



HENRY ROLLINS

On personal rebellion, making change locally and the importance of travel.

By Jessica R. Yurasek

Photography by Harun Mehmedinovic





MERELY READING ABOUT

Henry Rollins is not the best medium to receive his message. He has the presence and charisma of a performer. A man made for expressing himself. Best known for his role in the 80's punk-rock band "Black Flag," over the past few decades Rollins has expanded, working as an actor, spoken-word artist, writer, radio host and activist.

I sat down with Rollins on a January afternoon in Runyon Canyon, Hollywood's dry, dusty mecca for weekday exercisers. He is a true man of action, a person not made to sit still. With a television show in the works for H2 the History channel, a feature film recently completed, ongoing voiceover work, three book projects, a weekly radio show on KCRW and several regular columns to write, Rollins took a break for this interview to talk about the importance of making change locally, the value of travel and what it means to be a rebel.

BFM: What does rebellion mean to you?

I can only think of it in American terms, being an American. The last real rebellion besides the 2008 global meltdown, that was the banks rebelling against all of us. The U.S. government bailed them out. They are criminals and they got paid. It's the most amazing gangsta action America has ever seen. It makes Bonnie and Clyde look like small town. That's a rebellion I'm not with. Otherwise, the last big rebellion would be in 1861 when half of the country rebelled and succeeded against the other half. We're still digging ourselves out of the ruination of America from 1861 to 1865 and not adhering to the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, my favorite ones of The Constitution.

But for me, rebellion — I don't want to take up arms against somebody, I don't want to hold a rifle and shoot at someone — for me, rebellion has always been an intellectual pursuit. The hardest adversary I've ever had to confront has been myself, and the hardest adversary I've ever had to defeat has been myself. The times I've had the most significant change in my life have been when I've rebelled against myself and a way of thinking.

My most significant rebellions have been against my own limitations, my own shortsightedness, my own prejudices. I'm sure I've had them, I've never been prejudicial against people of a different skin color or sexual orientation, that's just too stupid for me. But I'm sure I've been prejudicial against something...mullet? But you know what I mean? Everyone's got stuff.

Years ago when I was young I rebelled against my high school classmates, teachers and parents. I went to school with country club kids who don't pay for stuff. They break stuff and don't pay. They were very conformist. I was called names. They'd all laugh. But punk rock, when I heard Joe Strummer, The Clash, Sex Pistols and Ramones, I was a mouth without a scream and that was the soundtrack for that roar. Punk rock helped me [realize] I should have learned to question authority from Thomas Jefferson, but they never taught that to me in school, so I learned it from Joe Strummer. He became my civics 101, he became my founding father really. And question authority? That blew my mind.

That was a rebellion but it wasn't fists. I had conquered my mind and the mind needs to be conquered and re-conquered constantly. At least mine does. So you might say I'm in a constant state of rebellion. You might not see it, but I know it's important in my life.

One can go through many personal rebellions, intellectual rebellions, and maybe one should. Maybe it's a way to scrape the barnacles off your own hull if you will, or floss your brain, floss your attitude, get the plaque off. That's why I travel where I travel.

BFM: Where do you travel?

I go all over Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia, Central Asia, North Korea, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, I've been to these places. I'm not trying to impress you nor am I an expert on any of them, but I go to see something different.

BFM: How do you choose those places?

Some of the places choose me. The last president had his axis of evil. My goal was to go to all three axis of evil countries while he was in office. I did two out of the three. It took three years to get my North Korean visa, but I finally got it.

I went to Iran. Had a wonderful time. The people in Tehran were amazing, beautiful people, great food, the best ice cream. When anyone asked me anywhere in the world why I was there I said, I'm here to meet you.

I'd stick out my hand and they'd laugh. All of a sudden everyone is laughing and you realize there's nothing to be afraid of.

I've almost been killed a few times, like really nearly dead. That's been in California, where I've been shot at and a buddy of mine got killed right next to me. Another guy nearly stabbed me to death. The biggest threats to my life have been in America.

The rest of the world has treated me very well.

