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NEW YORK

Legendary journalist and author Pete Hamill, a tabloid hero and teller of New York tales, dead at 85

By LARRY MCSHANE
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FEEDBACK



Pete Hamill photographed in June 2010. (Watts, Susan / New York Daily News)

FEEDBACK

Pete Hamill, the Brooklyn-born bard of the five boroughs and eloquent voice of his beloved hometown as both newspaper columnist and best-selling author, died Wednesday morning. Hamill, who worked at five New York newspapers and outlived three, was 85.

Hamill, four days after a Saturday fall that fractured his right hip, died in New York-Presbyterian/Brooklyn Methodist Hospital, said his brother and fellow ex-Daily News columnist Denis Hamill. Though Hamill underwent emergency surgery, his heart and kidneys ultimately failed.

“Newspaperman, novelist, mentor to so many, citizen of the world,” tweeted New York Times columnist Dan Barry of Hamill. “I once wrote that if the pavement of New York City could talk, it would sound like Pete Hamill. Now that city weeps.”



New York Daily News reporter Pete Hamill. (Daily News/New York Daily News)

documentary “Deadline Artists,” two old pals on an ink-stained trip down memory lane, with Hamill outliving his fellow legend.

The son of Belfast immigrants was once hailed as “the greatest chronicler of Irish America,” which hardly did justice to Hamill’s expansive range of topics. He proudly described himself as a generalist, as comfortable inside the Blue Room in City Hall as behind the yellow tape at a murder scene.

[Colleagues, friends and fans remember Pete Hamill, quintessential New Yorker,](#)

[journalist, author »](#)

FEEDBACK

His attention to telling detail and encyclopedic knowledge informed his efforts on subjects from Frank Sinatra to the Brooklyn Dodgers to his own life in the acclaimed 1994 memoir “A Drinking Life.” Hamill, once equal parts barroom and newsroom, swore off the booze in 1972 after one last New Year’s Eve vodka.

When asked why, the son of an alcoholic father offered a simple and direct reply: “I have no talent for it.”

His skills instead flourished behind a typewriter and then a keyboard, where Hamill collected more than 9,000 bylines on stories with more than a million words — the vast majority tapped out with one finger taking the pulse of his sprawling city. He emerged as the city’s erudite everyman, writing about its immigrants, its underclass, its downtrodden and dispossessed.

In between his stories and two marriages, Hamill found time to date a number of celebrity stunners: Shirley MacLaine, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Linda Ronstadt.

The Brooklynite became a constant witness to history: As a kid watching Jackie Robinson break the baseball color barrier in Ebbets Field. Walking decades later with Robert F. Kennedy in the Ambassador Hotel when an assassin opened fired. And again on 9/11 in the shadows of the Twin Towers.

Hamill recounted writing a heartfelt letter that convinced RFK to run for president. When the shooting started in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, he helped disarm killer Sirhan Sirhan as the mortally wounded Kennedy lay nearby.



Author and New York Daily News columnist Pete Hamill is seen in New York, Nov. 17, 1977. (CARLOS RENE PEREZ/AP)



Pete Hamill takes notes as he walks ahead of the Memphis-to-Jackson march led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. June 9, 1966. (Anonymous/ASSOCIATED PRESS)

FEEDBACK

He went south to cover Martin Luther King, and stayed home for the last interview with fellow New Yorker John Lennon. He reported on “The Troubles” in his ancestral homeland, and covered wars in Vietnam, Nicaragua and Lebanon. Hamill stood in Lower Manhattan on Sept. 11, 2001, with paper and pen in hand as the World Trade Center’s 110 stories came tumbling down.

That day, he wrapped up the novel “Forever” — later rewritten to reflect the staggering horrors inflicted on his city. Hamill, even after becoming a celebrity and a celebrated author, remained a newspaperman at heart.

He joined the tabloid New York Post in 1960 before moving to the New York Herald Tribune, the Daily News, New York Newsday and the Village Voice. And while he traveled the world, Hamill inevitably returned to his eternal muse: The ever-changing city of his birth.

“There’s no one New York,” Hamill said in 2007. “There’s multiple New Yorks. Anybody who sits and says ‘I know New York’ is from out of town.”



