I'd turn it to a classical station just before turning it off, in case Friedkin wanted something to work to on the way. Billy would climb in, switch the radio on, and switch *back* to the station with Stern. After a week of this, I didn't change to classical. I kept Stern on when Billy got into my car. As he climbed in, the sound of Stern's voice registered and I thought, "*This* is what a good assistant does. I know Billy's habits!"

Friedkin immediately switched to AM radio and dialed in a station with Rush Limbaugh, which shows you two things:

- 1) Friedkin hates to be second-guessed. And won't let ANYONE do it. He will do whatever it takes to catch you off-guard and keep you from thinking you know what he wants.
- 2) Friedkin pays attention to the impression and experience of Friedkin for EVERYONE. - audiences,

crews, and even PAs hired to drive him.

As an aside, the most surreal experience I had driving him to set was listening to Stern do an *Exorcist* send-up bit. Silently driving, eyes on the road, sitting next to the guy that created the cultural phenomenon that is *The Exorcist*. Neither of us commented on it, but it was fucking weird.

Lesson learned:

Don't fuck with Billy Friedkin.