

**Once More
Through the
Modified
Looking Glass**

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Second Edition

Cover photo by Allen Falkner

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Introduction

Through the Modified Looking Glass was my column for BME News from 2003-2007. What I have done in this volume is to collect all of the published articles (excepting the two year in review columns which, in retrospect, I found to be lacking of any real substance) along with three previously unpublished articles. I have done some minor editing and added some brief notes but they are presented here in more or less the same form that I originally submitted them to the then editor and publisher of the BME (www.bmezine.com), Shannon Larratt. Also included is my response piece to one of Shannon's own articles that resulted in his invitation to me to write a regular column. The dates shown are of submission not publication.

These articles were written very much within the narrow context and for the specific audience that was the BME community at the time. And it is as a sort of snapshot of that community and my thinking within it that they are probably best viewed – although I do think and hope they have something to offer readers beyond this. I am still active with BME today but it is not the major player in my life that it was in the past.

The published articles can still be found online as they were originally posted here:

www.bmezine.com/news/lizardman-all.html

Unfortunately though, the comment forums which provided for further discussion and an even better look at the community have since been lost to the ether.

I hope this new collection serves to entertain and provoke old and new readers alike.

By Way of Introduction

5/19/2003

This was the second article to be published, after The [Modified] Body Politic, under the banner of Through the Modified Looking Glass. While it probably should have been the first, the issue of tongue splitting legislation was far more substantial and occupied my focus at the time. The opening paragraph still sums up my feelings about it but I include it here for the title explanation if nothing else.

According to custom, something like this would have been my first installment for Through the Modified Looking Glass, wherein I explain my choice of column title, plans for future subject matter, and background. The problem with that is that I have always felt such pieces tend to be cop-outs which avoid a true effort. And while I try to maintain a familiarity and respect for custom, I quite often find myself circumventing it.

First, why ‘Through the Modified Looking Glass’? I am, as it happens, a C.S. Lewis fan but the greater motivation behind my choice is the use of the looking glass reference by another tattooed sideshow aficionado and performer: Mike Wilson. In his interview that appeared in Modern Primitives, Wilson describes the idea of becoming heavily tattooed:

“...signifying a possible way of going through the looking glass for me to achieve a whole other frame of reference, and to elicit experiences beyond the ‘normal’... presenting yourself as a signal beacon drawing things to happen to you.”

I had some of the same influences as Mike – surrealism and circus sideshow history so it’s not surprising that we held some similar views. In fact, this was as close to some of my own ideas and inspirations for my transformation project as I had ever seen expressed by another person. I first saw the interview in 1995 and through my own carelessness by not taking advantage of opportunities I missed my chances to meet Mike in person before his untimely death. I have since come to know some of his friends and colleagues from Coney Island and the title of this column is in part an homage as well as an expression of that shared notion. I like to think that Mike also realized one of my own personal joys of the stage and being a tattooed man – taking others through the glass for awhile just by being part of their day.

That is the story, for what it’s worth, of the title. But what do I actually intend do to do with this pulpit? Well, as evidenced by the first installment, The [Modified] Body Politic, some subjects will choose me and

simply demand to be addressed. In the absence of such ready made topics in the future I hope to address and give an accounting of the land I find through this modified looking glass and that others may report discovering through their experiences with me. I will also attempt to put to use some of the formal training I have had as a philosopher by examining concepts and terms like ‘body modification’. I would also suggest to anyone who has a topic they would like to see here that they contact me via my IAM page or email. And of course, feedback is always welcome.

Now then, you may be asking ‘So, who the hell are you anyway?’ Well, my given name is Erik Michael Sprague but I am far better known these days as The Lizardman. I was born on Fort Campbell in Kentucky in 1972. My mother is an elementary school teacher and my father works both as a high school teacher and a mountain warfare instructor for the military. Growing up, they always encouraged me and told me I could do whatever I wanted – I took them seriously. And so, using the tools they provided me in my upbringing and thanks to the support of them, my younger sister, and many dear friends I did what I wanted: I became a performance artist. A professional freak. Along the way I have worked a myriad of jobs (lifeguard, farmhand, karate instructor, warehouse crew, bartender, teacher, and many more) and picked up a degree in philosophy (I abandoned my doctoral thesis to devote my time fully to myself as an artist). Currently, I live with my girlfriend, Meghan, in Austin, TX with one snake and three ferrets when I am not traveling the world speaking and performing. My modifications, rituals, and experiments are documented here on BME as well as on my own website. Ultimately, I hope that through this column I will find another way to express and develop ideas and to make a contribution that others will find in some way worthwhile or entertaining.

Since this was written Meghan and I were married, there have been more ferrets, my snake passed away, and my parents both retired.

About Records

1/7/2003

This is the response to Shannon's article that resulted in his suggestion that I start writing a column for BME. Looking back on it, I think I could probably make these points more eloquently now but my basic position(s) remains the same.

I got an email this morning [1/7/2003] from a morning radio crew I did an interview with a little while back. They said they just heard about a guy getting three concrete blocks smashed with a sledgehammer on his groin and wanted to know if I would comment on it. Since they were previously really interested in my act where I get a concrete block smashed on my groin with a flaming sledgehammer. Now, I assume the guy stacked the blocks and had all three smashed at once because doing the act repeatedly is nothing new. I have done it hundreds if not thousands of times. How do I feel about it? Well, I don't care much really. I give whoever it was a certain basic respect for performing the act and putting his own twist to it with the multiple blocks (though in terms of the physics that actually makes it safer, not riskier) but in the end I would have to see it to make any real judgment. This is because what counts here is the show — he obviously didn't just do it for himself by seeking the press, so it now becomes, to my mind, a question of whether or not he managed to give the audience something worthwhile. If he managed to in any way inspire, awe, or simply entertain people then I say more power to him.

It was this, along with Shannon's recent piece about records on BME, that got me once again thinking about world records, or alleged world records as the case may be. I have been approached about records, probably hold a few, and I am friends with many people who now hold or have held various records as recognized by 'authorities' like Guinness and Ripley's Believe It or Not. I can tell you that among many professional performers that records are held in fairly low esteem and seen only as holding any value for the promotional value and resulting ticket sales they may produce. Actually, it is probably more accurate to say that we [performers] often hold the record 'authorities' in somewhat low esteem - just like many a viewer we hold people who achieve great things with some regard - not for the appellation of a record but for the act itself. In fact, being 'in the know' we often see records - as presented by people like Guinness and Ripley's - for the illusions they often are. A person's look and connections can easily result in them getting the record over someone who outperforms them in the actual technical specs. And as for those specifications, they are often a joke - created by uninformed 'experts' and enforced at the whim and leisure of their directors. Take a look at their idea of what constitutes a sword for sword swallowing and then look at some of

what has been used by their record holders and this is readily apparent [It was also the subject of an amusing conversation at a meeting of the Sword Swallowers Association International]

Once a person realizes that the records as they are presented are often inaccurate and, regardless of this, certainly temporary the focus often returns to the perennial question of “why?”. Why seek out records, why push yourself to such extremes? Is it just for media glory and attention - that as well is certainly fleeting and likely hollow but seems to be the motivation of many. And further, it is often argued that such attention seeking via records and extreme acts is a symptom of the modern media - and to most, a vilifying one. I think this is a bit out of touch with history though. Currently, we are certainly in an upswing for attention with the popularity of various TV shows but this is just a cycle that has gone on for centuries. Our modern media has not created this, at most it has perhaps exacerbated it to a new level given the ability of world media to reach much of the globe’s population almost instantly. Contests, feats of daring and endurance, and grand exhibitions are as old as recorded history and have always been a mainstay of politics, religion, entertainment, and the human experience in general.

What purpose does this serve? There is certainly the basic thirst for knowledge at play - as with any form of trivia. We want to know who’s bigger, who’s faster, etc. I think that we also want to know about our limits and to explore them - both individually and collectively. By pursuing and seeing others pursue records we learn about what is possible and experience, even if only vicariously through the performer, a sense of striving and triumph. To me, this is where records almost certainly have value - even if they aren’t entirely accurate. They set a challenge before people, they say this is what has been done but you can try and go further. And, by attempting to go further they can inspire awe and wonder and remind people that limits are more often perceived than real. Beyond which, seeing a record may inspire a person on a journey of their own to break that record or to simply have a similar experience. In Shannon’s article he wrote:

“Remarkable acts should be their own reward, and paths to enlightenment are not a sideshow act. I’m not saying it’s wrong to ask for recognition if you pass through a significant ritual, but if I can get preachy, I will say that it is wrong to treat recognition as the sole reason for significant ritual.”

I respectfully disagree with him in a certain way. Remarkable acts and paths to enlightenment have long been a sideshow - and I don’t mean exploited in western entertainment but in their own respective cultures and times. Religious and political leaders historically would often perform great feats (records) in order to gain attention and following. Historically, to prove

that you were really in touch with the true god(s) or nature and yourself and should be leading you would perform publicly - miracles, wonders, feats of endurance, etc. This continues today and probably will for as long as the human experience continues. If a man 'walks down from the mountaintop' with the secrets of the universe, even if they are legitimate, it will often take these sorts of demonstrations to get people to pay attention. Would anyone have listened to Jesus without the miracles? Didn't Ghandi use prolonged fasting and other ascetic rites to draw attention? Do not many modern people use these acts for such gain? I agree that the act should be done for one's own self first and foremost because something done solely for recognition often bears little of value over time but if it takes the enticement of recognition to get someone to go down the path, I'm not bothered by that. I'm actually willing to take the bet that once the person goes through the experience they may very likely recognize its value beyond the recognition – eventually.

For myself, as an entertainer, I love what I do and do these things with and without an audience. When I have an audience I hope to give them a sense of awe and to inspire them - if attempting to break a record does that, then I am all for it. Plus, it can often get me an underwriter for something I have been wanting to do but could not otherwise afford.

The [Modified] Body Politic

5/15/2003

This was the first column to appear under the banner of Through the Modified Looking Glass. Sadly, a number of states have since passed legislation which effectively creates a ban on tongue splitting and the negative pressure exerted on medical professionals previously open to the procedure has made it almost exclusively available from non-medical practitioners whose skills vary greatly. This has led many, if not most, to take a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) approach. While the initial wave has broken, tongue splitting has been, and will likely continue to be, regularly resurrected as political tool for media attention.

There is currently pending [it has passed the house and is awaiting review in the senate] in the Illinois state legislature a bill that would effectively ban tongue splitting as a procedure. A lot of people might assume that my interest in such legislation derives from my own experience with tongue splitting but, in fact, what I find most compelling about this issue are the far more sinister aspects I perceive - namely, the legislation of prejudice and the use of the media's body modification obsession to promote personal political agendas. In my view, what is at stake here is not really just tongue splitting but something far more fundamental: freedom of expression. However, to provide some background on the subject I will give a brief accounting of my history with the procedure before addressing what I think are really the core issues.

In 1997 I sought out an oral surgeon and was able to convince him to perform on me a tongue bifurcation using an argon biopsy laser. This was one of the first tongue splittings in modern record (two other individuals using different methods appearing at about the same) and almost certainly the first using the biopsy laser. I immediately began to share my experience and the success of the procedure with the world at large through online resources like BME, SPC, and my own website. I also publicized it through my live appearances and shows. Soon, a number of people had contacted me and even stayed with me in order to have their tongues split by the same surgeon. Within a couple years, the procedure had gone from rumor and myth to being one of the more popular "heavy mods" (keeping in mind that popular

in this context still means probably less than 3000 people worldwide today – six years later!) A little more than two years later I appeared in Time magazine and on Ripley's Believe It or Not! Tongue splitting was now

entering into millions of homes and my touring meant more and more press for the procedure. This was a double edged sword, because as it certainly made more people who might have desired the procedure aware that it existed and was a possibility – it was also just a matter of time before some of those who said “ewww!” when they saw a forked tongue initiated a backlash.

It happened first in Michigan when a piece of legislation was introduced to ban tongue splitting there. That ban was narrowly defeated. Now, in Illinois we have Rep. David Miller who has authored the following (taken from the Illinois General Assembly Website):

Synopsis As Introduced

Amends the Criminal Code of 1961. Prohibits a person other than a licensed physician or dentist from performing tongue splitting. Provides that a physician or dentist authorized to perform tongue splitting may perform tongue splitting on an individual only if there is a therapeutic or clinical basis for performing the procedure on that individual. Makes a first offense a Class A misdemeanor and a second or subsequent offense a Class 4 felony

Mr. Miller is a practicing dentist who after seeing an article in which I was pictured [So I am told and was reported in early stories covering the bill] brought one of my images into session along with his draft, obviously playing to shock value. He also came armed with a number of alleged facts, many of which I have spent a great deal of time in interviews about the bill having to correct.

Mr. Miller asserts that his bill is addressing a health care issue – unqualified, unlicensed practitioners performing a dangerous procedure [tongue splitting]. This is perhaps where Miller has done himself a bit of a favor compared to his equally bigoted colleagues in Michigan who described tongue splitting as ‘gross’ and ‘unnatural’. In Michigan this resulted in the legislature being very quickly identified for what it was – an attempt by a group of politicians to legislate into law their own opinions. That bill was defeated mainly because it would have restricted a freedom of expression without grounds. Miller has obscured this by saying that he simply wants to make sure

that the unqualified are not performing the procedure but that doesn’t make a lot of sense given the text of his bill. First, if that were the case then he really should better acquaint himself with the section of Illinois law that he is attempting to amend because it already contains provisions against practicing medicine and surgery without a license that more than adequately restrict tongue splitting to the realm of the medical professional. Second, and more importantly, if he only wants to see people using qualified personnel then

why include the latter portion of the bill which precludes even the qualified surgeon from performing the procedure without a “therapeutic or clinical basis”. This language is sure to be interpreted by doctors and their lawyers as effectively banning them from the procedure. Tongue splitting is a purely elective procedure. It falls in the same general arena as rhinoplasty, breast augmentations, liposuction, and the like. It is here that Miller reveals his bias. He does not seek for any of these other, far riskier, elective operations to be justified on a clinical basis.

So, just what is David Miller seeking to do? He is, I think quite plainly, attempting to make his negative opinions of tongue splitting into law. And in doing so, he does not seem to care that he is infringing upon one of the most basic and respected of our freedoms: freedom of expression. While the expression he opposes today is tongue splitting, it could just as easily be something else like breast implants, dancing, hair dye, or wearing a blue shirt – from a purely logical standpoint any one of these would be just as good as tongue splitting for the form of his argument. He has shown no basis whatsoever as to why tongue splitting should be singled out for restriction. What he has shown is that by exploiting visceral reactions and making unsubstantiated allegations that one can pass prejudices into law [Though I hardly think this qualifies as a major revelation in politics]. But given that this law would be very hard to enforce since only the stupidest people would advertise their violation of it and that it would be easily circumvented by going outside Illinois, I have to wonder if there isn’t possibly something more to this...

Miller and his bill have been receiving a great deal of press lately and this is the lifeblood of modern politics. While Miller has certainly not impressed me in my debates with him or his statements to the press, he is certainly no fool. He has to have realized that the defeat of a similar bill in another state would weigh against his chances for success. But I think he has also realized that body modification is currently very popular with the media – at least in terms of ‘eye candy’ and “heavy mods” like tongue splitting especially so. While the agencies behind them may not support or endorse body modifications the cameras will always gravitate to them. By putting out modification related legislation this otherwise unnoticeable politician has garnered himself national and even international press. As a community, if we are to be such, we can only hope and try our best so that he does not profit from such exploitation by confronting his efforts and exposing his motives.

Body Modification: Rights & Responsibilities

10/8/2003

This column appeared later in 2003 but is related to the issues raised by the tongue splitting legislation debacles that seemed to follow me at that time. Along with the next article (Modification and Self Definition), it is a somewhat hyperbolic expression, that I felt was necessary at the time to cut through the existing noise, of some [still] very important basic points. In retrospect it seems sophomoric but I can't say that my feelings have really changed. For further context, along with tongue splitting bills we were also seeing a number of school bans regarding body modification and experiencing something an overall political backlash resulting in many pieces at BME taking on similar slants.

They are not out to get you. They already have you. You have no rights. Rights are nothing more than political contrivances, pure fictions of the system. To believe you have rights is to fall prey to the deception that freedom is derived from government when in fact government exists only to curtail freedom. What rights are provided in a political system may very well be reflective of certain core beliefs or fundamental values of the systems creators put in place to prevent or restrict the system's regulation of certain areas of activity but those rights exist only as creations of the system. To be truly free one must exist outside of and beyond the reach of any governmental system. Whether or not the current state of the world even allows for this as a possibility is highly debatable. Regardless, very few people are prepared for or even interested in such an existence. To be so free is to be in a very precarious position – it is an existence without the benefits of government in terms of security and infrastructure and one of perceived outcast. So precarious, in fact, that most people upon consideration would prefer to take a degree of security in trade for giving up all but those rights delineated by a government. Would you rather be utterly on your own and completely free or do you prefer having laws and police and hospitals and various agencies for regulation and certification? Could you accept a world where other people do just what they want regardless of your ethical disdain or distaste?

Rights are never absolute. As they are created by a system that system will always allow for (in practice) the restriction of those rights. There is no conceptual ideal so great as to stop the actual workings of the machine. Go ask any protester in the holding cell if his constitutional right to free speech kept the police from shackling him and dragging him downtown.

It may, however, be what eventually gets him out of the cell via the judicial process. Of course, it may not as well. Many times the actual practice of exercising ones rights is strictly limited to an arguably responsible manner. The classic example for free speech is yelling 'fire' in a crowded theatre. Furthermore, many systems will deny or further restrict the rights of those with a history of 'irresponsible' behavior such as convicted felons being denied voting rights or gun ownership.

So what about body modification? Is it a right? Can it be construed so as to be covered by an existing right in our system of government? Under what pretense does the government regulate and restrict our complete freedom to do what we want with our bodies?

Freedom of speech, via the 1st amendment, is probably the most obvious route towards addressing body modification in a political context – at least in the United States. The first amendment states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Through practice and interpretation "speech" has come to be seen in a broad context encompassing not just simple speech but also expression. Some have further decided to pro-actively interpret the intent of this amendment as a directive to the government not only to respect the free expression of the people but also to encourage a climate in which the people feel free to express themselves. It is through such policies that we can see the development of a common misconception about the first amendment. It is meant only to ensure your right to make your speech and not to ensure that you will not be offended by the speech of others. However, in the aggressive efforts of government to satiate 'squeaky wheels' we can see them attempting to walk the fine line of restricting the speech of some in order to encourage the speech of others. Very often this is tied to issues of religion, with the dissenting non-believers demanding that all appearance of religious icons and expression be removed from public spaces and forums. I myself am not a believer in any religion and I do find the near constant bombardment I receive from many sources to be offensive. However, in the case of non-state funded or mandated expressions I am far happier putting up with the annoyance of their free speech than I would be attempting to walk on the border of hypocrisy by restricting their religious expressions in order to make me more comfortable in my expressions of non-belief. [I would like to note here though that so called 'moments of silence' or 'silent meditation' are complete bullshit. One need simply ask; 'On what basis and authority is my speech being restricted to silence in favor of those around me who want to

engage in silent prayer? Why am I not allowed to sing or dance or chatter per my want?’ If John wants to have a silent prayer beside me that is his right but it is not his right to have me forcibly silenced.] In terms of body modification, I think, it is important to realize that if you view your modifications as expressions to be covered by this ‘right’ then you must almost certainly also recognize the right of the person who calls you names to make their expressions of disapproval. And those voicing disapproval should keep in mind that voicing that disapproval comes at the cost of allowing the expression. Surely the ideal of creating an environment in which everyone can make personal expressions without fear or hostility or disapproval is a fine and noble goal but it is also one that fails the test of practicality in a world that contains diverse and often contradictory viewpoints. Furthermore, it should not be viewed as sufficient cause for the restriction of free speech as protected by the first amendment. But this cuts both ways – just as you should not demand that your expressions through modification not be mocked under the first amendment, those who disapprove should not be able to restrict your expressions simply because they find them distasteful.

And, in fact, this is not the traditional justification for such restrictions. The classic example, mentioned above, of screaming fire in a crowded theater is used to illustrate a situation in which the exercise of an individual’s right to free speech deserves to be restricted in that it creates and clear and present danger to the rest of the theatre goers who may be trampled or crushed in a rush to escape the fictitious fire. So, if body modification is a form of expression or speech as covered by the first amendment then how can it be that the government can restrict or prohibit it via policies and legislation such as school piercing bans and the anti-tongue splitting bills popping up in many states.

In the case of school bans the argument is often made that students, who are often minors, do not enjoy the full rights and benefits of a normal citizen because as such they do have the same responsibilities. As they are not legal adults there are many instances in which they are not held to the same standards, one example would be contract law, as would an adult and since they cannot incur the same penalties for violations, they are not allowed the benefits. Another position is that the school environment represents a context within which there are greater needs at play which supercede those rights. I believe that Shannon more than adequately illustrated how patently false this claim is in his article on school policies. As for the former position, I think it is worth considering the vast difference between something like free expression and things like driving and gun ownership in terms of the needs and benefits of restricting the youth.

As for legislation such as the anti-tongue splitting bills, I think that as

I pointed out in my column on the then pending Illinois legislation, such bills can often be traced to prejudiced politicians attempting to make clearly unconstitutional laws to enforce their prejudices upon others while also doing some self-aggrandizing soap box politics. They look to exploit a sure media draw in the form of body modification in order to further their careers at the expense of the rights of their constituencies.

Now let us get a little bit crazy.

The majority of modification related legislation has little to do with speech or expression in its content or intent. Along with many school level bans it is claimed that the motivation is one of public health and safety. And while many people, modified and not, will support such measures as requiring autoclave testing, gloves, courses in cross contamination and the like it remains to be shown that it is the responsibility and province of the government to put such regulations into place. Such regulations can make the process of getting tattoos or piercings safer but they are also very often used to promote the interests of certain parties or views (i.e. manufacturers of certain products being mandated into use, requiring certifications and memberships from specific associations, or effectively banning tattooing by requiring it be done by a doctor or with a doctor in attendance).

The government is not concerned with your health and well being as a matter of altruism. It is only concerned with your condition to the extent that a cattle rancher cares about the health of any individual or group of cows within his herd. And much like the rancher, the government takes action to regulate the procedures and hazards to which you are exposed because it owns you and feels that it is simply maintaining and protecting its property. You are government property. They have laid claim to you as possession and currency. The slogans may read 'Hearts and Minds' but it is the ass they're really after.

This is one of the fundamental aspects of the political world. People are resources just like metal deposits, forests, etc. And similarly, governments lay claims based on their borders or historical precedent (the happenstance of the geography of your birth or your parents citizenship). If anything, people as citizens are the primary operating resource of competing governments. Look at the role of China in international politics over the last century and India's increased international presence – primarily based upon their large populations.

As such, governments are committed to the management and exploitation of this resource. Some may do so in a more caring way while others may use a draconian efficiency. However, none will abide the population willfully making its own decisions on matters that affect their

value as a resource. Think of the rancher analogy and imagine what steps would be taken towards cattle that display self-destructive or herd disruptive behavior. Now consider government attitudes and actions towards suicide, euthanasia, and to a lesser extent public declarations of self-ownership like many ritual body practices and body modification. Look at the abortion debates, the bottom line has always been one of the government deciding what women can legally do with their bodies. The argument of whether or not a procedure is allowed only logically follows after it is conceded that the government gets to make that choice and they get to make that choice because they are the ones that own the bodies.

I can only hope that this is as offensive to others as it is to me. I see two basic ways of dealing with the situation as it stands.

1) In order to gain more rights and freedom regarding our bodies and body modification it must impressed upon system the value of allowing such freedom. If it can be shown that body modification can be beneficial then it would behoove the system to allow, if not promote it.

2) The other option is to get enough people to deny the government's position and claim to one's body – to create a herd revolt. On an individual level, making such a denial could be very precarious and anyone choosing to do so should remember that a government is a system rather than a single entity and successfully navigating it on such a dangerous course is dependent upon breaking down and recognizing the individual components and people which make it up and exploiting them directly on that individual basis to the greatest possible extent.

As always, thank you for hanging in there with my rambling and making it to the end.*

**I think this may be the first time I ended by thanking the reader for not giving up. It was probably long overdue and I always think it even if I don't actually include it.*

Self Definition and Body Modification & Ritual

11/5/2003

Written and published the following month from the previous article (Body Modification: Rights & Responsibilities) this one goes hand in hand with it expressing some of the more fundamental aspects and principles for me. A great deal of this article came from the still unpublished Freak Manifesto that I have been laboring over for several years. I never took any of these things to be shocking or incredibly revelatory but nonetheless I find myself having to repeat them over and over again and being shocked myself at how many people simply don't see it.

Everyone is a unique individual.

This is as close to an axiomatic truth as I have ever come to discover. It is very nearly a simple tautology, descriptive of the natural state of affairs. And while it is not a novel revelation, it is one of those simple facts that while readily agreed to by most is very often neglected in terms of consequence. It is also a source of great difficulty for systematic processes which seek to deal with people in the more general terms of categories and roles into which no one fits exactly because those categories and roles are purposely defined vaguely so as to encompass more than a single individual, in many cases to include as many individuals as possible, in what is often a futile attempt [I say futile because as I will discuss the de-individualizing of such efforts often results in redundancy, wasted effort, and even resentment which in turn negatively impacts overall operation] to improve efficiency. That is why they address sales clerks, employees, or citizens rather than Bob, John, Jane and Sue specifically. Unfortunately though, it is the systems that are far faster recognizing and adapting to the fact that everyone is an individual than individuals themselves.

One consequence of recognizing yourself as a unique individual, perhaps the primary consequence, is that of making a choice to either embrace or attempt to reject your unique individuality. To put it another way, you must decide whether or not you will define yourself or allow yourself to be defined.

To define your self is not simply to be different. You are already different. Self-definition occurs through a process of consciously evaluating and choosing from among your options on the basis of your personally selected merits and values. It is not a one time only decision, but rather an

ongoing process throughout your life. The expression of making such choices can be made in a great many ways – including, but certainly not limited to [consider the decisions of those who choose to select their own names rather the ones which they are given at birth in order to better reflect and express who they are], body modification and ritual. Body modification and ritual can also be used as an aid to the decision making process.

Because body modification and ritual are not only powerful tools for self discovery and definition but also stand as strong and potentially influential statements to others thereof, they represent a significant threat to those who reject their uniqueness and the systems and processes that rely upon viewing people as members of a category or their designated job title. There are two basic responses to this threat. The first and most obvious are the attempts to restrict and deny body modification and ritual. These attacks range from social stigmatizing and discrimination to school bans and workplace dress codes all the way to legislative attacks such as the various anti-‘tongue splitting’ bills [see my article *The [Modified] Body Politic* for a discussion of how these bills are almost always patently unconstitutional in their bias and redundant at their best] which have been introduced around the US recently. These attacks are generally easy to spot and while very onerous in their nature, they represent the least of the threat.

Of greater concern is the more insidious response, whereby body modification and ritual are adopted as method and controlled by those who oppose the full realization of each our unique individual natures. The grossest example of this would probably the use of tattooing and similar techniques to mark slaves, criminals, and war prisoners. By doing so, the subjects were demoralized through the loss of control over their bodies and made readily recognizable and classified as a category or type.

However, such gross examples are in some ways less threatening because they are so bold and obvious. It is hard to imagine such actions being taken today without incurring serious resistance. That is, of course, if they are attempted in a sudden and immediate fashion. But the danger is still there, for those systems and organizations are quick to adapt and refine themselves. They realize that it can be far more beneficial and easier to gradually introduce and adapt people to accept their forms and goals for body modification and ritual. They may even promote it to the extent that they find their subjects will behave better if allowed some small [lesser] form of latitude. In time, they may even delude people so far as to willingly take on the roles and categories they are assigned while thinking that they are actually acting in a self-defining manner.

Consider the prevalence of body modifications such as tattooing and piercing in the pop culture media and advertising. In advertising there is

usually a twofold process of deception, each depends on blatant fallacy which is disguised by being introduced on the alleged [and false] assumption that they follow from the position of admitting that everyone is unique.

For example, a current car company [I will not do them the favor of advertising their name here] begins one of their ads with a voiceover saying things like ‘You are not like everyone, so why should your car be like everyone else’s’ and other descriptions of how you are an individual. From here they suggest that you can best express this through buying their car. Here are the two most blatant and obvious problems:

- (1) Simple difference is not expressing or embracing your individuality; nor is it self-defining as mentioned above.
- (2) The purchase of any mass-produced item will hardly differentiate you.

So, not only do they make a false claim that you can define yourself through difference but then they fail to even offer you something that would achieve that difference. Also, the thrust of this sort of move on their part is to get you to identify yourself with products rather than defining yourself and then expressing your identity through your use and choice of products [customization often being a good overt example]. It can be a subtle difference to discern but it makes all the difference in the world.

Advertisers will include the use of body modification and ritual in order to further the idea of difference and to provide powerfully impacting images. However, the modifications and rituals used will be carefully selected based upon those most likely to be accepted by the dominating social systems of the time and region [or selected marketing focus] and will thus promote those particular examples in much the same way as is done in the rest of the media.

Media, particularly pop culture media, is a double-edged sword when covering modification and ritual. Positive portrayal of these subjects is certainly something we can applaud. But, attention must be paid to how and what subjects are focused upon. Look closely at the coverage and you may very well see the systems at large playing a dangerous game. They are willing to risk promoting all such behavior in an effort to control it by using the media to show the positive sides of some instances (bonding rituals, memorial and fraternal tattooing, etc) and negatively discussing others or leaving them unmentioned entirely. In so doing, they wager that the majority will end up channeling such urges in the accepted and promoted fashions. However, they also continue to characterize it as a fringe activity (despite its true prevalence and extent – consider my What is Body Mod column) in an effort to draw more within their grasp and retain those who may be moving

towards resistance.

So, what is to be done?

To this point, I have primarily been involved in a discussion of theory. Now I want to turn to a discussion of practical application of theory.

Embrace your individuality: The unexamined life is not worth living because it is at best a pale imitation of life. So, examine your life. Devote time and consideration to your motivations, decisions, and goals. Take hard looks at them all. Actively engage in the process of self-definition. Make a concerted effort in all things to assert and express yourself as an individual rather than as a category or role.

Embrace the individuality of others: Do not refer to or treat others in a generic fashion or in terms of a role or category. Everyone is a unique individual, just as you are and thus offers you a singular experience in your interaction with him or her. [An example from my own experience: Many people have asked me how I deal with answering the same questions over and over again on a daily basis. The answer is that I don't – the questions are not the same because they come from different people, each asking and reacting in their own way and for the first time for them.] By sharing expressions of your own self-definition and treating them as individuals you can stand as an example to them and help them embrace their own individuality.

Disrupt and exploit the inherent weakness of systems that do not identify and respect individuality: You do this at its simplest, by doing the above – embracing your own individuality and that of others. However, with a little concerted effort you turn these into powerful and self-beneficial tools. In my column on rights and responsibility, I wrote:

“The other option is to get enough people to deny the government's position and claim to one's body – to create a herd revolt. On an individual level, making such a denial could be very precarious and anyone choosing to do so should remember that a government is a system rather than a single entity and successfully navigating it on such a dangerous course is dependent upon breaking down and recognizing the individual components and people which make it up and exploiting them directly on that individual basis to the greatest possible extent.”

Upon consideration I suspect that this is actually the only option given the nature and structure of government as we know it and has always existed. Government may come to allow body modification and ritual to a great extent in enlightened self-interest but in its current and past forms would

never relinquish the claim to the citizenry as property. So, just as one should always recognize their self and others as individuals, they should never make that mistake of a system. Rather, recognize that the system is made up of individuals and identify and address them as such. No matter how strongly they have been conditioned or come to think of themselves as secretary, cop, etc. they are individuals and by embracing their individuality you show them the path towards embracing it themselves. You also stand a much better chance of successfully navigating the system. This is the chink in the armor of the system – it depends on its components to function as that which they are not. Exploit this but not the individuals.

This can be as simple as addressing people by their names rather than titles or utilizing their personal interests in order to establish a connection will make them less likely to treat you as category or type but rather as an individual yourself. For practical techniques, I suggest that everyone look to texts like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* or *The Golden Rule of Schmoozing* (a personal favorite and written by a friend of mine) and employ them with the added intent of aiding those who do not fully embrace their uniqueness. Doing so not only increases personal gain but can help to break others out of the conditioning to reject their individuality by treating them as individuals and rewarding them for acting as such.

From my own experiences and observations I cannot overstate the dramatic difference and changes that occur when people not only recognize and embrace themselves as individuals but others as well. Regardless of what anyone thinks of my choices and actions, there is real merit and value in this approach for everyone.

What is 'Body Modification'?

6/9/2003

I have always taken a very broad view of what constitutes body modification. While not generally known or thought of for encouraging people to think about the ways in which we are all alike this is one area that I do promote how much we are all same. Part of the reason for this is that I see body modification all too commonly used to create a divide that should not exist. Getting hung up on the fictional difference of modified v unmodified only gets in the way of getting to know each other and the interesting bits which are our real differences. It is most often how you are different from me that makes me interested in you.

Interviewer: So why do people get tattoos?

Me: There are probably at least as many reasons as there are tattoos

Interviewer: Yes, but generally why

Me: Because people modify their bodies

Interviewer: Some people

Me: All people

Interviewer: Not everyone gets pierced or tattooed

Me: They all do something – haircuts, make up, clothing changes the way in which your body looks and moves

Interviewer: But those things aren't permanent

Me: So temporary body modification isn't body modification? That doesn't make much sense

The above is paraphrased but pretty accurate and has actually occurred more than a few times. It is probably a good example of me trying to be a smart-ass; it is also what brings me to this:

The term 'body modification' has popularly come to refer to a loosely grouped set of practices - tattooing, piercing, branding, scarification, etc. And, it is usually with this pop meaning in mind that the common question 'Why do people modify their bodies?' is asked. The problem here is that the question 'Why do people modify their bodies?' is significantly different than the question that is very likely intended: 'Why do people modify their bodies with tattoos / piercings / etc.?' The former is a general question about the human experience and motivation while the latter is one that develops out of the first and looks only to particular methodologies. By analogy, to ask the former is as if to ask 'Why do people compete?' and the latter 'Why do people race cars?' Part of the reason I think that people are

often mystified by why someone would modify their body is because they have gotten tied up in the idea that this one particular usage is the pure definition of what is ‘body modification’. So then, what is body modification if not just these or similar procedures?

Most of the discussions I have encountered concerning what does and does not count as ‘body modification’ have born a great resemblance to the debates, which occupied a large portion of my academic career, over whether or not something was ‘art’. In the case of debates over art, it can often be shown that what is actually being argued is not whether or not something is art but rather whether or not something is good or bad art. Obviously, according to most theories of art, whether or not a piece is possessed of any great talent or merit is not what determines if it is art. That is to say, even though it may suck, even though you hate it – it is still art. In the case of body modification I have found that what is often at stake is not really whether or not something is or isn’t body modification but rather whether or not it is the sort of body modification that is of concern to the parties engaged in the debate. For instance, is hair dyeing body modification? In that it is an alteration of the body it would seem that hair dyeing is body modification on its face. However, since it is not permanent and because it falls (depending on the color) well within acceptable practices many people will claim that it is not body modification. Much of these debates focused upon what other terms would be assumed to be built into or implied in their use of the term ‘body modification’. On a practical level this is often expected and quite essential. It is common to use a specified definition for purposes of certain discussions (BME is a fine example of this in its motivation and choice of what it considers body modification for content inclusion) but that definition should not be mistaken for or masqueraded as exclusive or complete.

‘Body modification’ as it is commonly used today is a fairly recent introduction to our language and seems to have emerged mainly from the communities that practice it as described. And it is within these communities that I have been able to find the most common adoption of the term and debate over its definition. The other place in which I was most readily able to find the term applied was in anthropology – where it is often used in a very broad fashion. Anthropologically speaking, the term is taken at nearly face value. It is applied in most any case where the body of a person is in some way altered – from hair styles and body painting to skull shaping. The interesting, and important, thing about this is that taken in this way there is no record of any human culture or society without practice(s) of body modification. And it is for precisely this reason, that I support some of the broadest possible interpretations of what is body modification.

I do this because it helps to break down the, in my opinion artificial,

barrier between the modified and the un-modified. I am fond of pointing out that we are all individuals whether we like it or not. By our very nature we are different from one another but there are also many shared qualities. In embracing our own unique stature I think that it is important that we do not needlessly create the perception of even more difference. If body modification is something we all engage in, in one form or another, then there are no un-modified people. From this point, we may find a better way for those who do not choose certain forms of modification to understand the motivations of those who do. If the person who shaves, manicures, and is possibly considering a nose-job learns to see tattooing or tongue splitting as simply an alternative example of the same general behavior (modifying the body) that they themselves engage in, it may become less mystifying as to them. In fact, body modification taken as part of the overall effort to intentionally create the image that others perceive when they apprehend you – especially in an effort to better express one’s self – is something that I think most people would readily accept as the sanest and most rationale thing in which a person can engage.

What is 'Body Modification'? – What does it matter?

6/25/2003

This follow up to What is 'Body Modification' resulted out of comments from Shannon and the general response of the online community. The advice I give at the end concerning facial tattoos consists of things I had been saying for years and I think stands up well for the foreseeable future.

A lot of the feedback on my last offering ('Body Modification?') gave me a sense of preaching to the converted. That is, of those who commented the majority thought the points I was looking at were ones they agreed with and found to be rather obvious. While it is nice to know that others share something of my view, I can't help but be dogged by a certain uneasiness. If it is true that many modified people will agree that body modification is something everyone does and includes things like haircuts and possibly even clothing then why isn't that reflected in their words and behavior? It reminds of the problem with evolution. Many people will accept and recite back evolution when questioned as to the nature of the human animal but they do not reflect this position in how they actually behave. It is simply a 'fact' that they have learned to give in response to certain promptings but it is certainly not what they base their actual decisions upon. People who purportedly believe in evolution hardly ever react to and judge human behavior on the grounds that human beings are a domesticated primate group. If they did so, then much of our moral and social quibbling would be absolutely absurd. There is a clear gap between what many people say they think and how they actually behave on this issue and it shows up in much the same way for modified people talking about modification.

"The difference between people without tattoos and people with tattoos is that people with tattoos don't mind if you have tattoos or not."

I have seen variations of the above in many a shop, on t-shirts, and quoted by people complaining about the fact that the 'un-modified' often discriminate against or look down upon them. However, I often see behavior which goes directly against it – people with tattoos or other mods being very judgmental and pejoratively discriminating against those without. This is not only the case for people without what is popularly referred to as body modification but also for those with 'taboo' mods like facial tattooing or amputations. While I find it unfortunate and potentially damaging that

people who choose certain methods of body modification (like tattoos or piercings) would further divide themselves from people who do not rather than try and show those others that what they do in getting tattooed or pierced is simply another means in a process we all engage in, it seems even worse to me that they should want to divide amongst themselves those with acceptable and unacceptable tattoos, etc. For anyone doing so and then claiming to understand body modification as a more general term I would like to hold up the mirror of logic so that they can clearly see it shatter with their reflection.

