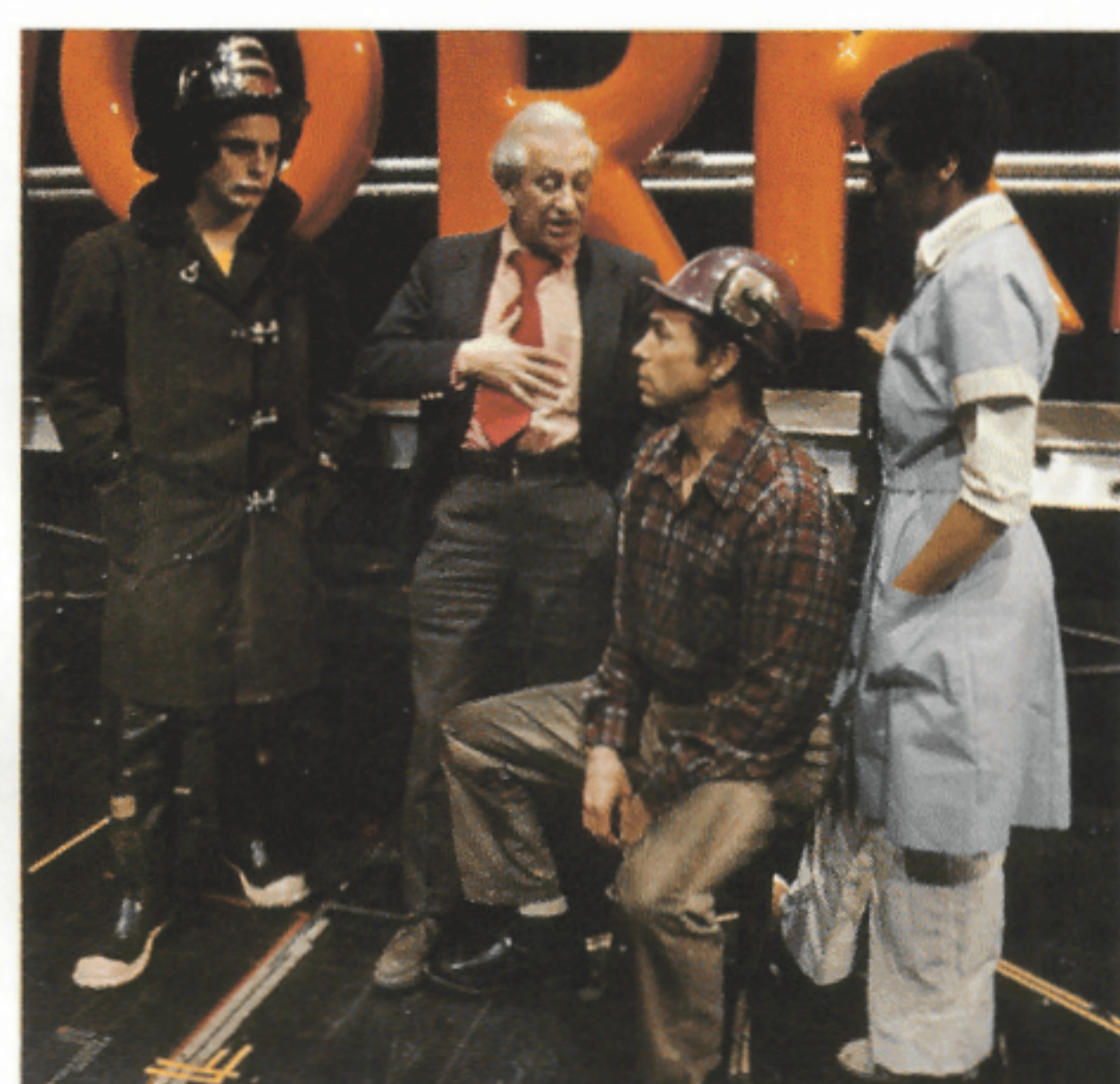




Studs Terkel, professed scrapper! (above) Across the barriers: Studs talks with a cross section of young workers about their "American dreams." (above, right)



Photos by Richard Faverty

by George Vukelich

Editor's Note: Too often our modern condition seems one of separation from one another, of barriers between generations. Prime Times created **Tribal Elders** to recall for all of us a tradition of respect and veneration which in the past has attributed to society's older members the special status of keepers of wisdom. Our older men and women have more years behind their insights than ever before. Now more than ever, we have need of their wisdom. Let's take this opportunity to "talk with our tribal elders" and look to them once again for their perspective.

BORN IN 1912, STUDS TERKEL grew up in Chicago, graduated from the University of Chicago in 1932 and from the Chicago Law School in 1934. He has acted in radio soap operas, been a disc jockey — the host of "Wax Museum" — a sports commentator, a TV m.c., and has traveled the world interviewing "real" people with his tape recorder.

Those interviews have been published in his widely acclaimed books: *Division Street, America*; *Hard Times*; *Working*; *American Dreams: Lost and Found* and his most recent *The Good War*, interviews with men and women who went through World War II, published this fall by Pantheon.

Currently he has a daily radio program on WFMT Chicago which is carried on stations throughout the country. It was at WFMT that this interview took place.

George Vukelich is an outdoorsman, columnist, freelance writer and radio show host who lives in Madison, Wisconsin.

An Interview with STUDS TERKEL

"We are all in the same boat, the one called 'the human condition,' and if you drill a hole in your end, it sure as hell is going to affect my end."

20 Prime Times/Fall 1984

"People's big concern today — the Number One concern — is survival of the species. We have this buildup of arms, of nuclear missiles and it frightens the hell out of all of us, young and old, and it should.