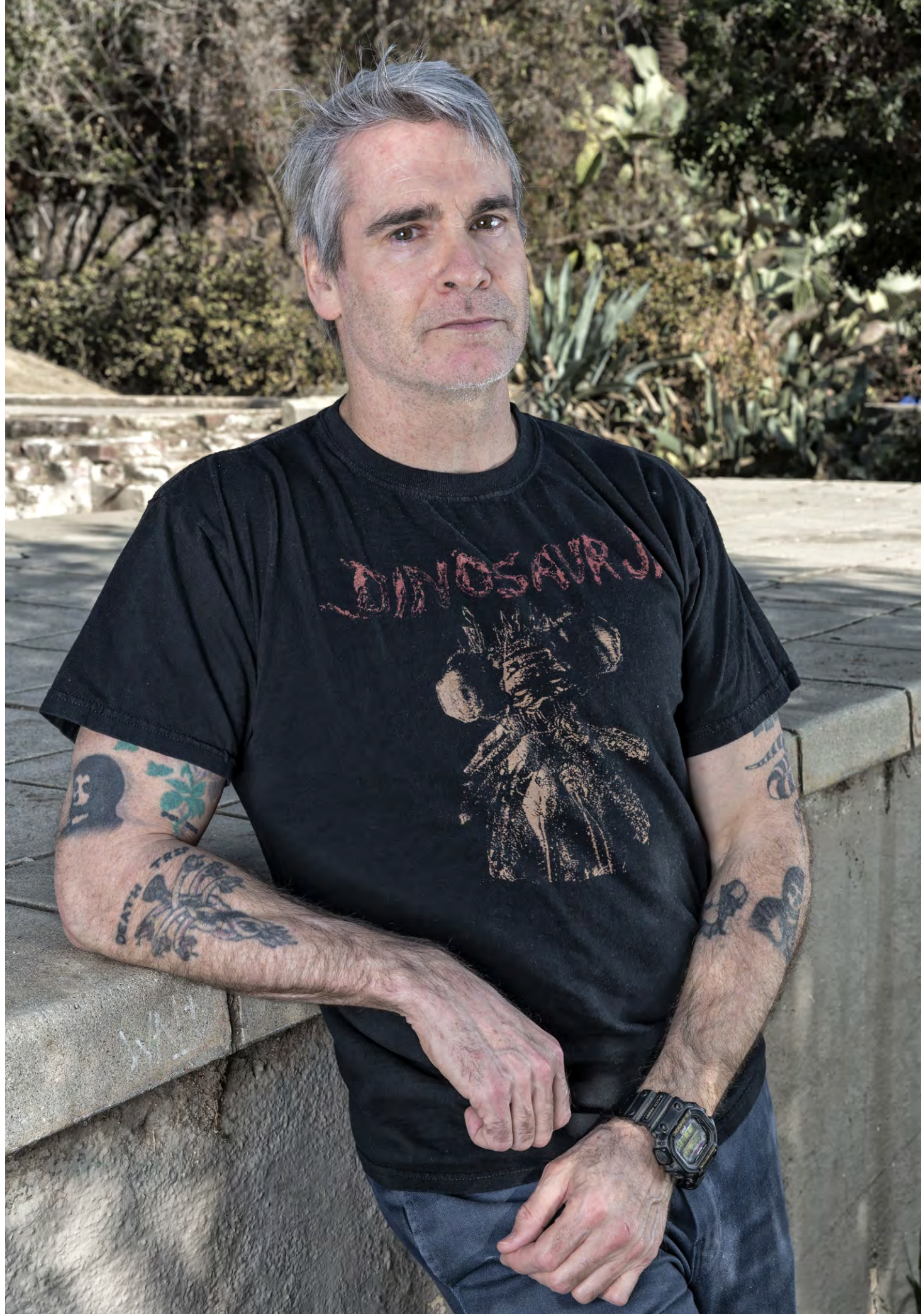
I'm not a tough guy. I'm not looking for a fight with anybody. I just refuse to be afraid. Because it's my own fear that has shortened my life, that makes things awful. For me rebellion is a constant. But the way it manifests itself that you would see for me is with a thick passport. Going somewhere different, because I don't know if I should go there — that's probably the first place I should go.

BFM: Can you talk a little more about the importance of how travel shifts perspective?

Travel forcefully. Travel forces you to get out of yourself and deal. What's that smell? Oh wow, India. Bangladesh, it's just open and happening. You'll see an incredible count of dead bodies a day in India. That's not where I come from. You have to go where you don't come from so you can come back with your mind busted out — unless you just hide under your hotel room bed. Some people travel and they just don't get it. 'We went there and the food was awful!' All that was lost upon them. Don't let that be you.

For me, travel has been hugely inspirational and influential in the way I think. Very politicizing. When you see what globalization looks like, the West holds the handle of the whip in globalization. The lash: Vietnam, Cambodia, Honduras, places where the sweatshops are, where the garbage eventually ends up, where the plastic piles up. The only way you're

"The hardest adversary I've ever had to confront has been myself, and the hardest adversary I've ever had to defeat has been myself."







going to really know is you have to go. Want to understand the Vietnam War? Go to Vietnam and get the Vietnamese perspective where they call it the American war and see what they call victory and defeat. It is a transformational experience.