This does lead to another interesting trail of thought, and one that Shannon suggested investigating as part of following up the piece: the differences between atypical and mainstream modification and how the line is drawn. Quite clearly this is a question of relative cultural and social values as it can be seen that what is the norm is one part of the world and a given subset of a population can vary widely and be plainly contradictory with another. For example, in many African cultures scarification would not be atypical while in the US it is still anything but mainstream and while tattooing might still be considered atypical in the US for the culture as a whole in many subsets (like the often cited bikers and rock musicians) it is very much part of their mainstream, if not obligatory. To push it back to a broader context, we could ask why is it that I am allowed, and often expected, to cut and style my hair but I am frowned upon for doing so in certain ways such as a mohawk. If you want to really see how something like hair style can affect your life try wearing a mustache in the style that was chosen by Chaplin and Hitler (and was very common in its day). I wore such a mustache for a few months in the nineties and was almost universally reviled for it, receiving harsh and negative reactions the likes of which my facial tattooing has never even approached. All for a small patch of hair that was representative of nothing symbolic. When people would call me nasty names I would sometimes rebuke them for not appreciating my homage to Chaplin's genius – this generally just confused and further incited them.

To really address why some modifications are accepted and others less accepted or even taboo would require an in depth examination of the relevant culture or society. I am certainly not going to attempt a full deconstruction of western civilization and its views on the body here – others have attempted and I think pointed to a great many salient points and influences. I do think though that what you see in terms of a given groups attitudes towards hair, dress, tattoos, elective surgery, etc is something of an admission that body modification is universal and as such rather than be denied it can only hopefully be directed for the good and interests of the group. We then see the typical problem arising on the macro scale that the group is simply too large and diverse in many cases to reach fundamental decisions. For instance, an ear piercing on a man in an urban area of the US

will have little effect but I still know and see regions in which it draws negative attention.

Another jump, mainstream versus atypical puts me in mind of another term: extreme. What is extreme body modification? Most of the treatments I have seen before have suggested that there are two grounds on which a modification can be extreme; technical difficulty and social reaction. Personally, I think the former can be almost completely discounted. The technical difficulty of a modification (now speaking in the popular sense) is negligible and for the most part only exists because of how the industry is structured. I do not mean to deflate anyone but the most complicated procedures being performed by modification artists (such as implants, genital splitting, urethral relocations, minor amputations etc) are incredibly basic compared to what is done on a routine daily basis by the medical community. It is the social component that makes something truly extreme in my opinion primarily because it is a social stigma held by those most qualified (doctors and surgeons) which prevents us from attaining the true outer limits of what is possible in terms of modifying our bodies.

Given the possibility that what is extreme is socially derived it will then be quite relative. As has been pointed out before, for a given pair of individuals it may well be a more extreme act for one to simply dye their hair than it would be for the other to tattoo their face. In fact, I am thinking of an actual case. I had a friend from a very traditional Japanese family in college who was nearly disowned for coloring her hair red whereas I received a primarily positive response from my family when I tattooed my face. And what about facial tattooing? Recently (6/23/2003) on IAM, Shannon predicted/described facial tattooing as the next “trend”. I have to agree that I have seen and been approached by people considering it a lot more in the past couple years but I would say that its only going to be for a certain type that it really becomes predominant (Remember what I said above about groups attempting to direct modification for their own good and interests) I think you will see people who have always been a bit further along (full body suits, heavy facial piercing, etc) realizing that in today’s world they aren’t really taking that much of a risk by moving into facial tattooing – If you already have large stretched or many multiple facial piercings the general public’s reaction if you add a facial tattoo probably won’t change that much. The ones that I think are interesting from the standpoint of cultural change are those that are less heavy designs – ones that work up the neck or along the hairline and are more decorative than transformative of a person’s appearance. All that said though, a couple things about facial tattooing (inspired in part by Cora’s column [*Cora was undergoing hormone treatments and counseling in preparation for sexual re-assignment surgery. He has since stopped the process and returned to life as a man*] for those considering the incredible transformation she is undergoing):

It will change your life. The degree will vary but it will change and you will not be able to predict a lot of it.

Make sure your life is at a relatively stable point. Getting your face tattooed is not an answer or a fix for anything. It is going to make your life less certain (see above) and that's not something you need if things are already unstable.

Make sure you want it and get what you want. Seems obvious I know, but it is amazing what people overlook or skimp on.

Tell people you care about beforehand and examine their response. They will be your support and can help you a lot. Sometimes people are amazed that I have such a good relationship with my family but as I often say (and I mean it every time) I could not do what I have done without them.

Try it out first. Use makeup or whatever to simulate it – not just for a minute but for days or longer. Put the design up and look at it everyday because once its there you will have to see it everyday.

In a perfect world, I would suggest these (and more) before any mod but I'm not naive enough to think that's going to happen.

The Benefits of Being Trendy

7/7/2003

I first wrote this in response to a few commonly heard complaints around various body modification circles and have since realized it is a never-ending cycle. For every group or generation that comes to find something and embrace it to any extent there will be those who must complain about those who find it after them and/or don't embrace it in just the same manner. Get over it.

They say, 'You have to take the bad with the good.' Now, we all know that They say a lot of things – and a lot of what They say is inane crap. I bring up this particular adage though, because when it comes to the popularity or so-called 'trendiness' of body modification all I tend to hear are negatives. It comes from both sides – those who are aghast that people do these sorts of things fear a new wave of modified people and the already modified are mortified that their cool, unique status is about to be threatened or that their deeply personal journey that the 'mod' represents will simply be mistaken as joining in with the latest fad.

Part of the problem, as usual, comes from the media that applies the label of trend or fad. Their doing so is usually a calculated move to create or increase the impact of a story – just look at the recent coverage of tongue splitting. Tongue splitting is not even remotely a fad or a trend in the world, in the west, or even among people who go so far as to get tattoos and piercings. At best, you might say that tongue splitting is approaching the level of a trend among those people who have disposition towards "heavy mods". But what makes a better sounding story? A couple random people doing what they want to make themselves happier or a rush of people mindlessly running to get their tongues cleaved? The latter makes a story, which combined with a good image or two, that is sure to draw attention and that is what it is all about: ratings. Commercial media is based upon how many people they can get to look at their product and subsequently the ads within which pay for the whole enterprise. But there is an upside. It is possible, I'd even say likely, that out of all the people who saw the coverage of tongue splitting that there were at least one or two who saw something that they could identify with, perhaps had even been dreaming of, and now know that they can achieve. If just one person benefits in this manner then I, for one, would be willing to go through the all the hassle and headaches over and over again tenfold.

By way of extension, we can apply such a loose model of exposure

to most ‘mods’. Think about how you first came to know of tattooing, body piercing, or whatever else might be your fancy. If you have come into any of these ‘scenes’, especially in the last decade or so, then it is very likely that your initial exposure was due in some part to the increasing popularity of them. Moreover, the primary reason you currently have such a large selection of quality manufacturers of jewelry and equipment, qualified artists, and other resources is because of this popularity (trendiness). [I know, it also spawns the glut of anything for a buck shops, but - ‘You have to take the bad with the good.’ Heh.] It was not long ago that finding jewelry, good or no, larger than 14 gauge was an incredibly frustrating search and the idea of something like pocketing was nowhere to be found. The necessary fuel to the creative fire of the people who pioneer new designs and procedures to offer us is an industry capable of supporting them. Before you bemoan the ‘belly pierced and quarter sized butterfly tattoo on her butt’ chick imitating her favorite pop star remember that she is one of legions and it is their dollars that help make this industry. Shops cannot survive off only the heavy and unique procedures and practitioners cannot simply jump in at an advanced level – good piercers get good by doing lots of piercing, good tattoo artists get their basics down churning out flash, etc. Every little flash piece from butterfly to Taz and every blinking light navel barbell are dollars in the coffers and experience at work that go towards potentially improving and evolving the industry and community. Without recent trends your current piercing would probably have been much more expensive, done by a less experienced piercer, and used lower quality jewelry. When the trends and fads are too thin to produce new customers the businesses fall off and it is usually the better shops that take the first hits because of their unwillingness to cut costs on the quality they provide to you in terms of staff and products. So, instead of laughing at ‘trendy chick’ or whoever else – thank them and kindly suggest that they think about adding to their collection. And who knows, perhaps in going through the process of getting that fashion driven ‘mod’ the person may well learn something unexpected or find a deeper meaning and motivation. That butterfly could grow into a bodysuit, we all start somewhere, but that first step might not have happened if not for the pop-star tattoo trend.

So, what do you do when everybody else starts getting the up till now rare ‘mod’ that you chose because it’s the latest trend? My advice: Get over it. If you only got something done to different from those who didn’t have it then you are just as shallow, if not worse, than those who run and get the latest thing their idol had done. Odds are you weren’t the first and only person to have it anyway – so why is it ok for you to one among tens or hundreds but not thousands? We are all already unique individuals by nature without making any effort whatsoever. Doing something just to try and be different is rather silly and redundant to the facts. Ask yourself, ‘If everybody else had it, would I still want it and why?’ Here’s another one of

those things They say, 'Just because everyone is doing it, doesn't mean you have to too.' To this I say, 'Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean you shouldn't.' Are you afraid of being one of the crowd or being perceived as one of the crowd? The 'crowd' is an illusion –everybody doing it has their own personal feelings and motivations for what they are doing – the differences may not be great but they are there. So, really you can't be one of the crowd but you can be seen as such. And this seems to be the most common complaint among the 'anti-trendy modified'. These are the people who are upset that their personally significant 'mods' will be viewed as just pop trends. Again: Get over it. People who look at you and think you got your piercing or whatever because the flavor of the moment rock star has it done weren't ever going to recognize the deeply personal or spiritual event/outlook it represents to you anyway. In fact, it is rather hard to do this in any situation unless you explicitly tell the person what it means to you. It may be annoying that they make an assumption that you find distasteful but that's life and it is going to happen a lot – people make assumptions, trend or no trend. How am I supposed to guess that your butterfly is symbolic of a reclamation and rebirth after abuse and addiction instead of something you and your sorority sisters did on a dare just by looking at it?!

I know and know of a few people who have removed or reversed things because they became popular. I sit here typing this and laughing at such people. To me, your 'mods' could not have meant so much to you as you claimed if they can be given up simply because others had their own as well. Beyond which I choose to laugh because the alternative is to cry at your lack understanding. Your ideas about modification may be deeply spiritual or have a greater context but that doesn't have to be so for everyone. You can stretch your lobes for enlightenment but let others stretch them for looks or just for fun. Why should it matter they aren't approaching modification with your particular frame of reverence? Feel free to be annoyed if you want but if you actually feel that way about it I would think that you would keep yours and educate others rather than giving up completely. I don't see the devout among Jews giving up circumcision and the bris, Hindus no longer wearing nostril piercings, or any other number of peoples stopping their modification practices just because other people in the world may start doing them for other reasons than their religiously / spiritually motivated ones.

Finally, perhaps the greatest benefit of body modification being trendy is simply a greater level of acceptance. If enough people are doing something that it can be rightfully called a fad or a trend then that means a lot of people are doing it. The more people doing it, the more likely it is to gain acceptance. Look at men piercing their ears over the last couple decades. People like myself with so called extreme and heavy mods are not the ones who can or will make body modification accepted at large. We can do our

part as ambassadors of a sort, but ultimately it is the trend followers that will bring body modification home to their families and fight on the front lines for its acceptance. Mom and Dad can sit home and watch me on TV, perhaps even enjoying it, without ever being threatened or changing their dislike for modification but when their son or daughter comes home with their new ‘mod’ then the real process begins. They face possibly an even greater struggle than those who might shun them for their fad – which would you think is easier to fall back upon for support in such times: A vision or belief based on body modification or just wanting to be allowed to look a certain way.

Are You a Body Modifier?

An Ode to Keith Alexander

5/21/2005

This piece was never published. This may well be because it needs work or because the backlog pushed it back long enough that it was held indefinitely after Keith's untimely death on July 11, 2005. Keith was incredible friend and influence to me. Nothing I could think to write would do him or his memory justice but I will share the following piece and smile like a fool every time I think of him.

Early on when I began writing for BME I wrote two columns dealing with how body modifications are defined (What is 'Body Modification?') and differentiated ("What is Body Modification?" – What does it matter?). This time around I want to return to that subject matter by looking at a question which follows from or perhaps even should precede those columns: Are you a body modifier?

Given my rather broad and inclusive position in these former pieces that everyone modifies their body in some fashion, even if only temporarily and in socially accepted ways like haircuts, it would seem that the label 'body modifier' is applicable to everyone and as such fairly meaningless. However, there is a specific context in which I want to pose the question. That context is one of community and social classification. I ask the question not in the sense of 'Have you modified your body?' but rather 'Do you see yourself and do others identify you as someone who modifies their body and if so, why and on what grounds?'

People engage in a great many activities which are seemingly ubiquitous but only describe themselves and are recognized by others for a few of them. For instance, many people run but not all of them would describe themselves as runners or be described as such by others. In this way we might also separate out body modifiers from those who modify their bodies (everyone). So, the question is how someone becomes identified by an activity beyond simply by engaging in it – which would, of course, be the obvious initial requirement. A great deal seems to be dependent upon self identification. That is, the individual makes a personal choice to describe themselves in this manner. People when asked to describe themselves will often use such terms (runner, cyclist, biker, artist, etc). An interesting aspect of body modification is that while a person may not identify themselves as a body modifier, many people utilize body modification to show the things they do identify themselves with. This ranges from things like punk or

rockabilly haircuts to themed tattoos and beyond.

This self identification seems to relate to taking a view of the activity as a means of filtering and expressing experience. That is to say, runners will view things in terms of running; gamers will relate things in gaming terms, and so on. Obviously, no one activity will completely rule the individual unless they have a clinical obsession but I hope that what I am describing is something that most people have experienced and can relate to their own lives. The one that stands out for me are my friends who are music buffs. I do love and enjoy music but I do not identify myself as a musician or music lover. I know people who do and they often use music terms to relate to non-musical events and things. They also devote their leisure time and spare cash on equipment and recordings that seem useless or overkill to me. And, to be more self-analytical, I know I devote far more time and money to modification and gaming than all but a small portion of my friends are willing to consider or even hear about for more than short doses.

Beyond the individual there is the description of the individual by others as being such. Others may accept or reject a self identification or may even impose upon an individual an identification (label) that the individual does not. The application of a term in language is a community process, otherwise language would break down and be ineffective for communication with everyone using words as they saw fit. So, it is one thing for a person to call themselves something and another for the rest of the language users around them to accept their use of the term. A popular expression among one of the groups I often work and spend time with goes something like this: \$20,000 and twenty miles doesn't make you a biker.

And this, for those who were wondering, is why this column is subtitled 'An Ode to Keith Alexander'. A couple of days after I started working on this column, Keith posted an entry entitled "Trendoid" that read: It's not a "mod." It's a fucking tattoo.

The entry had a forum which quickly became a discussion of notions like those discussed in my columns on the use of the term 'body modification'. Most of the back and forth was between Keith and Shannon with some interjections from myself and others. Keith's reputation as an often brutally honest provocateur and gadfly (those being the polite terms) should be understood before reading too much into it. Also, it should be known that this is not the first or likely the last time he goes down this route. In fact, Keith does a wonderful presentation / guided discussion on body modification which he has presented a number of times. I attended one of the earlier ones a few years ago.

I won't try to speak for Keith, but I do want to take up what I think is

his point or one them seriously. From a point of community and even just simple language use there needs to be a line in the sand, though that line may shift and move, where we say that a term is or isn't applicable. So, you don't get to be a biker just by buying a Harley; you aren't a runner because you jogged last Wednesday; and you aren't a body modifier because you got your ears pierced at the mall or a dime sized butterfly tattoo on your butt. In the past, I have discussed the benefits of being trendy to body modification and I still stand by that position. However, while I take issue with Keith's semantic techniques I stand firmly with him in what I think is this aspect of his position. I believe it was another notable figure in the body modification community, Shawn Porter, who once said something like:

“They get belly rings and tats; we have navel piercings and tattoos.”

That to me is a pretty good indication of people who have modified their bodies v body modifiers. Of course, it could just be me getting old and not being hip enough to the new language coming down the pike. And ultimately I think it is mainly an issue of language and language use.

So, what's the point? How do you tell if you are a body modifier or just someone who has modified their body? I could give a trite little after school special bit like 'it comes from inside' but I don't buy that and it might cause involuntary vomiting. The exploration has been interesting to me, and I hope it has held your attention but it only brings me to another question: Why is it important? And the answer to this question is, in my current opinion, self contained to the individual.

The current curmudgeon in me wants to say that you are a body modifier if I say you are – so, if you want to know, just ask me.

To Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake: Thank You!

2/4/2004

I still think it was fantastic and I am only saddened that pierced nipples being exposed on TV did not become a trend. As it turns out, the nipple shield in question was purchased at a shop run by a friend of mine in Houston but the exposure did not create a sudden huge demand. I should also note that more than five years later the court battles over this event are still ongoing as the FCC continues to make even more of a mockery of itself.

It is the probably the most popular topic of conversation post-super bowl. Not the game, not even the ads, but rather; the nipple. And, since that nipple was not only pierced but even further adorned with a stylized nipple shield, what better place to discuss it than here on BME.

For those of you, like me, who have little to no interest in football (I watch the halftime show and channel flip to see the ads) or are smart enough to simply leave your TVs turned off; here's what happened. At the finale of the halftime show performance by Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake, Justin tore off part of Janet's costume completely exposing her right breast and pierced nipple with starburst shield.

Did she plan it? Did they plan it? Did anyone else know it was going to happen? Do exposed nipples, or more so pierced ones, represent a danger? Does it even matter?

Whether it was planned or not, who knew beforehand, and if breasts are more or less offensive than the ongoing war coverage are all completely irrelevant to my thoughts on the matter. I simply want to thank Janet and Justin for what may have been an unwitting boon to piercing and many people in general. That brief live flash of a pierced nipple, which is now forever recorded, enlarged, and enhanced all over the web and on Tivo units across the world was very likely a first or at least a significant episode for many of the younger viewers in the audience. It also occurred in an obviously sexual context via the choreography and song lyrics. Given all this, it is not unlikely that a great many people have been given a positive erotic association with pierced nipples and nipples shields. If there is one thing we have found from studies of our collective psyches over the years it is that it takes very little prodding at the right moments of development to create deep fetishes and influence personal preferences. Something that is conspicuously absent in most discussions of the "incident" is how the breast

and nipple have become eroticized in our culture by being restricted from view, whereas in other parts of the world a topless woman is not noteworthy in the least for the sheer fact that her nipples are visible.

I'd even like to think that Janet & Justin realized the potential implications of showing her pierced nipple. The action of reaching over and grabbing the costume almost had to be entirely planned and intentional. Janet knew when she went out to perform that there was nothing under that piece of the costume that would tear away. Most people, in my experience of pierced nipples, do not wear shields all the time or even casually but rather only with some intent. But then again, who is to say she didn't have something intimate planned for after the show? I would like to think that Janet, with Justin as a willing participant, decided the time was right for the American viewing public to see what their counterparts around the world had been enjoying for years now on TV - nipples. I'd even like to think that she thought of the younger developing viewers and that they should learn to celebrate the nipple rather than shun it. That she could show them how she had celebrated her own nipples with piercing and jewelry and convey to them some of the joy of that intimacy by proudly displaying it. But that's all just needless pontificating on my part. What matters is that the nipple came out in all its pierced glory and millions beheld it.

Even if it doesn't create legions of people who salivate, or otherwise produce moisture, at the thought of nipple shields it certainly has brought piercing into the spotlight once again. Janet, despite her family's problems and predilections, is a beautiful, intelligent, and talented woman – you could do a lot worse for an example of who gets their nipples pierced.

It remains to be seen if people start rushing in to get their nipples pierced as a result of Janet's exposure but I am very pleased that the first live prime time nipple to be aired on network TV was pierced. And so, I proudly say:

Thank You Janet & Justin.

Bill O'Reilly Fears The Lizardman

7/23/2004

I actually doubt Bill has even the slightest recollection of my existence but this title still amuses me. He couldn't possibly be more irrelevant to my life these days but taking him to task can be an amusing exercise even if it is so damn easy – Keith Olbermann has nearly made a career of it. Also, I feel somehow indebted to anyone who helped provide the world with Stephen Colbert, ironically or not. I put this article after the one about Janet Jackson's nipple because one of Bill's pieces that I quote was also ostensibly about that super bowl though it degenerates quickly and in the usual fashion into prejudiced ranting.

The first time I encountered Bill O'Reilly's irrational views on body modification was some time ago when he appeared on Last Call with Carson Daly. I was flipping channels and came across the show, having only heard a little about Bill at the time I decided to stop and get some firsthand experience of him. The thing that has stayed with me from that interview was Bill's reaction to seeing Carson's forearm tattoo. With no more provocation than the sight of the tattoo, O'Reilly began to voice his extreme disapproval, tinged with sorrow, over people – particularly young people like Carson – getting tattoos. I do not have a transcript but the phrase 'hate to see young people ruining themselves' sticks in my head. While those may not have been his exact words at that time, they are certainly in line with the position he continues to espouse today, often without any prodding.

Besides revealing his prejudice a propos of nothing, the other thing that makes this notable for me is the context. Here is a man (O'Reilly) who as the guest on the show is lamenting how someone younger than he is, with (at the time) two very strong television shows has ruined himself and his future by getting a tattoo. I really think that Bill would do better concerning himself with his own career than that of Carson who could likely rest comfortably on his laurels for the rest of his life already and shows few signs of slowing down. Also, as Carson was quick to point out, this particular tattoo is a tribute to his Father. O'Reilly was hardly fazed at this, though it was enough for him to shift off from discussing Carson's tattoo to tattoos in general and then letting the subject go for the moment. So, when faced with fact that he had ignorantly spouted off about a tattoo that by anyone's standards would be a beautiful and solemn gesture he did not apologize or reconsider but simply went on pontificating, conveniently overlooking his misstep and the glaring counter to his argument sitting next to him.

Since this incident I have had the chance to hear O'Reilly denigrate tattoos and piercings regularly – most often in his radio broadcasts, when I am on the road I tend to search for talk radio and encounter him on the airwaves frequently. He often lumps being tattooed or pierced in with violent and/or antisocial behaviors, illiteracy, misogyny, and other undesirable qualities or activities. Sometimes he goes so far as to say that a visible tattoo or piercing is an indication that the wearer is a social degenerate. Frequently, he points to how people with visible tattoos or piercings will not be able to get jobs and thus make any contribution to society. Consider the following quotes:

“Already you see millions of young Americans covered with tattoos, unable to speak proper English, unwilling to read a book or a newspaper. How do you think these people are going to compete in our hypercompetitive economic marketplace? The answer is that millions of them will be unable to compete, and will be doomed to a low wage existence. IBM will not hire you if you have a tattoo on your neck.”

-<http://www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/oreilly020904.asp>

“Thus, we now have 10-year-old boys calling little girls "bitches." We have 13-year-olds with tattoos and body piercings. We have poor children without parental guidance selling dope and carrying guns.”

-<http://www.townhall.com/columnists/billoreilly/bo20030118.shtml>

My first question to Bill would be, where has this prejudice come from? It seems a bit too overdone, even for a pundit (the job description of which could easily read ‘making gross and unjustified generalizations’), to be simply a symptom of the residual western puritanical stigma attached to most forms of body modification. Perhaps every pierced and tattooed person that Bill has ever encountered or heard of was an ignorant, violent, leech on society with no redeemable human values. Maybe he somehow managed to overlook all of the good people who are pierced and tattooed – the policemen, firemen, doctors, scientists, and just plain good folks (including ones with neck and hand tattoos that work for IBM – I know of a few) . I won't deny that there are some truly repugnant people in the world and I will freely admit that some of those people are pierced and tattooed but there is something very important that Bill O'Reilly seems determined not to see:

Heroes have tattoos too.

In fact, if I were to over-generalize my experience in a similar manner I would be saying similar things about people without visible tattoos

or piercings. Nearly every person who has ever accosted me for money or that I have observed or experienced acting poorly in public was not notably modified. Conversely, the nicest and most successful people I know are very publicly modified.

And this is why Bill O'Reilly fears me – and probably you too. We rip the carpet out from under his proverbial feet. As much as he would love to paint us all as exceptions that prove the rule, there are just too many of us spread across too many fields and endeavors. And here is a note to Bill and anyone else who wants to tread that path: In real logic, the exception NEVER proves the rule. Furthermore, many tattooed people are not *employees* because they are **employers!**

If there is a silver lining to the success that allows O'Reilly spew his ignorant prejudice to such a large media audience it is that it means he will almost certainly never return to his former career as an educator. Yes, as he himself is often quick to point out, O'Reilly is a former teacher. Coming from a family of teachers and having teaching experience myself (ranging from elementary to college level); I shudder to imagine Bill O'Reilly entrusted with the care of developing minds. Per his prejudice against body modification and despite claiming to hold personal freedom in any regard he advocates draconian methods in response to students who he describes as disrupting classrooms through body modification and or dress. I can only hope that his replacement was more enlightened and realized that instead of removing someone from the system until they comply by force that issues of difference, including dress and body choices should be addressed for the benefit of all in the class.

As a final note, I will mention that I was contacted to appear as a guest on Bill O'Reilly's show over a year ago when tongue splitting legislation stories were hot and I was getting the chance to debate some of the legislators, often pointing out their complete lack of any facts on the subject. Bill and his producers seemed interested in the story because they agreed with my take on it being an issue of freedom and pointless legislation of prejudice. I also suspect that the political affiliations of the bills authors may have played a role. However, the appearance and story were canceled. I cannot say for sure as to why – I was told that they decided to cut it in order to give more time to another story. Here is an alternate theory: Having contacted me and done some basic research on me based on information I directed them to on my website and BME, the producers and Bill realized that I would likely not just be attacking the tongue splitting legislation but also looking to press him on his stance on body modification. Could it be that Bill O'Reilly didn't want to have to defend himself and give airtime to an educated well prepared opponent with a tattooed face?

I would still welcome the opportunity to be a guest on the show but given my plans to show up in nothing but a shower cap with a falafel and a loofah, I doubt the invitation is forthcoming. They would never air it anyway. If you don't get that reference, google "o'reilly falafel loofah" but not too soon after eating. Remember Bill, the internet never forgets.

Confronting Rudeness: How & Why the modified should go on the offensive

6/22/2004

It seems pretty natural to me to go from a discussion of Bill O'Reilly to one about rude and inappropriate behavior. The very first thing I ever wrote for BME was a text submission in the mid-nineties which may or may not have survived somewhere online. It was a brief piece on talking to modified people that was essentially a plea for people to stop being rude. It suffered from a number of flaws but the most serious was that I was writing in a forum mainly seen by those suffering the abuse rather than the abusers. The purpose of this column was to hopefully instill in the readers a sense of purpose for confronting rudeness. I still see this as a serious matter regardless of the pretense, whether it is modification related or not, rudeness should not be tolerated. I have two general caveats that guide me in social situations: Don't take any shit. & Don't be dick. I often find the challenge is to remember the latter while enacting the former.

When I first thought of doing a column on rudeness, my motivation was to approach the subject from the point of view of the modified individual confronted with rude actions and reactions on the part of the individual. In the past I have attempted to address the general public on issues of how to politely approach and discuss things with those whose modifications catch their attention. But clearly, the audience I have the best chance of reaching is the modified.

I am not going to use this as a forum to list or vent about the barrage of endlessly stupid questions or unconscionable actions that society overlooks as a whole when perpetrated against someone with visible modifications. You can get a quick idea of these sorts of actions and comments, and the venom they inspire by looking through many of the experience submissions on BME. Rather I want to discuss how and why the modified should respond with the goal of enacting some positive changes.

First, it is important to accurately identify rude behavior. Rudeness is a very subjective thing. Whether or not something is rude from the point of view of the individual and on the whole is almost entirely dependent upon context and personal sensitivity. Sure, there are pretty clear cases – such as, perhaps the most egregious, unwanted physical contact whereby strangers grab or rub tattooed arms and the like without asking. And even though

most cases might be pretty easily identified and accepted as rude there are more subtle and perhaps even more dangerous forms. More dangerous because the less obvious it is, the more likely it will be overlooked and allowed to continue. I think that a good ‘rule of thumb’ is that if you feel mistreated, then you should take some action. If you are unsure of whether or not you may be being too “thin-skinned” you might discuss it first with others but you should NOT simply accept ANY mistreatment.

In identifying rudeness, especially in the case of modification, it is important to try and gauge the rude person’s motivations. Sudden exclamations may not be motivated by malice or prejudice but rather the shock and amazement of seeing something incredible and probably incredibly foreign to that person. They may very well actually be excited and find what they are seeing to be positive. When in doubt, you may wish to first try and discern better the motivations behind the words or actions through observation or conversation to determine if it was a rudely motivated gesture or simply a misunderstanding before escalating to confrontation. In all but the most serious and obvious cases it is a good idea to give the benefit of the doubt. Think of how you would react in a similar situation – if something you were unfamiliar with suddenly walked past you, might you not forget yourself for a moment and exclaim out loud? As a person with a tattooed face I know that I still stare at other tattooed faces when I see them. To me staring is the natural reaction to something interesting, it is a compliment – an unspoken way of saying, “Wow! Look at that, its cool!”

If you do feel someone has been rude to you then respond. But gauge your response appropriately. If you are suddenly grabbed by someone, that is assault and reacting physically and/or involving the authorities is perfectly reasonable. However, if a 20 year old man grabs you at a party and you punch him the results will be far different than if an 80 year old woman grabs you in line at the grocery store and you punch her. By the letter of the law both cases should be treated the same but that is not how society works and we need to be aware of this.

Battling rudeness is, to my mind, a campaign for the hearts and minds (both others and our own). I fully understand the feeling and motivation to make some bastard pay but life is a lot like sports in that it’s often the second infraction that gets penalized. When you punch the jerk who grabs your arm you probably get nailed for aggravated assault – whereas if you point out the rude behavior to the world you can shame and make an example of them. Shame is one of the best weapons we have against rudeness. People are social creatures and they tend to try really hard not to look bad in front of others. Pointing out rude behavior, especially when it happens in a public place can be very effective. Also, in terms of promoting the case of the modified it shows we don’t stand for such infractions.

Shaming is also far less risky than physical action. In many situations physical action would simply be foolhardy. As important as it is to stand up for yourself, it is also important to keep yourself safe.

But why Respond To Rudeness? Sometimes it just doesn't seem worth it. Why not just let it go?

It may seem that the reason to confront someone who is rude to you is as simple as the personal affront to you, the righteous indignation that they shouldn't be allowed to get away with it. And while I would agree that this is a large part of it, it goes deeper than that. Rude behavior, like all behavior, is habitual and an expression of that person's thoughts and opinions and mediated by what they believe is appropriate or can get away with. And while the shock of seeing an incredible or foreign (to them) modification may distort the boundaries for them, they are not going to act horribly inconsistent with their usual behavior.

Rude people act rude because they think its ok and/or that they can get away with it and they will continue to do so until something makes them think otherwise. Every time you have the opportunity to confront rudeness you have a chance to help reform that person's behavior. In all likelihood, it will take many confrontations to break the habit of rudeness. And, as we all are all probably familiar, it is much easier for an established habit be reinforced than broken. And so, when you do not confront rudeness, not only do you forego a chance at helping stop it – you actually encourage it by giving that person the positive reinforcement of getting away with it.

The fight against rudeness is very serious. It is the fight for your well being and the well being of others. To be treated rudely is to be denigrated and to have this done on a regular basis and without challenge can destroy people. Being constantly put down and mistreated can have tremendous psychological effects. This is only exacerbated by having everyone else around you reinforcing the idea that you deserve the mistreatment by letting it pass as acceptable behavior. In time, the mistreated may even come to believe that they are worthless and/or deserving abuse. Suicides are not the result of bolstered self-confidence and being treated with respect.

Fighting against rudeness is fighting for survival. We cannot live and let live. That creed only works as a two way street – if you try to live and let live with someone who wants you gone, you will be crushed. Those who try to promote such a path are often just trying to set the other side up for a cataclysmic defeat. If you bury your head in the sand and someone will come along very quickly to bury the rest of you.

What About When You Are 80?

8/24/2005

As chronicled in the first paragraphs this column began a series of reader selected topics focusing mainly on common questions encountered by modified people. I found that with most of these articles I learned a great deal more by examining the possible motives for the question more than the question itself. If I live to be 80 I can almost guarantee that I will be far more concerned with happily living even longer than worrying about any past regrets that might arise in the next few decades.

The Lizardman Q&A columns have been a lot of fun but also a little repetitious of late. So, I have been trying to think of things and ways to make them a bit more fun and new again. Quite frankly, I was at a loss and not sure I was going to do one at all this month. Fortunately, inspiration struck in the form of a comment in one of my journal entry forums by IAM: saram. The entry had been about doing things (body modification or not) on the basis of true personal individual motivation rather than as a result of wanting to fit in or not fit in as the case may be. Saram posted to the effect that she thought these arguments were as silly as I did and then wrote:

“I find other repetitive questions to be far more interesting, like, "How will you feel about [a mod] when you're 80?" It's a silly question, but at least it's more thought-provoking.”

As a result, I then and there promised an article on that very question and realized something that would, at least to me, be a fun potential series of columns. As already stated, the following will be a discussion of that often related query “What about when you are 80?” In future months I will be posting other repetitive questions on my IAM page and letting people vote on the next one that I should address. And for fans of the old freestyle Q&A, I am sure it will make a return sometime soon as well.

So, what about when I am, or you are, or anyone else is 80?

I do get asked this question A LOT. Most often the motivating factor behind it seems to be a concern or allegation that I have not really considered the consequences and rushed into things. Of course, this is very far from the truth. I spent nearly four years developing, designing, and considering what I was getting into before ever getting tattooed. Even once I had started I broke my overall project up into sections that would allow me reasonable ‘exit points’ if I changed my mind for some unforeseen reason. This means that I spent more time considering this than some people spend together before getting married or having kids. Ask yourself seriously if you think it is more

foolhardy to publicly tattoo yourself or be responsible for bringing a life into the world without forethought?

Explaining all of this and adding that last bit for perspective is often more than enough to satisfy the inquisitor but if I look at it carefully it does not really answer the question asked – it simply dissolves it by addressing the concerns that motivated the question. Philosophically, being of a Wittgensteinian bent, I love this. But, let's try actually answering the question itself.

When I am 80, or however old I live to be since 80 is just an arbitrary age which most people would throw out as a point of getting reflective due to being potentially on the way out (which is rather pessimistic since I fully plan on living well past a century), what will it be like to have been tattooed, pierced, and otherwise altered? Obviously, there will be some physical degeneration – that is part of aging despite the best efforts of technology, medicine, and lifestyle. I actually look forward to aging, to living through the process. My modifications may have some unforeseen implications but that's half the fun (some wrinkling could potentially make scales look that much cooler) and not a deterrent unless they are seriously debilitating. In a somewhat analogous way, I would point to people getting their ears pierced and wearing the very common French hook style jewelry – would putting up pictures of old women's ears who have been slowly 'cheese cut' over decades of wearing these earrings put an end to mall piercing stands? Hardly. The doctor who split my tongue mentioned doing a brisk business of re-working the ears of people who had worn so called 'normal' earrings throughout their lives – a nice thing to point out since many of the inquisitors have just such piercings.

The more I think about it, I just don't believe that people asking the question are at all concerned with a direct answer such as the above. They are more thinking about what type of life you will be leading as you age and what you will be doing to support yourself or such when you reach that ripe age. Even more so, I am all but convinced that the vast majority of people who pose this question are simply looking to play out a superiority trip and accuse people with body modifications of throwing away their lives in some way – especially when it is asked with the implication of future regret.

So what about regrets and quality of life for the modified? Well, it seems like quality of life need not be a problem at all if people would simply be polite and open minded enough to accept that a modified appearance is not necessarily an indicator of much more than personal aesthetic preference. The problem is not my modifications but your ignorance and prejudice. Given a moment of rational clarity I would hope most people would prefer the eradication of close minded ignorance (on all subjects) to that of

something as potentially positive and affirming as body modification. Most regrets will likely fall from the same tree.

Now given that I am not entirely naive to the world, despite my best efforts to be, and I hope you aren't either I will discuss regret a bit more pragmatically – regardless of body modification. Wondering ‘what if’ seems to be a wholly natural and likely universal activity for people and is not the same as regret. Often when wondering ‘what if’ you may imagine a scenario much grander than your current reality but this should not necessarily lead to regret. I can honestly say that I have absolutely no regrets at this point in my life because even in those situations where I can ‘what if’ myself into much nicer scenarios for myself and others I still made the best decision I could given my knowledge and options at the time. Just because I look back now at what I know to be bad decisions, I do not regret them since being the exact same situation at that same time again I would do the same thing. Hindsight is 20/20 but unless you intentionally acted in a way you knew to be wrong I do not see cause for regret.

I cannot guarantee that you or I will be happy when we are older but if we act in the best manner we know to be available to us I have very high hopes.

What Does Your Mother Think?

9/23/2004

Addressing this question gave me the opportunity to do something I am always thrilled to do - brag and boast about my family. The most altruistic thing I can think of doing is simply wishing that everyone should get to know the joy that is the love and support I have experienced from my family. However, I know that isn't going happen so I hope for strength for those who must endure and persevere on their own and/or in spite of their families.

Earlier this month I took suggestions in a forum on my IAM page for frequently asked questions that people would like to see columns written about. I took the suggestions and listed them in a poll which was, in turn, voted upon by visitors to my page. As a result of that voting a topic question for this column was chosen by the members of the IAM community, or at least those who chose to stop by and vote:

What does your mother think?

This is a question that I, like most body modification enthusiasts, have heard many, many times. Of course, it is just one variation on the theme of family reaction. As much as I do love my mother (who offered in jest to write this column when she heard about the topic) I do not want to leave out my father (whom many people have thought would disapprove due to either his teaching or military careers) or even my younger sister. Thus I prefer to respond in more general terms to the question: What does your family think?

I have often commented upon how important my family is to me and that without their love and support I may not have had the strength or courage to do what I am doing today. It is obvious to anyone who gets to know me even a little bit that my family is very important to me and that I have a great relationship with them. Of course, many people expect just the opposite to be the case. Because of this and the fact that I am aware of how lucky I am to have such a wonderful family, I make a concerted effort to point out my good fortune regularly.