Norman Mailer, Pete Hamill, and Bill Bell review books in the 33rd Street newsroom at the New York Daily News in 1997. (Bonifacio, Mark/for New York Daily News)

FEEDBACK

The oldest of seven children, Hamill never attended college and worked as a delivery boy for the old Brooklyn Daily Eagle. His Brooklyn youth, spent in a crowded \$60-a-month Park Slope apartment, forever influenced his nuanced storytelling. It also fomented a lifelong hatred of Dodgers owner Walter O’Malley, who moved his beloved Bums to Los Angeles after the 1957 season.

Hamill and reporter pal Jack Newfield once compared notes on the three worst people of the 20th century, and produced matching lists: Hitler. Stalin. O’Malley.

The U.S. Navy veteran’s star ascended after a crippling early ’60s strike of the city’s seven newspapers. The suddenly-idled reporter left Manhattan for Spain before landing

a job as European correspondent for the Saturday Evening Post. He and his father Billy were in Belfast when John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963.

When Hamill returned to the states in fall 1965, he landed a column with the Post — and was on his way to Vietnam before Christmas. He soon became a habitue of the famous East Side hangout Elaine's, and a regular at the legendary Lion's Head — where the hard-drinking authors' book jackets served as wallpaper.



His own first novel, “A Killing for Christ,” appeared in 1968 — the tale of a plot to assassinate the Pope.

Hamill landed at the Daily News as its editor in 1996, charming the staff before leaving after just eight months. He also spent a tumultuous month in 1993 as head of the New York Post, leading an insurrection against loony new owner Abe Hirschfeld. Hamill's apartment was later decorated with a photograph of Hirschfeld planting a sloppy smooch on his cheek.

FEEDBACK

Columnist Pete Hamill and actress Shirley Maclaine arrive for the Academy Awards, in Hollywood in 1974. (Bettmann/Bettmann Archive)



Legendary New York icon Pete Hamill

FEEDBACK

The legendary Hamill served as editor for both the Daily News and the New York Post during a newspaper career that covered the last 40 years of the 20th century — an improbable dream come true for a high school dropout, the son of Irish immigrants, raised in a hard-scrabble borough.

“One of the best days in my life is when I got my first press pass,” he once recalled fondly. “To be a newspaperman is one of the best educations in the world.”

The lifelong New Yorker brought a touch of poetry to the tabloids, a sense of grace, wit and empathy amid the daily dose of crime and corruption. He wrote 21 novels and more than 100 short stories, along with longer pieces for The New Yorker, Esquire, Rolling Stone and New York magazine.

Pete Hamill: Music can help writers write



He was working at the time of his death on a book titled “Back to the Old Country,” a reminiscence about the pervasive influence of Brooklyn on his life.

Hamill inspired generations of journalists to follow his path, one that took him across the country and around the world but always returned to New York.

“I greatly appreciate him encouraging me to write as a young person full of self-doubt,” said Jelani Cobb, a staff writer at The New Yorker. “I will also miss the fantastic breadth of his knowledge of New York City and the indelible rhythm of the sentences he pushed off the tip of his pens.

FEEDBACK

[Mike Lupica: Pete Hamill was the voice of NYC, with ‘an old-fashioned thing called grace’ »](#)

Political consultant George Arzt recalled Hamill as a mentor and role model when he launched his career a half-century ago.

“I stayed in awe of him ever since,” said Arzt. “A two-fingered typist with miraculous powers. The Holy Grail of the real New York and one of the finest human beings I ever knew or hope to know.”

Hamill’s contemporaries back in the 1960s included some of the best writers of his or any generation: Fellow “New Journalism” acolytes Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese and Norman Mailer. He and Breslin were highlighted last year in the acclaimed HBO



Veteran journalist Pete Hamill, left, the New York Post's "former" editor-in-chief informally fired by eccentric new owner of the paper, Abe Hirschfeld, returns to his office at the Post to fulfill his editorial responsibilities, March 16, 1993. With him on the phone at right is Peter Faris. (Betsy Herzog/AP)

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At both stops, and for years after, Hamill was generous with his time and tips for any young writers inclined to ask.

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The oft-honored Hamill received the inaugural Seamus Heaney Award for Arts and Letters in February 2014 and a career achievement Polk Award later that year.



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Daily News columnist and best-selling author Pete Hamill in 2002. (Susan Watts/New York Daily News)

He became a distinguished writer in residence at New York University. And he managed to snag a Grammy Award with his liner notes for the classic Bob Dylan album “Blood on the Tracks.” Hamill even received his Regis High School diploma in 2010, 60 years after he dropped out.



