DAVID BRANCACCIO INTERVIEWING KURT VONNEGUT FOR THE TV SHOW “NOW” on PBS.

BRANCACCIO: His is a chaotic universe...remember SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE and CAT’S CRADLE? Kurt Vonnegut is back.

KURT VONNEGUT: We’ve killed the planet, the life support system. And it’s so damaged that there’s no recovery from that. We’re very soon going to run out of petroleum which powers everything’s that modern-Razzmatazz about America.”

DAVID BRANCACCIO: He’s on the bestseller list this week with powerful words about the state of the world and the failure of politics.

KURT VONNEGUT: It’s the winners. And then everybody else is the losers. And, the winners divided into two parties. The Republicans and the Democrats.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Vonnegut on life, democracy, and the importance of being funny.

BRANCACCIO: Welcome to a special edition of NOW. This country has been through a lot in the last month and we’ve been out there covering it. But I’m thinking its time to pause for the big picture and when the brilliant and irascible Kurt Vonnegut said he was up for an interview, we jumped at the chance.

It’s rare to get to sit across the table from a giant. Do yourself a favor and read SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE again ...like now, this weekend. Before it’s too late.

Mr. Vonnegut has a new book challenging us to think about how life works or doesn’t work. He’s 82, but I’ll tell you what, he’s still a total riot. And this icon of American literature has got some choice words for our political parties, our president, and our planet.

Mr. Vonnegut, thanks for coming by.

KURT VONNEGUT: My pleasure.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: How’s life?

KURT VONNEGUT: I’m 80-- I’m practically 83. It won’t be that much more of-- for me to put up with. I don’t think.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well, you were writing about maybe you want to sue your cigarette companies? You smoked all those years and there’s a warning on the package saying that this will --

KURT VONNEGUT: Brown and Williams, on their package, promise to kill me. And they haven’t done it. I mean, here I am 83.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: False advertisers on the cigarettes?

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: You know as I grabbed every Kurt Vonnegut I could find to re-read--

KURT VONNEGUT: Uh-huh.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: --knowing you were coming. I was looking at the beginning of SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE.

KURT VONNEGUT: Uh-huh.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: The good uncle in that novel complains that people tend not to notice when they’re happy.

KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Maybe the character’s right. You don’t notice when the good stuff that’s around us.

KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah. Well, this was my uncle Alex. And I had a good uncle and a bad uncle. The bad uncle was Dan. But the good uncle was Alex. And what he found objectionable about human beings was they never noticed it when they were really happy.

So, whenever he was really happy, you know he could be sitting around in the shade in the summertime in the shade of an apple tree, and drinking lemonade and talking. Just sort of this back-and-forth buzzing like honey bees. And Uncle Alex would all of a sudden say; If this isn’t nice what is? And then we’d realize how happy we were and we might have missed it.