But getting back to the question, I often wonder, at least for an instant before boasting about my family, why does the inquisitor want to know what my family thinks? I'm not talking about interviews; this is a question that many people face regularly for no other reason than that they have chosen to modify their bodies. As with many of the more commonly asked questions, I suspect a masked hostility. I suspect it even more when

the tone is seemingly unkind. And sometimes they even make it obvious - instead of asking the question they make a statement like 'Oh, your poor mother.' or sarcastically quip 'I bet your father is real proud.' When I choose to dignify this type of behavior with a response, and per my confronting rudeness column I do believe it should be responded to, it is generally to announce that my mother is doing quite well and that both she and my father are happy to have raised a child that grew up knowing how to conduct them self properly and politely – obviously unlike some peoples parents. So, just for fun now, let us consider why someone might ask what a person's family thinks of their modifications. They might be legitimately curious but outside of people who are also modified, or considering it, and looking to find out about the situations of similar people to themselves I doubt this accounts for many questioners. Others might be looking to throw proverbial salt in what they suspect may be an open wound. I may be overly suspicious but I think this is the category into which the most will fall.

There is also the chance that the person has not actually made up their mind about you and your modifications. It is certainly not uncommon for a person encountering someone with very public and/or unusual modifications to be thrown off balance. I have, on a few occasions, had people be clearly unsure of what to think of me that were then rather calmed and pleasant after finding out that my relationship with my family was quite positive. Ostensibly, this would mean that being able to maintain a good family bond indicated a positive trait for them and enough so as to remove concern over the behavior of modification. This leads me to the other question that sometimes leaps to my mind when people ask about family: 'Why does it matter what my family thinks?'

I am an individual. And, I endorse some rather extreme forms of individualism. To me it seems perfectly rationale to say that it doesn't matter what my family thinks and it is far better that I live for myself. Circumstances have granted with me a family that loves and accepts me, but if things had been different I think it would be better that I struggled through living the way I wanted rather than caving into pressure from them. I can understand why many people, as a result of social conditioning, would be highly inclined to believe that maintaining a good family relationship is admirable but I do not accept that it should come at the cost of one's own self. As good as my relationship with my family is, I would be lying if I said there were not bumps in the road and there were times that I had to say I was going to go ahead regardless of what they thought. Fortunately, I found out that my family is open-minded and intelligent enough to love me and respect me even more for following my own way. If this had not been the case things would have undoubtedly been harder for me but it would still have been the right thing for me to do, in my opinion, to go on without their support.

I know that a lot of readers do not have the luxury of a family like mine. So, to close this column I want to move away from the topic question a bit and talk about dealing with family. As I have said before, clichés are clichés for a reason - there is truth in them. You don't get to choose your family and you cannot escape that they are your relatives. As such, there is a certain prudence in taking extra care when dealing with family. Remember that it is a two way street – what hurts you, hurts them and what hurts them, hurts you. Particularly in dealing with parents you should keep in mind that, even if misinformed and/or misguided, much of their behavior arises out of deep concern for the well being of their children. My optimistic side makes me want to believe that if they truly love you they will eventually come around to realize it is more important that they accept you for who are. Now, the potential of that future moment is, I realize, little comfort when in the throws of what are often highly emotional and irrational battles but it is important to keep it in mind to prevent going past a point of no return. Your family is very likely trying to reconcile all sorts of information on modification, much of it poorly represented or blatantly misrepresented by popular media, and doing so in light of someone they love and care about being involved with it.

Just as you should educate yourself about any modification you want to undertake, you should also, at least attempt to, educate your family and those who matter to you. Let them know, as best you can, about the history, method, and most importantly the personal significance. Do not ask them to somehow psychically divine your motives, especially when your actions may be very foreign to them. By involving and informing them you make it that much easier for them to be accepting even if they cannot fully understand.

You just want attention / You're just trying to be different

10/4/2004

These two alleged criticisms rank pretty highly among my pet peeves and my disdain for those who are prone to using them is more than evident in this piece. I almost wish I had been a bit more cynical and abusive with my responses but overall I think the necessary points get made.

In some recent columns I have addressed common questions that modified people often face from the general public. Along the same lines I thought it would be interesting to tackle potential responses to some of the more commonly made statements and assertions made to or about modified people. To get things started, here are two that I commonly hear and see, especially in online forum discussions, about myself and other visibly modified people.

You just want attention.

When I hear this the first thing that comes to mind is, 'Yeah, so what?' Everybody wants attention; nobody likes to be completely ignored. It is the type and source of attention desired that varies from person to person. There is nothing wrong with wanting attention. The real offense, in my mind, would be to be undeserving of attention i.e. wasting the time of people who are nice enough to give you attention. Through body modification you are at least increasing the odds of there being something interesting enough about you to warrant the attention.

The next thing, and this should be apparent by the fact that someone is commenting at all, is that any effort for attention has obviously been successful. Therefore, by making this particular comment the speaker is simply congratulating the modified person on their achievement of a perceived goal. Perhaps a simple 'thank you' is in order. Then again, probably not.

What really sets this comment out as an attempted insult is the qualifier 'just'. The impolite jerk, I mean the speaker, is trying to imply that the **only** reason one would modify their body is for attention. Now, even if this were the case, this is still a very weak and shallow attempt at an insult for the very reasons I mention above. Of course, the incredibly simple view that any behavior, especially one with as many possible cultural and personal significances as body modification, could be reduced to only one base

motivation indicates immediately that you are not dealing a member of the intellectual elite. Even trying to introduce a concept like quantum causality or merging influences would be futile unless it were an attempt to elicit the all encompassing ‘Huh?’ so common to their ilk.

It is far better to utilize a response more suited to the audience in question. One avenue would be to point out to the person the salient points of how we all seek attention and that it is not a bad thing (unless you are terminally boring). Another, and in my experience, more fun route is to turn things around. I like to suggest that it is the impolite jerk, oops I mean speaker again, that is seeking attention and doing so very likely out of jealousy for the modified person’s ability to attract and command attention. They are only making the comment in order to draw attention to themselves in a way in which they think will win them favor for being astute or clever, something they are clearly not. Unfortunately though, they are probably preaching to an equally ignorant choir. But in the event you can’t educate them, you can at least amuse your self with their mental fumbling.

You’re just trying to be different.

I have often commented on how trying to be different is redundant at best since by nature we are all unique individuals. However, that ‘big picture’ view notwithstanding there are many instances in which separating one’s self out can be beneficial if not essential. This is only exacerbated by the fact that not everyone recognizes or operates in light of this fact. An environment where there is a large degree of commonality of characteristics only makes it that much easier for a person within it to lose track of their inherent uniqueness. By purposefully decreasing the level of shared characteristics a person can help themselves to remain focused on their individuality and to develop and cultivate it. Furthermore, that person makes it far less likely they get lost in the shuffle by becoming more noticeable, for both good & ill, to others. And even ignoring this, the question remains as to what it is that is so bad about trying to be different? If we are all different then when someone implies there is something wrong with being different they must necessarily imply that there is something wrong with them as well. Toss that out and watch the confusion set in.

In theory, free thinking and going your own way are often celebrated and allegedly encouraged. However, in practice, we often see any significant variation or failure to comply with “the norm” is promptly denigrated and crushed whereas minor contextually non-threatening variations will be glorified under the guise of those alleged celebrations and encouragements.

As with the previous statement we also see the ‘just’ qualifier in play here again. And much of what I noted for ‘You just want attention’ can also

be applied here. Additionally, it can be pointed out that there are any number of methods which could equally or even more successfully garner attention and/or separate one from the crowd such as mode of dress or any number of behaviors besides body modification. And many of these would have the additional potential benefit of being far less likely to attract negative results such as these and similar statements. So, one might make the case (and I think often successfully) that the real motivation being evidenced is that of trying to be one's own self.

If someone wants to tell me that I am just trying to be different I believe that I can more accurately show that I was already different and through my modifications I am simply trying to be myself on my own terms. But of course, I'm not surprised when at the end of my discourse I am greeted with, 'Huh?'

Can I touch you?

1/13/2005

Any day I leave my house I can be certain that someone will touch me – sometimes they will ask first, sometimes not. I really am not into being touched by strangers, even the really pretty ones but it has been part of my life for longer than I can accurately remember. It isn't just me, I see it happen to others all the time. And when it happens to my wife I am always a little bit surprised that I'm not in jail for righteously smacking someone upside the head. Obviously, if you are going to touch you have to ask first but is it really an appropriate question – please think about that and encourage others to do the same.

When I last took suggestions and then polled IAM members as to what annoying oft repeated question I should next address in a column I was more than a little surprised at the response:

“Can I touch you?”

My surprise was accompanied by a somewhat vexing block in terms of writing the column. This was exacerbated by a national tour and other concerns but I did not simply walk away from the challenge. In fact, I regularly polled myself and some others as to the nature of this particular quandary.

I have touched upon the issue of touching before, notably in my column on confronting rudeness. However, that was primarily the case of unwanted contact and in particular: unexpected, unwanted contact. As we all probably know from experience, and perhaps even being guilty ourselves, human beings are very tactile by nature. Touching may well be an instinctual response. We often find ourselves admonishing children to look with their eyes and not their hands but more than a few adults could use a refresher course on this subject. The sight of interesting and unusual modifications can often turn otherwise reasonable polite adults into children. A simple ‘Can I look at your tattoos or piercings?’ may be quickly followed by their grubby hands pawing away at you. But what if they ask to touch your tattoo, piercing, implant, or whatever? Now, it may be my paranoia acting up again but I think there is something potentially insidious at play here. Asking first is the polite thing to do but when refused it sets them up to play the victim and cast the modified person badly. How could you, the modified person, refuse such a polite request?

Actually, it's quite simple. You don't want to be touched. Touching someone is only rarely really appropriate behavior. Asking politely to do

something inappropriate does not make it acceptable.

You might turn it around and ask them you could them back but this hardly amounts to anything unless every single modified person they ever meet does the same – even to the point of initiating the request. They will not know what it means to have strange people regularly trying to grab at them, and thus they will not appreciate the situation. They will go on thinking that it's somehow different when there is body modification involved. The implication becomes one similar to the accusation of attention seeking. That people who modify their bodies are asking to be asked to be touched.

While not as desperately serious as saying a woman in a skimpy outfit wanted 'it' after a rape, this is basically the same argument and it is as rampant as it is offensive and logically bankrupt. I only bring up such an abhorrent example as rape in hopes that it might be enough to wake up some people. Touching someone's tattoo without consent is an assault; the constant requests to touch are harassment.

But of course, this is a foggy minefield to walk through since everyone has their own comfort level for physical contact and requests. At the risk of sounding like a hypocrite, I often let people touch my tattoos, implants, and piercings. However, I reserve the right to refuse anyone at anytime regardless of past acceptance on my part. The fact that enough people suggested and voted on this to make it the overwhelming choice for a column tells me that many people are having trouble. My initial reaction was along the lines of, 'Well, at least they are asking instead of just grabbing' but I see now that that misses something.

Body Modification v Spirituality

8/12/2003

This piece really is just a collection of musings and reactions motivated in part by being often surrounded by people speaking of the spirituality of modification and as a reaction to the politics and problems coming out the attempted Church of Body Modification. My atheism is as strong as ever and I still find nothing of value to me in the various mysticisms of the world. I have no problem engaging in activities like suspension and other rituals without a supporting framework of irrationally derived beliefs. This was the first, and I think only, article for which I chose the opening quote rather than Shannon. I always thought he found excellent quotes and supporting images to dress up the articles but with this one I felt the Malaclypse quote was perfect and contained something I really wanted in the article. The BME Mega survey can still be found online at: <http://iam.bmezine.com/megasurvey.html>

*“We are not engaged in a complicated joke disguised as a new religion. We are engaged in a new religion disguised as a complicated joke.” –
Malaclypse the Younger*

This column will be a little different. In terms of style, it is even more so than usual a collection of thoughts and reactions. It is very much a sort of revealing of the process and analysis which runs through my consciousness as relates to the topics within. I present it hopefully as ‘food for thought’ because that is the sort of food which while it cannot support life can make living far more interesting.

From the BME Mega survey:

Are you a member of any religious groups that are involved in body modification?

No	89.2%
No, but I was in the past	2.7%
No, but I hope to be	2.9%
Yes	2.4%
Yes, very actively	0.4%

How important is religion or spirituality in your life?

Not at all	33.6%
Not very much	21.5%
Medium	19.3%
A fair amount	15.1%
Extremely Important	9.0%

How important are morality and ethics in your life?

Not at all	3.4%
Not very much	6.2%
Medium	21.4%
A fair amount	35.7%
Extremely Important	31.8%

These results left me a little bit [pleasantly] surprised. I suppose because like many others I have been sold, to a large extent, the media version of body modification ala the modern primitive / seeker bent. I also often hear, or read on BME, about people connecting their modifications to a faith or spiritual outlook. Then again, many times it seems that the choice of terms ('spiritual') is very much based upon a broad and almost meaningless pop usage. Spirit derives from the Latin *spiritus* meaning breath and thus 'breath of life'. The Greek term would be *psyche* standing for the principle of animation or life. These notions are most often developed in conjunction with a doctrine of [the] soul. Broadly applied it could be related to anything regarding the experience of living but it would generally presuppose a commitment to the idea of spirit and/or soul as substance. This idea is fundamental to many religious doctrines but also presents a host of problems so great that many thinkers have conceded dualism to be effectively bankrupt and instead tried to focus on developing a notion of soul and spirit that is not separate to the body. Given the context in which the term is often placed I have to wonder if something like 'life affirming' might not be a less baggage laden and equally accurate term for many to apply to their experiences.

I am not a religious person. I am not a spiritual person. I do not worship. I do not believe that I have a soul or spirit. I do not feel that my mind and body are in any significant way distinct from one another. I have simply decided, after research and experimentation [which is, of course, still ongoing] that the way in which I currently choose to view and functionally interact with the world does not require these things.

Dualism of the mind-body, body-soul, or even the triad of mind-body-soul types is to me very much like the notion of a flat earth. It has some strong intuitive appeals but eventually it fails my needs and requires

unacceptable complications of explanation. I have no objections, however, to others believing in a flat earth or anything else that may suit them. When I hear ‘mind-body’ I think of it in the same relationship as say ‘liver-body’.

God, Gods, Buddha, Allah, Vishnu, Bigfoot, UFO’s, leprechauns, and the Trix rabbit – believe in whatever you would like. However, do not expect me to share your beliefs nor to accept your implication that my experience of life is any less vibrant or fulfilling for not sharing them. The idea that you can make qualitative judgments of other people’s experiences for them is both arrogant and absurd. While you are at it, you can attempt to convince me that the taste I experience when I eat broccoli* (which I detest) is one that is wonderful to me.

That which inspires religious or spiritual fervor in others is not missing in my life. I simply experience things through a ‘different lens’. To me such things are not evidence of the glory of a greater being or giving me contact with some universal, unifying force. They are, however, glorious life affirming experiences which further impress upon me the wonders which I can come to know.

I do not seek transcendence of body. I seek to revel in body. To me it is a marvelous and nearly unlimited thing and I am far more interested in developing it, pushing it, driving it, and ultimately exploring its full potential. I sometimes wonder if those who seek transcendence are not in some way afraid what their bodies are capable of doing and of themselves. Is their transcendence another way of explaining experience or fleeing from the vastness of experience which is possible.

In fact, transcendence is meaningless to me. In my view of myself as a whole there is no going beyond. All is contained within. This does not mean I have any more or less than those of different views but that I explain the experiences differently. For example, I have experienced by induction and spontaneously all of the sensations often described as OBE (Out of Body Experience) many times, before and after my developing my current views. I would say now that OBE is a misnomer. Of course, I don’t agree with the definition of ‘body’ that is inherent in that description to begin with.

Body modification and ritual are a very large and important part of how I choose to learn about and explore my world. I have a great deal of respect for those people and cultures that have come before and continue on around me in these varied practices. They can teach me a great deal and lead me to a great many possibilities. However, I am at all times on guard to try to be aware of and separate out the necessary from the personal and cultural artifacts. Body modification describes a set of procedures and practices. They need not be religious or spiritual but can be and are often used as such.

This means that the religious or spiritual component is one that is added by the individual or group as a function of their beliefs. Your experience with body modification is your own and need not involve the religious or spiritual beliefs of others. At least as careful, perhaps more so for many, as one is in choosing what foods they consume so should they be with the ideas and beliefs they intake.

P.S. As soon as possible, for general mental nutrition, obtain and read the essay 'Religion for the Hell of it' by Robert Anton Wilson. You can find it re-printed in his book Coincidence. Among other things it contains the essential solution to an effective Church of Body Modification – even for us non-religious, non-spiritual types.

**My original example was spinach but I have since discovered that I love raw spinach, at the time I had only had it cooked and in various other forms which I still hate.*

Suspensions & Me

9/8/2003

If tongue splitting has become a trend, then suspension is an out of control pandemic taking over the world. In the insulated bubble that is the online body modification community it would seem hard to believe that there is anyone left who has not yet suspended. This is obviously not true but still a somewhat susceptible delusion. I continue to be involved with suspension in various forms and fashions though it has been some time since I last went up on hooks myself. I find myself in the very fortunate position of having met the right people at the right time so I know that any time I want I can engage in a safe suspension – if only everyone else could say the same. If I or anyone else has inspired you to consider suspension please seek out qualified professionals to assist you in realizing this goal.

It was about 10 degrees cooler than on the ground and there was a nice gentle breeze. I could see the highway, the water of the Gulf, and the car show going on below us but it was pleasantly quiet except for our collective vocalizations of awe. I was one of six people 150 feet up in the air – hanging from a crane by hooks pierced into the flesh of our backs. At the time, it was the farthest thing from my mind but now it seems fairly obvious to ask, ‘How do you end up in such a situation?’

They say that hindsight is 20/20. In my experience hindsight is where people revise, jump to conclusions, and make assumptions about how things might have been or why they are as they are now. Keeping that in mind, this is my best account of how suspension has become part of my life.

The first recollection that I have of seeing a suspension or even knowing that people did this sort of thing is from my early childhood. I remember seeing on a television show (probably That’s Incredible or something similar) some footage of a man with many small hooks in his back from waist to shoulders hanging in what we now sometimes call a ‘superman’ style suspension. He was reaching back with both hands holding his ankles and then swinging forward and back like the swinging ship carnival rides. It seemed to be somewhere in Southeast Asia or possibly India – that general region of the world - and the explanation given was that the man was trying to insure better times for his family and himself in this and for future lives. I remember seeing a lot of things like this as a child (including many Sufi practices via newsreel footage). I now know that a lot of the coverage was heavily biased and/or just inaccurate but still I got to witness a lot of amazing things which I believe inspired me a great deal overall. However, at the time I felt nothing more than entertained by what I saw – no primal urge or empathy or need to be suspended myself.

My next brush with suspension is one familiar to many people about my age or a bit older - A Man called Horse. I have often heard people reference this as their first time finding out about suspensions. No doubt many people today would be citing things like Ripley's and the movie The Cell in the same manner. If nothing else, it shows that these things are hardly new to the media nor is our fascination with them. I have never seen the movie version of A Man called Horse but my parents had the book and I read it and the sequel. I was intrigued by the suspension but again not particularly inspired or drawn to it.

As I got older and began getting more involved with performance & body based art and developing my own ways and ideas of toying with my body I encountered the work of people like Stelarc. This is when I first really started to get excited about the idea of suspension. It was finally in a context which 'spoke to me'. However, I still wasn't really thinking in terms of suspending myself. I was simply impressed with what he was doing artistically and the method (suspension) he had chosen to employ. Suspension as an experience to me was one that held some interest as something to do but wasn't high in any terms of priority for me. I wasn't actively seeking out information about it, just taking it as it came by me. To a large extent I perceived it as being tied up with rituals and 'head-spaces' I wasn't all that into and wasn't going to push through just to get to hang by hooks.

Jump to 1998 – the year I met TSD (Traumatic Stress Discipline). A release party for Dee Snider's film Strangeland was being held in NYC at Webster Hall, entitled The night of 1000 Scars. Keith Alexander had worked on the film and was organizing entertainment for the party. In a move I am still indebted to him for, he hired me to come down and do some fire manipulation and sideshow stunts for the event. Also on the bill, Traumatic Stress Discipline.

Before things got started that night there were numerous concerns about liability and safety particularly concerning the suspensions and also with my fire show. That gave me a chance to hang out with the guys from TSD and collectively we made fun of lawyers and various naysayers – including the now infamous 'We will absolutely guarantee there will be no more than a 5% mortality rate during the show' (It took them a minute realize that mortality meant people would die and another minute to realize we were joking). In the end, of course, it all went off quite well. The show that TSD put on that night was more of a kinetic living sculpture or exhibition than a story driven or theatre show (like the one I would drive to Oklahoma to see later that year). Allen Falkner, Xeon, and Pat Tidwell did a three man spinning beam with Pat on one end and Allen and Xeon on the

other from an independently spinning beam of their own. I made sure that I was on the floor when they took the stage and went up. The performance energy was immediate and incredible. For the first time I saw something in suspension that spoke to me – I saw powerful audience impact and potential. It was amazing to behold and drew me to want to be part of it in much the same way that viewing masterpieces always makes me want to grab a brush and canvas.

I still remember how amazed I was that after their show, they came down to the first floor stage where I was playing on a bed of nails and the like and complimented me on my fire show earlier. I was still overcome by the power of the performance they had given. We talked, drank and generally bonded and became quick friends for the rest of the night. By the time I headed back north to Albany from Manhattan; my mind was pretty much made up that I would be going to Oklahoma City to see their next show: Life Cycles.

As a number of my friends and anyone who has seen the road video will attest, the trip to see the Life cycles show was an adventure with a great many tangents. The relevant part to this story though is that I made more friends and contacts and was once again greatly impressed and drawn to what TSD was doing. Life cycles was a story driven show that illustrated the cycle of life through various suspensions. Over the course of the next year I would do a number of events with TSD – usually my own show leading up to a suspension by them. Then in the fall of 1999 I joined them onstage as part of one of their shows for the first time. For the ball of whacks in Chicago I participated in a four man pull / stage lift that was the beginning of their show at the event. It all happened kind of suddenly. I had only planned on attending the event but once there it came up that they had an opening for another body and invited me to be it. I had never done anything really like it before so there was some trepidation. However, having seen them work before and having gotten to know them all so well I was quickly won over my desire to try the experience, be part of the show, and, of course, my confidence in their abilities. The pull went well and only furthered my desire to suspend. It was a good introduction to the feeling of having the hooks put in and playing around with them. However, it would still be awhile before I actually I got to suspend. But not for lack of trying...

Soon after the Ball of Whacks I left to go on tour with Godsmack as part of The Jim Rose Circus. While on tour I tried to arrange for Allen and I to suspend as part of the Dallas show at the Bronco Bowl. Logistically, it was pretty much dead from the start and there was some resistance from the tour organizers and sponsors. But shortly after in 2000 I took a trip down to stay with Allen and things were arranged so that I could suspend at the TSD warehouse while visiting.

For my first suspension I went up on four hooks in my back suicide style. I was nervous beforehand but it's hard to get too worked up with people like Allen and Pat cracking jokes at you. It also helped that Meghan had made the trip up from Austin to Dallas to be there as well. Once I was pierced and rigged Brion Thompson gradually worked to chain hoist to lift me off the ground. Once my feet were off the floor I slowly pulled my legs up into something of a lotus position and there was a quite pause in the room. Brion said, 'Is he smiling?' and Allen leaned in to look at my face before responding 'Oh yeah, he's smiling.' For the next 20 minutes or so I swung back and forth, twirled and just generally enjoyed the sensation of flying by the hooks. Once I felt warmed up, Brion grabbed my legs and hung off me for a second or two and then I came down. Later that same evening I went back up on the spinning beam with Mark Rose.

That is how it started. Later that year I would be suspended at Modcon by Allen and Ron Garza. In 2001, Ron would suspend me again for the Travel channel in Austin. Allen would then suspend me for the Jagermeister tour in 2003 after a prolonged break. In that time I would also attend and help out at a number of suspension shows and events and contribute to the BME suspension FAQ.

It was barely a couple months ago when Ron instant messaged me about the 8 man mobile and the crane. My love for suspending and belief in its power and potential for performance has only increased. So when he mentioned a 200 foot crane I was only further enticed by my love of heights and immediately volunteered myself if they needed another body. Fortunately for me, they were ready to oblige and send me to the top. So, on August seventeenth Meghan and I drove to Corpus Christi, TX. Once there we met up with Xeon and grabbed some breakfast before heading to the car show where we would be performing. Within moments of arriving I was laying on a table and Chris and Richard were putting two 6 gauge hooks in my back. After that it was a few interviews and little pumping up of the crowd before we all got rigged onto the mobile and lifted by the crane. Then it was fun time as we started spinning, running, and jumping. After playing a bit like that, we all got safety lines, made some adjustments to the mobile and were taken up approximately 150 feet. It was glorious.

And that is how I ended up swinging from two hooks in my back from a crane.

A View on the Modern History of Tongue Splitting

7/21/2005

With each passing year I would tell myself that it was time to write a history of tongue splitting. The early years were somewhat poorly documented and even those involved with it often had only a partial knowledge of its past at best. I don't know what made 2005 the year but I finally got around to it. It is over twelve years since I had my tongue split as I write this now and it is certainly what I am best known for still. Splitting my tongue is easily one of the best decisions I ever made.

Eight years ago, in July 1997 (on the 18th to be exact), I walked into the office of Dr Lawrence Busino with one tongue and emerged under an hour later with two. There was no media coverage and apart from a couple emails and a posting on rec.arts.bodyart not many people even knew this was happening. Of course, this would all change and an amazing and unforeseeable chain of events would be set into motion.

I was not the first person to have my tongue split, anyone who has paid attention to my comments about it will have noticed that I refer to myself as 'one of the first'. My best guess is that I was probably the third bifurcation but the first to be done surgically using a biopsy laser. In fact, the first actual split tongue that I knew of was on BME just prior to my own procedure in 1997. An Italian man sent in notes and then pictures of his split created by cutting and silver nitrate cauterization. Along with the notes there are six images early in the gallery with a June 1997 date stamp (for time received and posted, not taken). When I first approached Dr Busino I brought along printouts of those translated notes, by the time the pictures were online I had already scheduled my appointment for surgery. It was not until after my own procedure that I eventually found out about Dustin (covered in Body Play #16, I think) who had used a tie off method to split her tongue earlier. It seems that 1997 was the year for tongue splitting to happen. Within a very short span of time three people, unconnected and nearly unknown to one another, all split their tongues using three different methods.

Up until this time, modern tongue splitting was all but a myth. There were theories and vague references but no one could provide any documentation – it was always a friend of friend saw this guy/girl, etc. BME included a theoretical method reference for stretching multiple center tongue piercings and then cutting between them but this was just speculative. Some

people made historical references but again the documentation was questionable. Even some of the more reliable sources citing a cutting the tongue in half do not specify a bifurcation and strong arguments could be made that they are talking about an amputation cutting in half as punishment or torture from side to side rather than from the tip back. The BME Tongue Splitting FAQ contains references to some of these historical practices. Personally, I find these less than compelling but I do not entirely dismiss the possibility since it only seems even more unlikely that someone had not tried it before. What can be said with good authority is that the idea and image of the split tongue is a powerful one that has played a major role across cultures and around the world. With the advent of modern tongue splitting, it was poised to do so again.

Over the next two years tongue splitting would grow slowly but steadily. As word of my surgery and Dustin's successful split began to spread (I have never heard anything further on the Italian), more and more people became interested or realized their own fantasies could now come true. I introduced a number of people to Dr Busino as well as hosting many of them at my apartment in Albany (including BME's own Shannon Larratt) so they could come to town and get the surgery done by one of the only willing and experienced doctors in the country. Dr Busino was very accepting, if not enthusiastic, about body modification and loved discussing various modifications and possible procedures. With each patient he continued to refine the procedure, especially the suturing which helped to prevent re-growth and provided a more natural rounded look to the interior of the split. At one point he even commented on how the laser machinery could be transported fairly easily to conventions or meetings where he would be able to potentially do many bifurcations were the demand to continue. Meanwhile other individuals and practitioners worked with the tie off method and experimented with scalpeling.

At the first Modcon in 1999 my split tongue was a novelty and, as I recall, the only one present other than Shannon's. Between hosting many of the splits at my house and Shannon's network of people and practitioners via BME we could say that at that time we probably knew personally or could at least name most of the split tongues in the world. This would soon change.

At the 2000 Modcon a number of split tongues were present. Online, BME was seeing a significant increase in photos and experiences. Due to my unabashed media whoring, my own tongues had appeared in Time magazine, on several television shows (such as Ripley's), and even on a billboard in NYC. Split tongues were suddenly very visible. An increasing number of practitioners were offering the procedure and it became much easier for people to find someone near them to do it. Also, a number of people performed the procedure themselves. However, there would be a cost for this

visibility.

Almost certainly due to the increased exposure and references to him in stories about tongue splitting, Dr Busino soon found himself under unwanted scrutiny. As a result, of what I and others suspect was pressure brought on him by colleagues who found tongue splitting to be distasteful, Busino was soon refusing to do the procedure and even going so far as to deny having ever performed it. I last spoke with him in 2000 before these problems arose. He was the model of an open minded professional when I knew him and it is a shame that the prejudices of others came to so bear on him. And, as bad as this was, the potential for even worse loomed ahead in the form of government legislation.

By 2001 split tongues were common as surgical modifications go, being one of, if not the, most popular ‘heavy’ modification. Keep in mind that’s not really common at all in terms of the world population or even just the US. In fact more people in the US get their ears pierced each day by underpaid, under trained employees in unhygienic mall stores often improperly using equipment and jewelry that even when used properly is at best barely adequate for the job than the entire collected world population of split tongues. Or to put it another way, if you had a dollar for every split tongue in the world you would not have enough money to buy a decent used car or pay the yearly rent on slum apartment in most cities for a year. Even though it sometimes seems like they are common within our modified community, they are still rare in the world.

Despite so many other prominent problems and looming dangers in the world, in 2003, some state legislators began to think that the tongue splitting “trend” required new laws. As a result, a number of laws have been passed which have limited the context in which the procedure may be performed. Most of these are redundant to existing laws and serve no real purpose beyond soothing the prejudiced positions of those who introduce the bills but they are preferable to the total bans they often start out as. This senseless waste of government time, effort, and money was the subject of my first official column for BME. I continue to write and debate lawmakers across the country as they follow suit.

Due largely to these laws and the unwillingness of most doctors to perform the procedure a significant number of split tongues are now self done. The method of choice for them and the limited number of practitioners offering the procedure is scalpel. Scalpel the tongue is quite bloody, as many of the photos on BME will attest. However, it is at once the simplest and probably best method available. In my observations and from talking to subjects, it appears that scalpel is on par with laser surgery for speed, if not faster, and results in far less swelling due to the lack of cauterization.

When combined with proper suturing it results in some of the best looking, fastest healing splits with the least amount of re-growth between the forks. The only significant problem being that people doing it themselves or even having it done by most practitioners do not have the benefits at hand in case of problems or emergency that would be available in a professional surgical setting.

To date, the modern history of tongue splitting is overall a positive one. We have come to discover that it is not only possible but that many of the anticipated dangers or consequences such as difficulty speaking or eating are complete myths. Contrary to expectations the real problem seems to lay with reversing the procedure. This has happened once, to my knowledge, and was not voluntary or the result of any complication or dissatisfaction. No, the story of the only reversal is far darker and can be found on BME – it is the story of an effectively compulsory reversal at the hands of the government, the victim being a military officer made to choose between his split and his career, which was more or less botched by the surgeons who had little to no knowledge about the procedure. In fact, I do not, nor has anyone else I have spoken with know of anyone voluntarily reversing their split. It is this case that I think now points to the direction for the future.

The first tongue splittings were done for personal reasons of satisfaction and fulfillment. As a result others were able to do the same, likely for similar personal motivations. Now, as split tongues have become visible to the world it becomes time to establish their place within it. That is the work to be done. To cultivate the view and understanding that a split tongue is simply another way in which a person can, and should not be restricted from doing, shape their own image.

The Lizardman goes to Am-Jam

2/5/2005

Am-Jam continues to be part of my life and career. Since 1999 I have only missed one year (2006) due to being in the middle of a four month tour with Disturbed. It is the benchmark by which I measure other conventions.

When I moved to Texas in late 2001, one of the fringe benefits I was greatly looking forward to was no longer having to shovel snow or de-ice my car. Why is it then that every January when NY is doing its best imitation of an icebox I have traveled back up north into the snow and cold? To be part of the Am-Jam Tattoo Expo.

My connection with Am-Jam goes back six years now. It began in 1998 when an announcement for the upcoming 1999 edition of event was posted online in rec.arts.bodyart. At the time I was a regular reader and contributor to r.a.b. and having recently decided to get back into performance as a full time venture I contacted the poster – none other than then VP and now head honcho Jeannie aka “Mom”. Being so close to the actual date, things were pretty well locked down in terms of entertainment and budget but being that is was only a few miles from my apartment in Albany to the armory in Schenectady where the event was being held we struck a deal that I would come out and do a few things during the breaks in onstage activity and she would give myself and a friend or two passes into the show and some drinks. It wouldn’t be the first or last time I worked for free beer and good time.

I was accompanied out to the show by Scott, who has since gone on to become The Amazing Dr. Grift and an indispensable part of my show and business. Within moments of arriving we made fast friends with everyone there and Jeannie was soon calling us her ‘sons’. Throughout the day I would get onstage and do an act or two – a bed of nails, sew buttons to my arms, lift things with piercings, the blockhead, etc. It went incredibly well and the crowd loved it. This was also the source of one of my favorite all time crowd comments: “Man, that is fucked up!” The comment isn’t particularly notable in and of itself and I hear it a lot but when I heard it that day from a Hell’s Angel it meant a lot more. I was reaching people with a generally higher than average tolerance for the weird and unusual. We returned each day and did a little something every time – including a stint as the walkway for the leather fashion show with each model stepping on me on the bed of nails as they took the stage. In those three days we made lifelong friends and probably got overpaid in terms our drinking. Throughout the year we would do the same at other Am-Jam events. BME still contains

galleries of some of the pictures I took, which also show a pre-implants and facial tattooing version of me. Am-Jam would be a regular part of my schedule and integral part of the development of my show for the future.

Things continued on in much the same way for 2000, 2001, & 2002. These were years of great growth for myself and my show and every time we returned to Am-Jam it was like a homecoming and we did just a bit more. Am-Jam became the event where I brought media coverage to see me in action. Over the years I have been filmed and photographed there for numerous print publications including many industry magazines as well as German TV and print, National Geographic, and more. This year was no exception as I was joined and covered by a Hong Kong based magazine.

In 2003, I took on a new role – albeit briefly, as co-MC for the expo. This was also the year I met Spider Webb who was exhibiting a number of paintings and other pieces at the event. The meeting was fortuitous and resulted in not only a new friend but also a new tattoo as I became part of his ‘X’ work by receiving an ‘x’ tattoo under my eye. That was the first and last year I would MC at the event and also the last year it would be held in Schenectady.

Liverpool, NY became the new home of the Am-Jam tattoo expo in 2004. And then, as before and as I am sure I will again I got in my car and drove from the warmth of Texas into the blizzards of western NY. The change of venue meant some very positive new things for the event. It was now partnered with a strong local radio station (105 The Dog) and there was a new hotel with much more space – and a full stage for competitions and performances. This was also the year that I would get my lips tattooed while there, by Miss Vicke.

And that brings us to this year’s event. The 2005 Am-Jam would be the first event in a 2 week run on the road. I had hoped that we were well prepared for the trip north by our first gig of the year in Anchorage, Alaska a week prior but it was to no avail. New York proved to be colder than Alaska – by several degrees – during the time we were in each state respectively. Nonetheless, we made it through – mostly by staying indoors. We arrived on the Thursday evening prior to the event and said hello to all the family before getting some much needed rest after 30 hours in a rental car. Technically, it was split between two rental cars because around Cleveland our first car got a flat tire due a random chunk of metal in the road. As the show must go on, so must the car. We exchanged cars at the Cleveland airport and were back on our way.

A brief nap would be all we got before awaking to visit Scorch on the morning radio promo for the event. Before leaving for the radio station there

was some local news to shoot for as well. I did an excellent job of disturbing the reporter and apparently the studio editor as my antics were mostly cut from the piece that ended up running throughout the day – still it did the job. We got back a bit before noon and had another nap before setting up the booth and opening up with the event at 6pm on Friday night.

As might be expected for our sixth year, we had tons of familiar faces stop by and visit our booth. The snow held off for Friday but on Saturday we were effectively snowed in. It always snows during Am-Jam, but this just means you know where the party is and it's not going to go anywhere. Saturday was also our performance day and we had a great time with equal response as always.

Sunday we made the decision to stay in the hotel through Monday which relieved of our usual need to pack up and rush goodbyes before getting on the road. We took things leisurely and enjoyed a successful show and weekend of business at the booth. That night, after shutting down it was a trip to the hot tub and strategizing for the upcoming bar show in Albany, NY and then another convention in Ohio.

There are always variables in life, especially that of a traveling performer, and sometimes the start of a new year can seem daunting but I feel assured that I can count on being at a lot more Am-Jams and every one sending me off better than the last into the rest of the year. My sincere thanks to the Am-Jam family and all friends old and new from the event that have helped make my show what it is.

Magnetic Jewelry

10/10/2005

This was never published, I don't recall if I submitted it or if it got lost in the shuffle but it details a fun experiment that I tried. In fact, I still have my magnetic jewelry and enjoy playing with it from time to time. I have yet to work out just the right way to work it into a performance though.

Regular readers and fans of BME will already be familiar with magnetic implants. Like many I found (and still find) the prospect of this “magnetic vision” very interesting and compelling. I have not yet committed to getting these sort of implants myself but while continuing to consider the procedure and listen to the reports of others I did hit upon an idea for an experiment: magnetic jewelry.

It occurred to me that that my septum would provide an interesting chance to play with the idea of “sniffing” magnetic fields and to play with possibility of having a personal magnetic field. In order to accomplish this I would not use an implant but instead simply place a magnet in jewelry for my half inch stretched septum piercing. Unsure of the suitability of magnets for wear in a piercing, particularly one in an absorption membrane area like the septum, I decided it would probably be prudent to have the magnet coated with something safer like silicone. At this point I contacted a friend, Jesse Jarrell in Arizona. If you don't already know of Jesse by name, you almost certainly have seen his work producing and designing implants for Steve Haworth and as part of Kaos Softwear. Jesse is infinitely talented and knowledgeable; he is also always game for a fun experiment.

Jesse directed me to www.wondermagnets.com as a source for my magnet. Looking through their online catalog I selected a 3/8 by 3/8 inch cylinder shaped magnet and after purchase via paypal I had my magnet a few days later. Of course, I couldn't control myself and that same day the magnet found itself in my septum. It didn't sit particularly well but I got it stay in place enough to play with it a bit. Soon I was hanging key rings and anything else I could find that would react to the magnetic from my nose. The fun of this alone made it immediately worthwhile. A day or so later I sent the magnet off to Jesse for coating. After a couple weeks, I got the magnet back encased in a new silicone plug.