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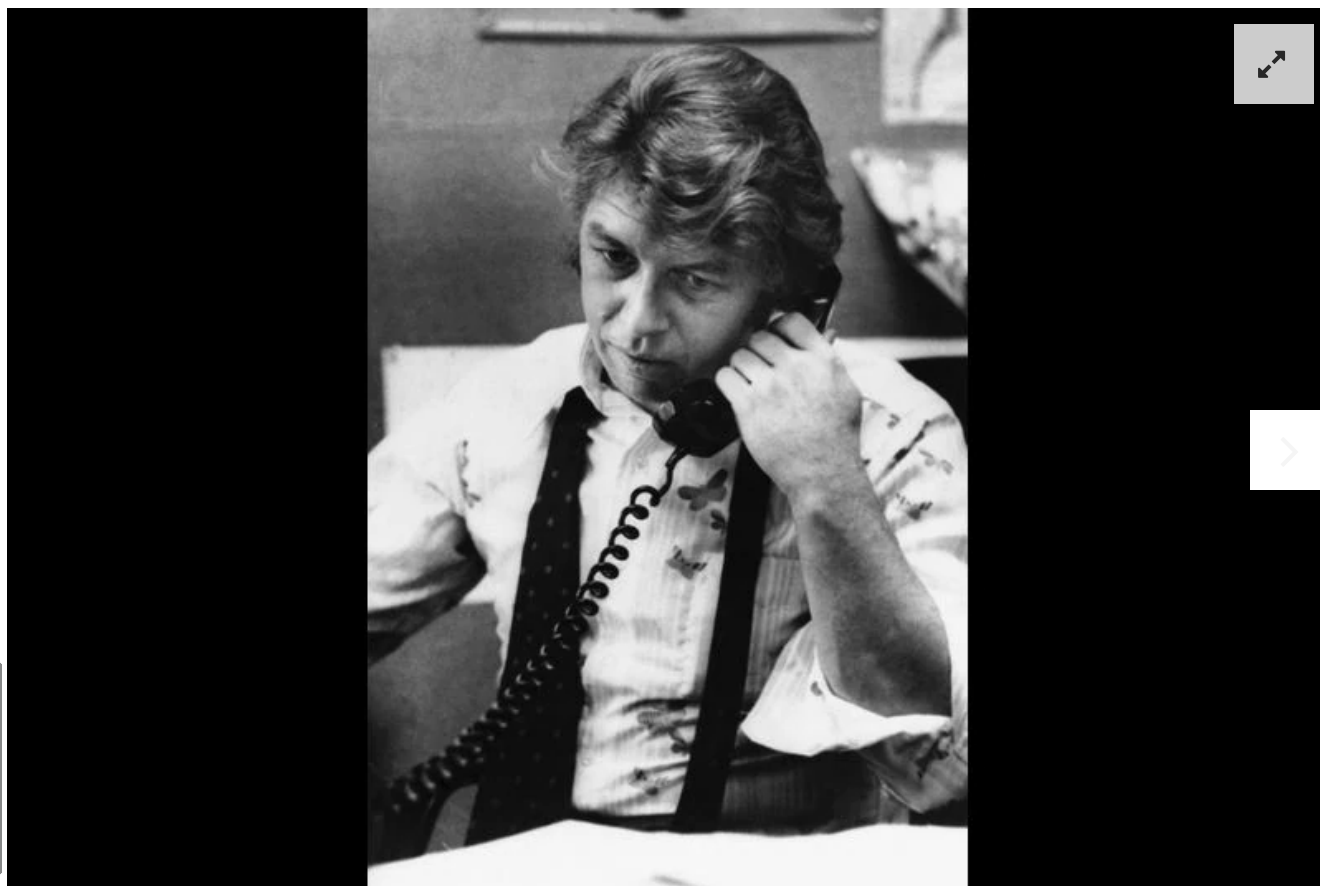
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Hamill, after sharing a Tribeca apartment for years with his second wife — Japanese journalist Fukiko Aoki — and hundreds and hundreds of books, returned to Brooklyn in 2016. There he set about writing his final book.

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Life and career of legendary journalist Pete Hamill

Hamill was survived by his wife, daughters Deirdre and Adriene, and a grandson. His wake and funeral will be for immediate family only due to COVID-19 protocols.

“He epitomized being a New Yorker,” tweeted Art Shamsky, a Hamill fan and an outfielder with the “Miracle Mets” of 1969. “His writings are legendary. The likes of him don’t come around very often. I’m so thankful I had a chance to meet him!”

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