And the bad Uncle Dan was when I came home from the war which I was quite painful. He clapped me on the back and said; You’re a man now. I wanted to kill ‘em.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: So you weren't just in the war.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You actually were a POW.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: In Dresden during the fire bombing.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Famously. So that's what it took to make you a man?
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: In this uncle's view.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Well, he'd been made a man during the first World War in the trenches.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You didn't actually kill 'em though.
KURT VONNEGUT: No. He would have been the first German I killed.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Your experience as a soldier must give you great empathy for what our soldiers are going through right now. Because whether or not a person agrees with the logic behind this war in Iraq. Or vehemently thinks it's a bad idea. Everybody agrees that it's hell for those guys and those women.
KURT VONNEGUT: Well, not only that, it's a-- they're being sent on fools errands, and there aren't enough of them. And I've read that they go on patrols and they're in awful danger. And the patrols accomplish almost nothing. And so sure, that's a nonsensical war. That isn't how you fight.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: It strikes me that maybe you are not the biggest fan of the president of the United States at this juncture?
KURT VONNEGUT: Well he is what it in my grade school, we would've called a twit. And in my high school, we would've called a twit. And and so I'm sorry we have such a person as president.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: But just short of that, there must be things that you think the current administration has done wrong that has so upset you.
KURT VONNEGUT: Well, yes, it doesn't know anything about military science. Doesn't know anything about science. You know, global warming, they just don't believe it. And my lord, to send 143,000 soldiers, or whatever it is to occupy a country of what? Several million? Is I-- what, it's seven million, you think? It's preposterous. I knew better than that. Although the highest rank I ever held was corporal. And so these people don't know anything about anything. They're incompetent. And, so, yes, they are getting a lot of our guys killed. But, also, they've emptied our treasuries. You know, we can't fix our roads. We can't fix the schools.
It's my dream of America with great public schools. I thought we should be the envy of the world with our public schools. And I went to such a public school. So I knew that such a school was possible. Shortridge High School in Indianapolis. Produced not only me, but the head writer on the I LOVE LUCY show.
And, my God, we had a daily paper. We had a debating team. Had a fencing team. We had a chorus, a jazz band, a serious orchestra. And all this with a Great Depression going on. And I wanted everybody to have such a school. And, yeah, we could afford it if we didn't spend all the money on weaponry.
But I brought something.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Oh.
KURT VONNEGUT: It's a message for the president. Is it alright if I read it?
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Yeah, for the President of the United States?
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. I want to get it right.
I am now an elder in this, the greatest democracy in the history of the world. I will be 83 in November. I am a member of what has been called "the Greatest Generation." I am a combat infantry veteran with a Purple Heart and a Battle Star. And I now want to put my president on notice. And I am talking about impeachment. Enough is enough. If he commits oral sex in the Oval Office and I don't care with whom-- that will be the straw that broke the camel's back. Out he goes.
There. I've thrown down the gauntlet. That be treason, make the most of it.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: But impeachment, that's strong words. What do you want to impeach him for?
KURT VONNEGUT: For oral sex in the Oval Office. I said that--
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Wasn't that the other guy?
KURT VONNEGUT: Well-- I don't know. That's the standard now. That's the precedent. Is-- is the one unforgivable thing a president could do.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Why has the president angered you so?

KURT VONNEGUT: Well, because he shouldn't be president. Is-- we ought to have a stronger person. And he's obviously an actor in a made for TV movie. And other people are, in fact, telling him what to say. Of course, we have only a one party government. It's the winners. And then everybody else is the losers. And, the winners divided into two parties. The Republicans and the Democrats.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well, you write in the book you say that the last election, the two leading candidates were two C students from Yale, as you put it.

KURT VONNEGUT: Two members of Skull and Bones at Yale, for God's sake. If I mean, that's what a charade the combat between the Republicans and the Democrats is. It's rich kids. Winners on both sides. So the winners can't lose. And, of course, the losers have no representation in Congress or whatever. But look, yeah. We had to choose between two members of Skull and Bones? What about if we had to choose between two members of Sigma Chi at Purdue? Wouldn't somebody have said what a minute. What the hell happened here?

DAVID BRANCACCIO: But you're saying you don't see senior political figures really, anybody representing the interests of people who are struggling?

KURT VONNEGUT: No, are not representing the American people. And, so there are people who made a hell of a lot of money one way or another. Making it during the war, incidentally. As you know, maybe the war is a bad idea. But some people are making a ton of money off of it. And they want to hang on to whatever they've got. And so they bank roll political campaigns for both Republicans and Democrats. Look, we're awful animals. We can start with that. You know, it's a whole human experiment, if that's what we are.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: That heart-- at heart, we're awful?

KURT VONNEGUT: Look, we after two World Wars and the holocaust and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after the Roman games and after the Spanish Inquisition and after burning witches, the public-- shouldn't we call it off? I mean, we are a disease and should be ashamed of ourselves. And so, yeah, I think we ought to stop reproducing. But since we're not going to do that, I think the planet's immune system is trying to get rid of us.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: The planet is sort of trying to shed us as if we are some sort of toxin.

KURT VONNEGUT: Look, I'll tell you. It's one thing that no cabinet had ever had, is a Secretary Of The Future. And there are no plans at all for my grandchildren and my great grandchildren.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: That's a great idea. In other words a Cabinet post--

KURT VONNEGUT: Well, it's too late! Look, the game is over! The game is over. We've killed the planet, the life support system. And, and it's so damaged that there's no recovery from that. And we're very soon going to run out of petroleum which powered everything that's modern. Razzmatazz about America. And, and it was very shallow people who imagined that we could keep this up indefinitely. But when I tell others, they say; Well, look there's-- you said hydrogen fuel. Nobody's working on it.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: No one is working seriously on it is what you're saying.