Jesse had, apparently and from what I understand by his messages at the time, taken the magnet and encased it in a clear silicone plug which was then molded inside a black silicone eyelet which was approximately 9/16 of an inch. I had told him I was confident of getting it into my septum without too much trouble. My confidence may have been a little misplaced. I first

trimmed the flares off of the plug because my septum abhors flares. Anytime I put any type of flared jewelry into my septum it reacts badly. With the flares gone, I lubed up and worked in the plug. The forced stretch and (I suspect) the less than perfect flare removal (there were still some rough edges from my cutting) resulted in an unhappy septum shortly thereafter but for the time I had the plug in it was much like when I had played with the magnet before upon first receiving it with the added advantage of it sitting in place better. Then, in an ill advised move, after removing it to give my septum a chance to recover I decided I would try and trim the plug. The results were less than good and culminated in my decision to simply cut the magnet free and start over.

Instead of bothering Jesse again and impinging further on his generosity I decided to try something, which in retrospect, I probably should have tried first. On a trip downtown I stopped in at Mercy Body Piercing and picked up a half inch silicone tunnel. I once again trimmed away the flares and then inserted the tunnel into my septum. With the tunnel comfortably in place I was able to simply insert the magnet into it at the angle of my choosing. This worked perfectly.

The functioning of the magnet in the piercing is probably what you would expect. It does not provide any real practical function but there is seemingly no end to the fun of “sticking” things to your nose – or I’m just that easily amused. When placing an object on the nose or simply getting close to something I can sense the attraction of the magnet at a range of about 2 to 3 inches at the most. The sensation is hard to describe, more in common to a sort of slight pressure than pulling. The hope of “sniffing” out magnetic fields did not materialize. I tried checking out store security sensors as described by those with finger implants but found that most sensors stopped short around shoulder height thus requiring me to bend down to check them. Even then, it was only when I got within inches that I could detect anything. It was similar to bringing my nose close to the refrigerator door and feeling the attraction there.

Beyond simple amusement this sort of magnetic jewelry probably has very little application. As a showman I can think of a number of simple applications for it – like a balancing assist but really it is just a toy. However, it is also a very cheap and fun toy anyone can easily put together for themselves. What’s better than that?

Tattooed People Onstage: From Exhibitions to Entertainers - Part I

2/16/2004

This article and the follow up (part II which was never published but is included in this book) was inspired by work I was doing at the time for the BME Encyclopedia and would later be the basis for a lecture I now offer on the history of tattooed performers.

The modern western perception of tattooing has been indelibly marked by its cultural association with the sideshow and its historical predecessor the traveling exhibit. Tattooing as an art form cut its teeth and developed in the west in great part due to the desire for and profit to be had by exhibiting tattooed people. At many circuses and carnivals one could not only see a tattooed marvel but also receive a permanent souvenir from the traveling tattoo artist on the lot. For years, tattoo artists commonly spent most of their time on the road with such shows, possibly also serving as its banner painter, and then wintering at a street shop location. A great example of such an artist, and an inspirational tale in its own right, is Stoney St. Clair whose life and work was documented in what is often considered a seminal work in the history of tattooing: Stoney Knows How.

In this column (and part II) I am going to attempt to cover centuries of tattooed exhibits and performers. Chronicling how we have come from natives brought back from expeditions to their lands to our current age where performers such as myself, ThEnigma, Katzen, Lucky Rich, and many more have chosen to tattoo their bodies and exhibit them as part live shows.

In AD 325 Constantine (whose name would later be used by a tattooed attraction in a sort of poetic justice) banned tattooing in the Roman Empire. In AD 787 Pope Hadrian I issued a papal edict against tattooing. Of course, this did not stop the crusaders sent by later popes to wage war for the holy land from getting tattooed while there. However, for the most part these and other similar laws issued forth reflected a general western prejudice that had developed in the culture against tattooing. Many alleged “experts” considered tattooing to be a sure sign of people being uncivilized and particularly savage. And it was with just such “savage” peoples that exhibitions of tattooing began to gain prominence.

In 1691, Giolo or Prince Giolo was taken by William Dampier in settlement of a debt. Dampier fixed upon the idea of exhibiting the tattooed Prince. The marketing for Giolo created a sensation in England but the exhibition was ultimately doomed as Giolo came down with small pox and

died shortly after arriving from the Philippines. Despite the exhibition not meeting expectations, the successful marketing drew attention and many people realized the potential profit in exhibiting native peoples and particularly those with tattoos.

In 1774 a South Seas islander from Tahiti named Omai returned to London aboard a ship from one of Captain Cook's expeditions. Omai had only minor tattooing mainly on his hands but the fact that he was tattooed was a major part of his marketing and often exaggerated. Playing the role of the 'noble savage' Omai was incredibly well received and successfully toured most of England, including a royal audience. In 1776 he returned home.

With the success of these exhibits it was only a matter of time before westerners themselves would hit upon becoming the attractions. Many sailors made efforts to exhibit their 'souvenir' tattoos but the standard for non-native exhibits would be set by a man named Jean Baptiste Cabri.

Cabri was discovered in 1804 living among the natives in the Marquesan Islands by George Langsdorff. Cabri, a French deserter, had 'gone native' and been extensively tattooed while living on the islands. Returning to Russia with Langsdorff, Cabri not only exhibited his tattooing but also told exaggerated tales of his life among the natives, effectively moving into performance and creating the archetype that would be followed by tattooed people for centuries to come. With good initial success he was able to successfully tour Russia and much of Europe. However, by 1818 his notoriety had declined and he had died in his native France.

After Cabri came Rutherford in 1828. John Rutherford, the first extensively tattooed English exhibit, returned to Bristol after having left for New Zealand in 1816. Rutherford was heavily covered in Maori tattoos and spun fanciful tales of shipwreck, abduction, and living with the natives. Rutherford was able to better capture the imaginations of his audiences than Cabri and further developed the basic elements and progression of the tales that would be mimicked by other tattooed people for more than 100 years.

As it was in Europe, so it went in the U.S. The first tattooed person believed to have been exhibited in the states is generally held to have been James F. O'Connell. O'Connell appeared at Barnum's American Museum in 1842 telling tales similar to those of Cabri and Rutherford. He published and sold copies of his adventures under the title 'The Life and Adventures of James F. O'Connell, the Tattooed Man, During a Residence of Eleven Years in New Holland and Caroline Islands' (1846). While many attribute his appearance at Barnum's Museum to mean that Barnum was the first to have a tattooed exhibit, there is evidence to suggest that he was already in residence before Barnum took over the museum and several exhibits from Dan Rice.

In 1873, O'Connel was succeeded by Prince Constantine (like the pope) in Barnum's show. Constantine was a Greek man also known as Alexandrinos Constentenus aka Djordgi Konstantinus aka George Constantine and Captain Constentenus. He was very likely the most successful exhibit to date and for some time, commanding a salary of \$1000 a week and making good sales on his own book of adventures. This success was most likely due not only to his talent for spinning yarns but even more so for the quality and extensive nature of his tattooing. Constantine was covered with finely detailed Burmese style tattoo work. He is also notable for probably being the first person to completely tattoo their body with the specific goal of becoming an exhibition in mind. In the years to come many would follow his model. And, future exhibits were not the only ones he would inspire – it is said that the legendary tattoo artist Charlie Wagner was so struck upon seeing Constantine that he set out to learn to tattoo. This resulted in his finding an apprenticeship with Samuel O'Reilly, who patented the first electric tattoo machine.

With Constantine we enter into what might be called the golden age of the tattooed exhibits. A time when hundreds of people got tattooed and made their living as part of traveling shows and museums. Also, the time in which we see the tattooed women come to the stage and even eclipse it. This era, the decline of the traveling shows, and the return of the tattooed exhibit as performer in the modern sideshow renaissance will form the second installment of this two part column.

Part II

3/16/2004

I left off in part one of this two part piece with the tattooed man known as Constantine in the 1870's and the coming advent of the Golden Age of the Tattooed attraction. As Constantine's extensive, high quality tattoo work and flamboyant story telling helped to push the tattooed attraction further up the show hierarchy another addition was coming that would revolutionize the display of tattooed people: women.

There is some question as to when the first tattooed women went on display. In 1723 two women described as American Indian princesses were exhibited at European fairs. Their exhibition is often listed in conjunction with displays of tattooed natives but no reliable record that details what, if any, tattoos they may have had is available. Notwithstanding this, the first recorded tattooed lady to take the stage is generally held to be Nora Hildebrandt.

Nora Hildebrandt (sometimes recorded as Hilderbrandt) was the daughter of Martin Hildebrandt. Martin was a German immigrant to the United States in the mid to late 1800's and is often cited as the first professional American tattoo artist. Nora was tattooed by her father and made her debut at Bunnell's Museum in NYC in 1882. In similar fashion to the men that preceded her Nora told a tale of forcible tattooing but with a slight twist. Her story went that she had been tattooed by her father (which was likely true) while they were both prisoners of Sitting Bull. Allegedly, the chief promised them freedom should he cover his daughter with tattoos. And thus, per the fabrication, she was tattooed for six hours a day for a year.

Within weeks of Nora's debut another tattooed lady appeared. As reported by the NY Times, Irene Woodward made her debut in NY, joined Bunnell's Museum, and would eventually tour Europe. Woodward's career quickly eclipsed that of Nora but Nora did beat her to the stage. Woodward's stage story is notable because in it she claimed not only to have been tattooed by her father, but also that she had wanted the tattoos – having been inspired by the sight of Constantine. Woodward had been tattooed by James O'Reilly (who would patent the electric tattoo machine) and his apprentice Charles Wagner. In the years to come this pair would be responsible for a whole host of tattooed people and animals.

Tattooed women presented a whole new level for the consumer. The act of tattooing for the mainstream ran directly counter to almost all of its feminine ideals and the idea of a woman being forcibly tattooed played on their sensibilities even more than that of a man. Another sure draw was the necessary exposure for displaying the art work. While the costumes they wore would make them seem highly overdressed today, in their time they were quite daring. By going to see a tattooed woman there was an air of properness, academic inquiry even, in viewing the excess flesh.

In 1890, La Belle Irene appeared in London. She had been tattooed by O'Reilly and Wagner but told her audiences that her tattoos had been done as protection against the savages in the far off land of Texas in a variation of Hildebrandt's tale. Emma de Burgh, an early masterpiece of O'Reilly's electric machine work, displayed a suit of religious motifs including a last supper backpiece while touring Europe in 1893 with her equally tattooed husband.

As more and more people realized the potential career path that being tattooed offered, more and more attractions appeared. The electric tattoo machine allowed them to be created in much less time. Soon there were tattooed couples, families, animals and more gracing almost every traveling show or museum. In order to compete with the women many of the men began picking up the 'working acts' like the bed of nails or fire manipulation.

By 1910 the draw of simply being tattooed had become greatly diluted but it remained a viable career for many well into the 1930's even drawing in some who already had other good careers in the show.

Jean Furella Carson was a bearded lady who shaved off her beard and got tattooed at the suggestion of a friend. Annette Nerona was not only tattooed but also a snake charmer and a magician.

However, there were still those who made their careers primarily through simply exhibiting their art work. In the 1920's Anna Gibbons became Artoria (such names were common, with many women going by Pictura). Anna was a devout Baptist and her tattoos reflected this with religious and patriotic icons. She worked well into the 1980's.

Betty Broadbent is perhaps one of the most famous of the tattooed ladies. At seventeen years old she joined the circus in 1927 working the Spidora illusion. Soon though, she grew tired of this and struck upon being tattooed. This resulted in a very successful forty year career which saw her tour with Ringling Bros, Barnum, & Bailey and compete in the first televised beauty pageant at the 1939 Worlds Fair.

For the men, the standout of the 20th century was The Great Omi. When most tattooed men and women had been forced to add working acts to their roles, such as Rasmus Nielson the Scandinavian Strong Man who lifted anvils with his nipples and also used piercings in his throat and tongue for performances, Omi proved that an innovative body modification concept could still work on its own and command a rate as fantastic as that of Constantine in his heyday.

Omi began with the more common pictorial tattoo work (flash as we would call it today) but soon realized he would have to do something far more involved. To this end he became 'The Zebra Man' covered in thick stripes and designs that moved with his body. Not just tattooed, Omi had his teeth filed and large stretched piercings in his earlobes and septum. Like those before him he told fanciful stories of abduction and forced modification.

But, as the traveling shows and museums began to decline so did the market for the tattooed performer. Many continued to work the shows that did survive, others retired on the money they made from relentless touring, and some went in tattooing at shops rather than on the road. In fact, a great number of early tattoo artists came from the ranks of traveling show people who learned the art on the road and got much of the early experience working on the tattooed attractions of their day.

There are a great many people who I have not mentioned here. Space and lack of records prevent ever doing a complete catalog, but I have tried to hit upon some major figures and dates in order to try to convey a sense of the importance of this part of the history of modern western body modification in general and tattooing in particular. In a coming column, as an epilogue of sorts, I will discuss the modern tattooed performers like myself, Enigma, Katzen, Lucky Rich, Eak, Insectivora, Mike Wilson, & Captain Don and how we fit into this overall history.

I never got around to writing the column on the more modern performers. I considered doing it for this book but then I realized my laziness would not allow it and I would feel very weird writing about myself and most of the others in that manner.

Selected Sources & Suggested reading:

Stoney Knows How; Leonard L., St. Clair

The Art of the Tattoo; Ferguson & Procter

Freaks, Geeks, & Strange Girls; Johnson, Secreto, Varndell

Freak Show; Bogdan

Modern Primitives; Vale & Juno

Bodies of Subversion; Margot Mifflin

Dealing with the Media

11/26/2004

Entire books get devoted to this subject and I don't claim that I was then or now an expert. My goal was to share some basic advice culled from years of experience (including many mistakes) with a community that was, and is still, being regularly used and abused by the media. Within the scope of that limited audience I think this is probably one of the more practical of all my articles from this column.

The media loves modified people. As a rule, we are visually interesting, provocative, and often present a curiosity to their consumers that has been proven to draw ratings. Shannon recently presented a request for guests he received from the Maury show on his page and as a result of my comments to him about it he suggested I write a column on dealing with the media. The following is a great deal of personal experience over the last decade combined with the usual dose of my opinions. I am sure there are others here on IAM that can greatly add to this and I hope they will via the forums. It is important that as a community we take advantage of the media as the positive tool it can be rather than being taken advantage of by the media.

First, and most importantly, whether you are going to involve yourself with the media as a participant or just a consumer everyone should learn to look past the false glamor associated with media coverage. Appearing on TV, being interviewed on the radio, or whatever it may be is essentially meaningless. Take a look at your local paper and evening news and you will quickly see that a great deal of it is filler and that almost anyone and anything can end up there. Getting covered should not be seen as an end or achievement in itself. If you fall for this you play directly into the hands of those within the media who wish to exploit you and you very likely damage any cause you might have. Media coverage is a tool you can use but it is also a force that can easily use you.

Always remember that the media has an agenda and a plan to achieve it. This is not to say that all media outlets and people are working on nefarious schemes but rather they quite simply do have something they are out to achieve and they will do so at your expense if necessary. Interviewing you or having you on as a guest is simply a method for them to achieve their goal. If you are going to deal with the media then you must also have an agenda and a plan. If you go in unprepared then it is most likely that you will get used and end up looking dumb, or in the best-case scenario you somehow get lucky and escape with your dignity intact but little or nothing gained. At a bare minimum, because it is a business, they will attempt to do

as little as possible in terms of compensating you for your contributions.

Never underestimate your importance to the media. As a guest or subject you represent the raw materials of their enterprise. Media is business. No one there is working for free and neither should you. Often, getting compensated for your time and work (and it is work) is as simple as asking. Most worthwhile productions realize that they need to pay and will do so when asked, but rarely offer up front and then lowball. The exception to this being many news programs, which don't pay on the principle that it would impinge on their integrity. Personally, I don't see a lot of merit in this claim for most stories but the value of advancing your agenda and getting your message out can be valuable enough to offset not getting paid. Of course, this assumes you have evaluated your ideas and goals and formulated a way to achieve them that uses the media coverage you can get.

If you are going to deal with the media you have to do your research and plan your statements before you are recorded. Even very intelligent people often end up looking silly when hit up for 'man on the street' comments because they are not prepared for them. You should not only refresh your knowledge of your topic and ideas but also research the particular show or outlet you will be dealing with. Try to figure out their agenda and how you can either counter it or make it work for you.

Below I have broken down some practical tips and information about various forms of media. I strongly encourage anyone who is thinking about any involvement to consult with professionals whenever possible and if you are going to be doing it with any regularity a manager and/or lawyer are nearly a must because there is a lot to keep track of and having people who know the business help you is invaluable.

Print (newspapers, magazines, books): Print media almost never pays and is mainly suitable for advancing information and/or advertising yourself or your business. The exception is for photos – read releases carefully and make sure that they only allow for use in connection with the relevant story or entry and that it is only for one story or edition. This insures that any use is legitimate in terms of what you expect and that future use will result in further compensation. In terms of content I prefer to do the interviews by email so that I have a written record of what I said in an unedited form. If the interview is recorded for transcription I request a copy of the recording. Most people will supply complimentary copies of the finished product but are often lazy or forgetful about doing it.

Radio: Much like print, radio is almost always an unpaid gig. It best suited for information and advertising. Most radio is live, which means you have to be on your toes and well prepared. Shows may be taped and

edited for later rebroadcast, which means you should take care to not present them easy fodder for manipulation if you think they may be hostile in any way. Very rarely will there be any contracts or releases involved unless they are also recording images for a website or something similar.

TV News: As I mentioned above, news shows rarely offer pay but they can be useful in that news coverage often increases the perceived legitimacy of your statements. I won't go into the difference between public perception and truth here, but it is worth noting that if you say something on the news it will likely go further than something spouted off on a talk show and reaches a different audience. News appearances often come with short notice and because the particular show has a story they want to run. It is very important to discern the motivation and goal of the story and to be extremely well prepared. The news rarely uses releases.

Talk Shows: Talk shows are probably the biggest offenders when it comes to claiming poverty and not paying guests. Many will try to draw people in with the promise of a free trip (hotel & airfare). This isn't a horrible thing but the fact is that they do have a budget for guests and should at the very least be offering money for food as well. Initially, I generally tell them I want to be paid AFTRA scale for the appearance. AFTRA is the American federation of television and radio actors and is similar to SAG (the screen actors guild). They set minimum pay and rates for their members; this is what scale is - a minimum amount for a day's work. You should also ask for residuals from future airings. This basically means that they agree to pay you a percentage of the original amount each time they air the episode again after the first time – with shows like Maury or Ricki Lake this can add up quickly. If they continue to balk about payment you can also suggest they pay you the day rate you would receive at your regular job since it is likely you will be missing some work to travel and appear. Sometimes they will take to this better and even news programs will sometimes go for this. In the end, don't be afraid to stonewall – losing the appearance is not the end of the world. Check releases carefully and get help reading them through if necessary.

Domestic Cable (HBO original programs, Discovery, National Geographic, etc): These programs have widely varying budgets but there is always money there for you – it is just a matter of how much. These shows pay to fly crews and equipment around the world, there is no reason for you to put in the work (and these are usually the most work and disruptive to your usual life) without being compensated. This is where having an agent and/or manager really helps. Yes, they take a percentage but they often get you more than you would have on your own which makes up for their cut. It is very hard to get residuals from cable networks though, but worth trying – don't let it be a deal breaker in this case.

International TV: For Americans, foreign television provides some of the most lucrative opportunities. Residuals are almost never there but the up front money is often much better. Again, an agent is very helpful. Many of these outlets pay people to find and shoot the stories and they let them keep the money in the budget that they don't pay you. A good agent will know the current budget levels for these organizations and get you all you can.

I haven't mentioned things like variety shows for performers or acting appearances because if you are going to do this then you really should be working with a professional to handle things. Hopefully this helps someone and don't be afraid to ask me or anyone questions.

So you want to be a freak

12/10/2003

This piece is the one that I most often refer people contacting me to read and the one from which I have received the most regular feedback and further inquiries. I now have over a decade of experience making my living as a professional freak and every bit of this still rings true to me. In fact, I re-read it from time to time just remind myself of the salient points and help maintain my focus.

Ever been called a ‘freak’? Ever want to be a ‘freak’? I think everyone should be a freak. In fact, I am working on a book* that I think re-defines what it means to be a freak. To me, a freak is someone who embraces their individuality by engaging in an ongoing process of self-realization and self-definition. However, that is not what this article is about.

This column is about being a professional freak. It is about making your living through a certain style of performance art. Perhaps it could have been more accurately titled ‘So you want to join the sideshow’, but that just doesn’t have the ‘grab factor’ you get from ‘So you want to be a freak’.

There are very few professional freaks in the world today. I have counted myself among their ranks for over a decade now and have made my living solely from touring and performing sideshow acts for about three years – prior to this I supplemented my performers’ income with part-time bartending, teaching, and other jobs. And while I am not using this space to attempt to add contortion to my repertoire by bending over backwards and kissing my own ass, I do think it is fair and reasonable to say that I am one of the better known and more successful of the modern sideshow performers.

The following are things I have learned or come to find common to those who have succeeded in this specialized subset of the entertainment industry. They are not absolutes or guarantees, but I do think that anyone considering a career as a professional freak could benefit from them. To supplement this, in future columns I will be interviewing a number of notable modern sideshow personalities and readers can compare and contrast what they have to say with what I offer here.

Consider and Re-consider your decision: As cool as it may seem, make sure you aren’t just falling prey to ‘The grass is always greener’ syndrome. Being a professional freak is a big risk and takes a great deal of work. Becoming a birthday party clown or even a mime would likely be a more sound business move with greater range and future potential. It is very unlikely you will ever become even moderately wealthy or famous. It takes

a lot from you and gives back very little - unless, you truly love it. The only thing that will make it a worthwhile decision is if it means you will be getting to do what you love.

Get Your Life in Order: The first thing you should consider doing is making sure that the rest of your affairs are as stabilized as possible. Embarking on a career as a performer is not an answer or a fix to any problems you may be experiencing. This is especially true if part of your plan is heavy public modification (like facial tattooing). If anything it will be a de-stabilizing force as you deal with a host of new issues and find yourself in many uncertain positions. As a performer, you will very likely not be making much money to begin to with and it will come in spurts – not regular and consistent paychecks. Before starting out, it is a good idea to get some savings in the bank to carry you through the inevitable thin times and to get secondary jobs that will allow you to perform and travel as needed – I found part time bar work to be ideal for this. Also, remember that there is much more to be done than just the onstage show. You are essentially starting a business here and you will need to take care of all the usual business drudgery – taxes, accounting, advertising, insurance, etc. Take some courses if possible and study other small businesses. You are attempting to build a career, getting things in order first is the equivalent of laying the foundation. Do it right.

Be Prepared to Work Long and Hard: Most people who own and run their own businesses will tell you that a nine-to-five schedule would be like a luxury vacation to them. Well, as a performer, you will not only put in the extra hours associated with the business aspects of your show but you will also have the additional responsibility of developing and performing your show. In this respect, sideshow is much like starting your own band. After everything else is done (promotion, booking, etc.) you still have to write, rehearse, and perform. It's like having two businesses. The difference being that in sideshow you will never score the record deal that means someone else will step in and do some of that other work. At this point, hopefully, you begin to see how much effort this all takes. Maybe you are wondering how or why anyone would ever want to do this? Simple - because working at something you love isn't working in the way that digging a ditch or clocking in at the factory is working. And while that is great for those of us who love sideshow and performing it also means another potential drawback: Don't expect many people to appreciate that you actually work longer and harder than they do. People don't tend to appreciate the work aspect of doing things that may be enjoyable. They miss the important difference between just doing something fun and doing it as your job. An analogy, playing the guitar can be fun but a professional musician devotes much of their life to practice, composition, and performance – and that is work, even though the musician enjoys it. You can expect people,

even friends and family, to poke fun at you for ‘not having a real job’ but in the end, even though you likely invest a great deal more of your life working than they ever will, you have to learn to just shrug it off rather than let it anger or consume you. This gets easier if you realize the joke is on them for spending so much time doing things they don’t want to, while you get rewarded for doing things you do enjoy.

Do It Everyday: This was once revealed as the greatest secret of the Illuminati and various magick orders. Repetition is indeed the key element to many things. If you are working on a new stunt or act there is no substitute for actually doing it. Stage presence is something that needs to be developed and only comes with time and a show is never at its best until it has been stage tested and refined. Great ideas often suffer and even fail because of a lack of proper rehearsal and development before being brought to the audience. I often tell myself that ‘every moment I am not onstage is a moment I don’t exist’. I use this to sum up the attitude I have seen in many successful performers – you have to live to be on stage and working. Any moment you are not performing must be justified. Whether it is rehearsing/practicing in your living room for your pets, hitting the local open mike, working a street corner, or whatever – you have to do it everyday and love to do it to get good.

Make it Your Own: Sideshow acts go back centuries in their current form and history here in the West. Beyond that, many of the acts reach back to the earliest history and even pre-history of human civilization. Sword swallowing dates back to 2000 BC in India. So, even though you may be performing incredible acts – they are not new. Part of the challenge you will face as a performer is how to make these acts worth watching for your audience. DO NOT use other people’s material – stealing material is obviously wrong, but even you have their permission, you will ultimately be better served by developing your own act. If you want to be memorable and successful, you have to make the act your own by putting your own twist to it. If you do this well enough, it will also make it impossible for others to steal from you. A great example of this from the world of magic is Penn & Teller. The tricks that they do are, for the most part, basic and known to the majority of stage magicians. However, they make the tricks their own through their unique characters, presentation style, and interpretations of them.

Respect Sideshow and Your Audience: Another way to put this might simply be: act professionally. It should be obvious, but for some people its not. Sideshow as an art form and an industry are what will be providing you with a living and your audience is how it will do so – respect that. This means not only recognizing the long history and tradition of sideshow along with your place in that tradition but also extending a certain

respect to others in that tradition. Be nice. It is a small community and it helps those who help it. Even if only out of enlightened self-interest, you should act respectful. I have gotten work and gotten several others work through referrals. Support the efforts of other performers – in most cases, if one person wins, you all win. Good press for someone else is good press for freaks in general and will create more for everyone to enjoy.

Run your show properly. Treat venues and their staff well and be sure to keep up on things like the local ordinances, necessary permits, and, of course, insurance. In many cases you are going to be seen as representing all of sideshow – if you open a door by doing a good job, others may benefit from your success but if you burn that bridge you are affecting others as well. Bad shows and poor attitudes affect everyone negatively. There are venues that will or won't book you based on others previous actions and you will have an affect on future acts chances as well.

Also, when it comes to discussing or presenting acts and perhaps the inner workings or details always remember that you cannot expect anyone you are talking to or performing for to show any more respect for the act than you do. If you denigrate or dismiss the power and wonder of the sideshow, you denigrate and dismiss yourself.

You are always 'on': This goes double or even triple if part of what you do involves public modification (facial tattooing) or displaying modifications (in my case, my split tongue even before my facial tattoos and implants). As many people with public mods already know, the general public will treat you as being on display for them. As a sideshow performer you face an added element; while most people don't pester comedians off stage to tell jokes or ask illusionists to make their car levitate or disappear they will pester freaks to do something for them. Keeping in mind the above section, I often try to carry a few small things with me for suitable occasions. Also, remember that each such instance is a potential opportunity to win a new fan and perhaps more – you never know who the person you take the time to do something for might be or know. For those situations when it simply is not appropriate, try to bow out gracefully.

You see the same people on the way down that you saw on the way up: This is a classic from show business in general. Remember, clichés are true for a reason. This one goes hand in hand with what I mentioned above about respecting sideshow in general and other performers. The person you mistreat today could be the one you need the most tomorrow.

I have had the opportunity to work with a great number of people. The ones who have fallen from the peaks of their success are usually those who have forgotten this rule. They have little hope of ever succeeding again.

It wouldn't take much tweaking to apply many of these concepts to any major decision or aspect of life. But, in the end, I simply hope that those of you who may have been contemplating the road of the freak as a profession found this to be helpful and that perhaps the rest of you have gained a new perspective or even appreciation for it.

**and I am still working on it – The Freak Manifesto.*

The Interviews

These interviews may well be the most enduring portion of *Through the Modified Looking Glass*. Most of the subjects were sideshow performers and after 'So You Want to be a Freak' it was my intent to use the column to expose people to the lives of my friends and colleagues in that world. I also ended up doing pieces on some notable figures in the body modification world (Matt Gone & Jason Sand) and at least one incredibly modified artist that who was almost unknown to the community (Mike Jones). Having been interviewed so many times myself, it was fun for me to get to be on the other side of things. The interviews were conducted via email and published with almost no editing beyond some window dressing in the form of quotes and images selected and added by Shannon. Everyone I approached ended up doing an interview except the very first person – Harry Anderson (actor/magician of *Night Court* fame). I met Harry when I stopped by his shop in New Orleans and subsequently got him to consent to an interview but I was working through an assistant in order to have it done via email and things dragged on till contacts were lost and eventually I gave up when Hurricane Katrina became a far more pressing issue for those in that area. I still greatly appreciate the consideration he showed me and I do have the questions I prepared laying around in the event of a future opportunity.

Matt Gone

12/1/2003

I first found out about Matt Gone when he emailed me a friendly hello some time ago. Since then, he has made appearances on Ripley's Believe It or Not and the Rikki Lake show. And quite deservedly so – his tattoo work is extensive and inspired (including self done genital and anus tattooing) incorporating a central theme of checkerboards which he has taken beyond the surface of his body and onto the objects around him; including his home. You can see his work and learn more about him at www.mattgone.com.

While I have not had the pleasure of meeting Matt in person, we have a regular email correspondence and via this he was gracious enough to allow me to conduct an interview with him for BME:

Give us the quick biographical run down on yourself – name, age, place of birth, etc.

My name is Matt Gone. I'm 33. I was born in Manhattan. I have lived in 5 states since then. I grew up in a single parent home. No living relatives since I was age 16.

You have embarked upon what might be called a “lifestyle aesthetic”, you have taken a design motif (the checkerboard) and integrated it into your life as part of not only items like your house but also onto your body – was this planned from the start or something that evolved?

This was planned. I got the idea from playing with graph paper that I was designing my tattoos on. This was in 1988. I had been getting tattooed since 1984. 1988 was the year I decided I wanted to be fully covered.

What came first – the tattoos or ‘checker boarding’ things around you?

My body checkers came first. Things just grew after that.

On your website you refer to the checkerboard as the central concept of your tattoo work. The patterning is also sometimes referred to as chessboard by some. I would guess it is all a matter of perspective and which game is more relevant to the person speaking. Is either game or the symbolism of the boards significant to you?

I'm one of those old cranks that prefer checkers. I more like the op-art look of checkers. They give things a clean look.

You have undergone and incredible amount of time to achieve your bodysuit over the last 14 years. Describe any particularly memorable sessions or milestones for you.

Sailor Moses tattooed me 9 times for an average of 8 hours each session just before he died in 1997. I would travel to Biloxi, Mississippi by Greyhound bus and get tattooed and make the last bus home. There would be no sleep for 40 hours for me due to the travel and my work schedule. Moses was my favorite artist. I was never stronger.

My favorite tattoo memory was getting tattooed by Roy Boy Cooper in the Badlands of Gary, Indiana when I was 16. He did the skeleton rip on my right side. Roy Boy is the most badass tattoo artist I ever met. He tattooed most of my early pieces (16-18 years old). He is responsible for a lot of my enthusiasm for my bodysuit. Visit www.Royboys.net

Your website includes a link to a site about Polands Syndrome and you also mention there that you were born with birth defects which the tattoos not only help to cover but also allow you 'not to hate' your body. Tell us about Polands Syndrome as it relates to you and the motivation for your body modification

I am missing my left major pectoral and my left lower biceps. The combination gives me a weak left arm and side. I have curvature of the spine from the lack of muscle. The left shoulder area is always in pain and I am off balance a bit and walk kinda funny. Many people with my condition are embarrassed to take off their shirts in public or in private. The pain is both mental and physical. My left arm is a little shorter. Other complications from Polands syndrome are gastrointestinal distress of unknown types. Things may be missing or malformed internally and never properly diagnosed. My guts HURT. Doctors only guess. Polands was named after Sir Alfred Poland in the 1880's and it usually involves the missing of a chest muscle and further defects of the arm on the same side. I was lucky, my fingers were fine. I'm just weak on one side. I cannot sleep on the same side of my defect because of the lack of padding. There are only 6000 people on the planet with Polands and no two are the same. We are all at risk for many other serious health problems. Life has a totally different perspective if you are born with defects. Polands is caused by an interruption of the blood supply to the fetus on the 46 day of incubation. My mother was a hemophiliac and I think that's what caused it.

Quoted from your website: "This website is not intended to

inspire people. It should make people realize how difficult it is to tattoo a whole body.” Despite you not intending to do so, many people may very well be inspired by the extent of your dedication to tattooing and your use of tattooing to appreciate your body rather than hate it. What is your feeling or response towards people who say you are an inspiration?

Pay me. Ha. I have had a lot of handicapped people nearly in tears after seeing me in Ripley's and it is beautiful. My "art" ain't that great. It's good, but it just ain't all that. Whatever works to inspire people. My photos inspire a lot of people to masturbate also. A compliment is a compliment.

You have recently made appearances on Ripley’s Believe It or Not and the Rikki Lake Show. How would you describe these experiences, have you enjoyed working with pop culture media? Do you feel that you were treated fairly and accurately portrayed?

I was underpaid by Ripley's. That pissed me off. They manipulated some of the perspective of the segment by editing it down to a simpler viewpoint. Same with the Rikki Lake show- she mainly asked me about my genital-anus tattoos and they cut that part out of the show. I have been in over 40 tattoo magazines, 5 newspapers, the 700 club (old videotape), Cheri magazine, some music videos, 3 commercials- one a major Southern Comfort ad campaign worldwide, and there is a small internet market in pictures of me. I like the publicity. It makes me money and gets me laid. My life would have sucked more without the attention it got me.

You are not a performer or a working professional in the body modification industry (i.e. piercer to tattoo artist) – the career paths many would assume are the only options for the heavily modified. How has your experience with the job market and society in general been affected by your tattooing?

I got lucky in my current job. I have been a chef in the French Quarter in New Orleans for 10 years. I am in a dead end job and my future looks rather bleak economically. I want to tattoo my face sometimes and would have but I would lose my current job. The prospect of ever making any real money or having a less crappy job seems to be limited because of my tattooing. I am too old to be homeless and dependent on others. I have no real hope for the future anymore. The thing is, it probably has nothing to do with my tattoos. There are 10's of millions of people with no tattoos who are stuck economically.

You have expressed a desire for facial tattooing but also realize that it may have consequences (such as loss of employment), and I

noticed on your site that you have experimented with using markers for a temporary effect. Given the potential repercussions, what is the allure of tattooing your face? Simply completing the design or is there more to it?

The art of the design is so technically challenging to me is the reason behind my drive to tattoo my face. Also, the artistic dilemma of doing something v. not doing something. The fact that I cannot do it makes me want to. I designed it to do it eventually. I cannot do it because of employment and I have a technical issue of how the checkers will age. The corners will blow apart too. They have all over my body. That is a negative side effect of checker tattoos.

Would you recommend or encourage others to get tattooed to a similar degree?

Depends on the person, but I would never encourage anyone to get any tattoo, no matter what size, unless it was a special circumstance. I stay out of the encouragement game as much as possible. The thing is, you still have to face yourself after you do it and either you wear the bodysuit or you lie to yourself and it wears you. You have to live with this shit. The process is too much to get over mentally. When you are done-even you are "in progress" Erik, it takes time to get away and let your life heal and separate the experience and the art from the process. 10-15 years of pain and poverty is too much for most people. It was simpler for me because I have birth defects and will spend 99% of my fucking life in pain. I mean, both mental and physical pain. I'm already dead. There was nothing to lose for me.

How do you feel about the word 'freak'?

I'm Jewish, bald, and short too. It's just a word to me.

Sound off on anything you would like.

Where are the women with bodysuits? Why won't they return my phone calls? All people with completed or near completed bodysuits contact me. We will form a secret society.

Tyler Fyre

1/1/2003

Tyler is a very good friend and a lot has gone on for him since this interview. He is now married and actively touring with his wife Thrill Kill Jill around the US and the world putting on amazing shows. I cannot say enough good things about him and I only wish we got to be in the same place at the same time more often.

If you have been to Coney Island's Sideshow by the Seashore – and if you haven't, you need to get your ass there – you have very likely born witness to the Amazing Blazing Tyler Fyre. In fact, it may very well have been Tyler who enticed you into the show. Because, one of the many roles that Tyler plays there is that of outside talker (not a barker). On the inside you can see him perform a multitude of modern miracles including feats of magic, escapes, the blockhead, sword swallowing, and, of course, fire manipulation. He is a tireless worker devoted to the show and even in those precious few moments he gets away from Coney Island he is always working a stage whether it be with the Bindlestiffs, the Bros. Grimm, or his own side project The Lucky Devil Circus Sideshow.

Who are you?

The Amazing Blazing Tyler Fyre - real name Tyler Fleet - got my stage name at Silver Lake Waterpark in Raleigh, NC. The sign painter arrived and I had five minutes to think of a name for my sign.

What first drew you to the sideshow?

You know it's a question that seems so easy but I've never had a good answer for it. I saw the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus Sideshow as a kid in 1982 at the Omni in Atlanta, GA. Like most kids - I thought it was the coolest thing ever. There was also a book my grandparents had - Toby Tyler or 10 weeks with the Circus. Back then (unlike now) Tyler was an uncommon name so a kid in a book with the same name as me was pretty exciting and he just happened to run away with the circus. I guess you could say those two things planted the seed. I've always been an entertainer at heart - telling stories - doing tricks - and then I got into theater for a while. The thing I've come to love about sideshow is not only the amazement factor - but the fact that it appeals to the widest possible demographic. That is, people of all cultures and classes can enjoy the same show.

How did you 'break in'? Tell us about getting in at Coney Island and then starting up The Lucky Devils Circus Sideshow.

Okay this is kind of a funny "must be meant to be" kind of story. I was in college for playwriting and had already figured out that it wasn't really for me. I took Hovey Burgess's circus class and he taught me how to juggle, walk the tight rope, do trapeze and balance things. It was great - from there I met a guy who taught me the basics of fire eating. The next semester I took a street theater class and it just so happened that Jennifer Miller - the bearded lady and Todd Robbins were guest lecturers. Their stories about Coney Island were enthralling. So I made up an act and worked that summer at an amusement park in North Carolina - first full time gig doing sideshow acts. With a heavy heart I left the south for NYC to finish my degree and once finished I was ready to leave NYC for good. However I had this stack of tickets from riding my motorcycle like a madman. So I went to the DMV in Coney Island to settle all the tickets and was told that my license had been suspended and I could resolve the matter in 7-10 months. I went for a walk on the beach to calm down and walked past the sideshow. It was closed on a weekday, but the T-Shirt vendor next door told me to knock on the door - and five minutes later - out comes Dick Zigun. I say - I'm the Amazing Blazing Tyler Fyre, I eat fire, pound nails into my head, juggle machetes, walk on stilts, and do magic. He checks them off on his fingers like they're nothing telling me that all those positions are filled or not needed. "But we do need an outside talker" he says. So I show up to check out the show in full operation, and Dick hands me the microphone and says go to work. With no idea what I'm supposed to do, and having shown up just to check the show out, I take the microphone and they didn't let me go until 10 hours later. That was six years ago.