"The priorities of the United States should be, first of all: *Stop the crazy arms race!* That's the first priority. And when you stop the crazy arms race, the money you save can then go into: Modestly priced housing developments, nurseries, parks, rebuilding our highways, rebuilding our roads, rebuilding our railroad beds, more mass transit, more schools. The priority should be for lifegiving rather than death-dealing, enterprises.

"We assume that we're sane people, yet, in accepting the rhetoric, the junk, that our politicians hand out, we have allowed ourselves to be lobotomized to a great extent.

"You see day after day this trivia we're being fed, this *banality*. You know that it's happening all over TV and in print. I don't mean just People magazine or National Enquirer. I mean even our so-called 'respectable' papers, our 'serious' papers. They're printing trivia. Half-truths. Righteous nationalism. Jingoism.

"Hannah Arendt wrote a book about Adolf Eichmann and his trial. She called it *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, but she had a subtitle and the subtitle was *The Banality of Evil*.

"She points out that the Nazis were just 'ordinary people' and that was the banality of it: You could stop your imagination. You could accept and you could do terrible things.

"Well, I'll reverse that now. In America today, we're witnessing *the evil of banality*. We've gone away from discussing the issues. It's the daily, small trivia things that are being discussed.

"For example, I'm not against *sport*, but I think it's too much now. If the average American male knew as much about the world as he does about sports, we would be the wisest people who ever lived. Listen to the average American male the Monday morning after a pro football game. The guy's sophisticated, this guy knows every single play. You know, how the end cut in, the quarterback, it's incredible.

"Yet, the average American male doesn't know anything about the world. Nothing at all about the Depression of the 1930s, nothing at all of the situation in Europe, in Africa, in Central America. He simply accepts what he is told and I think the real problem here is our

machismo. Machismo, that John Wayne image that we have of ourselves. Machismo is more glorified than ever and what I'm saying is: Machismo must go. We have to challenge it because it's an insult to our intelligence, and the great need for us today is to use our intelligence.

"I think the best way to do that is to get active, get involved. That's my best advice to people: Get active in your community, get active in life. I mean *scrap* for what you think is right, whether it's the polluted atmosphere you're challenging or the utility companies for exorbitant rates or whether you're developing a highrise or a condominium stopping from blocking out the sun or whether it's a peace demonstration, whatever — *get active!* It keeps the juices flowing. You live longer, but more importantly, you delight in life more.

"That's why I feel particularly good about groups of older people becoming active such as the Gray Panthers of Maggie Kuhn. When Maggie and her contemporaries — who were 70, 75 — started picketing something, started protesting something, the juices began to flow.

"I know, we all know, that in this country aging is mostly looked upon as a disease. Well, that's why I love the Gray Panthers. They're *scrapers*. And there's a Gray Panther in all of us.

"You have to *act*, and not sit by and be a spectator, because spectators are going to vegetate. The big thing is to debate, to argue, to discuss — and that means debating, arguing, discussing the Issues and not the Images.

"You know, it's ironic that as more and more older people are getting fighting mad, a lot of young people are just giving up. A lot of them figure you can't change things anyway.

"That's because 'making it' is what it's all about in America today. Money is what it's all about. Money is more discussed than sex because money is sexier than sex. Money. The kids are reading *The Wall Street Journal*. They're reading *Barron's*. It's incredible. At the same time, you're getting more and more older people questioning everything. It's like a reversal of the 1930s.

"Many of these kids are anti-union. They don't know how they got their minimum wage. Ask them. They think they got their minimum wage because the industrialists were nice and sweet to them.

"They know nothing of the heads that

were busted back in 1937. They don't know about the Flint, Michigan, sit-in strike: Forty-four days, forty-four nights. They know nothing about those old-time labor guys and the goons that were used against them. They know nothing about our history, *their* history.

"So, you have the new kind of union-busters today. Smooth and sweet-talking and wearing three-piece suits. They use lawyers now, not goons, but it's the same old union-busting.

"It goes along with the whole cold war program and so we live in what the sports writers call 'parlous' times.

"Get everything you can while you can, some of your young people are saying, and don't make any long-range plans because there's no long range left. Hey, we're living longer than any human generations have ever lived, and yet, we have a tremendous number of our young people saying: '*We're not going to make it.*' Isn't that true? That's the irony. The Biblical phrase was 'three score and ten' for a human life. Well, the average age now is well beyond seventy years. But many of the young don't think they're going to make twenty-one years. Many of them think they aren't going to live beyond four or five years more, because of the arms race. Now if this isn't insanity, I don't know what is!

"We are all in the same boat, the one called 'the human condition,' and if you drill a hole in your end, it sure as hell is going to affect my end.

"I gotta tell you about a guy I knew named Joe Matthews, now dead. Joe Matthews was one of those freewheeling ministers with a family of about nine kids. His father died at ninety-two and they asked Joe if he would come and perform the service for The Old Man.

"I went to see The Old Man at the funeral parlor,' Joe said, 'and I didn't see my father. I saw a kewpie doll in that casket. Rouge, makeup, not a wrinkle. That wasn't my father. So I told the funeral guy I wanted a sponge and soap and water and the guy said: *what?*' but he brought them. I spent three hours washing and wiping all that crap off. Three hours!

"Then I saw my father's cheeks sink in. Then I saw all those wrinkles in his face. And I said: *That's my father.* We put those wrinkles there. My mother and my brother and my sisters, we put those wrinkles there and those wrinkles mean we have lived.'

"That's Joe Matthews' story.

"That's our story, too." ■