KURT VONNEGUT: That's right. And, and what, our energy people, presidents of our companies, energy companies never think. All they wanna do is make a lot of money right now.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: If you accept your idea that it is a horrible world out there. And people are tribal, people are greedy, people are cruel, then you can also conclude that, well, Americans didn't invent that. And I remember-- I know someone wrote you in the book-- and you mention someone wrote you this letter. Saying we need to be armed against all the badness that you see. You know, with Iraq. The threat is on a bigger scale than Al Qaeda, the guy wrote to you. And he-- and he writes, "Should we sit back, be little children, and sit in fear and just wait?" We need to take military action, is the implication.

KURT VONNEGUT: No we don't. No we don't. Is we should be-- somebody else has to declare war first. If we're in the-- of course, Iraq never attacked us.

KURT VONNEGUT: I have one more thing I wanted to read. It has something different.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Something in the other pocket, too?

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Alright.

KURT VONNEGUT: You know, Christianity is very big now in particular-- and our president, of course, is a Christian. These are words I never hear. Blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is kingdom of heaven. This isn't original.
Blessed are they that mourn. For they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the Earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. 

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers. For they shall be called the children of God.

Not exactly a Republican platform.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: These, of course, are called the Beatitudes. 

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: From the Holy Bible.

KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: It's interesting. It tends to be Ten Commandments, not the Beatitudes in modern day America.

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Not only that, it's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth justifies a lot of violence. On the part of many different societies. But actually, that's from the Code of Hammurabi. And what he was trying to do was cut down in violence in his society. In Babylonia.

And saying, look, okay you're a real man. You got to get revenge, I guess. But this much and no more. Otherwise, Babylon is going to-- we're just going to be people getting revenge. Revenge is going to become the chief business.

And I-- about Moses-- I wish he had come down off the mountain and — with word from God that hey, we've got to cut down on revenge, too. Because revenge is bad news. It's a very bad emotion. And again, we have Jesus. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Imagine that on a wall in the White House?

No, it's we must get revenge. And, of course, the armaments manufacturers — what we used to call merchants of death are — making a lot of money out of this.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: It's interesting. You normally describe yourself as, I think, a humanist.

KURT VONNEGUT: Absolutely. It's my ancestral religion. It's my ancestors who came over here from the north of Germany during the Civil War. One of 'em lost a leg and went back to Germany. But anyway, they were free thinkers. They had been Catholics. And, but science had impressed them that the priest didn't know what he was talking about, often, and so they were free thinkers.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: What does it mean to you to be a humanist in this day and age?

KURT VONNEGUT: Well, to admire the hell out of Jesus Christ or of everyone who speaks well. And, well my grandfather said is-- if-- what Jesus said was marvelous. What does it matter whether he was God or not? And it doesn't matter. So this is a human being who spoke extremely well, and we humanists listened.

Not only am I the honorary president of the American Humanist Association, preaching the sermon on the mount. I'm also announcing that the world is about to end. And, that is the world as we know it, surely. One, we're destroying it as a life-support system.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Destroying the environment.

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. And I wrote a poem about that-- which was published, incidentally, by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation on their cover. But the poem goes, "The crucified planet earth. Should it find a voice? And the sense of irony might now well say of our abuse of it. Forgive them father, they know not what they do. The irony would be that we know what we're doing. And when the last living thing has died on account of us, how shapely it would be, how poetical if the Earth could say in a voice floating up, perhaps from the floor of the Grand Canyon; It is done.

People did not like it here. And they don't and they shouldn't.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: If we're despoiling our surroundings, it must mean that we don't respect it.

KURT VONNEGUT: No. We don't. And I think most people have an awful time here. And, I have said on behalf of all animals, is life is no way to treat an animal. It hurts too much.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Mr. Vonnegut, how does a man stay funny when he thinks the world stinks like this?

KURT VONNEGUT: He smokes.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Is that the secret to humor?

KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Yeah, it helps a lot.

DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well, I want to ask you about this. You ask in the book a question that actually you don't answer so I want to -
KURT VONNEGUT: I'm old.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: But I want to-- think about answering this one. You write "what can be said to our young people now that psychopathic personalities — which is to say persons without consciences, without senses of pity or shame — have taken all the money in the treasuries of our government and corporations and made it their own?" What can we say to younger people who have their whole lives ahead of them?
KURT VONNEGUT: Well, you are human beings. Resourceful. Form a little society of your own. And, hang out with them. Get a gang.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You're preaching getting into gangs?
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Well, look, it's--
DAVID BRANCACCIO: A good gang.
KURT VONNEGUT: Look, I don't mean to intimidate you, but I have a master's degree in anthropology.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: I'm intimidated.
KURT VONNEGUT: From the University of Chicago-- as did Saul Bellow, incidentally. But anyway, one thing I found out was that we need extended families. We need gangs. And, of course, if they're tribes and clans and so forth have been dispersed by the industrial revolution by people looking for work wherever they can find it. And a nuclear family, a man, a woman and kids and a dog and cat is no survival scheme at all. Horribly vulnerable.
So yes, I tell people to formulate a little gang. And, you know, you love each other.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You know, I think I have found, at least, some evidence that at heart you're a bit of an optimist and here's, here's my proof here. In the new book, there is a picture of yourself that you drew here.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Some of your artwork. And that's definitely you. Iconic image of Kurt Vonnegut. But I looked that you-- drew it on some old stationary, it looks like. It says Saab Cape Cod. Kurt Vonnegut, manager?
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes, I was in the Saab business. As I think I was one among the very first Saab dealers in the United States.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: That's an act of optimism-- selling one of those things back then. Those are weird cars.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes, they certainly were. And, and-- it's why I never got a Swedish car. That's why I never got a Nobel Prize. Of course, a lot of people ask me how come you never got a Nobel Prize?
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well, why not?
KURT VONNEGUT: Huh? Because I spoke so ill of the Swedish car Saab which was a stinker back then. And now, of course, it's-- there's a convertible. I guess is the ultimate yuppie canoe.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You know, here we are talking about technology. Cars--
KURT VONNEGUT: Uh-huh.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: You're a bit of a Luddite?
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Absolutely. I — all the new technology seems redundant to me. I was quite happy with the United States mail service. And, I don't even have an answering machine, for God's sake.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Sounds un-American to me.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah, well, certainly, for a science fiction writer. But Ray Bradbury can't even drive.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: So you have one up on him if you were selling Saabs.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: There's a little sweet moment, I've got to say, in a very intense book-- your latest-- in which you're heading out the door and your wife says what are you doing? I think you say-- I'm getting-- I'm going to buy an envelope.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: What happens then?
KURT VONNEGUT: Oh, she says well, you're not a poor man. You know, why don't you go online and buy a hundred envelopes and put them in the closet? And so I pretend not to hear her. And go out to get an envelope because I'm going to have a hell of a good time in the process of buying one envelope. I meet a lot of people. And, see some great looking babes. And a fire engine goes by. And I give them the thumbs up. And, and ask a woman what kind of dog that is. And, and I don't know. The moral of the story is, is we're here on Earth to fart around.
And, of course, the computers will do us out of that. And, what the computer people don't realize, or they
don't care, is we're dancing animals. You know, we love to move around. And, we're not supposed to dance
at all anymore.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well you wrote in the book about this. You write; What makes being a live almost
worthwhile--
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: --for me besides music, was all the Saints I met who could be anywhere. By 'Saints' I
meant people who behaved decently, in a strikingly indecent society.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yes. Their acts of kindness and reason. On a very-- on a face-to-face. On a very local.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: On a human level.
KURT VONNEGUT: Yeah. On a human level. And, oh, I've also spoken about you, know you've heard of
'original sin.' Well, I also, I call attention to original virtue. Some people are born to be nice, and they're
gonna be nice all their lives, no matter what.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: Well, I think it's easy to notice that some moments with you Mr. Vonnegut add up to I
think a magic moment. Thank you very much.
KURT VONNEGUT: Well, I had a hell of a good time I must say. If this isn't nice I don't know what is.
DAVID BRANCACCIO: The legendary man of American letters, Kurt Vonnegut. His latest book is called; A MAN
WITHOUT A COUNTRY.

BRANCACCIO: Next week on NOW, we'll go to Minnesota, for a look at one of biggest issues faced by people
from Caribou, Maine to Baja, California: is there enough money for our retirement?
This time, it's the precarious state of many pension plans, how they got that way, and what the government
should be doing about it.
RETIREE: And I had money coming. And, and yet I wasn't getting it.
BRANCACCIO: And that's it for now. From New York, I'm David Brancaccio. We'll see you next week.