Describe your modifications (piercings, tattoos, etc)?

I used to have piercings, and still have many of the holes, including the hole in my tongue that I enjoy putting toothpicks in. (oh and that vibrating tongue ring too) but I haven't worn any jewelry in years. I used to pound a nail through the hole in my tongue, but one day a 10 year old girl said "oh you have a pierced tongue just like my sister" I never did the act again. I've got some classic flash style tattoos on my arms, but all the work is custom originals. I've got a pair of angel and devil girls on each upper arm done by Cammille who used to be our blade box girl in Coney Island. She lives in Austin now, working with Leopard Larry. The angel girl is below my first tattoo of an apple for my hero Johnny Appleseed, with a 4 leaf clover for luck. The apple and the angel girl with the snake wrapped around her ankle is my garden of Eden arm. The right arm has a horseshoe for luck and the cloven hoofed devil girl with hell-fire and flames. I've got a dragonfly from Dragonfly on one hip done at the tattoo convention with my pants down at Roseland. And most recently a firefly from Katzen on the other hip. I tattooed my cock with "I Want To Rock" That was a lot of fun actually - my

Lucky Devil show was performing at Forged in Ink tattoo convention in Wyomissing, PA and we all got tattooed on the last day - there I am at the convention getting my dick tattooed as people walk by and say "So what is that?" The big one is in fact the first tattoo I ever wanted, and I made myself wait 10 years to get it, but I love it. I've got red evil eyes tattooed on the back of my head. One side is good, the other side is evil - you decide which is which. There's a lot of good and evil in my ink - but there's a lot of good and evil in all of us.

Do you use any of your modifications as part of your show (other than general appearance)?

Every now and then I'll make an eyes in the back of my head joke, but most of the time it's never mentioned.

Have you or would you ever consider getting a modification for solely use onstage (i.e. 'Is this your card?' and it's tattooed on your arm)

You know, I would consider getting a tattoo for stage use, I like joke and optical illusion tattoos, like the dancing hula girls on muscles, Angelica's [Insectivora at Coney Island and a member of the Lucky Devils] cock that hangs below her knee and that sort of thing, but really - I'm not the tattooed man in the show - and since there is a tattooed man or woman or often both at the shows I'm working on - calling attention to my tattoos just seems silly.

You work closely and regularly with two heavily (including facially) tattooed people, Eak and Insectivora. What have you noticed about the difference between how people react to them (as audience members or in general) and how they react to you – you are all tattooed but do they overlook your tattoos next to them or perhaps act more accepting of your less extensive coverage?

I spend a lot of time with facially and extensively tattooed people. Arty Flash was the first tattooed man I worked with in Coney Island. He was perhaps the nicest about it all - walking to the train after work he would be stopped every 10 feet and asked the same questions, he always smiled and talked to everyone - I never saw it bother him. I just finished working with Katzen and The Enigma at the Bros. Grim Sideshow in Texas. We went to the rodeo one night and at the end of the night the cowboys came over and introduced themselves to us and asked us if we wanted to ride a little. It was a great sight to see Katzen and the Enigma up on rodeo horses shaking hands with the cowboys. Now I work with Eak and Insectivora and we spend a lot of time together at the show and outside of work too. I'm used to standing right next to them when sideshow fans recognize them from Coney Island and have no idea who I am while they talk about how great the show was.

But it's always funny to me when someone asks about my tattoos while I'm standing next to them. It's nice to have my work recognized while standing next to such beautiful and extensive living canvases, but I sometimes wonder if it's the white elephant and it's just easier to break into the tattoo conversation by talking to me - the safe one.

Ever want to go the heavily modified route yourself? Perhaps a full bodysuit of flames?

I love tattoos and I have such admiration for my totally tattooed friends. I toyed with a couple ideas of the Slim Goodbody anatomical suit of bones and organs tattooed all over my body. And yes flame patterns, but really that's not me. I'm just happy to get to be a part of such a fascinating world.

How have your modifications affected your career, if at all – have you gotten or lost jobs/gigs due to them?

It's funny, because I've learned a lot about life in the sideshow and working full time as an entertainer - there are certain things you think life will be like, but it's often a little different. Today I had to get a fax machine and a five foot tall file cabinet. I'm a showman - but somehow I end up doing hours of show related office work every day. Tattoos are the same way. I thought working in the sideshow I could be as crazy as I wanted - have bright red hair - tattoo full sleeves and anything else - but it's just not true for me. When I started at Coney Island I was the outside talker - who is really the go between for the audience and the human oddities and performers. To do my job well and convince the people to come inside I have to be one of them, not one of the "freaks." So I'm the one saying "hey I'm like you, but look how weird this is, look how amazing it is, come inside, it's safe and you'll like it." So in that role I can't afford to distance myself from the rubes with the way I look. That character and idea helped my performance so much that I've never really dropped it. When I'm on stage inside the show - I allow my personality to be a little wilder - but at the core of it - for me - looking like the audience allows my acts to hit home harder - as if to say I may have been born just like you but look what happened to me since - and maybe it could happen to you! I certainly get calls for gigs that I know I'll have to wear a long sleeve shirt to. I have to think about which promo photos to send out whether they show my tattoos or not. But I've done bar mitzvahs in my vest with the naked girl tattoos out in the open - they want the sideshow guy to be "Crazy" but everyone draws that line somewhere differently. And I've decided to hold off the elbow and lower arm tattoos I had planned out and stick to less visible areas.

I can empathize about buying filing cabinets and office work, do

you find that you perhaps underestimated the ‘off stage duties’ that come with being in and running your own shows? Do you think most people realize those aspects of what you do in order to be successful in sideshow (or entertainment overall)?

Working in the sideshow can be the best life in the world, but it is work. In Coney Island, we perform about 15 shows a day over 12 hours, and anyone who's worked for Ward Hall or Bobby Reynolds will tell you that they do 50-70 shows a day. Now as much as that 15th sword of the day grinds into your throat while you're looking out at an audience of 20 people (and often less) drunk, making out with their girlfriend, or trying to start a fight with you while you're on stage, that's the glamorous part of the sideshow. After the show is over, you've got to pack up your props, take care of the animals, fix anything that broke, sweep and mop the theater, take out the trash. Oh, you thought we had maids to those tasks right? No the big stars go from signing breasts after the show to picking up broken beer bottles under the bleachers. Now after you've got all that done, and it's three or four in the morning, then you can start working on that new act you've been wanting to put into the show. And like I said, we've got it easy in Coney Island - we're in our own building. Working under canvas on the mud route is a whole other kind of life. After a three day spot, you finish the last show at 2am, pack up the show, pull the tent stakes, drop and fold the canvas, put it all in the truck, and drive over-night to the next town, sometimes a thousand miles away. And when you get there, you all get motel rooms with room service and jacuzzi's right? No fucking way, you hop out of the truck, and start pounding tent stakes, now these aren't like the ones for your backyard camping tent, one tent stake weighs 20 pounds, and you're about to pound 50 to 100 of them into the dried-up, hard as a rock mud, or if you're lucky enough to be working a fair on asphalt, then that's right, you're working the jackhammer and then pounding tent stakes. All so you can perform for three days - maybe ten days - Wow! And then pack it up again. But for all that work we do in the summer; we all go to Florida and kick back for the winter right? Myth # 467 about the sideshow. Not true. I'm here at home now, surrounded by sideshow banners and props getting a fresh coat of paint. But over the winter it's a full-time office job of running a business - hiring people for shows, getting props made or repaired, adding up all the receipts, coming up with the new master plan to make more money next year, figuring out how to book two more shows into fairs you haven't played before. The work never ends. So, is it Hell to work in the sideshow? No it's amazing, you work with the best people in the world, you get to see places, that no ordinary travels would ever take you. And the best part is - it's the most fun you could ever have.

The Coney Island schedule can be grueling, requiring several

performances a day, day after day, for weeks on end. I think it is important that people realize that not only are sideshow performers risking themselves with their acts but also through the sheer statistical weight of constant repetition. Do you do anything special in order to keep up with the grind of sword swallowing so many times or doing fire manipulation (slow poisoning) so often?

Oh man, we do so many shows. I just got the stats from this season yesterday. We did almost 600 shows this season - and that's just the Coney Island sideshow - I'm also doing other shows during the summer too - burlesque and rock and roll shows after the sideshow closes - Brothers Grimm and Bar Mitzvahs on my days off (and there are not many days off from the sideshow). Last year I counted and I did almost one thousand shows in a year. I'll come close this year, but I won't break 1,000, we had too much rain. It's my goal to break a thousand - but it's a dubious honor. I could be Ozzy Osbourne and do one show a night and be super rich - or I could work in the mud and the dust and try for a thousand. Oh Hell, I love it. But yes, it's grueling on the body - this year in Coney I was the Human Blockhead, The Sword Swallower, I pitched the blade box and the blow off, I eat fire, and I did the inverted escape act - tied up by an audience member in a straight jacket then cranked up by my ankles until my head is six feet above the stage. Actually this summer the crank that holds me up broke while I was upside down in a show - but Eak caught the rope! I love that guy. Yes, it takes an incredible toll on the body. I do what I can to preserve myself for the future - but mostly I do what I can to preserve myself for the fifteen shows I have to do tomorrow. I have to take care of my voice, that's the big one for me. I take vitamins, I go to the gym, I gargle salt water, and mostly I try and stay in tune with my body so I can fix problems before they get out of hand and make me miss work - because there are no sick days in the sideshow - even if your neon sword breaks in your throat during the first show of the day and cuts you open... It's not a job, it's a way of life and I wouldn't know what else to do with mine.

Would you suggest the sideshow as a career option to others?

Working in the sideshow is not just a job or even a career - it really is a way of life. After the years of grueling training, after starving and selling your soul to learn the skills that may one day kill you, after hours of pounding tent stakes and sweeping the floor, if you make it then, there are no days off, no sick days, and try explaining your promotion to the in-laws at the Christmas party. However, if it is the life for you - it's the best life in the world. It's about commitment. If you want to be in the sideshow go to the state fair or the carnival that comes through your town and get a job. There's always work on the carnival. That's right, work. Doing a "crazy" trick with your friends at the rock club is not a sideshow. Sideshow is an American folk

art rooted in the traveling circus and the carnival. You can't do sideshow unless you understand how things work on a carnival. There are a lot of kids now who take up sideshow as a hobby and it's great to see anyone with a love for the sideshow keeping this world alive. But there's a difference between doing a couple of tricks and being an entertainer. That's what sideshows are and have always have been - entertainment. Sideshows are not gross-out shows. Like the circus, you don't have to speak English or read the Playbill to enjoy the sideshow. They're entertainment for everyone.

What does the word 'freak' mean to you?

To me, the word freak is a specific descriptive job title. The word freak has changed meaning substantially since the first half of the 20th century, with the biggest change coming in the 1960's when the counter culture adapted "freak" into a badge of honor that separated them from mainstream society. The counter culture then went on to homogenize with the mainstream taking the word freak with it - really stripping the word freak of the strength it once had. People come up to me after shows all the time and say, "Hey, I'm a freak too!" I know they mean it as a compliment, but it grinds at me every time I hear it. But the word freak is a badge of honor to me - but one that's hard won and often not chosen by those special enough to carry that title. Calling yourself a freak because you have pink hair this week or your mom doesn't like the music you listen to is like me going into the hospital and saying, "Hey, I'm a doctor too, I put this band-aid on all by myself." The word Freak describes a person who is visibly physically different than the standard form human being. Physically deformed people like conjoined twins, bearded ladies, and dwarves are classic examples of freaks, though I believe that amputees and totally tattooed folks fit the category too. Freaks have always been the royalty of the sideshow. Freaks make more money, get better trailers, more press, and let's face it, are harder to replace than the rest of the cast and crew. But freaks can't "turn it off" when the work day is over (although in the carnival, it never feels like the work day is actually over). I am not a freak and never will be. I am a working act. I've dedicated my life to learning skills that are amazing on stage - but when I walk out of the sideshow at night, I can put on a hat and be virtually unrecognizable. Freaks are jaw-dropping different not just when they're on stage - but when they're getting their morning coffee too. It takes tremendous strength of character to be a freak - and thus, some of the strongest and most interesting people I've been honored to know, have been interesting on the outside as well.

Fredini

2/5/2004

The Great Fredini is a man of many hats – and I understand the rest of his wardrobe is pretty nice too. Onstage he is an MC, a talker, magician (world's worst by his own description), a blockhead, a ventriloquist, and a sword swallower. Fredini also does the Coney Island website design and works with Funny Garbage. And while he no longer regularly performs as part of the Coney Island Sideshow cast, he hasn't left the stage behind as he now hosts 'This or That' the resident burlesque show.

Start out with the basics – Name / Stage Name, age, location, job, etc. All that you are willing to let the world know of your vital statistics.

Fred Kahl / The Great Fredini, Age 38, New York, NY, Sword Swallower, Currently work as a creative Director at a New York Design and Production company named Funny Garbage.

How did you first get involved with sideshow and Coney Island

I was an art student interested in illusion. I spent a lot of time up at Flossos's Magic shop perusing old magic books. At the time I was doing sculptures based on illusion principles- am lot of stuff inspired by Duchamp. I got into performing magic on the street and through the Flossos connection became enamored with Coney's history. This was in the early 80's -at the same time that Dick Zigun's Coney Island USA was just being established, and the Coney Island Hysterical Society was running the funhouse in Coney. There was a lot of great underground art going on out there and it seemed like the perfect place for me. A few years later John Bradshaw hired me to be in the sideshow and so I went for it. I only worked about a month for him because I had an artist in residency somewhere that summer, but that was it I had the bug. The following season, Dick set up his own show and signed me on for the season.

Do you have any tattoos or piercings?

I have one small jailhouse style tattoo on my foot- it's of a key, and it's about an inch long. I'm the straight man in the show.

You worked closely and were good friends with the late Michael Wilson (who many readers will probably know from his interview in Modern Primitives). He is probably one of the better known and respected tattooed men of the modern sideshow revival. Can you give us a favorite story or moment.

Michael was really an amazing artist- himself being his most famous work, but he was quite an accomplished painter as well. We had a lot of good times together. One of my favorite ways he dealt with hecklers was when they shouted out "take your pants off" or "what's on your butt?", to which he'd reply "There's a rose on my ass, wanna smell it?" Believe it or not he was actually very modest about revealing the tattoos he had down there. He was once on the Robin Byrd Show (an adult cable access show in NYC) and Robin tried to get him to strip down but he refused.

Michael was also the first person I knew with a tongue piercing. Back when he first started hammering a nail through his tongue, we literally had people practically fainting or walking out of the show. Later in his career, piercing got more prevalent and it lost its shock effect.

What was your perception of heavy tattooing & piercing before you got into sideshow – has it changed much now that you have worked with and known so many heavily modified people?

I remember seeing Captain Don perform at the modern primitives show in Seattle, or seeing Jonathan Shaw at the first tattoo show in Coney, and remember being impressed by their tats-specifically the fullness of their coverage. I guess over time, I've really grown to have an appreciation for the art form and have refined my tastes of what I like best. I really like the old school American sailor flash myself, as well as artists who do contemporary stuff in that style. I keep thinking I'll get some when I turn 40.. But the only way I'd go for it would be to get a big area- a full back piece or sleeves- none of this piecemeal stuff.

As a sword swallower, you engage in a very serious form of body control and manipulation, if not modification. Tell us a bit about how you got into sword swallowing, your experience with learning to swallow (mine was very a very rough self taught journey I wouldn't wish on others), and any effects you have noticed now after performing the act for years.

When I first worked the sideshow, I just did Blockhead and Magic, as well as lots of ballying. Michael Wilson and I had a competition as to who would swallow swords first. I always wanted him to do it so he could swallow neon. I wanted to call him the human lampshade because of the way the light would go through the tattoos on his neck. At the time no one in the show was swallowing swords, but Michael would say its all yoga. During the off season, I started studying yoga, and got really into it. I tried to swallow a coat hanger periodically, but had no success. When the season started, I brought my coat hanger out to Coney. I figured I'd learn backstage between

sets. My first attempt in Coney Island worked- and boy was I surprised. That afternoon I began performing it on stage, and by the following week I had a sword.

You have children, which in my experience, is a little bit rare for sideshow performers. Did you consider how the sideshow environment might impact raising them (positively or negatively)?

I just do what I do, and they take it at face value. They'll probably grow up to be bankers in a backlash against it.

Would you encourage others to learn acts and join the sideshow? Is it a career path you would like to see your children carry on?

Like Melvin Burkhardt used to say, "It's a hard way to make an easy living."

What does the word freak mean to you?

Ugh, I don't know. People who are mentally and emotionally malformed. Not most people in the sideshow. Michael Jackson is a real freak- both psychologically, and in the self made freak kind of way.

You are a guest lecturer at the Coney Island sideshow school. Tell us a bit about your experience with that.

Todd Robbins is the real master of Sideshow School. I just do a little sword swallowing tutorial. We do some breathing and relaxation exercises and try swallowing coat hangers. The old law was that a sword swallower would only ever teach one other person- just to pass the act on, but I guess I'm doing the opposite- teaching more Sword Swallowers than anyone else... but really- Todd Robbins deserves all the props for Sideshow School.

Tell me about the Coney Island Burlesque show

For the last seven years, I've run the Coney Island Burlesque at the beach series, which gave birth to my latest project -"America's favorite Burlesque Game show- This or That!". This is the TV show I want to see when I turn on the TV. We're about to start pitching it around at networks. I'm not sure if anyone will touch it but we'll see. The idea is that it is a sexy game show- part Gong Show, part Let's Make a Deal, but hotter. We make the contestants reveal their inner exhibitionistic selves. Its really just good clean fun (with some skin showing). Along the way there's some wild variety acts in the show, but its really about making the contestants-these "normal" people come out of their shells, and believe me they do- you can't believe the

things people will do to win a vibrator... see what I mean at
<http://www.thisorthat.tv>.

What was the impetus to do a burlesque show? Was it the historical connection or simply a matter of saying 'Hey, you know what people like - stripping!' Perhaps a desire to expand a bit from the traditional sideshow model?

Burlesque is an old American art form like the sideshow so the historical connection was a draw, but face it- sexy girls are a lot more exciting than looking at Eak! (Unless you're into that!) At Coney Island USA, we had always done an annual Go Go Rama night, and Dick Zigun had written about Minsky's in the 70's, so it was something that was in the air out there. The charter of CIUSA is to uphold American popular art forms like the sideshow and tattooing, so burlesque was a natural extension. Plus, it made good money, so in the age of struggling non-profits, it made good sense. When I left the sideshow I knew I wanted to stay involved out there and Burlesque at the Beach/Tirza's Wine Baths was born out of it!

Is it different doing acts like the blockhead and sword swallowing for a burlesque crowd?

Not really- The crowd at the burlesque shows is usually all revved up, so in that sense its good- at a sideshow you get audiences that span anywhere between super revved up, to dead as a doornail, but really, my blockhead/ swords routine is pretty much never fail, so there you have it.

Dick Zigun

2/10/2004

Dick Zigun is the man. No, not that man, not the one that's been holding you down all these years. He's the good kind. Dick is the driving, some might say whip-cracking, force that helps keeps sideshow alive at Coney Island. He is an ever present icon at Sideshows by the Seashore overseeing daily operations and even taking part in the cast when needed as a talker. If you've caught any of the many sideshow documentaries and programs that have often graced basic cable networks, such as Discovery and TLC, in the last half dozen years then you have likely seen Dick acting as spokesman for Coney Island – and he is eminently qualified to do so.

I first met Dick Zigun when I did a guest appearance at Coney Island in 2002. And, at the risk of tarnishing his otherwise gruff reputation, I have to say that what impressed me most was how incredibly welcome he made me feel. Talking with Dick and working with his cast, I had never before felt so good and reassured about myself and the path I had chosen.

But, I don't want to risk ruining his reputation any further, so let's meet Dick Zigun:

Beginning with the usual interview formalities; tell us your name, place of birth, current title/position, all that jazz

Dick D. Zigun, born May 11, 1953 in Bridgeport, CT. I am founder and Artistic Director of CONEY ISLAND, USA a non-profit arts organization dating from 1980 whose purpose: "is to defend the honor of American popular culture through innovative performances and exhibitions". PT Barnum was Mayor, developer and Patron Saint of Bridgeport. He built his houses there and had the winter headquarters of the circus there. He bought up the shorefront (which was the front yard of his second house) and left that property and others to the city for parks. There is a big beach with a statue of Barnum. To grow up in Bridgeport is to think that elephants and midgets are patriotic and all-American. During the big Barnum Festival each summer (month long, largest 4th of July parade in USA during the 1950's, car show, air show, 5th graders impersonating midgets, etc) the local paper is full of biographical info on Barnum and Tom Thumb, who was born and lived a few doors from my grammar school. I was a Barnum scholar before I was a teenager.

You have an impressive pedigree academically and professionally (Bennington, Yale) and many notable connections in the art world – so why sideshow?

I was a scholarship student for a BA at Bennington College (when it was the most expensive college in the world in the early 70's) and again a scholarship student for the 3 yr. MFA program at Yale School of Drama. Back then there were no books and no classes on sideshows or vaudeville or burlesque...not at my schools and not at any schools. As a Bridgeport guy out to defend American theatrical traditions I was an oddball, a rebel and a pioneer. I was writing plays about ventriloquists wanting to kill Thomas Edison, things like that. Right out of Yale School of Drama I was produced in the regional theater movement I had been trained for but not happy typecast as an edgy experimental playwright doomed forever to producing new plays in regional theater second spaces for the hoity toity blue haired ladies. In 1979 I was having a play produced at the Mark Taper Forum in LA...grooving on the beach and thinking that LA was the capital of American...but set on living in New York City which is the capital of the world and the only place someone serious about theater can earn a living. Another play being produced at the same time in LA was KID TWIST by Len Jenkin about the Murder Inc. stool pigeon thrown out the hotel window in Coney Island. I went back again and again to see the play and Coney Island intellectually stuck me as a way to live the beach lifestyle in NYC. Then I was visiting the Santa Monica pier and epiphany struck when I saw an arcade building for rent. I vowed to go back to Coney Island and check out loft space. One thing lead to another and by 1985 I opened a theater/arts center on the Boardwalk called Sideshows by the Seashore. Sideshows are the most indigenous theatrical tradition in my chosen neighborhood so it was only natural to create a program where we would be the only place left in America to keep alive the ten in one.

You are noticeably tattooed (your sleeves) with work by notable artists – tell us about your tattoo work and any other modifications, and the artists responsible

Running an arts center has given me the opportunity to bring a lot of American underground culture into the mainstream by virtue of being a known arts center in NYC that sends out press releases, puts on public advertised shows and organizes artists to present things. We not only pioneered the new sideshow movement but also helped to create the new burlesque movement and within NYC (which tattooing was illegal and no one was producing an annual tattoo show) helped to bring tattoos out of the underground. Our first tattoo/motorcycle shows was in 1986. Since I was producing a tattoo show, hanging out with tattooed people, making money off of tattooed people and was good friends with Michael Wilson...I thought long and hard for ten years about myself and whether I would spend my life employing freaky people but remaining a standoffish academic type. So in 1996, after ten years of over-intellectualizing, I came up with this: four limbs

equals: earth, water, fire, air. I got my first tattoo, on stage, in the street, in front of the police captain when tattooing was still illegal in NYC and everyone could hear me scream. Spider Webb tattooed my right arm which is "water". Camille Cline, spider's protégé, did my left arm which is air. Dragonfly, another spider protégé, is working on my right leg which is fire. That's as far as I've gotten.

At what point did you begin getting tattooed in relation to your association with sideshow? If before, how was it looked upon at the time. If after, do you think it was influenced much by your experience with the sideshow?

Michael Wilson, with his debut in Modern Primitives, had a lot to do with introducing post-modern tattoos and piercings to America. Which Michael first worked here no one since Jack Dracula had publicly exhibited a tattoo face...some 20-25 years. It was a big deal and since pierced tongues were also unusual in the 1980's it was a big deal when Michael would hammer a nail thru his tongue. Now every suburban teenage girl in American has a pierced tongue. When I first came to Coney Island I was an outsider artist type and my education and non-Brooklyn accent enamored me to the locals as a spokesman for Coney. It would have been difficult back then if I was heavily tattooed but now I've become some kind of Coney island institution and as long as I stay alive and articulate it doesn't matter much what I do...well, maybe it would matter if I tattooed my face.

You have known and worked with a number of people who were heavily tattooed (including probably more facially tattooed modern performers than anyone else) Has this changed your perception of tattooing, or facial tattooing? Ever considered going that route yourself?

Knowing and loving and respecting so many heavily tattooed people helped me accept the idea of inking myself. I can see myself with a total bodysuit but not facial or hand tattoos. I am an old-style kind of guy. My job is to be the producer and director and spokesman. I am not one of the performers. Since I am always hanging around the place my tattooed sleeves help in that I am another freaky looking staff person. But as a spokesman it is best that the audience more or less identify with me as one of them and not one of the extreme freaks.

Do you think that sideshow has helped or hindered the popular view of heavily modified people (such as those with facial tattooing)?

Without question the sideshow movement has helped the popular view of heavily modified people. A few decades ago a Michael Wilson or Lizardman or Enigma would have been stoned walking down the average

small town American street...now you all are famous TV celebrities.

**What societal role do you see sideshow playing in the future?
What does it provide?**

Sideshows have reintegrated themselves into American culture. You see sideshow influence in rock videos, in advertising, in fashion. I am proud to have a role in moving sideshow culture from the margins back into the mainstream, where it belongs. America used to have an inferiority complex about its own culture: sideshows, burlesque, vaudeville. We used to be embarrassed not proud of our populist culture. Everything used to be Eurocentric and that was boring and elitist. Artists especially are now free to use American culture as history and influence without freaking out their professors or getting kicked out of school, galleries and museums. Nevertheless, not I nor Jim Rose nor the Bindlestiffs have made big money out of producing sideshows. It only goes so far. I'd like to see it go farther and I'd like to see sideshows make more money especially since we need to INSTITUTIONALIZE the arts center in Coney Island now that Coney Island is developing fast and taking off. We are renters and not owners and our lease in up in two years. We need to fund this place and the history that has taken place here since the 1980's or else we will lose it.

**Coney Island now offers a sideshow school – tell us about that
and how it came to be.**

Of course there is a lot of interest in sideshow acts by a new generation of circus idiots for the 21st century...and there is a lot of BAD INFO out there in books and on websites about how to learn and master the sideshow arts which ARE DANGEROUS!!! So since we are a non-profit educational institution we decided we would be the very first school which taught the arts the RIGHT WAY. It helps us earn money for our programs and it helps eager sideshow amateurs how to stay out of the hospital.

**With over two decades experience you have been working the
sideshow longer than many of its current fans and hopeful future stars
have been alive. What would you suggest they consider or do before
taking their first steps or preparatory measures before beginning
training at the school or elsewhere?**

I am amazed how CASUALLY some people tattoo their faces or do extreme body modification these days. Used to be that someone would get a tattooed bodysuit first and then consider the face but these days some kids start with the face. Frankly, although a lot of brilliant committed people get facial tattoos, a lot of others are "no future" crusty heroin junky types who just don't care about next year or even what tomorrow brings. Fine if that's

your chosen lifestyle, fine but sad...but if you're gonna be a professional in a sideshow then you need to show up for work on time every day and do you act sober and junkies don't get jobs on payroll at Sideshows by the Seashore.

Given your experiences would you recommend others attempt a similar path?

If it is a "labor of love" and you just gotta do it, then sure, I'll not only recommend it but be your mentor and give you advice (up to a point, don't need more competitors). Ain't no one gonna get rich doing sideshows and the trials and tribulations will mess with your family life and love life and make your life hard but very, very interesting.

What does the word 'freak' mean to you?

Freak used to be a pejorative, a bad word. Now it's a badge of honor. People wanna be a freak. Freaks have freedom; freaks are not like everyone else. Freaks are cool.

Is there any act that you have always wanted for the show but never been able to get?

Siamese Twins. A perfectly proportioned 3 foot high midget. A 9 foot tall giant. The real missing link. Hell, even a sideshow celeb like the Lizardman working for me at minimum wage for an entire summer. I better keep dreaming...

Open forum – sound off, plug shamelessly, thank the academy, say whatever you want:

www.coneyisland.com

Nippulini

3/2/2004

Two of the main focuses of my life and work are body modification and sideshow. I spend time every day researching online for new information, going over the books in my personal library, and generally contemplating and updating my information base on both these subjects. Thus, it surprises when I find out I have somehow missed or overlooked a major player in either of these communities. Nippulini stands out in both, but still I somehow managed to miss him for a number of years. A little less than two years ago was the first time I ever heard of Nippulini – via online references and then his postings in an online sideshow discussion group. Since then I have gotten to meet and even share a stage with him at the 2nd annual Sideshow Gathering. He has made a serious dedication of himself to body modification and taken it to the stage with a rare passion.

Now, in his own words; The Great Nippulini:

Name, Rank & Serial Number – You know the drill; give us the usual biographical data.

I am the Great Nippulini, World's Strongest Nipples. Philadelphia Licensed Body Artist #8586, piercing for over 12 years and have performed over 15,000 pierces in my career. I live in the Philadelphia area, own a 200 year old historical house, am currently in the middle of a divorce, have 2 dogs, 3 cats, 7 reptiles, a blue faced Amazon parrot, and a Madagascar hissing cockroach (who just had about 20 to 30 babies... yay!).

Describe your body modifications

I have 14 piercings around my body (5 ears, 2 nipples, a Madison, 5 hafadas), a few tattoos here and there, some scarification, and nipple hair electrolysis. I used to have a frenum, but removed it a while ago. I took it out to an 8 gauge. It's been years since I've had it, but I can still fit a 14 gauge through it.

What first got you started in body modification?

Actually I got started in all this through my family's business. In 1989 they started adding body piercing to supplement their retail clothing store. At first things were new, we had to learn a lot, but we grew and became the area's largest high volume body piercing ONLY shop. For promotions, I would go to local tattoo shops (at the time, NO tattoo shop did piercing), and I got interested in getting inked. I also have had done some

self scarification with a Dremel cut-off disc with excellent results. Electrolysis, by definition, is also a body mod I've gone through.

When did you first decide to start working at lifting and pulling with your piercings? Why the nipples?

I first started to lift heavy stuff in the shops to freak out customers. I started off with a 7 pound towing spring, then gallon bottles of distilled water (for the autoclave) and so on. I chose the nipples as my piercings of choice for this because at the time I was at 6 gauge. This must have been around '96-97. I was most impressed with Fakir Musafar's nipples, and at first wanted to get them so I could put a finger through them, he was my main influence for increasing my nipple size. Now I am at 00 gauge and am quite happy.

How did you first train your nipples for weight and what regimen (if any) do you use to keep them 'in shape'

Like I said, I started with 6 gauge, (when lifting... I actually started at 14 gauge in 1990) and comparatively small light weights. As the nipple size would be increased, I would try out slightly heavier objects. Over the years I became able to do heavier and heavier items. As far as keeping them in shape, I can only say that I keep them moisturized and am VERY cautious when it comes to anything going near them.

You use some interesting custom jewelry – tell us the story behind that.

I have a few different types of jewelry depending on my mood. For major shows and competition, I use 00 gauge 5/8" circle rings. They are basically circular barbells with only one bead, they lend the appearance of CBR's. I use them because installing 00 gauge CBR's onstage would be close to impossible. For show and other things (heh heh) I use my custom shackles. These are pieces that I designed myself and had fabricated for me. They are comprised of 00 gauge solid bars that have 4 gauge 'U' shaped barbells that run through the main bar. For everyday wear, I use flat disc ended barbells or standard 00 gauge barbells. I also have custom hollow acrylic pieces I wear in case of things like surgery or when I get my occasional nipple hair electrolysis (that shit REALLY hurts!).

When you say 'competition' do you mean impromptu contests with people you meet or is there an underground nipple fight club?

Heh heh, I wish! When I say 'competition' I mean for the hardcore weight. The shackles are nice, but when large amounts (over 30 pounds) are applied, they tend to pull from one side or the other being that the main bar is

straight. For 30 lbs. and up, I prefer to use the circle barbells because they are safer and hold the weight better.

You are well versed in the historical aspects of your act. Besides simply continuing the tradition, what do you see as your contribution or development to the act?

The various stunts that I do with my nipples I have seen before, and whatever I create are basically hybrid acts or just way out there type of stuff (i.e. the cup crusher, iron grinder, etc.). I started using anvils as a tribute to Rasmus Nielsen, one of the forefathers of pierced weightlifting. I have also come up with these creative nipple acts so that maybe someday in the future will be replicated by someone when I'm not around to do this anymore.

How important is it to you that acts like yours are remembered in the future and that people continue to do them? Why?

Being remembered for strongest nipples is the most important thing for future generations to reference. It's more important than fame or money. Everyone dies eventually, we are born dying. This in some small way is my immortality. As I have been inspired by Rasmus and the like, I would hope to do the same for someone hundreds of years from now. My current goal at the moment is to break a buck (100 lbs.) in a lift. I can't really explain why, it's just something inside of me that I do.

Are your nipples your primary focus for your show or do you plan on expanding to other piercings or even other acts?

I do use my ear piercings for my "Bowling" stunt, and have played with the idea of using my hafadas in the act. I just don't know how comfortable I'd feel displaying my genitals onstage... yet. I am waiting for my Madison (frontal neck pierce) to heal so I can have some fun with that. I got that from Rasmus too. I believe he pulled wooden carts with people or sledgehammers in them with his Madison (I'm sure they didn't call it a Madison back in then). Other than that, I prefer to have my nipples to be the main focus of what I do. It helps me stick out in people's minds. I get asked a lot why I don't perform other sideshow stunts, well mainly it's because this is what I am best at, and if I started doing other things it would detract from the seriousness of the nipples. Plus, I am not too good at other types of stunts... I know how to do them, just not well enough for me to feel comfortable doing them onstage.

What does the word 'freak' mean to you?

Freak? Michael Jackson? Seriously though, in the sideshow definition of the

word, it means born freaks or oddities. In modern slang, freak is used to describe someone "offbeat", "alternative", what have you. I believe everyone is a freak, and that freakdom is a part of human nature. Those of us who embrace this part of ourselves are the ones who have the courage to admit it. The guys in their 3 piece suits and the housewives who all think they are 'normal' are too afraid to be in touch with that part of themselves and it's their loss.

Shout out time – say anything you want:

Pierced weightlifting is something not to be taken for granted. I've seen many people toy around with it and hurt themselves. I have spent the past 8 years taking myself to the point where I can lift 55 pounds, or tow 2,000 pound cars with them... this isn't just something you can "jump into" like blockhead or bed of nails. Don't try this, and if you do you'll see what "It's a great stunt, but I can only do it once" means.

Jason Sand

1/21/2006

I had the opportunity to meet Jason in person in 2003 after first reading about him on BME. Since then the original interview with Jason was removed for various reasons but always with an eye towards replacing it with an updated account his amazing life and modifications. I was very happy when he approached me with the idea of doing the new interview and I hope I have done him justice by asking good questions – here are his responses:

Let's start with the standard introduction: What's your name? How old are you? Where do you call home?

Jason Sand. 27 years old. Currently living in the D.C. Area (MD), next year Vermont.

How would you describe your motivations for your modifications?

I would say many of my modifications are a blend of reclamation, spiritual, and aesthetic appeal. My theme as a whole is based on my personal and spiritual evolution. Amongst all of that I've accumulated a few mods that simply appeal to me artistically, or even sexually.

Describe your modifications and who did them:

Facial and neck tattoos by various artists including: Shane Munce, Rosanna (No hope no fear in Amsterdam), Joe Marro, Preston Jarvis, Mike Derazmo, Chris Lee a.k.a. Batryder, JD (Psychotic INK), Jackie Brown, and Eric Stokes. Half sleeve by Bryan Harper. Back piece in progress by Shane Munce and Chris Lee. An in-progress chest piece by Jon Clue. A crotch piece by Mike Fikes. Leg and foot work from Shane Munce, Mike Derazmo, and Eric Stokes. And some other work by various artists.

Piercings top to bottom: 2X2ga upper ear, 00ga upper ear, 4ga upper ear, 1ga conch, 1.25" ears (split/reattached by Steve Haworth) 13mm Septum piercing, 27mmX14mm Labret, 00ga guiche, 1/2" guiche, 5/8" guiche, and a 1" upper scrotal piece done in transcrotal style (i.e. partially stitched closed during procedure.)

Carved silicone facial implants and 8 large Teflon horns by Steve Haworth with Jesse Jarrell having carved the facial ones.

Chin branding by Steve Haworth. Shin branding by Alva in

Jacksonville.

Chest cuttings by Frances and knee cuttings by Ron Garza.

Self-done partial subincision. Partial head splitting by Shane Munce. Self cut and reattached split tongue. I think that's it.

Future modification plans?

Possibly switching the Teflon in my chest out for silicone. And really that's about it...I'm pretty complete with most of my projects aside from tattooing.

Did you have an overall plan or idea for your mods or was it a piecemeal / evolution process?

Most of it was part of an overall plan, but like many things in life, some of it was spontaneous, and much of it evolved and changed naturally as I came up with better or different ideas. Even now that I've planned out the rest of my work, there is loads of room for change and adaptation.

Can you expand on the theme? I think because its not an obvious visual one it may be harder for people to pick up on immediately

I am not sure I can get this across correctly, mainly due to not being done, but I'll give it a go. I have a few different related themes. Starting at the face the blue dots are to honor the skies above, and the water below, a tribute to air and water. My face/neck is a representation of destruction and creation, the Big Bang with the symbol for "God" (as in a being, not the one in the bible) being in the center, and below on my throat, a goat with the same symbol of God, representing destruction. I've also incorporated plants and animals in between this to represent the here and now. On the sides of my head I have "Kill thine Idols" as in not to have idols before your perception of god or enlightenment. The other side states "life after death" in regards to passing from this life into another.

My front torso is a huge face in progression formed out of different forms of plants from a cellular level to a lichen growth. As this piece progresses it will have more plant textures incorporated. This represents the organic process of part of myself growing out of me, a kind of spiritual peak through my inner window, ever reaching outward. My back section is a tribute to fertility (the "human" orchid i.e. human vagina as opposed to insect vagina emulation) Represented with an Orchid and various spiders. Once finished it will have incorporated a scene of various nebula's and birthing stars, all overlapped with webbing to represent how its all "tied together"

Growing off the orchid and encompassing my ass will two large Berries with fetus's growing inside them, fusing the concept of birth and growth with an organic plant like fusion. I'll leave it at that for the areas that are not currently done so as not to jinx it.