We're very insulated in America. You're not going to starve to death in America. You can try. You can hide somewhere, but you'll get fed. For some people in America it's a brutal ride. But not brutal like Bangladesh. Not brutal like parts of Uganda. When you go to someplace where you can't envision living where they live, eating what they eat and looking out into the mess and saying this is my life...I can't get my head around that. I'm not saying Americans suck, not at all. But unless you travel there's a good chance you'll never get that perspective.

On 9/11 someone on CNN said, "Today America learned that they're part of the world and not the world itself." That's what traveling really makes you see. Everything is connected.

BFM: What's your approach to activism in general?

I'm not putting out rules for anybody, but for myself, all change I've come to find in my life has been local. I like to see something happening right in front of me. The first kind of activism that I did was when I was asked. Once a year [there was] a benefit for the Hollygrove Children's Services Center, an orphanage for kids who have problems getting placed. That was the first time in my life I was tasked with: do this and do it on a regular basis. That was local change.

If you want to change the world—I don't know who said it—you can't necessarily change the world, but you can change worlds. You can certainly improve the lot of these kids who didn't get asked to be born. You can help them directly. If everyone did something like that all over the world, there would be change.

A lot of people have this idea that activism has to be massive. Take global climate change for example, which is no doubt important. The way you raise awareness and concern and do something proactive to curb it is to work locally. The most polluted part of the world I've ever been to consistently is India, but I'm not there very often. Look at the garbage here in Los Angeles. Look at the smog layer. I can work right here and deal with that bigger issue. To me it's just being civically concerned with my own space, the space I share with others, the commons as we call them. In a way—this is a word I use very sparingly and carefully—but it's a way of being patriotic. That word comes with a lot of stuff. A lot of people who scare me use it often. But to really love America I have to be concerned with my neighbors in Texas, Oklahoma, Delaware and the way I do that is by taking care of what's right in front of me. That means a lot to me. America's ours to lose.

If you think about it, man has done nothing to upgrade the earth. The world is kind of done with us. Homo sapiens have not done one single thing to make the planet better. All we do is use up the natural resources, screw up the air, screw up every natural water system. We swindle, kill and render species extinct.

To not be active on some level—standing up for marriage equality, standing up for equality in this country, which is still a hurdle. In my mind, if you don't do something like that, you're basically agreeing with and being sympathetic to everything you disagree with. You don't have to swat every single thing, but if everyone grabbed a

couple, things would be better.

BFM: There are so many problems in the world, as you just mentioned, I think that for a lot of people it becomes overwhelming and immobilizing.

Exactly, that's why you have to work locally. Because halfway around the world is local to someone else. You can work right inside your own zip code if you just look around. If everyone did that, if everyone changed worlds and not the world, the world would change. The grass roots stuff, that's where change happens.

You can rebel against small things. You can say, 'I'm not going to be a part of that when some guy makes a semi-racial joke.' Call it out. Be the squeaky wheel. That person might not mean any harm, but they are harmful. It's like throwing a rock into a pond, you get the ripples. Your voice doesn't go unheard unless you're in an abyss or a forest yelling, but even then, the Buddhists would say the trees heard you.

BFM: What do you think the biggest opportunities are right now for people who want to do good in the world?

First they need to do good for themselves and then they need to look locally. I get letters from people: 'I'm semi-homeless living on my mother's couch and I just want to help people.' Help yourself first. You're just staving off the helping yourself part by helping everyone else. Don't talk about helping others until you get your own world together.

"If everyone changed worlds and not the world, the world would change."

BFM: What inspires you to take action and do good?

There are different things I contribute to. I'm a poster boy for Drop in the Bucket, an NGO. I contribute money to Southern Poverty Law Center and Hollygrove. But I don't contribute to Hollygrove because I like kids, which I do. I don't give them money "hey I'm gonna help!". I give them money out of anger. Why are these kids orphans? Because mom and dad couldn't handle childbirth. Because their parents are probably screw-ups. I'm mad about that. All this stuff I do, I do it out of wrath. I'm mad. I don't want to see these kids without a home.

West Memphis Three, I was one of many people who worked on that for over a decade. Not because I wanted to help because I'm a good guy, but because I'm mad at American justice. I do all this stuff because I'm pissed. I'm an angry person. I'm angry every single day. Obviously not at you, I'm angry at all that stuff.

I was touring last year and caught Ann Coulter on Fox. She said, "I admire Sarah Palin's enemy list." She doesn't have any enemies, those are just snarky liberals who say funny things about her on Huffington Post. I have enemies because I go after the top-shelf ones. My enemies: hunger, thirst, discrimination, homophobia, racism. Those are my adversaries. Reading Nietzsche as a young man—you should put in: rolls eyes—taught me at least one good thing: choose good adversaries, ones that can probably lay you out. Go after the black belts. Go after the ones who can hit back.