Lastly, my feet are once again a representation of destruction and growth within filth as myself and Shane Munce are currently working on them with tattoos such as 3d zits, the worm from poltergeist, and eventually bruising, bloating, frost bite, gangrene, etc.....

The rest of my body, arms crotch etc....carry a few token tattoos from friends, more representations mostly abstract, of plants and animals. My knuckles read 'Hard Love'; my brother has the same tattoo. We got it to represent the way we were raised.

I've also used implants and subincision, and eventually tattoos to give my genitalia an abstract, hermaphroditic, plant like appearance.

Tell me about the lobe re-attachment?

Well as to the "why" One ear I had overstretched early on, and suffered a thin spot. Later down the road I had a similar problem with the other ear during a scalpel session. They both harbored thin spots but were holding in fine enough until I got too drunk on a rollercoaster ride and had my plugs forcefully jerked out of my ears. That made the thin spots too thin for comfort. So about a half year down the road when I was getting my temple implants I asked Steve Haworth if he'd do my ears next day. It went well with one ear not completely attached after healing so six months down the road Shane M. did a partial reattachment on it. I'd say the attachments were about 80% successful, and 3 years later, I'm still happy with the result.

You cut and then later reversed your own tongue splitting?

Yup, after the initial swelling went down, about two weeks to be safe, I realized it was grossly off center, I went back in and removed the scabby tissue from the center and bound it with a rubber band. In the first night the back reattached, and by the second day the front was fairly well attached. I have a small off center fork resulting from it and a crease that opens up a little bit. There is a hard piece of scar tissue in it to this day about 5 years later.

So your motivation was simply the off center cut, not that you no longer wanted a split?

My motivation to reattach? Yes, it was literally like a quarter inch off

center. That's what I get for marking AFTER the lidocaine. I had plans to do it again. I was waiting for the lump of scar tissue buried in my tongue to soften and go away. And while it has gotten smaller, its not softer and I've just not gotten around to going through it again. I want to make sure its done right and I have been focusing on other areas since then. I'm sure I'll get around to it later, but with the scar tissue and all, I have some worries that it might not be the best of ideas, could impede mobility or something. Only time will tell.

So do you think you will go for a self cutting again when the time comes or is it something you now think would be better done by someone else for you?

More than likely I'll go to someone else due to there possibly needing to be a bit of sculpting, because of the existing scar tissue and fork.

What are your views on D.I.Y. versus going to professional practitioners?

If you want quality work with less risk and better chances of success, go to a professional. Many are even accommodating to "rituals" that people would like to be involved in during their procedure. I personally don't see much wrong with DIY if you're aware of the potential risks, willing to live with a mistake if it happens, etc. It is a wonderful experience to have that kind of responsibility in your own hands and bringing it to fruition.

Did the bad tongue splitting affect your views concerning D.I.Y. procedures?

Not in the least, I knew I was taking a chance, and lived with my mistakes. Success will only teach and show you so much. You have to make a few mistakes before you really start seeing the bigger picture.

Do you differentiate much between the process and the product in terms of your modifications?

When it comes to my scars, its often in the "process" of healing that I find more fulfillment, whereas with everything else, its the end product, I don't necessarily get much out of the process. I do find it relieving at times, but I this is more related to the idea that inflicted pain can help one displace personal stress along with the physical discomfort. In terms of getting something for original motivations or not, I'd say that is debatable in the sense that I may get it for one reason, but it could turn into a hundred others by the time I finish it, or on the flip side, I could have a hundred ideas of what it means, but once finished, its purpose is obvious.

You keep a low profile outside of IAM and other online modification sites. Is this by design? And if so, why? Given the public nature of much of your work how hard is it for you to keep under the radar?

I like to think it's by design, but I also think luck and circumstance plays a part. At times when I've wanted to be more "public" it generally hasn't fit into my situation at the time. I've done some small TV coverage, a commercial or two, and some events but not much. I'm also not one to pursue things of that nature that don't just fall into my lap. It really isn't that hard at all to go under the radar. I use to get approached for things a lot, but one day it just kind of went away and hasn't come back. So whatever I'm doing, it's working.

Others with mods as extensive as your own are likely to work in either the modification industry or as performers. Have you ever worked in either of those realms? Do you prefer working so-called 'straight jobs'?

Not at all. I absolutely prefer it. Though the money and fame are attractive, it is simply not my calling. Straight jobs are great, though I wouldn't mind something a bit more unusual and creative from time to time.

To what extent have your mods influenced your job selections and opportunities?

Well I'm not out there trying to get a vast assortment of jobs. I generally have a good idea of what places will and won't hire me and tend to stick with those. Believe it or not, my work history and word of mouth have pretty much helped bypass any problems with getting hired initially. Public notice and fitting into dress codes are definitely limiting factors. Also certain employee environments may not be suitable. I tend to get along really well with college age employees, and am usually taken in fairly well. Granted my eccentric personality and approachableness helps a lot in this area. Many skilled labor jobs tend to look past the work if you have the experience or capability to back it up

Were any comments made regarding there being consequences or resistance to going further than what you had when you were hired?

Actually, no there hasn't been. I've just done it and not asked for permission

Do you mind listing the jobs you have had in the past and their

reactions to your modifications?

When I was just pierced and stretching I got a job as a Data Analyst. After being relocated to another office in Florida, I started tattooing my face. At first a few administrative employees (i.e. important ones) were a little taken aback. But since I already had a reputation for being eccentric in appearance with my piercings and various hairstyles, it was pretty much looked over. I worked the graveyard shift and rarely had to deal with anyone face to face. After five years of that I left the job to pursue other interests and ended up working for TLA Video in Philadelphia. They didn't care at all how I looked as I was mainly doing sales and customer service over the phone and internet. After that job I realized a bit of the difficulty finding work in a smaller city. In Vermont I ended up working as custodial maintenance a few hours a day, which after a good while with the company and a few stints doing other oddball jobs like Mortgage refinancing and working in an Thai Bistro. Eventually the other job hired me on full time working in the kitchen or bussing tables, or any other job aside from bartending and waiting tables. They didn't mind if I was seen by customers, just hadn't chanced me serving them. Then upon moving to Maryland I was very lucky to have known the kitchen manager at a TGI Friday's in Greenbelt, 3rd busiest in the nation last year or some such. And that is where I'm currently at, though upon moving back to VT, I'll probably start back up at my old job and possibly try and see if I can get on at another Friday's. Most places just take me as I am. I've rarely had anyone complain or reject me. I do occasionally get the uncomfortable coworker but that works itself out over time. Right now I think my resume' and willingness to work in most environment, keeps me an eligible candidate for employment.

Anything you would tell anyone else considering heavy / public mods that caught you off guard after you got started?

Hmmm. What caught me off guard the most was the overall positive reaction I've gotten. Many people like the art a lot even if it may seem a little bizarre, basic, and unplanned. (I'm not the best artist! and yes it was all planned) I expected the negative comments; many of us with lesser mods know most of these. What I didn't expect was people simply not noticing or at least not letting on to the fact. Online I've taken a lot more abuse than I generally get in person. One surprise you might find is people get loud, obnoxious, and sometimes jump right out of their seats. Expect to be touched, poked, prodded, and sneered at. Expect drunken people to run up to you and say "dude, you totally rock, much respect" and then figure out a way to respond to such a comment without coming across as an arrogant prick. Oh and no matter what your tattoos are someone is going to ask if you're the Lizardman they saw on TV.

Eventually there comes a time when all that goes away for the most part, and you get to start living your life like everyone else. You may look different and be different, but it all comes to how you fit into the community around you. That luckily isn't necessarily affected by how you look, but instead by how you act. That to me is what is most important and will get a lot further than you think, even with a tattooed face.

Mike Jones

3/23/2006

The first time I got to see Penn & Teller live at the Rio in Las Vegas I was advised by my friend Todd Robbins, who had arranged the tickets for my wife and I, to arrive early because before the show they played live jazz and I 'might just recognize the tall man playing bass'. I don't think it will be spoiling anything for anyone to say that the tall man in question is Penn Jillette, who I immediately recognized. However, my eye was quickly drawn away from Penn and to the pianist he was playing with. I turned and whispered to Meghan, 'I think the pianist has stretched lobes.' with more than a little surprise. The pianist, Mike Jones, did in fact have stretched lobes and a whole lot more as it turns out. It also turns out that Mike is not just any old jazz pianist. Now, when it comes to jazz I do not have a refined ear by any means but as the saying goes I may not know much but I know what I like. I greatly enjoyed the pre-show entertainment he and Penn provided (he also appears and plays during the show). Later on, I googled Mr. Jones and discovered just how accomplished and respected he was in his field – visit www.jonesjazz.com for more on his music. After a recent return to once again see the show I noticed his tattoo work peeking out above his collar and below his sleeves and had the idea I should have gotten when I first met him: a BME interview. After finding a contact email on the P&T website I wrote and requested an interview, to which he graciously consented:

When did you first get interested in body modification / art?

I first got interested in tattoos when I was a teenager. I would see someone on TV with some tattoos and thought they were really beautiful. I talked about getting some in my twenties, but was worried about being able to work. I think I knew even then, that if I started, I wouldn't want to stop!

In the mid nineties, I first started to see some stretched lobes, and facial piercing in New York, and I thought they were really cool. I started hanging around a Tattoo and Piercing studio in Salem NH, (Masterpiece), and got to see some really amazing work up close, for the first time.

Describe your modifications (tattoos, piercings, & anything else) and who did them?

My first piercing was my left nipple, done at a place on 2nd Ave in NYC. I can't remember the name, but I'll try to find out. I think my nose was next, and that, along with my tongue, ears, labret, p.a. and nipples were all done by Rob Smith at Masterpiece in New Hampshire. I decided to move to

Vegas in 1999 to work with a singer, and was given my first tattoo as a going away present by Dan Carroll, the owner of Masterpiece. It was a beautiful Celtic band around my left bicep, and I was hooked!

I moved to Vegas and found Dante, the owner of Dante's Studio Tattoo in Henderson Nevada. She did my first big piece, a half sleeve on my right arm. Her daughter Angela then did a full sleeve on my left arm. Dante then laid out the rest of my right sleeve, and Angie is currently coloring it in. She also did some ram horns on my head, some stars on my neck, and we're working on a big chest piece with sparrows. I also have some Doc Marten boots tattooed on my feet, and legs. It's a long project and a lot of black! My friend Tony Fitzpatrick, a famous and amazing artist whose work hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in NY, and other galleries around the world, is designing a jungle piece for my back.

I remember talk of a deal with Doc Marten based on your boots tattoo - where does that stand?

I took some time off from the boots, but I'll be finishing them up over the next few months. It's a LOT of black, and my poor artist, was going crazy. When they're done, I'll have our agent go to Doc Marten and see what they say. Of course, I didn't do it for that reason, but it would be funny.

Is there a theme or overall concept to your work?

I really don't have an overall theme, although I have the traditional Japanese on one sleeve, and really colorful tribal on the other. I like big pieces where you have to stand back to get the whole idea. I waited a long time to get my first tattoo, I was 37, so I made sure I knew what I wanted in terms of each piece. I like bigger pieces, rather than a lot of little ones.

How does your family feel about your modifications?

My Dad is a WWII vet, and to him I think tattoos were something way outside of the mainstream. He's been pretty ok about it, but I think he'd rather I didn't have any! Shortly before my mom died, I told her I was thinking about getting a tattoo, and she said she thought they were cute, but not to tell my dad!

As a musician you work in a highly creative field and jazz is often esteemed as being a particularly creative form of music. Do you see your modifications as an extension or another form of that creativity? Are they related in any specific way to your work in music?

Here's where I get a little shallow! I create music every night, and I'm

one of the most fortunate people on the planet. I work with two dear friends, whom I respect and admire, and I get to do pretty much whatever I want. I can also look however I want, and they think it's great. I don't attach any real meaning to any tattoo, other than to think it looks cool. I know some people get ink for very serious and personal reasons, and I respect and admire that. With me, I just like the way it looks.

The stereotypical connection most people make between tattoos and music are rock and metal bands. Are tattoos and piercings common in the jazz world? How do your professional peers react to your modifications?

I love that most people think I play metal, and the look on their face when they find out I play music that's fifty years old. When I was at Berklee College of Music, I'd wear almost nothing but Zeppelin and AC/DC shirts, and get filthy looks from the hardcore jazz guys, who all dressed like they were Miles Davis in 1963. They shut up when I played, and that was the end of that. It makes me very happy to mess with people's perceptions. I think piercing and tattoos are becoming more popular in jazz just because they're more popular everywhere. It's 2006, and it's just not that big a deal anymore.

Since you have public modifications (stretched piercings, scalp tattoos, & hand and neck tattoos) do you find a difference in the reactions of fans from before and after having these done?

I haven't had any negative reactions from any fan at all. The most common thing I hear after the show is "I love your tattoos"! It's weird. My wife tells me that people are staring at me once in a while, but I'm oblivious. I never mind it when someone asks me questions about mods, because, as far as I'm concerned, I'm a walking billboard for the tattoo and piercing industry!

You mentioned early concerns about possible work related issues if you got tattoos (a very real and rationale concern) and then later talked about getting dirty looks and comments for your choice of dress only to "shut them up" with your ability to play. It seems that many times a person who wishes to explore body modification must overcome in order to be accepted and gain respect. In a perfect world judgments and criticisms would be based solely on merit but in reality people's prejudices often slip in. To what, if any, extent do you think that your choices of dress, modification, etc have affected your career?

Well, with P&T, my career has never been better. I believe I wouldn't be able to get a gig at the Ritz Carleton again, but I made a deliberate decision a few years ago, to not do that kind of work. When I play at a jazz club, I never have a problem. I really think that people are just getting more

comfortable with body mods in general. The days of going into a small "redneck" town where they don't accept you because you look different are disappearing. The one or two times that I've been nervous, or uncomfortable, going into a small town diner, I'm usually greeted with the same kind of interest and curiosity that I get anywhere else. It always ends up with people saying how cool it looks! I've stood out in front of the P&T theater singing autographs and greeting people for over four years. That's over a million people that I've connected with, for at least a second or two. One time, one person, out of those million, an older man came up to me and said, "Love the music, hate the tattoos". I smiled and said the exact same thing I would say to anyone else, "Thanks for coming, have a great night!" So if only one in a million people doesn't like my ink, I'm doing fine!

I noticed that the photos on jonesjazz.com don't really show any of your modifications, nor are they mentioned there - is this by design or just happenstance? Have your modifications ever really factored in to your marketing as a performer and/or with dealing with labels and the like?

The website was put together before I started any visible mods, and when my next CD comes out, they'll be there! I've always thought that having me look as I do would be a killer idea for marketing. Zeke (from our show) calls me the "jazzdemon" and I would like to exploit that. I haven't even gotten far enough with a big label to address the issue of my appearance, but Chiaroscuro has no problems with how I look. The fact that I'm a reasonably good musician seems to be all they care about.

Per William Burroughs, any 'words of advice for young people'?

My words of advice for the youngsters is only to do what you love. Life is too short to fuck around. You only get one chance, so make it count. These all sound like clichés, but, it's all true, and so important.

I'm so happy someone else says that about cliches.

Q & A

Without a doubt the question and answer columns were the most entertaining and rewarding pieces for me. I even began to incorporate q&a sessions into my live shows as a result and they are usually my favorite part of the show these days. There were eleven installments of The Lizardman Q & A and they presented here along with the date(s) I completed them with only very minor editing. When they were originally published the questions included links to the people who submitted them. I have removed the names here as they would be essentially useless to the reader but they can still be found online along with links to their IAM page if still active. For the purposes of this collection I have removed questions which were purely obtuse inside jokes and some of the more purely repetitive queries.

There are two things humans know are going to happen to them in life, one being puberty, the other death. Yet most people are afraid of death, to even talk about it. So the question is ‘Are you afraid of death, and why or why not?’

I don't think puberty is as certain as death – many die long before reaching it. And while it may not be as conscious a fear, I think people experience a great deal of fear and anxiety when approaching and experiencing puberty. As for the certainty of death, I know and have read a lot of immortalist literature and while I personally feel that there is a large amount of “pipe dreaming” in their thinking I do find many of their ideas to be inspiring – the most basic of which is that we should not simply accept death as inevitable. I do think though that it is very likely that I will die and that doesn't scare me. I imagine that my death will be my final experience and thus I only hope I can make it magnificent.

What are your views on the fat people disorder? Why are we really fat?

I think different fat people are fat for different reasons – but I think a great deal more of it can be traced to will (or lack thereof) than most would want to accept or find ‘politically correct’. For those having a hard time translating that: I think a lot of fat people are fat because they eat too damn much ‘bad’ food and exercise too damn little. I will accept alternate explanations on a case-by-case basis when accompanied by a doctor's note – which should detail not only your condition but also why you are so particularly bad at controlling it.

A friend of mine says robots going to replace human teachers in schools in the future. What do you think?

I think that in terms of effectiveness robots will not be able to do the work that humans can, in my experience good teaching includes a very connective, emotive, and well ‘human’ quality – but that doesn't mean that this approach will not be tried. If such robots become cost effective (and possible) then expect them to be the norm – not unlike the babysitters that masquerade as teachers in many of our schools currently. I would personally never allow anyone I cared about to be solely machine educated.

In your experience being part of a freak show has it helped people when watching your acts and others in viewing the modified in better terms or has it been negative i.e. thinking that we're weird and freaks and belong in the sideshow world?

What's wrong with the sideshow world? It is caring and supportive of its members and very fun and entertaining. I think what you are asking is whether or not such shows contribute or detract from the general public's respect for the modified...the answer is that it depends on the show and the viewer. A good performance demands and earns respect. I have known many people to have their first experiences of the modified be through such shows and those experiences were very positive when the show they saw was a good one. Of course, there are those who just always seems to react badly and I don't think you can blame the shows – these are people that would have hated mods whether they saw them at a rock show or in an art gallery or anywhere else

Do people ever pull away their children when you go to the supermarket?

Very rarely. More often I get children who react in a positive and curious manner to my appearance who are then shuffled off by their parents out of embarrassment. Too bad really since I will gladly play and talk with an inquisitive kid rather than have their parents stifle them like that.

I would like to know the lizardman's views on marijuana

On marijuana (because I could go smoke some) or on marijuana use and applicable laws? The history of legislation as relates to this plant is rife with politics that defy common sense – particularly in the use of hemp fiber and its many industrial applications (as pro-legalization people are often prone to point out, many of the founding fathers farmed hemp as a cash crop) that have no connection whatsoever with marijuana as a drug. As a drug I think it is necessarily no better or worse than any other and what comes of its use is far more a function of the user than the substance. If you're looking for an admission – yes, I have inhaled many times and enjoyed it. Overall, I can take it or leave it and current prevailing laws in the U.S. make it easier to leave it and avoid unnecessary hassles.

If you ever have children do you worry what they will think? Or if it will make it hard for them to grow up with a father who looks like you.

I don't plan on having any children but looking at it hypothetically I think that having me as a father, in terms of my appearance, would likely provide for both additional difficulties and privileges. It certainly wouldn't deter me. I have other reasons for not wanting to be a parent.

What crazy stuff did you do when you were in college?

Why just while I was in college? Anyway, it's more than I could possibly account for in anything less than a book – and that's just the stuff I remember. Also, I'd have to check the statute of limitations on some things to make sure I wasn't endangering myself.

Do you feel the end of this planet is near? If so how do you think it will end? When you first started modifying your body did you know that you would go as far as you have & also at what point did you decide to become the lizardman? Have you ever got into a physical fight because of your appearance?

No, but human life on this planet is always on the brink of ending in many possible ways. I designed my transformation extensively before beginning it and before that I knew that if I were to undertake these sorts of modifications I would want nothing less than a full body concept. The idea and appearance of Lizardman really started to come together from 93-95 but I didn't take that name per se until the end of 1998. I have never fought anyone due to my appearance but I have defended myself – mostly in a pre-emptive fashion by 'letting people know' that they didn't really want to fight with me.

Why a lizard? And a different animal?

I like lizards aesthetically and it was an obvious thematic amalgamation of all my procedures.

Boxers or briefs?

I am not a slave to underwear.

As someone who's now moving from personal friend of many people here (i.e. "on the same level") to genuine celebrity status, how does that change your perception of (a) the people you deal with every day, and (b) your IAM page / personal blog in general?

I genuinely don't think of myself as a celebrity. However, there are times when having that self-image is actually beneficial but I have to consciously work to maintain and project it. (a) I don't think my perception of those I deal with every day has significantly changed. It is more a matter of an increased wariness towards new people. There is often a slight uneasiness about them attempting to use you or only wanting to attempt to profit from an association with you. But, I suspect that these sorts of people often greatly overestimate my value in this respect. (b) As for my public postings, I'll admit to having edited myself a bit in entries in the past but

experience is showing me now that I tend to get a better response when I don't tread so lightly.

I have two questions. One I ask of everyone that asks for questions, just because you never know who knows the answer. The other is a favorite topic of debate at the club. 1. What is the meaning of life? 2. All things equal (cost, upkeep, feeding, etc), would you rather have a helper monkey, or a helper robot?

1. I am not at all convinced that life has a meaning and that the question isn't simply an artifact of the defects of language. Meaning to me is primarily representative of part of the process by which we use symbols of various sorts to represent and not a property of things. Also, searching for a meaning to life seems to very heavily imply that life is a more like a noun than a verb and my position would be the latter rather than the former. 2. I have to go with the robot – mainly for customization of appearance and design, if I so desired I could make it a robot monkey.

What is your stance on abortion?

I feel no more need or right to tell a woman what to do with her reproductive processes than I think anyone else should about how I cut my hair. Despite romanticized notions and expressions of couples being pregnant and the like, it is ultimately only that individual carrying the fetus that has any real claim to a decision regarding the pregnancy and then only that particular pregnancy. I certainly recognize that others will make claims beyond the individual based on moral and societal prerogatives but I find that I will almost universally deny the premises of those claims when presented.

8/25/2003

What future mods other than finishing the tattooing do you have planned in your transformation?

Finishing the tattooing is my main priority currently and other than some additional stretching of my piercings is the only definite plan left to be completed at this point. That said, I have a number of things under consideration/being researched and I am always looking for future possibilities as they become available.

When you sent me this email (11th of March, 1998), did you have any idea of the sheer immensity of what you'd helped start?

Subject: another tongue

Don't know if you knew but there will be another split tongue very soon. I will be taking essie (of r.a.b.) in to Dr. Busino to have her tongue split on Friday morning. The ball keeps rolling and gathering momentum...

Erik

I didn't have clue it would go as far as it has gone and continues to go. I was still very much joking about armies of forked tongued people then while happily getting to show others a way towards enacting their desires.

Clearly you are a role model for children, being bright and articulate, as well as unique, engaging, and funny to them. Children tend to want to emulate their idols; having pursued a university education yourself, is this something you would recommend? Has being "the academic freak" been helpful?

The last thing I want to be is anyone's idol. Influence is acceptable but idol is too much. Being 'the academic freak' has had some advantages. Primarily it provides me with a 'degree' (pun intended) of credibility in the eyes of many people who might otherwise simply dismiss me as a nut or loser. It also makes for a nice media hook. My own feelings towards academia or more specifically the educational system in the US are fairly mixed. I think it suffers from a lot of fundamental problems and that in many cases people are better off getting away from it as much as possible. I come from a family of educators and while I respect their efforts they often seem like Sisyphus. If someone were to ask me if they should go to college or beyond I would have to say that it depends very heavily on what they really want to do and how much of a burden it will be – student loans should not be taken lightly. On the other hand, if you get a free ride (I got a full academic scholarship for my BA, my decision to take loans for graduate school was a mistake) take it and enjoy the experience.

Why haven't you worked more aggressively to complete the tattooing on your face? I think if it was me, I'd have completed my face before anything else since that's what the public sees.

Oddly enough it's the being seen aspect that has slowed it down at times. Knowing that I would be in public would often tend to motivate me to not work on my face so as not to be putting a healing tattoo on display and/or be unshaven due to the healing process. I have tried to have the work done in a pattern in public areas in order to be a bit less piecemeal in appearance. Also, for awhile I was thinking of not tattooing my scalp and going with dyed hair but ultimately I did and that created a whole new area that needed to be done.

What made you decide on the bluish green, versus a bright yellow-green like the background of your IAM page?

Thanks to my tattooing I have become acutely aware of color perception variances and the impact of lighting – especially in photography. I chose a darker green because I liked the shade. It often appears a bit bluish in photos. One of the more common comments I get when people see me in person is that I am greener than they expected.

Do you ever hope to authenticate your appearance by going into further details with the scales making them more realistic and less of just a simple representation?

Potentially but I will be happy to get just the basic two tone coverage completed and then work from there.

What types of foods spark nostalgia for you? Songs? Images? Smells?

I am not a particularly nostalgic person but I know that part of my fondness for soft pretzels comes from pleasant childhood associations – the same for gummi bears and James Bond movies.

Which modification has been your favorite/most successful, aesthetically and spiritually?

Spiritually? Someone didn't read my last column (Spirituality v Body Modification). As for the rest: tongue splitting.

Is there a certain lizard characteristic/ability/look that you have decided not to pursue due to the danger involved, or because you wouldn't like the outcome? In other words: will you try to reflect a lizard as much as possible, or only use those parts that are of interest to you?

I am only dealing with what interests me. It is a reptilian motif but obviously stylized a great deal.

Having walked around with you in London, it appears to me that people seem more accepting and less fearful of you than some one with maybe only 25% tattoo coverage and a few facial piercings. Why do you think that is?

It's all in the presentation. Today it is a bit easier to attribute it to things like recognition but things today aren't much different than before I

became the media whore I am now. I have always said that the key is how you present yourself. Nine times out of ten when people treat you like a jerk it is not because you have mods, it is because you are acting like jerk – walking around with some chip on your shoulder and not giving them the chance to be decent to you. Another theory I have is that it is easier for people to look at my project as just that – a project. It has an obvious theme and that reflects a certain amount of consideration. Even though this is the case for many other people, it is not as obvious to the casual observer and so instead of thinking ‘creative person with an overall goal’ they think ‘punk’ or ‘thug’ who doesn’t give damn.

Say you're given the opportunity to be a guest speaker at an elementary school. Can you sum up what your presentation would cover?

I should probably mention that my Mom is an elementary school teacher and I have friends with kids in this age group, so it isn’t horribly uncommon for me to visit an elementary school. But to answer your question, there are lots of subjects I could address, given free range to choose for myself I would very likely do something along the lines of appreciating differences. I used to teaching swimming for 3yrs and up and kids classes at my old dojo. I really enjoy working with kids under the right circumstances and have received a good deal of praise for my work.

What words of advice would you have for someone interested in attempting a full-body transformation through body modification?

Get the rest of your life together first because the transformation will consume you otherwise. Plan, consider, revise, repeat. Find support before you begin. Think twice. Have a life besides the transformation project, in as much as it can take over your life at times the project itself is not a life or a solution.

How do you think you would feel mentally if you did not have the mods you have today and how would your everyday life be different.

I think I would be able to find other ways to channel my ideas and drives since my modifications are not compulsive behaviors themselves but rather expressions of myself. Much like painter who could no longer paint might turn to sculpting or composing. It is one thing to deny a particular method and another to deny the motivation. Probably the most significant change for me in daily life would be the lack of head turning / staring / etc. Then again, I might get that anyway for doing something else that was bizarre.

What is the biggest way your philosophical background affects your outlook on life, both as a modified man and as "just Erik"?

I take philosophy very literally - love of wisdom. Wisdom for me is the practical interpretation and application of knowledge / experience. The experience of life, while an end in and of itself to me, can be further enhanced through the practice of philosophy.

When will you be *done*? And how will you know?

I don't know when but when I am, I will know. I suspect it will be much like knowing when to walk away from a painting or a drawing.

What did you dress up as for Halloween as a child?

Something different every year. The one that stands out in my memory right now is Q-bert (with a big homemade paper-mache head).

If you weren't "The Lizardman" what do you believe you would be doing right now (employment/career wise)?

I would probably still be trying to make it as an artist / performer of some sort even without the transformation. And if that wasn't making it, I would likely have gone back to night shifts at a warehouse – that gave me time and resources to do whatever I wanted.

If you could, would you take anything back/change anything/done anything different?

Nothing significant.

Read any good books lately? What's on your want-to-read list?

I'm much less of a bookworm than I used to be – much of what I read now is reference or of a much shorter form (magazine articles, online essays, etc.). The books on my 'to get to' list are mainly instructional. The last thing I (re-)read for pure pleasure was Siddhartha by Herman Hesse.

What's your middle name?

Michael

Will the Chicago Cubs win the World Series in our lifetime?

I wouldn't mind seeing baseball abolished and thus negating this

question. I don't like the game.

What are your feelings towards, or opinions about people with very little modifications? For example the average person on the street with an eyebrow, or navel?

You can't really judge someone by the amount or type of modification they choose – develop hunches maybe, at best. It takes far more information and interaction for me to hold any real convictions or opinions about them.

If you were a rich man, would you biddy biddy biddy biddy biddy biddy bum?

Probably not – but then again, maybe once just to see.

This has nothing to do with the green, the tongue, or anything else really. I'd just like to know if you're content with your life...maybe even happy?

I'd say I'm happy. And, quite frankly, that is what matters.

When did you stop wearing underwear on a regular basis?

1992-93

Have you read the part in Dante's Inferno (canto xxv) where people are turned into reptiles and vice versa? When I read it I thought of you.

I've read it but more or less forgotten about that part. Just goes to show how classic I am. Heh.

How do you feel when you see yourself on television? Do you even bother to watch the shows when they come on?

I generally watch to see how the finished product came out – you really can't tell at all during the filming. I am hypercritical of myself in such situations and often more pre-occupied with how 'useful' I think the piece was than thinking about being on TV as something cool. Any nitwit can get on TV (most do – just watch your local news, real TV, etc.) but to have it actually mean something in terms of being entertaining and/or informative is a challenge.

How do you feel being presented alongside furies? And how do

furries respond to you?

I have no problem being presented alongside them. I just don't want myself or them misrepresented for our respective ideas and beliefs. Most furries I have met have been very enthusiastic about my work and incredibly nice.

Do you still want to finish your PhD at some point?

Not really. I don't need or particularly desire someone else to 'certify' my work in that way. I'd take an honorary degree (I'll take pretty much anything free) or I'd at least seriously consider finishing if they waived the costs.

Why is my cat looking at me like I'm food?

You are food.

At what age do you think it's appropriate to let kids start major body modifications/transformations; the ones that are not easily reversible (like standard lobe piercings, etc...)?

The real answer is that it varies from individual to individual. The socially practical answer is to set an arbitrary age which will be good enough for most. In order to avoid unnecessary hassles, I suggest people wait till at least 18 but I have met a lot of people who weren't close to ready in my opinion at 30 and some that were ahead of the game at 14.

How do you feel about binary gender identification? Do you feel people can be both, none or a third gender?

To me gender is simply a matter of classification for convenience based on genetic make up i.e. XX v XY (v XYY, etc). Anything beyond that is relative BS (that's bullshit, not Bachelor of Science). The identification you are describing, I think, is not identifying with gender but with ascribed gender roles and possibly genital structure. To that I say - act as you want and change around your genitals as much as you like and science will allow for. People can be whatever they want since it's people that make up these things in the first place (Q: Who makes the grass green? A: You do. – indelicately ripped off from Zen Buddhism)

What inspired you to become what you are today?

Everything I have experienced up to this point. Seriously, I think looking for causation and singular causation in particular is very often a

fruitless and often harmful process.

How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?

A woodchuck would chuck all the wood that woodchuck could chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood. I love that rhyme.

How can I get my puppy to stop farting at night?

Butt plug? Or maybe a change in diet.

So far I've only heard about full body transformations (other than tattoos and piercings) similar to yours in the US and Canada. I know that there are some individuals who do take their body modifications pretty far in other countries/regions but so far nothing like you or the Enigma. Do you know if there are similar individuals outside North America? If not, what reasons could be behind it? There are only reliable hard-mod resources in those countries, for a cultural reason or something else?

There are people outside of North America doing extreme modifications and extensive transformations. I think the main reason you may not be seeing them is that the US and N. America are pretty much the media spotlight of the world. We, collectively, send out our stories all over the world but intake very few others and even then we re-package them. It is just far easier to get high level (world wide) coverage in the states.

What are your favorite season, favorite food, favorite TV show, favorite movie, and favorite book?

Depends on geography but most places it will be Fall, pizza, The Simpsons, it varies with mood, and The Illuminatus Trilogy by Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson.

Who is your favorite musician, band, or musical group?

Dependent on mood but I can almost always listen to anything by Rob Zombie, Tori Amos, Depeche Mode, Ministry, Slipknot, Slayer, or Bach, and I adore The Overture of 1812.

9/22/03

Do you ever buy magazines that have articles about you in them and go up to people and show them saying, "Look, it's me!"

Nope but when I used to model for a lot of art classes and and the like I would go to the gallery shows and stand by paintings and drawings of me and smile at people as they checked them out. This was especially fun when it had been a nude modeling session.

Ever scare the absolute SHIT out of Jehovah's Witnesses when they come knocking?

I believe I have shocked a few door to door evangelists in my time. Once while I was living in Albany (above a bar) a woman came knocking to hand out pamphlets and was greeted by me in just a towel (fresh from a shower) and obviously not happy at having run down the stairs to meet her. She was pretty taken aback but still managed to stammer out a bless you or something like that and hand me the pamphlet.

Do you mind being the butt of a joke?

Not at all – but I'd prefer it be a good joke. I missed the Leno bit, but as it has been recounted to me, it sounds like little more than a cheap shot without much substance. However, since a comic rarely achieves greatness without drawing from his own experiences it is probably best for Russ Meneve (the comic in question) that he is focusing in on jokes about masturbation and not having dates.

What's your favorite candy?

I love black licorice

Have you ever thought about having kids (or, how many kids do you have if in fact you do have them)? If yes: What would you say to those people who would call you an unfit parent because you are heavily modified?

I don't plan on having kids. It is not a responsibility I am willing or interested in undertaking. The fact that I am modified has nothing to do with it nor would it have any bearing on my ability to parent. Parenting is not at all dependent on one's appearance – if anything, having an unusual parent would probably be an advantage to a child in the long run.

Can we expect a tail being added to your body anytime soon?

If I knew of a way to really have a tail then I would have one but alas it is sometime away in the future. I will say that some of the animatronic prosthetics being used in the furry community are pretty cool though, but

they don't meet my criteria.

Would you ever wear green lipstick?

I have worn green lipstick (and a few other colors)

Whats the worst you've hurt you self performing/practicing for a performance?

A few years back I got 2nd degree burns over most of my face while fire breathing at AMJAM – the wind turned a fireball around on me and it engulfed my head. Unpleasant, on video it looks like I was probably dead since you lose sight of me from the shoulders up. Other than that I have deeply sliced my foot jumping on broken glass.

Have you been reading the Earth X trilogy from Marvel Comics? That is, assuming you read comics. If not, what is the best book you have read lately?

I do read comics from time to time – I used to read a lot when I worked for Diamond Comics. I loved Johnny the Homicidal Maniac and Scud: The Disposable Assassin (from which I took one of my old stage names: Spidergod5) In terms of Marvel, I am a big Sabertooth fan. The best book I have read lately would be The Golden Rule of Schmoozing by Aye Jaye.

Ever contemplate "the nut cracker" as done by the Lizardman a nice little modded ballet for all of us to see

Not really, no.

I seem to remember on your big BME debut interview, you mentioned fingernail modification. I was wondering; have you continued modifying your nails, and if so, how is that going?

Not much to report there. I have experimented a bit and managed to thicken my nails to a point but I never kept with it enough to get the sort of results reported in the BME FAQ and galleries for extreme thickening – which is what interested me.

Has anyone ever accused you of "stepping on sacred ground" by glorifying heavy body modification? If not, what would you say to them if you were accused? If so, what have you said to them?

Not per se – I have gotten the standard flack about desecrating the

body on several occasions. My response is usually to deny their premise. I am not a believer so to me I'm not desecrating. There are also those who talk about how good I looked before or how much better I would look without my mods. To them I simply say that I think my mods make me look even better.

Why did you not continue with your doctoral studies? To the same end, is it easier (artistically, academically, politically (?!)) 'outside' the system than 'inside' it?

Continuing my doctorate would have meant going deeper into a system and structure I didn't agree with or particularly care for. Also, financially it was the best decision to stop spending money and start making it. There are benefits both inside and out, which is better depends on your personal preferences and goals.

Ever have anyone come up to you out of the blue knowing exactly who you were and asking for an autograph? How do you feel in general about your "celebrity status"? Oh... and want to come hang out with me sometime? I figure if I hang out with you, people will be forever less scared of me I'll give you free piercings!

I get recognized all the time and sometimes they do ask for autographs – it's a very nice feeling, it makes you feel appreciated in a way. Recently, while I was at the Gravity Games for Sobe I was signing posters and doing short shows in their 'Lizard Lounge' area when a woman approached me on one of the couches and asked me who I was. When I replied that I was The Lizardman she was not impressed and immediately went on to ask why she should know me, why I was there, was I an athlete at the games, etc. As I tried to formulate a response to this a family came into the tent, including a little boy who immediately recognized me and got very excited. They were all fans of Ripleys and had also seen many of the Discovery Channel and TLC shows. They saved me by regaling the woman with stories about my TV appearances and more. In the end, she asked for a picture and an autograph as well – very gratifying. Hanging out with me may just make them more scared...

How do you spell candy with only 2 letters?

BJ?

If you had the opportunity to meet your Higher Power/God, what would you say to them?

The same thing I say every time I look in a mirror – 'You again?' Seriously, no god or higher power for me.

Do you have any fetishes?

Oh yeah – if it's vaguely sexual it gets my attention. Physically, I am a legs and ass man with a preference towards redheads. Not surprisingly I also like piercings and tattoos. When it comes to action I am dominant with a taste for spanking and restraining. And, big surprise given the tongue and teeth, I have an oral thing going. I also dig blood.

If someone wants to be a performer like you, obviously getting "the look" is just a matter of plunking down the money to pay for the procedures... But that doesn't make one a superstar. How can someone best learn the sideshow acts, and become more comfortable on stage and develop a winning stage persona?

A look is not a show. A look can compliment a show but it will never substitute for content. Also, your look can hinder your work – it can typecast you or remove you from consideration for many roles and opportunities. Before I was heavily tattooed I made very good money being filmed for stock footage doing fire-breathing and the like. I no longer get those jobs because of my unique look. It can also influence the audience, many performers use a normal look in order to make their acts all the more amazing or shocking. With my look, people tend to expect the extreme right from the start. In my opinion, you should develop your look after your show in order to compliment it and if your look is going to involve permanent modification then it should be done only for personal satisfaction and not any perceived benefit to the show – you still have to live with it offstage.

As far as learning acts, there is no substitute for direct instruction from a qualified professional. I could have saved myself years and a great deal of discomfort if I had had resources like Coney Island's sideshow school available to me back when I was teaching myself. The school is run by Todd Robbins who is one the modern greats.

But simply learning to do the acts is not necessarily learning to perform (though Todd can help you with that as well). Anyone who wants to perform sideshow or any other form of live entertainment should study theater, improv, stand up and the like. And that study should be active – there is no substitute for doing. Practice makes perfect, or at least improvement.

Do you have a heat rock?

No, but I think I might like one.

Has anyone attending (watching, not participating) your performances left the scene early because of sickness, vomiting or something like that. If so, what performance you think caused it?

Happens all the time and it all depends on how I am pitching the show. Most often it is something like the stomach pump but I can often get that reaction whenever I want by tweaking out the presentation. I have had people come up to me after shows and say ‘You made me puke! That was so cool!’ It is an interesting reaction that I bet few other shows can get.

Have you ever been forbidden to perform in a certain town or community by officials, without prior warning? Has the show ever been shut down?

I haven’t been shut down but I did lose a promotional appearance (for a live bug supply company) after the strongly christian wife of the owner saw my website and decided he shouldn’t be doing business with the likes of me. Another time on tour, we pulled into the venue in Salt Lake City and found that a local officer was waiting for us with the venue manager. They were there to make sure, among other things, that I would not have any nudity in my show – apparently the description of my Mr. Lifo like liftings in earlier press had them scared I would whip out my penis onstage and hook something to it (not unheard of, but also not planned for this show) They also suggested that there should be no profanity and sexual references kept to an absolute minimum, but given that the bands on the bill would not be censoring their lyrics we didn’t cut the cursing from our show.

You find a genie in a lamp on the beach and he is a real asshole and he says he is going to take away all of your mods, but in return you can have any one thing you want, what would that one thing be?

The means to do it all over again bigger and better.

Has there ever been a point when you wanted to go back to being less visibly modified? ie: no facial tattoos, etc.?

Not seriously, no.

What do you think of the recent RIAA lawsuits, and the downloading of mp3s in general?

I think the lawsuits are a very bad approach to the situation and they are more than deserving of backlash from it. As for downloading, I do see it as theft of property and self-destructive for those who are fans of an artist. The artists can only take time to produce when doing so provides the means

for their needs. Sure, some artists are grossly wealthy but that doesn't make it right in principle. I see the major problem being with the labels for continuing to expect high prices for less product.

Do you actually know any lizards personally??

I have worked with many of them – does that count?

Seeing as how in the past, you have made the (admittedly jokingly) claim that you are a super hero, who do you think would win in a fight: The Lizard (Dr. Conner from the Spiderman series) or The Lizardman?

I'll bet on me – I play dirty.

Given the choice, would you rather be immortal and grounded, or mortal and have the power of flight?

Immortal. Death is game over and I am having too much fun playing.

What do you think comes next in the spectacle of life. After you die... what happens?

I think you die, I have no evidence or feelings that lead me to believe you get anything more afterwards, so enjoy it now.

If you could have any super-hero power what would it be?

Invulnerability

Is there any one single person in the world (famous or not) that you would like to get in a fight with? Who?

Due to my martial arts training I define some terms a bit differently than many – So, to me fighting is an all or nothing kill or be killed affair. As such, I don't really want to fight anyone but if I have to I want a pushover opponent. On the other hand, there is sparring which is a cooperative exercise whereby each participant is trying to better one another. I would gladly spar with most anyone – its fun. Maybe Jackie Chan or Jet Li.

Many people (at least in the body modification world) see you as a larger-than-life celebrity, do you feel that you are? If yes, why, if not, why?

I see myself more as being recognizable than famous or a celebrity.

Do you feel that you have done a better job during a show where audience members have adverse reactions? (puking, passing out, crying, even cringing)

Only if that is what I was going for. It often amazes me at how positively crowds can react to being pushed in those directions. I have watched people puke over the barricade and then cheer even louder. Fainters have been picked up by their friends and applauded as they were carried off to the first aid station.

When you were a small child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

Lots of things – marine biologist, scuba diver, mountaineer, scientist, stock broker, explorer, etc.

What's your favorite scent?

I like fresh popcorn.

Erik, what is good in life? (shades of Conan)

Shades of Conan – To hear the lamentations of your enemy's women

Ever chase someone around, waving your penis at them?

Of course

If you could be any form of money(coin or paper,any country),what would yo be and why?

The largest denomination of YEN – because I like the double meaning in English

What's the worst thing that's ever happened to you?

I really don't know – I guess that means nothing has been too horrible.

Can Free will and a Predetermined path co-exist?? AND Is it valid to believe that one can have free will and destiny at the SAME time???

You can define out the terms in such a way to make it possible for both but I prefer my concepts a little cleaner than that. So my feeling is no – make a choice dammit, its either free will or predetermination.

How would you like to be remembered when it's all said & done?

With a laugh and a smile.

10/28/2003

Do you believe in an afterlife?

If it wasn't obvious from my spirituality column or some of my answers in the last couple Q & A columns – No, I don't believe in an afterlife. Nothing I have experienced nor any credible experiences of others leads me to believe that there is anything more than this life, which I am currently living to the fullest extent that I can. I will not rule it out as a possibility but under the current circumstances I cannot rely upon it or make it a consideration in my decision making process as it would represent a bottomless pit of 'what if' predication.

(If you are still alive) Do you see yourself still performing in 30,40+ years?

Not only still performing but very likely having to perform. I am a self-employed freak. I don't have a 401k and I don't have the sort of income that makes it easy to amass savings for future retirement. This is something anyone looking to go into a similar sort of career should seriously consider. I plan on doing a future column detailing and describing the various pitfalls and concern one should address before thinking of embarking on a career as a freak in which I will discuss this further. The likelihood is very high that I will perform until my death not only because I want to and I love it (beyond the fact that given what I do I will probably die onstage) but also because it will be a real world necessity for me in terms of supporting myself. The nice thing being that many of those before me have shown that you can have a successful run swallowing sword, eating fire, and the like well into your 80's.

What is Thanksgiving dinner with your family like?

It's a dinner. My family (mom, dad, sister, and myself) was never really a big thanksgiving family. It was just a day we all had off to be together and have nice meal. Sometimes other relatives would come by, but its mainly just that core nuclear group.

How long was your longest tattooing session? And approximately

what area of the body?

The majority of my body thus far has been done in 6-8 hour sessions. The longest single session I have done was about 11 hours that involved outlining and filling in the black designs on my ribs and abdomen. That also became the most tattooing I have had done in a 24 hour period since after a short break when the artist (Mad Pup) did a small piece on another person, we started up again for a total of 13 hours in one day.

Is there one question, or topic that you'd really like to comment on or talk about in your Q&A column, but it has so far not yet been touched by anyone? What would that be?

I really approach the Q & A with no expectations or goals other than answering the questions that come – hopefully in a fun and informative manner. If I have something I that really want to tackle, then I either do it as a column itself or wait for the opportunity to tangent into it off another question. Very often, the reverse happens – that is, I will get asked about a topic I hadn't thought much about before or that leads me to something else and that becomes the topic for a column

Do you plan on going further into your study on martial arts? Like maybe some Mixed-Martial Arts styles like Brazilian JuJitsu or something.

Probably not – at least not open hand styles. I would love to go on, if I could find a dojo that really fit me again. My interest now is shifting more towards weapons. I would like to find a good kobudo club or get back into fencing and/or kendo. I'm also thinking of going more modern – I grew up with a dad in the military and in an area where hunting was always popular so I grew up with lots of guns around me. However, while I am fine rifles and shotguns, my handgun knowledge and experience is less than I would like. So, I am thinking of getting my permit and finding a good range in Austin.

You've done so many shows and been so many places. Is there one place you've enjoyed visiting/performing in the most? Would you ever consider moving there if given the chance?

There is a big difference between enjoying visiting and performing somewhere and wanting to move there. About the only place I can think of that I really love performing in and would consider as a place to live besides Austin right now would be Las Vegas. As a purely practical matter, it would probably be a very good career decision for me to move to LA but I don't really want that. Where I live is more a matter of the concerns and desires of

those important to me – being that I travel so much, where I hang my hat is not a big deal for me. Meghan likes Austin, I like Meghan, and thus we live in Austin.

Thinking of trying to insert any other power tools into your head via your nose?

Always, and other orifices. The thing about me going into a hardware store, or any other store, is that I am always thinking about the show. I pick up all sorts of stuff and wonder if I can balance it, or swallow it, or fit it up my nose. I wonder how it might look onstage or what else it could be used for in the show. On tour you can often find me juggling toilet plungers in dollar stores or doing impromptu demonstrations in home depot for the sales clerks. Many of the funnier bits and more unusual objects in my repertoire come from these improv moments and demos. The fork I currently put my nose as part of my blockhead routine comes from the Orlando alehouse. It was last year at horror nights in Universal when one night after finishing up we went over there for a couple beers and someone asked about show. As more and more people got involved, a few of them expressed disbelief and were convinced I was putting them on. So, I took a fork off the table and worked it into my skull to prove that the blockhead is real.

Do you think the average person who sees you the first time, thinks you are a dumb person, not for doing what you have done to yourself, but in general. As no person with any brains would do that to themselves.

Given the context (performing onstage or on TV) that most people first see me, I think most of them realize that I have to be reasonably intelligent and have developed myself consciously to this point. They might not respect or like what I do, but I think they have to recognize it takes some work and brains. I really don't get much of that sort of response – it is more that they ask 'Why?' as opposed to thinking I am just dumb. After asking 'why?' most people tend to be obsessed with finding out how much I make for performing or being on a certain show – which just goes to show the misplaced sense of priority that is so pervasive in our culture. The thought that something can make money outweighs any consideration of personal enjoyment, risk, or non-financial consequence.

If you could instantly have and heal any mod, what would it be?

Hmm, there are lots of wonderful possibilities. It's very hard to choose. I would love some wings or a serious tail (crocodile like but more prehensile). Venom glands and spitting cobra fangs are tempting too – I have actually worked on designs for the dental implant equivalents a little bit.

What do your friends call you? Erik? Lizard Man? Some other nickname? Do random people you run into on the street know your real name? Or even your stage name? Or do you get a lot of "hey, it's lizard dude!"

I don't put a lot of stock in names – I probably use Erik and Lizardman the most in terms of introducing myself, but I also accompany that with the disclaimer that I don't care what I am called outside of the media, where I want The Lizardman name to be used primarily for business reasons. Other than that, you can yell 'hey asshole' and it works well enough to get my attention. Lots of people seem to know my name(s) – it comes with media exposure but I don't think you ever quite get completely adjusted to people knowing your name and much about you even though you are just meeting them for the first time. There are still many people who use some of my old nicknames like 'satan' and 'freak' or 'freakshow'.

From a marketing point of view, what are the advantages / disadvantages of choosing a name that can't really be used in conversation (i.e. The Lizardman implies that you also have a "real" name), versus a moniker that "becomes" your own (i.e. Amago)? Or are you slowly shifting from "Erik" being your identity to "The Lizardman"?

I think there is an advantage in marketing to having a name like 'The Lizardman' because it implies a singular or premiere nature via the 'The' and by being an obviously assumed name it communicates that there is a character involved, which can help create interest. The only real disadvantage, and its not one that I think is serious, is that some people begin to see your real name as a sort of prize or secret and will use it instead of the stage name in situations where it would be more appropriate to call me The Lizardman. It creates a false importance for my given name. There is no difference in the identity of The Lizardman versus Erik Sprague – so there is no need to shift.

How does sideshow culture improve the world?

I plan to address this in more detail in a future column (** I guess I never got around to it*), but here's the short(er) answer. It primarily provides entertainment – and I think that is often greatly underrated. Additionally, it provides a platform and outlet for the sorts of activities that can inspire along the lines I discussed in my first guest column About Records. It also helps to relieve of us of one of the silliest stigmas in modern culture by providing an atmosphere that actually encourages staring and exploring things that we find unusual and even scary. Adults entering a sideshow temporarily become

children again, they are wide-eyed and honestly curious about their surroundings. When you avert your eyes or avoid a subject you learn nothing. Sideshow encourages a sort of direct confrontation that can lead to better understanding and acceptance. We should remember that much of early sideshow was the traveling exhibition that also forms the foundation of the modern museum.

Have you ever been offered a role in any movies? If you were would you do it if it was the right part?

I was up for a role in a Jodi Foster movie that has since been indefinitely shelved. Other than that, a screenwriter and independent filmmaker I met doing Ricki Lake has told me he is writing a part for me in his next film. I would love to get into movies – at this point, the right part is pretty much the one I can get cast in. In the late 90's I did shoot and sell some footage of myself for stock use doing things like breathing fire and the human pincushion. To my knowledge it has yet to be used – it was in Universal Soldier 2 (on a TV in the background of one shot) but then the scene got cut.

Just wondering also if you had any pre or post show rituals you do?

Out of necessity before any show that involves the gavage I have to fast for about 8-10 hours depending on what I have eaten. This clears my system so that the pump works more smoothly. I try to avoid superstitions or behavioral ruts that don't actually add anything tangible. I stretch out before taking the stage and right before the show starts I take a set list and confirm that all props and materials are present. After a show I always feel a bit hectic until I get the chance to clean and pack everything (especially the gavage tube) – again out of necessity since it can get nasty if left to sit. Once all the relevant business is done I get a beer and some food (preferably pizza), if possible I take hot shower and stretch in it while drinking the beer.

Of all the people you would count as friends or acquaintances, what percentage of them are modified?

Well, given my broad view of what constitutes modification (What is Body Modification? & What is Body Modification (part (2))) I would say that all of them are modified. However, looking at the more common view of atypical mods being those that make one modified, then I would say that almost all of them have something or other but not necessarily heavy or extreme mods. There are notable exceptions like one of my oldest and best friends who has not even a simple lobe piercing. A person's modifications mean next to nothing to me in terms of my opinion or connection to them. I

look at actions and attitude. Having mods is not an indicator that I will necessarily have anything in common with a person or want to spend time with them and not having them certainly doesn't preclude me from wanting to know them.

How much would you say you have spent on body modifications?

I estimate my total spent (which is far less than face value) at around eleven or twelve thousand dollars for tattooing, surgeries, implants, etc. However, that total does not include things like travel costs and the time incurred for procedures and healing. I personally feel that the monetary cost or alleged value of a modification is a very poor rating scale. It isn't about money.

Do you ever get pre-show jitters?

I sometimes get anxious in the planning stages and negotiating stages of setting up a gig – where I often have the least control. Once it is set up, I tend to be excited rather than anxious - especially for things that I know are big and have a lot riding on them. When I get ready to step on the stage, I just slip into a relaxed fun state and enjoy it.

What has affected you more as a person, your mods or people's reactions to them?

In terms of who I am as a person the mods are a reflection / expression. People's reactions to them mainly tell me about those people. I'm not sure I answered that question.

You regularly stick a snake up your nose and perform the gavage. Is there *anything* that turns your stomach?

I have often suggested to people that the queasy feeling they get when I am pumping my stomach or working with Cricket the Wonder Snake is not unlike the one I get when I look at so called 'normality'. The truth is that while I find plenty of things personally distasteful they do not affect me in such a physical manner. Not that I am desensitized, but rather I have excellent coping skills – just as I have learned to accept skewers and stomach pumps and I can also sit through most disturbing images, smells, and the like.

How often do people think that you're really trying to become a snake, not a lizard?

I don't know really, it's not that big a deal to me. What does sometimes get me are the people who think that they are fish scales or even a

spider web. I wonder about their ability to recognize patterns and wholes.

How important to you, if at all, is the shock value of your appearance?

It is not something that I find necessary but rather something that I find useful at times. If the world and people change around me such that my appearance isn't shocking anymore I won't be bothered at all.

11/29/2003

I know with being famous you get all sorts of attention, but do things like being part of a tabloid article that pretty much casts a somewhat negative tone to you and your being, bother you? Also, I have read in your diaries about a few times people have used your image and footage of you without permission. What course of action do you take to either stop or gain compensation? Do you live and let live or do you aggressively go after them?

The tabloid article referred to here is the recent piece in the Weekly World News. Let me first take this opportunity to once again deny my fame. I'm not famous – I am recognizable and I draw attention. I think there is a subtle difference. I don't think the short blurb in the tabloid was all that negative. Yes, they portrayed me as a freak – but I always take that as a compliment regardless of intent. I have three issues with the piece overall. One, they used my given name and not The Lizardman. My deal with press is to always use my stage name because that's how I present myself publicly and make my living as a performer. Two, they inaccurately described my modifications – 'fish scales'?! Three, the images used came from a photo-shoot that was done expressly for another magazine article.

The last one is what leads me to the second part of your question. As much as I would like to live and let live, I cannot. If I do so, I risk losing what thin rights and legal recourse I do have concerning my image. The law requires that I aggressively pursue and defend my copyrights in order to maintain them. I usually start out by tracking down the source used by the offending publication or entity as well as contacting them to demand they demonstrate their rights to use (i.e. produce a valid release). I do this anytime I do not feel someone has the right to be using my likeness or I disagree with the context of its use. In one recent case I emailed a magazine editor off their website to complain since a photo designated for promotional use associated with a recent event I had done ended up in their 'grab bag' commentary pages with a disparaging caption (no mention of the event it was taken at). As a result, the person who put the pic and caption in was reprimanded and lost the column assignment and I got a nice complimentary

article in the next issue. That may seem harsh but keep in mind that had the person simply looked at the back of the photo they would have seen it was clearly marked as to how it could and could not be used – a standard practice. In other cases, including some pending, I end up seeking monetary awards.

If given the chance (and the money to do it), would you ever consider putting together a DVD of performances with other performers in the 'freak show?'

It would depend entirely on the content for the DVD. I would certainly be willing to work with any number of other performers and I have worked with many in the past – I'd love to a 'battle of the monsters' or such with Enigma. The idea of putting out a video is less appealing though. I will say now that unless a huge sum of money is involved there will never be a Lizardman show DVD. I do not want my show out on video for a number of reasons. Mainly because it tends to negatively affect ticket sales (Many people foolishly think that seeing it on video is a substitute for the live experience) and it makes theft / imitation of material that much easier.

When you were on the game show with Stalking Cat and Beki b and a contortionist, you fell down a trapdoor when you lost. Did you REALLY, or was it a camera trick? Actually, another, more serious: Given the recent events with The Great Orbax, have you reassessed any of the acts you perform, or been given pause as to what you will attempt?

The trapdoor on Russian Roulette is real. You fall a few feet onto a crash pad and then crawl a short way out from under the stage. I didn't so much lose as I got randomly eliminated, dammit.

I don't know all the details about Orbax's accident, so its hard for me to comment on it. I do know he is a solid performer and I am glad he healed so well and quickly. I read a couple reports and saw the damage he suffered. But, the thing about doing these sorts of acts is that an accident for another performer – at least for me – has no effect whatsoever on what I do or how I do it. For any act I do I have already considered and accepted all the risks involved and worked out how I will deal with them. If I hadn't then I shouldn't be doing the act. If something happens to another person and it makes you wake up and realize there is something else you missed then it should really be a wake up call to you to stop completely. Performers most often get hurt when they get too relaxed or complacent, you should always be in a state of alert and concern for your own safety and that of everyone else present.

Ya ever bounce a quarter off someone's ass?

Actually bounced? I don't think so. However, along the lines of other classic tasteless jokes and stunts like 'touch your elbows behind your back', I and the rest of the bar staff at a place I used to work would do a thing about bouncing a quarter off someone's ass that ended up with them just getting spanked very hard.

Do you feel obligated to stick out your tongue whilst having your photo taken?

Pretty much. It often takes a conscious effort for me not to do it now – I managed to keep it in for our wedding shots. Most photos I take are souvenirs for other people and they really want the tongue to be out, so it just becomes second nature.

Do you have health insurance?

Starting with the New Year I will have health insurance through Meghan's job – my lovely new bride. It will be the first time in about five years that I have been covered. However, while I may have been 'working without a net' as concerns my own health, my show has always been covered – either through policies I have taken out or by the venue and/or promoters. Event coverage is something I think is a must for any performer – risk yourself not the audience or venue. It amazes me when I get contacted by promoters who want to undercut my price by saying something like 'Well, bob here in town said he'll breathe fire for half that' and when I ask if Bob has over a decade of experience and if he is insured they don't think it matters. Well, when Bob burns himself, your stage, and the entire front row and you're in court for the rest of your life you will be wishing you spent that extra money on me and my insurance policies.

What is the most bizarre assumption that someone has made about you simply because of your mods?

That might be a hard one to narrow down. How about that I am Irish or a Jets fan? Those two kind of caught me off guard at the time. I am pretty sure the people making them thought it was paint and not tattoo at the time though.

What is the worst reaction you have ever had from a random member of the public? How did you respond?

A very large biker once walked by me, paused, turned and said. 'You make me want to punch you in the face.' I looked at him and said, 'You gotta do what you gotta do'. We stared at each other for a second or two, then

chuckled, and he decided, quote - “You’re alright.”

Since nothing actually bad happened (he just felt the need to ‘size me up’), I don’t know if that was the worst but it certainly had the potential to be far worse than anything else that has ever happened to me. He was not alone and I was.

I've heard you speak about student loans and why they're not a good thing to get. I assume you had an awful experience with them in the past. What happened?

It’s a good thing this is online, because many forests could die supplying the necessary paper for me to list my grievances with the current university system in this country. But focusing on student loans:

When I decided to go for my doctorate in philosophy, I first tried to make it on savings and through tuition waivers and pay from teaching. That wasn’t nearly enough to cover the ‘mandatory’ costs much less food and shelter. So, I took minimal subsidized loans to begin with. This still ended up with me having to go to my family for some support. So, the next year, I took out larger loans (but still not the maximum they wanted to stick me in debt for). And so it went that in just six graduate semesters I had been effectively pushed into about \$36,000 worth of debt whereas I had entered with no debt at all. Keep in mind that I lived in horrid apartments for under \$250 a month rent and kept my food budget around \$100 a month so the rest of that money plus my teaching earnings all went to tuition, fees, books, and the like.

The current school pricing and loan system sets out to make people indentured servants to banks. In many cases it pushes people to get degrees and certifications that don’t hold a candle to real world experience but cost far in excess per school year of what the future job will pay annually. A better plan would be to work construction for two to three years at 18 and then use that money to get the degree you want – if you still think you need the degree after spending some time in the “real world”.

The only good thing I can say about my student loans is that they make me happy about the current poor state of the economy because the interests rates on them are staying low.

say a small child drowns trying to emulate spongebob squarepants by trying to live under water in the backyard pool...Who do you blame? The parent's for not properly teaching their child to fear and respect that pool or Nickelodeon for not putting a proper warning before the show or is the child just not fit enough to survive and this just

a case of thinning the herd?

Some of this will depend on the age of the child but overall the parents need to be monitoring their child – especially around a pool or when there is access to the pool. If the kid is still trying to emulate cartoons in this manner after a certain age, then yeah – we probably didn't lose a future NASA engineer. I wouldn't blame Nickelodeon because a warning probably wouldn't get through to a dumb or too young child and the parents wouldn't act differently or probably even notice it anyway (not if they are the sort that lets their kid around the pool unsupervised). Also, I think some things are so basic as to defy the need for warnings and labels. If you can't figure out fire=hot then good riddance.

Do you mentor other artists that are either working on a full body transformation, or want to make it in the same field as you have made it? Would you consider teaching young people that are serious about it the "tricks of the trade" or give them guidelines in order to circumvent things you wished you'd have know in advance?

I don't know about mentoring, but I have spoken with and given my advice as requested to many people. I do workshops with groups from time to time on various sideshow skills like fire manipulation and talk about different aspects of the business as it were. However, I am not at a point where I want that to be my focus and to do it right, it needs to be your primary focus. I try to be as open and helpful as I can but in a responsible manner that won't potentially hurt sideshow or the person interested.

Hopefully at least one will get chosen:

- 1. were there any other "animals ideas" to turn yourself into before or competing with a "lizard"?**
- 3. When will you be finishing your face ink?**
- 4. What does the Lizardman ride?**

There were other ideas and concepts but not really other animals – gargoyle being the closest to an animal. The black markings on my back were originally designed as part of that concept and got held over into the reptilian theme.

Soon, I hope – as with the rest of my body. I'd really like to say in the next two years – but I keep getting busy with other things that make getting lots of sessions in difficult.

Right now – a 1998 Geo Metro (sigh – good mileage and it gets me there). I could really use a nice sportster or maybe a Buell, but other things come first.

Tongue splits - scalpel & suture or laser & suture?

Mine was done with laser & sutures but earlier this year I took a scalpel to it to remove a little scar tissue and add maybe an eighth of an inch to the depth. Having now done minor scalpel and looking at the results and experiences of others with a scalpel, I think that scalpel may be a better alternative to the laser – if you don't mind the blood. I do believe that sutures are very beneficial for shaping and for preventing re-growth. The problem being that suturing the tongue is very difficult and scalpel procedures are not often done by those who can do the proper suturing whereas laser surgery is almost exclusively done by doctors who can also offer the sutures.

I apologize if this question has already been asked but when you decided with what you were going to do with your body and such how did you approach your parents with it?

A very good question. A lot of people have asked how my parents reacted but your approach is much better and potentially informative. It took awhile before I really gave my parents the whole picture, but they did get to see it coming as things developed. I tattooed my hands with scales without letting them know until they saw them. While they were very supportive, there was also a little uneasiness. I was not positive how they would react to my facial tattooing. I told them in a phone message (or maybe email – I forget exactly) about what I was doing when I made that step and they came down to the tattoo shop. They got there after I was done with the session and in what is probably one of the best moments of my life they took it all in and told me they loved me.

6/25/2004

How long did your facial/head tattoos take? How many sittings did you go through?

I only generally keep track of total overall hours and then only because people seem to want to know. I don't really worry about individual portions of my body. And since different artists work at varying speeds and the design is a big factor, I don't think time is all that great a measuring stick. But, to try and answer your question – here are some best recollections and estimations.

My face was outlined in one sitting. That includes my neck and throat but not my scalp or ears. I believe that it took about 2-3 hours to do but I was there for six hours if you include getting the stencil drawn on right.

The facial scales were then filled in over four (maybe five) more sessions of 2-3 hours a piece. My scalp was outlined and the black Mohawk stripe filled in during in one sitting of around nine hours. Since then some scales have been filled on the sides of my head and neck for about three more hours worth of time. Also, I have had one ear recently colored green and the other one is scheduled to be done the weekend before BMEfest – the first ear took just under 45 minutes.

When you do television shows and interviews they focus on your "freak" side and your sideshow act, but do you ever want to show that you do "normal" things as well? (Like eat steak, or do your own laundry, and that you don't consume bugs at all meals etc.)

I don't eat steak. I hate doing laundry. If bugs were easily available I might eat them at each meal – I will snatch up random ones and eat them if the mood strikes me. My freak side pretty much is my normal side – I don't behave all that differently offstage than I do onstage. I tend to be trying to balance something or juggle and seeing if anything at hand can be swallowed or stuffed up my nose. The real difference is whether or not I am being self-conscious about it. Onstage I have to be concerned with presentation and an audience, offstage I just do it.

Do I want shows to focus in more on my "normal" activities like driving and grocery shopping? No! I want to be entertaining and interesting. I find those things boring – which is why I find freaky ways of doing things to make them more interesting to me. If I turn on the TV and see someone just grocery shopping or eating then I turn the channel. Being on TV to me is primarily a means of letting people know about my show and what I do as an artist – that is what I want put on TV.

I have a very important question? Bacon: How do you like it? Crispy, chewy, or burnt to a fucking crisp?

I don't like bacon at all. I don't eat meat as a matter of taste and like Samuel Jackson said (per Tarantino), "I don't dig on swine"

Which do you prefer, performing on the east or west coast and why? Or do you have no preference?

I just like performing – but I will describe what I see as the differences around the US.

East Coast: East coast crowds are aggressive and challenging, they won't let you get away with anything half-assed but if you do reach them they will support you and go off like nowhere else.

West Coast: West coast crowds often seem like they can't be bothered – playing LA can be a real chore. However, you know when you get a response that you have achieved something.

Central: You didn't mention them but the central US markets are great venues and crowds. They tend to 'pop' easier and just seem to be enthusiastic that you showed up. They show love and almost never give you any bullshit or drama.

More often than not it is the venue that makes the difference (good audiences are everywhere) and to that I would have to say that while the coasts have the more prestigious rooms the central US treats you better and gives you much less venue attitude.

I heard you can juggle. What props do you use? Balls, clubs, rings, diabolos, devilsticks or what? And how many? Thanks for this piece of information.

I have juggled since junior high but I am still pretty mediocre. I do some very basic contact work, 2 piece, and three piece juggling. I also do balancing – fingertips, hands, chin, & nose. Since my skills are limited I tend to rely on unusual and/or dangerous props and setups to sell the act. I use balls, torches, knives, & plungers most often but I have used rings and clubs in the past. I haven't used a devil stick in quite awhile but I was proficient in the basics years ago. Also, Dube exerballs (weighted juggling balls) are part of my daily exercise routine.

It seems that you meet all different kinds of unique people on IAM. Not to mention that a lot of people (including me) admire you for your intelligence, your awesome sense of humor and your cool ass mods! What do you think of the fact that tons of people want to hang out with you and talk to you? Do you enjoy meeting and making friends with IAMers? And I bet you get flooded with IMs too! Thanks in advance for answering my question.

I think my basic reaction to people wanting to talk to me is that I am simply flattered that people care enough about what I think and do to want to talk to me about it. I enjoy meeting and talking with people in general – and if they are interesting (as most people, especially on IAM tend to be) then all the better. I do get a little bogged down with my IMs from time to time but I don't mind.

Of all the cities in the world you have been to, besides your wife, was there another reason besides love that decided your move to Texas in

concrete?

I probably would have moved to Texas anyway – but to Dallas not Austin. And if not Dallas I think I would have ended up in NYC after Albany. So, yes, as I have said before I ended up in Austin, TX because it meant being with Meghan.

Assuming you could find a qualified artist, and you believed there were no safety concerns, would you get your eyes tattooed, and if you did, what would the tattoo look like (ideally)?

I'd do it in a second. My design would be simple – I would want to whites of my eyes to be filled in with a speckled green to make them more crocodilian.

I am seamlessly tattooed between my legs, meaning it is tattooed solid everywhere. Even places that normally do not accept tattoo ink. Will you go this far even though it may be one of the most painful and difficult ordeals you will ever go through? Tattooing the genitals is one thing, behind them is quite another. You have to spend days in bed not moving like a surgical procedure and have multiple sessions. It is the worst. Will you go that far?

I don't know if I will or not. Being that it is not only not a public area, but also an area that I myself don't see (without a mirror and some effort) it just doesn't occupy much thought for me. I wouldn't go so far as to say that I won't do it, but if I will remains to be seen.

Do you have any plans to stretch your ears larger? If so do you have a goal in mind?

I don't have any particular plans to stretch my ears beyond an inch – however, for quite awhile I didn't have plans to go beyond ¾". Then, after some contemplation I went to an inch – in part because I was seeing jewelry and items I wanted to fit. My primary concern with my ears is maintaining their strength for lifting in my show – I currently use empty beer kegs onstage (which weigh about 35lbs) and I can do a bit more than that now. I suspect I may get a bit more size just by pushing the weight limit some more and inserting larger pieces after lifts, if I have a goal at all it is more weight rather than larger diameter.

What kind of negative reactions do you get to your mods, other than people staring, pointing and talking amongst themselves? What's the worst reaction you've gotten? Have you ever felt bad after having gotten a bad reaction from a child for example? Come to think of it, I'm

guessing their mothers are more prone to bad reactions than the kids themselves.

I don't think of stares as negative – I stare, I think it's a natural reaction to something interesting. I will also talk amongst my friends but I will usually wait till a private opportunity, particularly if I think it would make someone uncomfortable.

I have scared kids from time to time but I have a lot of experience working with them so I can generally mediate the situation pretty quickly. If not, I don't feel bad but I do try to remove myself or do whatever is necessary to let the kid calm down. Many times it is the parent who worsens the situation – and probably created it since kids learn from and mimic the reactions of their parents.

Was college worth it?

College was worth it for me. This was primarily because I had a full academic scholarship. As they say, YMMV (your mileage may vary). Graduate school is another story, for all the good experiences and people I met the financial burden it left me with is still not justified.

I know you're into computer gaming, but what are some other games you like to play (board, card, etc)?

I like chess and Othello (reversi). I enjoy most card games. I had a long love affair with mankala in college. I find tangrams to be helpful with thinking through problems and beating any creative blocks I might be having. Tic-tac-toe still engages me on a philosophical level. The thing is, I tend to get to play these mainly online against other people or against AI – another reason I love pc gaming, it provides opponents when you are alone.

Do you ever plan on having children? If so are you going to raise your child the cookie-cutter traditional way (or as close to possible) or your own special way?

I will not, and Meghan is with me on this, have children. Regardless though, I am not sure there really is a cookie cutter way to raise a child. It seems like by its nature it would always be a very unique experience that more one attempts to restrict the process to a model the more problematic it would end up being. Certainly there are values and principles that one might see as traditional to the process but the application must be individually tailored.

If I found myself raising a child I would, as I imagine many do

(whether they wish to or not), rely upon my own upbringing as a guide. They keys being instilling a sense of self, responsibility, and providing as much opportunity as possible.

I have always wondered how you made the decision to undergo a full body transformation and also why you picked the lizard to transform into.

The transformation itself started as a concept art idea which became a performance project which then continued to develop and absorb / integrate many of my pet ideas and loves; like sideshow. I chose a reptilian motif out of pure personal aesthetic – I just like how its looks.

I have a question I have been wanting to ask for a while but it seems all the previous Q and A's have slipped by me. Which philosopher has beliefs and ideas most similar to your own?

I'd love to say Heraclitus but I know that's not true given the spiritual nature of his thought, but I dig his style. It would really depend on the subject matter but the two well known and accepted philosophers that I would most often agree with are Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.

Do you plan to get anything else pierced?

I have been playing with idea of lip rings for a couple years now but I have no definite plans.

How do you feel about people getting tattoos of your logo or your likeness on themselves?

I see anyone getting my logo or likeness tattooed on them as incredibly flattering. If my image is that appealing to them or something I do moves them to get it done then I am really kind of awestruck. I just hope that they have seriously considered it and are doing it for their own sake OR they are doing it in a truly comic and irreverent sense with that full awareness.

In comparison to many performers/celebrities, you are very approachable and "real" to your fans, and to some extent there appears to be a blurring of the line between "friend" and "fan". How does people perceiving you as a real or "down to earth" person affect the public freak persona that you need for the career aspect of your life?

Part of the reason I don't think of myself as a celebrity is because I am easily approachable and honest with people. Also, I don't like the celebrity concept as it tends to play out, where people will be interested in

you just because other people are interested in you. It's easy for me to be "real" with fans of what I do because my fans are real – I don't tend to get the celebrity chasers who only give a damn about me because x number of other people do.

As for blurring the line between "friends" and "fans", I am very friendly with people – and even more so when they are fans of what I do because I am really enthusiastic and in love with what I do. From time to time this does create minor issues because people will perceive themselves as being closer to me than they really are but it's definitely more boon than bane. I actually think it helps me professionally because when people get to know me a bit, they often become invested, in a way, in what I do. I think its like what happens to me when I tour with a band or work with another performer – regardless of what I felt of their work before, if its positive I come away wanting them to succeed and being more drawn into and receptive to their future work. I think this is an extension of coming to know and like them as people. And, by seeing that I do have a "down to earth" aspect I think most people develop a new found respect for me.

Of course, if people were to think that the freakiness was just an act it would probably have a very negative effect – but getting to know me will simply reinforce to a person that I really am what I portray myself to be onstage – I just project it more (turn it up to 11) when I am performing.

7/25/2004

Why do you stick with the PC instead of going with a console? Wouldn't you have more time to play if you could play when you are on the road?

I prefer PC gaming over consoles for a combination of superiority and expediency. PC titles are generally far superior to console titles – especially when you look at a game that exists on both platforms side by side. Consoles simply cannot match high end pc's technically. This technical advantage allows games to be bigger and have more depth. Also, the mouse & keyboard control setup is far more versatile and well suited to the types of games I prefer. An argument might be made for game catalogs in favor of consoles but not playing on a console I rarely, if ever, miss out on a title I want. Playing on a PC is also better for me because it means not spending money on the console. Given that I am going to have a computer for other applications, it may as well serve as many functions as possible – thus my computer is my gaming platform, stereo, and much more. This saves me the expense and space of the other electronics. As for gaming on the road, my laptop is powerful enough to game with pretty well, and I keep my Treo 600 well stocked with amusements for the airport lines. Our last

tour bus did have playstations and we had access to Xboxes. I did play them – I can't not game when it's available but I was nowhere near being converted.

What is your favorite game of all time?

Arcade Donkey Kong and Pac Man are what really got me started on video games but the Mortal Kombat series would be the one I am really a sucker for to this day – particularly number two.

What game are you most looking forward to playing that isn't released yet?

I am going to say World of Warcraft because the more I learn about it, the more I suspect it will be the MMO that finally grabs and holds me for more than a month or two. Of course, I am also really looking forward to Doom 3 (especially the 4 person multiplayer limit – I think there is a lot more skill and challenge in smaller number deathmatches) and Half-Life 2. However, since I have a really good idea of what to expect from them and how they are going to impress me, it is World of Warcraft that has me more on the edge of my seat and dying to try it out.

Most people only get touch ups on their tattoos whenever the tattoos begin to look very faded or they have the time and resources to. Because your tattoo coverage is very extensive and is in the public eye so much, do you have a set schedule you get touched up on? Like a certain body part at this time, then another, and so on?

I haven't really gotten to touch-ups. I am fortunate in that my work is holding up well enough that I haven't really felt it necessary. Sure, some things could probably look a little better or we could go over scars I have acquired (such as from suspensions) but I want to finish the initial fill first – unless something gets really badly degraded.

Since I'm sure Mike Tidwell is the one doing those touchups, I have a question about him. It has taken me a very long time to find an artist I can really bond with enough to trust him with my artwork and my flesh. Especially since your work is so important to your image, your choice must have been even more difficult. What factors caused you to settle on Mike over others to be the one to tattoo The Lizardman?

In 2001 I decided to move to Austin, TX meaning that I would need a new tattoo artist (to that point I was tattooed by Mad Pup of Plattsburgh, NY) because I wouldn't be traveling 2000+ miles for a session. My friend Allen Falkner offered the services of his shop, Obscurities, in Dallas. Mike was the

artist there that stepped up to the task of doing countless hours of mind and hand numbing green fill. I knew Mike as the brother of another friend, Pat Tidwell – that along with working at Obscurities was good enough for me.

I have noticed a recent trend in the iam community where those that are extensively modified are having more branding and scarification work done as a way of reaching toward less mainstream modes such as tattoos and piercings. I also noticed (unless I've missed it somewhere) that you have no branding or scarification work done. Are there any current plans for anything of this nature? If not, is it because that type of work doesn't fit into your concept of The Lizardman?

I have experimented with cutting and branding. In 1995 I tried cutting designs into my calves but I did not scar very well. I have repeatedly branded the palm of my left hand with a small dot and purposely burned myself on various other parts of my body but with little in the way of permanent results. Ultimately, I did not find a way in which to incorporate these particular body modification techniques into my overall plans and thus I have not explored them further.

What would 10 year old Erik think of the present day Erik?

I think 10 year old Erik would find The Lizardman to be really interesting and probably collect all the information on him that he could. However, 10 year old Erik would probably be somewhat guarded about his interest in public. Growing up, I had a tendency to be secretive about my real interests and motives.

During your transformation becoming the Lizardman have you ever gotten frustrated at points feeling as if it was taking you to long to capture the essence of the persona you have created now? If so how did you deal with it?

I have had moments where I have been struck by how much more impressive or better something might have been were I further along – my appearance on Ripley's TV was one of these. Mainly, these are the sorts of moments that motivate me further rather than needing to be dealt with, they inspire me.

I know you have to love mods of all different kinds what are some modifications that you are really fascinated & interested in that you personally wouldn't get?

There is nothing I can think of that I would absolutely say that I wouldn't get gone. That said, I am really intrigued by trepanation but see

very little likelihood that I will get it done. The same goes for hand and/or large limb amputation – fascinating but near nil chance that I would ever consider it for myself.

What or who has been the biggest inspiration for becoming the Lizardman?

My parents and the upbringing they gave me – by encouraging and fostering nearly complete creative freedom. But if you are looking for someone who inspired the transformation specifically (rather than the context of my upbringing that made it a viable option for me) then it would most likely be The Great Omi and the anonymous irezumi upon whom I first witnessed full body designs.

Do you think you would enjoy working in a traveling sideshow like in the old days where there were many different people involved showcasing totally different types of freaks or do you think you would prefer just doing your one man show more?

I have a good taste of both kinds of work (ensemble and solo) and I can say that I do enjoy them both. Solo work allows you far more control and freedom but also places the entire burden upon you. Group work allows you a lot more breathing room and much less pressure. Given my druthers, I would prefer to work my own show but with a cast of amazing guest performers.

Do you have a favorite style of music that you listen to before a show to get you pumped up & who's your favorite bands currently?

Currently, I am still in big Slipknot & Chimaira phase coming off the last Jagermeister Tour with them. Before a show I don't necessarily listen to any particular music but working a lot of rock shows means there is generally something loud and pounding helping me get pumped up beforehand. As much as that can be a help, I also sometimes like to get a quick quiet moment to pull together my mental notes as well – it just depends on the night and the show.

What has been the most rewarding thing about what you do for yourself?

Everything. Seriously.

If you had to choose any other profession besides what your doing now what would it be?

Writer – though that is a large part of what I do now, I wouldn't mind it being more.

When you think of your future what are some goals you have yet to accomplish that you would like to see happen?

I think there is a lot more I can do in terms of the entertainment industry. I want to see myself with a regular show or role (stage or television) and continue pushing further into the mainstream – as a fixture rather than an occasional feature. I also want to finally finish and publish a number of book projects I have had cooking for some time. And I really want there to be a mass produced Lizardman action figure.

I know when I met you at the Jagermeister Tour I was a little curious about how to address you. Do you prefer Lizard Man or can we call you by your real name?

I don't mind being addressed by my given name, but in public situations I often prefer Lizardman. The only time I get annoyed by use of my given name though is when it is obviously inappropriate (such as when I am trying to promote a Lizardman show) or when the person doing it does so only to try and portray themselves as a sort of insider to my life or special because they know it.

Are you more liberal or conservative?

Democrats suck, Republicans blow (or vice versa) – thank you, Lewis Black. I don't think either liberals or conservatives would be happy with me claiming to be in their respective camps. My views are issue dependent and there is no clear majority for either side of the fence.

Have you ever considered taking on an apprentice? MTV could make a reality TV show, called Freak Show Apprentice (or something) about people trying to become your apprentice!! (watch out Donald Trump, the Lizardman is here to kick your ass. hmm... I'd pay just to see that. nothing against don, it'd just be neat to see you fight.)

Hmm...I think I would rather box Trump than do such a show. As an alternative, a show I would like to do is one where I travel around doing my thing and have special guests that I employ and/or teach to do stunts and acts as part of that episode.

In the unlikely event that I ever come face to face with you, can we spar?

I'll give that a conditional yes – provided that where and when we meet is appropriate.

9/24/2004

If you found yourself with a large burst of cash in the million dollar range from a film or advertising contract, how would you spend it?

I have given this some thought – probably too much thought when weighed against the likelihood of it actually happening. But hope springs eternal, just like my get rich quick schemes...

1. \$250,000 – Pay off mortgage & remaining student loans, sell current home, purchase lot and construct “dream home”. Dream home is more a matter of custom design than furnishing and this could all likely be done for much less – any excess would be channeled into #3.
2. \$500,000 – Create funds and investments for our future. Start up money for various business ventures. I would continue to work (at highly reduced rates) being far more selective about projects and donating much more time.
3. \$250,000 – Given away to family, friends, and as patronage to the arts & sciences.

What will you do if elements of your transformation backfire? That is, what if your brow implants start to erode the orbit or otherwise damage your face? What if your teeth decay and have to be extracted? It wouldn't be the first time that modifications believed to be safe went bad.

I have given a lot of thought to this too, especially when I started to see some of the first stories on complications with implants. They present the biggest potential worry to me but seem to be doing ok thus far – if they need to come out, they will and it will sadden me since I like them so much. If my teeth decay then I can always get the implants that were part of my original idea but I do prefer having my natural teeth.

I have often said that life is an odds game. I am playing and will continue to play the odds I am comfortable with. If things backfire there is really nothing to do but go on, hopefully a little bit wiser and able to let others know how to better their odds.

What is your backup plan? If the ability to work as a freak totally disappeared and America became highly conservative, what

would you do?

The loss of a viable market for work as a freak is one thing. It would mean that I would have to either move or travel regularly to where such a market still existed – and I really think there will always be a market somewhere in the world for what I do. Obviously, I am more than willing to do the traveling and if absolutely necessary I would move.

The loss of the market for reasons of extreme cultural/social backlash represents something else entirely and implies not only a lack of work but also an openly hostile daily existence. In such a situation I am ready and willing to fight (take that as you will) so long as I see a possible victory – but I will not martyr myself or my happiness. If I believe the shit has hit the fan I will not hesitate to extricate myself through any and all means available or necessary.

If you were to run for president what would your policies be?

My policies would be enough to make sure I never got elected, or at least ensure my assassination. Rather than address the myriad of issues a presidential candidate must formulate policy on, I will simply put forth one I think is most important to our future and also the one least likely to happen (which is unfortunate since I consider it absolutely necessary):

The abolishment of the legal status of corporations as individuals and/or entities in terms of liability or action. I would demand that all businesses ‘have face(s) put to them’ such that there was direct and obvious culpability for any and all operations.

What wouldn't you do for a truckload of cash? Meaning, is there a moral you won't break for any amount of money???

I once turned down over \$10,000 to eat a football as part of the super bowl halftime show. This was the same one that featured the infamous Janet Jackson nipple. Since no one else did it either I guess they dropped the bit or just couldn't find anyone, frankly the former seems much more likely. It wasn't so much a moral decision as it just wasn't my thing, I'm sure I could do it but I didn't want to. I don't have a lot of moral objections but I am very obstinate about only doing what I want or absolutely have to do.

Is there a trick in your act that you're afraid to do sometimes?

Not on a regular basis but there are times when due to random circumstances I get a little nervous – not so much for my safety but more because I think its not going to go right and thus detract from the show. If I

have any safety worries I just don't do it – that's why I am not in the morgue.

Do you believe the stranglehold corporations have on the youth of today will affect our future?

I don't believe that corporations do have a stranglehold on the youth. I believe they have an undue amount of access to power and influence, but I also think that their position is fragile and that anyone 'under their hold' can break out or be broken out at any time. As for the future, I think we do have to be vigilante and that corporations will play a large role but if it is to be as dark as your question implies is up to us not them.

Do you save snails from the road (slash) pavement?

I can't recall it ever coming up. I rarely ever see snails and then not on pavement.

And what are your thoughts on the eating of seaweed?

Same as anything else – if you like it, eat it!

Does performing ever feel like a chore? Do you have the same dread of going to work that most people have?

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't had some days when I was tired or sore and just wasn't as into it as usual. However, I know the 'work dread' from my previous more typical jobs and I have never felt like that about performing. In fact, it is usually thinking about how cool it is to get to perform for a living that gets me over being tired, sore, and cranky.

Where's the best place you've performed (in terms of money, crowd reaction, or any other factor)?

Money: (tie) German & Japanese Television

Crowd Reaction: (tie) The 2nd Annual Sideshow Gathering / Jagermeister Music Tour

Personal Satisfaction: Coney Island

Would you ever give up your freak career for more financial security? If so, how much money would it take?

It would take the proverbial butt load and even then it would depend on the conditions. Do I have to work a new job? Am I somehow banned

from performing? There are other jobs I could see doing but not many and if I was amply compensated I suppose I could go without publicly performing but I would still be doing the acts on my own in private – these activities are part of who I am.

Why haven't I seen any Lizardman action figures in toy stores?

Ask the toy manufacturers. I want it to happen (and yes, I have tried and will continue to)

Do you ever hear audience members explaining the "tricks" behind your act to others in the audience, and does it bother you when people don't believe that what you do is real?

Well, I don't really do tricks so there is very little if anything to explain – in fact, I often explain it as I do it. Explaining my acts would be a lot like explaining tightrope walking i.e. 'He is just putting one foot in front of the other and not falling.' Sure, I get the occasional wannabe expert who thinks he can explain the bed of nails or some other act via physics but the fact is that I push the physics (like using 16 or less nails) to a point where most people can't or won't ever want to go. Knowing the science behind pole vaulting doesn't mean you can go break the record and knowing the science behind fire eating doesn't mean you will pull it off without getting horribly burned. Such people are basically sorrowful killjoys who don't know how to enjoy a show - I pity them.

As for people thinking my acts aren't real, I go through a lot in the show to prove the veracity of what I do. In the end though, if you don't believe it then that's your thing – try and enjoy the presentation at least. I have heard incredible theories as to how I do some of the acts because people won't accept what they see, it amuses me that the simple obvious truth is not acceptable to them. One guy claimed that the gavage wasn't real because he claimed all the fluids stayed in the hose – he didn't deny that it was in my stomach via my nose, instead he claimed that all the fluid in the pump (more than a quarter gallon) stayed in the tube when the handle was depressed and then was sucked back out of just the tubing when the handle was pulled and thus he claimed I wasn't really pumping my stomach. How crazy is it to think I would stick a tube up my nose and down into my stomach for an illusion? It seems that it is just about as crazy as believing 6 feet of quarter inch diameter tubing can hold over a quart of liquid volume. Not to mention the extra stuff that comes up with it or when I make blue fluid from the pump mix with yellow fluid I drink and turn green when extracted. The gavage is one of the most obvious 'what-you-is-what-you-get' acts but still people question it – I can't let it keep me up at night.

Does it creep you out at all that someone has a tattoo of your face?

Not at all – I think it is incredibly cool. I just hope that down the road they still think it is as cool as I do.

What human quality do you admire the most?

Humor

What human quality annoys you the most?

Jealousy

Are there any foreign cultures that influence you?

I have been influenced by a lot of cultures. Outside of my own culture I believe I have drawn a lot from the Assyrians, Chinese, Japanese, Ancient Greeks, Ancient Egyptians, Native Americans, and Polynesians to name but a few. I make it a point to expose myself to as many different worldviews as possible and I have yet to find one that has not given me something positive to add to myself.

What body modification do you plan to get next?

The next actual modification will probably be a tattoo session. However, the next thing that I am considering outside of already ongoing processes would be a navel negation. I have been discussing this with plastic surgeons and it seems likely that I will soon have my navel effectively removed (i.e. smoothed over as if never there)

Is there any modification that you would like to get done but they don't have the technology for it?

Alligator / crocodile tail graft.

In a society of today's culture, how do you feel about the banning or prohibiting Body Modification? Such as Tattoo's, Body Piercing, Surgical Modification?

Obviously, I would be opposed to it and I believe it would almost certainly fail and eventually come back to bite those behind it on the ass.

1/17/2005

If you were called on to do a USO show in Iraq, (a) would you go, and (since I assume you would), (b) what kind of show would you like to do?

If the USO wanted a show from me, I would do it in a heartbeat. I think something like that is a great opportunity and I would simply do my regular show. The reason being, that regardless of anything ideological or political that I may feel about this particular conflict or war in general, the USO stage is not the time or place for it. My only interest would be to give as much entertainment as possible to people who are in danger for their lives. Preaching at people who are actively being shot at is misdirected effort and by the same token I would not go for cheap 'pops' by saluting everyone and making propaganda style jokes about the other side. I would simply do my show and hope that I could be good enough to make someone in such a horrific situation laugh or smile for a moment.

How do you deal with overly aggressive fans that start to border on stalkers, or try to put emotional demands on you?

Fortunately, I haven't had too much of this thus far but when it does happen it can really shake you up. What I mostly get are people who seem to mistake general politeness and kindness on my part as an establishment of a deep friendship that somehow obligates me to them. Sadly, this seems to arise out of many people just not being used to having someone show any interest or simple decency towards them. I do my best to try and explain that just because I will listen and make some simple effort to help you (like providing information) that doesn't make us best friends, I do the same for most everyone. I really am a misanthrope but I am optimistic enough that I try and golden rule my way through most situations in hopes of reciprocity.

What are the spiritual elements of your modifications

Repetition is one of the cornerstones of marketing and education (think about that), so it can't hurt to say it again:

The Lizardman is an atheist who firmly believes that any and all spirituality is a mental construct at best and ultimately a crutch which must be discarded as false and limiting!!!!

There is nothing spiritual about me or my modifications nor can there be.

As a person who makes their living based in part on the mystique and fantasy of their persona, do you ever worry that being "too real" or "too accessible" could negatively affect your career? Do you ever feel

that maybe you should "act more like a celebrity"?

Oh to act more like a “celebrity” – and get away with it. Isn’t that the dream? If being “real” or “accessible” is what puts someone off, then is losing them really much of a loss? I do try to act like some celebrities, but I am selective about it. I look at people like Kerry King and some of the others I have worked with and see them as good models for handling people with respect and openness regardless of any celebrity status.

Is your wife going to be a Lizard Woman? Cuz that would rock

My wife is not going to be Lizard Woman. She does have her own very interesting theme going though, all based around urban legends.

This may have been asked before but: Even though you started these modifications for yourself was there ever a point in time where you got such negative feedback that you questioned going any further with the transformation?

I had plenty of moments of doubt early on, which is why I took so long to get going with it but once I got started each piece made it more and more right. I have never gotten any feedback that made me question doing it; it was only ever a matter of getting past my own reservations. I am the only one that can make me worry or regret and in terms of my modifications I am past that. The wonderful thing about doing something for yourself is that while you can consider other people’s opinions, they are mostly irrelevant.

Did you ever receive a "special treatment" when crossing international borders (at airport controls etc). If so, were the security guards interested in getting to know you or did they perceive you as some kind of weirdo, that might be a security risk?

You seem to say it in a bad way but I do get special treatment now and then but almost always in a nice way. I am a very obvious non threat to most security personnel and as such I often pass by fairly easily. They are often curious though and will ask me lots of questions, even going so far as to take me out of lines and such to do so – but often this means I get expedited through the rest of the process, which is an advantage. Many security personnel remember me, especially at airports due to my frequent travel and I get greeted politely and treated better than average – which can often annoy the straight-laced businessman fumbling with his shoes while being patted down since I just stroll by.

How do you want your children educated?

I don't want children, so I don't want them educated. The children may be the future but today belongs to me!! (The Simpsons)

Will they have body mods?

Since they will have no bodies (see above), modification is non-applicable

Are you scared of Israel because what they show on TV and do you think that one day you will come here?

Israel doesn't scare me in the least. I would gladly go there given the opportunity. Seeing some of the historical sites of the Middle East and walking on the great wall remain two of my few unfulfilled travel ambitions.

If you were getting your tongue split now, would you still go to Dr. Busino? I'm sure that you get lots of messages asking about where one can go for a tongue splitting. Do you suggest doctors, or people in the community?

Historical revision questions are hard because lots of the options now only exist because of what was made possible as a result of Busino and others. If I was just a person now looking to get my tongue split I would likely still go to a doctor but if I was me with the people I know I might opt for a cutter due to personal trust and knowledge of their work. I always recommend doctors first because they are better trained and equipped for emergencies (at least any doctor I would trust) and it helps avoid legal issues and potential community fallout in the event of problems.

If you could start over with another transformation theme, even if it involved mods that currently don't exist or are unsafe but potentially possible, what would you choose and what would it involve?

The only other theme that has really stayed with me as something that would have been great to do is the full body maze tattoo, but really I don't have any interest in a different theme just improving on this design as I can.

Are there any hobbies that you'd like to do but can't or that you do but not to the level that you'd like to because you simply don't have enough time to dedicate to them?

Plenty, although most are probably due more to laziness than true lack of time. It's almost always lack of effort rather than time. I would really like to be better at computer programming. My juggling could use

plenty of advancing beyond the simple three object patterns I can do now. I'd like to be a better unicyclist. And there is always the dream of professional pc gaming, but my skills are not on that level - yet.

I am sure people have or have tried to touch you without asking permission but has anyone ever caught you in the wrong mood and things got ugly.

The worst I can think of is me shouting at someone in a mall. Things rarely get any uglier than me getting loud as most people will back down at the sight of an angry Lizardman. If I recall right, someone grabbed at my arm while I was eating and I responded with something along the lines of a very loud, "Do not fucking touch me."

If you chose not to be `The Lizardman` what would you of been...was there an alternate species that was viable..or would of been something like Mr. Sprague, attorney at law?

Most likely possibilities would have been educator, something I did do. Or a more traditional media artist.

When you die, what do you want done with your body : burial, cremation, embalming, mummification?

Burial or other rites are done for the living not the dead. I don't much care but I will try and leave funds so as not to burden loved ones with expenses. Might be nice to die knowing that my ashes or remains baked into a cream pie would be thrown into the face of someone appropriate though.

How are you liking WoW? What has been your impression of the story, the potential for changes, the setup? What things would you like to see Blizzard do in the future with the game?

I am loving W.o.W. (World of Warcraft). I have always enjoyed Blizzard games and their game world. This is easily my best MMO experience. I am looking forward to the battlegrounds plans they have and expansion of the world and story. The only real thing I would put on a wish list would be player owned and modified real estate in the game. For anyone else playing, my current primary character is Aargh, a warlock on the Kargath server and member of the Blackhammer guild which includes notable other iam'ers.

What have you found as the best way to get people to leave you alone? Meaning if you are in the airport do headphones work to stop the questions. I ask because when I go to the mall it is hard to get any thing

done quickly because of all the questions.

Headphones do work amazingly well. Combined with sunglasses and or a hat and walking with a single focused purpose does wonders. Body language is an incredible communicator and if you learn how to use it you can move through almost anywhere with little notice or interference – even if you are green. Of course, there some people who simply cannot be deterred – I wonder about their evolutionary heritage.

Would you do Ripley's again?

Absolutely. One of the main reasons for my interest in Ripley's was not the exposure or pay off but rather historical significance of becoming part of the same line in history as people like Omi. It could have all worked out better but it was and is still very much worth and significant to me in ways far beyond simple business. I may be an incredibly self centered egoist but I do have some sentimentality for the larger picture.

2/17/2006

Have you ever thought of changing your diet to more resemble that of a lizards?

I am a vegetarian, by taste, and I do eat live insects. So, depending on which one(s) you choose my diet does resemble that of a lizard. Realistically though, the only things that I take into account when choosing my diet are taste and health with a heavy emphasis on taste. I am a picky bastard as anyone who has ever gone to eat with me can attest.

If tomorrow it became a federal law that tattoos were illegal and all of those tattooed had to be rounded up and placed in camps across the nation, would you lead the march against the white house?

Why are these hypothetical scenario questions so often gloomy and pessimistic?

I would not march on the white house in such a situation, what you have described is well past the point of no return - I am nobody's martyr. When I act and fight for modification rights and respect I do so out of enlightened self interest, what is good for all is often also good for me but don't think that I will blindly sacrifice myself or you will be very disappointed.

You have traveled the World as we all know. Some of us like me, haven't been able to travel the World. My question to you, since you

aren't the " norm " what country or cities are more welcoming to your lifestyle? Are there certain countries or cities where the majority has frowned upon you if not shunned? Also are there certain countries or cities where you were so welcomed with open arms you would want to visit again?

The great thing about being an entertainer is that the world welcomes you. When I travel it is almost always for work e.g. doing a show or an appearance. I know that other people with public modifications on par with my own have had far different experiences in many of the same places. To answer your question though, I honestly can't think of anywhere that particularly leaps out as welcoming or hostile to such a point based upon my modifications or lifestyle. My experiences most places are so focused that I kind of doubt I ever get a really good sense of what it is like on a regular basis – that's part of the downside of touring. I get to go almost everywhere but I don't really get to experience anywhere very deeply.

Where would your “optimal” place to live in for the rest of your life be? By that I mean somewhere you visited and really enjoyed and would like to, or you can imagine yourself living in for the rest of your life.

The requirements for my happiness are almost completely unrelated to geography. The optimal place for me is one where I have my friends and family and the freedom to live more or less according to my own desires. I am very happy in Austin, TX currently and could easily see staying there. Besides which, I travel so much that I effectively get to live all over in a sense.

What is your favorite species of lizard/reptile?

I really like the various monitors and salt water crocs.

Why are you so lovable?

Loving me is easy cause I'm beautiful.

What kind of body modification makes you uncomfortable?

No particular kind of modification makes me uncomfortable – but it's also not like I would watch subincision or flesh removal procedurals just for fun. If anything about a modification is going to bother me it will most likely be the motivation. When people get procedures as a means of one-upping someone else or seem to be pushed into it by others, that makes me uncomfortable. I also get 'the willies' when I see practioners doing things

like cross-contaminating.

have you ever considered more subdermal implants (small flattish ones, on your arms, for example) to make your scales appear more "textured"?

I'm not entirely sure how feasible such a massive implant project like that would even be, but it's not something I would really want. In terms of texture for the scales I think that further tattooing will provide that adequately through the effect of color shading. I'm not currently considering any further implants with the possible exception of magnetic implants that would be essentially invisible.

what's your favorite movie, and favorite video game, and why? or one of, seeing as 'favorite' is kind of tricky

It is very hard to pick a favorite. Besides which, my favorites have changed and likely will change again in the future. I can say that in terms of movies I have watched the original Highlander and Caddyshack more times than probably any other films. I still really like Highlander on a lot of levels but I am kind of burnt out on it, whereas I still watch Caddyshack at least once a week or more on the tour bus and Full Metal Jacket runs on a loop in our front lounge most days. For video games, I have a long running obsession with the Mortal Kombat series.

Whos your favorite comedian alive or dead?

Rodney Dangerfield. I loved his stand-up style and his autobiography It's Not Easy Bein' Me : A Lifetime of No Respect but Plenty of Sex and Drugs not only inspired but also influenced me in terms of my own work.

What book or books have you read that have had the most impact on you or been the most enjoyable reads?

The Illuminatus Trilogy has profoundly affected me many times. I have read it at least once a year since I first found it in while in high school in the late eighties and I have no plans to stop.

If you could sum up your philosophy of life in a sentence what would it be?

I don't know if I can do that yet. I definitely don't think of myself as a role model but in terms of my philosophy, such as it may be, I do think that how I live my life is the best expression possible rather than trying to work

language around it. If I have to take a swing at a one-sentence summary I'd currently go with: Survive and enjoy doing it.

Do you feel like there are certain mods you're missing out on that you couldn't incorporate into your lizard theme

There are some designs and ideas I have had and passed on due to my overall theme but I don't think I am missing out. Ultimately, if I really want something I find a way to make it work for me and my theme. I made the rules for this project and I will bend and break them as I see fit.

whats your favorite city to perform at and why?

I don't have a favorite city for the simple reason that the city you are in is a guarantee of nothing. No matter where you are the crowd can be good or bad or indifferent (which is worst of all). Of course, there are general trends that I have talked about before but the closest thing I could say for a favorite is the town I am in any given night because that's my focus.

Who do you look up to?

I admire a lot of people but I try not to put anyone on a pedestal. The most important thing to remember about anyone you look up to is that they are still human and they have faults just like everyone else – this is especially important for anyone who might look up to me. A short list off the top of my head would be: Lanny & Cindy Sprague, The Great Omi, Rasmus Nielson, Robert Anton Wilson, Rodney Dangerfield, Penn & Teller, James Randi, Aye Jaye, Houdini, Andre Breton, Heraclitus, & Zeno.

If you could meet anyone dead or alive who would it be? Why?

I always hated this essay question in school. One of my favorite responses was to suggest that I wanted to meet myself under such conditions that I would have answer any question completely and honestly since we lie best to ourselves. I know that's a cop-out so, I suppose I would like to meet the actual historical figure or figures behind the new testament (I find the alleged evidence of a historical Jesus to be rather suspect) so that I could try and discern their motives and get a read on how they would feel about the abomination that their efforts have become in the many modern forms of Christianity.

i know that at one point you were a doctoral candidate in philosophy - what was your planned dissertation going to focus on?

It would have been a linguistic theory of art. My undergrad thesis

was a treatment of the ancient problem of the one and the many using the latter Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblance. My doctoral thesis would have used family resemblance in a similar fashion to address the question ‘what is art?’.

What special challenges do you face when travelling? Do you have additional issues getting through airport security, due to being "the green guy"? Alternatively, do you get special treatment in a positive light? Extra drinks from stewardesses, for example?

My two main travel challenges are my show gear and other travelers. In terms of gear, you have to think about how airlines tend to view things like swords, traps, and flammable fuels (or their residue). Luckily, over the years I have gotten very good at streamlining my props and packing them for weight and security. Other people are a challenge because as much as I want to be polite and accessible, people who have layovers in airports don’t seem to understand very well that I may not have the same amount of time and that I need to get to my gate to make my flight. On occasion I do get a little special treatment. I fly enough that I have racked up elite status on some airlines and using the same ones means that in some places their staff tends to recognize and remember me. I have gotten quicker passage through security, upgrades, drinks, and been boarded earlier in the past. I have also been invited up to the cockpit a few times – including post 9/11.

Your stage show does have a lot of sexual innuendo in it. Do women or men hit on you after shows?

It does? Define a lot. I thought it was just right or a little low if anything. Anyway, yeah people do hit on me (both men and women) after shows, before shows, anytime really. As much as I am not a fan of wearing jewelry, the wedding ring is nice thing to have at those moments along with the phrase “I’m flattered but...”

what is the one thing you collect that has nothing to do with sideshow memorabilia or the "lifestyle"?

I don’t really collect things. I have tried but I usually get bored or just forget. I have been keeping ‘do not disturb’ signs from hotels for a while but that is lifestyle related. I keep an archive of stuff related to my career and I gather circus, magic, and sideshow materials for research. If I wasn’t my own historian and researcher my possessions would probably be rather spartan or just clutter.

Do you see yourself tattooing your body a second time around in the future to brighten your scales?

I think once will be enough, or at least I hope once will be enough. I won't rule out touch ups here and there but I don't envy the prospect of going over my whole body more than once. I'll leave that sort of thing to Lucky Diamond Rich.

I remember you mentioning a possible procedure to make it so that your navel is gone (only smooth skin, no proof that a navel ever existed). Is such a procedure possible? Are you still considering it now that you have your stomach tattooed and colored? Ever thought of doing the same thing to your nipples or any other part of your body to add to your theme?

The procedure is possible and was even recently shown on Modblog. I definitely still want to have it done, a touch-up to the tattooing in that area will likely be in order afterwards. My plan was and still is to also have my nipples surgically deconstructed as well.

if there were a way to 100% safely and painlessly remove your ferrets fur and tattoo them would you do it? if so what theme would you give there tattoos?

I don't see how this would be of any benefit to my ferrets or me; it really strikes me as rather absurd. I love my fuzzy little minions and besides they are already tattooed (ferrets have their ears tattooed to mark them as spayed/neutered and descented). My wife, Meghan, who is responsible for introducing me to keeping ferrets had the idea of getting similar dot tattoos but rejected it as not fitting with her urban legend theme. I am still considering getting one dot in the event that I get a vasectomy which is fairly likely (both the operation and the tattoo).

Were you always such a sexy beast?

Without a doubt and only getting sexier. You may also have noticed my legendary humility.

how many times have you been called the enigma?

A lot, but he gets mistaken for me too – apparently all us tattooed folk look alike. In fact, I was once sitting next to him in jackelope (a bar in Austin) and a person came up to talk to him (he was doing a show there that night) and they went on about seeing him on TV. Eventually they asked, 'Can I see your forked tongue?' He simply chuckled, pointed at me, and said 'I think you want him.'

How about...what's the modification you've received that you enjoy the most?

I love my bifurcated tongue, it is my favorite on pretty much every possible level.

This is a two part question (hope you do not mind), how long is your tongue split? does it re-grow?

I don't mind at all. The depth of the split depends on how I hold my tongue but is approximately a little more than an inch. It does not re-grow; the depth has been stable since it finished healing after the second operation in 1997.

I have met you and you seemed a perfectly sane person, well by my standards anyway. i was just wondering why a lizard, do you or have you ever felt a strong urge to be a lizard. do you just like something about lizards, their reputation, their aesthetic qualities. how modded where you by the time you decided to under go a complete transformation, was it always intended to be part of a show. if you did have some sort of urge to become a lizard do you feel more complete now, if not will you ever, or are you just a guy who always had an interest in mods and somehow decided to take it down the path of a lizard.

It has never been about being a lizard for me, it is the transformation idea – I chose a reptilian theme based mainly on aesthetics. At the time I first started thinking about the project my only modification, to most people's standards, was a pierced ear (done myself with a safety pin). By the time I truly committed to the project I had pierced and stretched my lobes somewhat and had begun some of the blackwork tattooing on my arms to see how well I would be able to take it. I did not originally intend it to be part of a show but that was a dream that has since come true. I wouldn't say I feel more complete but it definitely has been and continues to be fulfilling.

So how'd you choose a shade of green?

I had limited options in terms of the greens available in tattoo inks, but I simply picked a bottle out the rack that looked good to me.

What event this last year was the most memorable to you and why?

My Dad's heart attack and recovery. The reason should be obvious.

I've read a couple of times you would like a tail of sorts, ever thought about getting a subdermal implant near your tailbone and slowly stretching it (2nd generation 3rd gen, etc)

I have had it suggested to me before but never seriously considered it. Even if that were a viable method for creating a tail, it would not effectively create the sort of long crocodile-like tail I would want.

Also, when can we expect to see you in Australia?.. I want to see a Brisbane show, I'll even shout you dinner if you head down this way.

I am still working on getting to Australia, I want to my show there as well – any promoters down there reading this? I'm ready to go.

How did you train your snake to be comfortable / perform on stage? And by snake I mean your little green friend, not your happy green friend

Snakes are not particularly trainable (snake charmers and similar performers are often actually just choreographing their behavior around the snakes reflexive, instinctual reactions) but they do seem to 'condition' based on repetition. When I start working with a new snake I handle it a lot till it settles down and then I just go for it. The first few times through can be difficult but over time they seem to take to it as a matter of routine. Some recent experiments with snakes and mazes seem to indicate that they have more mental capacity than previously thought and perhaps this is similar to the 'learning' exhibited in those studies.

9/03/2007

Do you ever get tired of answering questions?

It all depends on the question and the context. There is a sense in which I was I was tired of every question before it was ever even asked but, thankfully, it is often a genuinely fun and interesting experience to field questions. I wouldn't have started this Q & A thing if I didn't enjoy it enough to want to do it. If I do get tired of it, I will simply stop answering.

Toilet Paper: Over the top or around the back?

Excellent question! An inquiry that strikes at the very core of one's being. However, my toilet paper dispenser at home holds the roll in a vertical fashion thus avoiding the dilemma altogether. I don't want to seem to be dodging the question though, so let me just say that in a perfect world those who prefer around the back would be wiped from the face of the earth

as is deserving of such a scourge upon decent people.

Where did I leave my keys? haha, just kidding. What is the best positive reaction you've had from someone regarding your appearance?

Kid all you want, I'm answering – your keys are in the last place you left them. Ha. I think the best reactions are the very simple ones. I love it when someone is stopped by what they see and can only manage a 'wow' or 'oh my god' and obviously mean it appreciatively. I see this as praise on very basic and instinctual level. Often they will end up talking to me more afterward and articulate a number of positive things but it is that initial honest hit that really speaks to me.

What's your favorite thing to bite?

I've never given it much thought. I have bitten quite a few things including a number of people. As much fun as living things can be to bite, if I have to pick a favorite, I know this is boring (but tasty) - pizza.

Do you think my babies would be cute if I made them with Shawn Porter? Why or why not?

I would think that your babies would not be cute but making them with Shawn is irrelevant because I don't find babies to be cute. Certainly I could rate them on a relative scale as more or less cute than another given baby but objectively I don't use cute to describe babies. To me babies are odd and often interesting looking little creatures but I would only ever call them cute as contrived social gesture.

What do you think of "serious" theatre?

I have a great deal of respect for serious or traditional theatre and it is only through my experience with and study of it that I have been able to be as successful as I have been. It is some of social culture and institution that has developed around the theatre, much like with the world of fine art, that I have come to abhor and often reject. As the saying goes, you have to know the rules to know how to break them. One of the biggest problems, in my opinion, with a lot of performers in genres like sideshow and suspension performances is that they make basic mistakes that an intro / survey course or just a little personal research in theatre would prevent.

Who do you think would win in a fist fight between Jerry Falwell (if he was still alive) and Christopher Hitchens?

I would certainly have more points of agreement with Hitchens than

with Falwell – despite being on the opposite side of the fence from him on more than a couple issues. So that may bias me in his favor but I think the real reason to pick him in this fight would be his drinking. A man with the sort of drinking experience he has professed would likely have some good bar fighting experience, so I am giving him the edge. Besides, I find people who bluster in Falwell’s fashion tend to be cowards if challenged physically. For all his fire and brimstone hate speeches against homosexuals I think Falwell would have offered to suck a dick to avoid a beating and maybe even been thankful for the excuse to do it.

Is the size of earth relative to the size of Reverend Phelps ego?

No, the size of the Earth is not relative to the size of his ego, the size of the earth is a relative constant of small stature in the universe whereas his ego would seem to be a never ending, constantly expanding miasma dwarfing not only my own ego but also providing us with perhaps an even better practical example of infinity than the reaches of space.

Why don't people get addicted to nicotine from passive smoking?

I have no idea and my brief ‘googling’ of the subject wasn’t much help either. Maybe it is a dosage level issue? On a somewhat related note: I don’t smoke and smoking bans are rapidly making it so I don’t have to worry much about dealing with other people’s smoke anymore. Smokers who complain about the bans amuse me because if someone came into a restaurant and sat at the table next to them stinking of shit, they would complain rather than defend that person’s right to stink - just as non-smokers complained about smokers. Health issues aside, smoking is often an offensive invasion of other people’s personal space and the case can be made for limiting it under the law for that alone – as we do with noise, for instance.

How do you feel about the way you look now, in comparison to the way you felt 10 years ago?

I feel about the same. I am happy with how I look but I also have plans for how I will look in time from now. Of course, much of the work I had planned ten years ago has come to be now and I quite glad for that. In this particular respect though, I think happy is happy. I wasn’t unhappy ten years ago I simply had unrealized ambitions.

What is your grand plan in life, as far as retirement and taking care of yourself during those years?

I’ve never really had a grand plan for life other than just trying to enjoy living it. As for retirement, it isn’t something I think about a lot but I

have made what I hope are some reasonably intelligent financial moves to assure that I can survive comfortably in the event that I experience a severe reduction in the amount of work I get or even have to stop completely. One of the many benefits of being an entertainer is that there is effectively no age limit to my career. I know of at least one sword-swallower who worked into his eighties. The whole trick, as it were, is not to kill yourself and then you can just keep on doing it.

What are your favorite books and films on freaks?

To be fair, I will leave my own as yet unpublished works out of the running. But thanks for reminding me about my horrid procrastination and delays. Really, you're a good friend.

In terms of books, the bar has been set, and set fairly high in my opinion, by Robert Bogdan's work: Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit. I also really enjoyed both Mannix's Memoirs of a Sword Swallower and Howard Bone's Side Show but the latter two should be viewed suspiciously in terms of the level of factual content. They are the sort of works that get people hurt when they treat them like textbooks.

I don't really have a movie recommendation but Tod Browning's *Freaks* is, of course, a cult classic and while not a personal favorite for me in terms of cinema it does feature a number of classic sideshow personalities.

What is the best part about living in Austin, TX?

I could compare it to other places I lived, in which case I would say the weather, cost of living, and local entertainment are far superior but I'm not sure any of those are the best thing. What really matters to me about where I live is that I feel comfortable when I get to be home and I really do feel comfortable in Austin. A city that prides itself on maintaining weirdness is good fit for me.

I know how it feels to come home from being on tour, but seeing as you have been doing it a lot longer than I did, do you still get that feeling? Or have you just adapted to your surroundings? And what's the best thing to come home to, outside of your wife?

From my own experience and having gotten to work with people that effectively tour their entire lives I would say that you never adapt to the point of losing that feeling. Lots of people adapt to the point where they actually do better on the road but everyone still seems to have that home feeling and need to get at least a little bit of it now and then. I absolutely love and thrive being on the road but I also have a home life and just as I get itchy to travel

again when I am home, I get itchy to be home sometimes on the road. The best thing about home beyond getting to see Meghan and the ferrets are the basics that most people take for granted but that you don't have on a tour bus or when jumping from one city to another – full size beds and bathrooms, making your own meals in a real kitchen, stretching out on a couch and watching TV alone instead of jammed in a bus lounge with 4 other guys, having access to all your stuff and being to have it all out at once.

What type of reactions have you received from people of non-Western cultures (for example, when traveling or from recent immigrant communities, such as ethnic Hindus, Nigerian farmers, Buddhist monks, Chinese students, devout Islamic folks)? What type of perception do you think would most knock your socks off if you were able to read - or invade - their minds? For example, worship due to descent of ancient deity, alien invasion, instant fatwa of death to such an infidel, immediate sexualization, animation come to life due to bizarre drug flashback, Samadhi enlightenment state due to realization that everything is possible...

I haven't really had enough contact with people that weren't already 'westernized' to a fairly significant extent. In my travels it just seems more and more of the world I have gotten to see has at least had enough contact with western culture to have a frame of reference for me. One encounter that does stand out in my mind happened on a cruise ship elevator when I got on with a porter who seemed visibly disturbed by my appearance. I'm not sure where he was from but when one of my friends said 'Pretty weird, huh' in a friendly manner his reply was 'I'm afraid I dream of that tonight and I die.'

Of the reactions you listed worship makes me uncomfortable regardless of the motivation. I like to be appreciated and respected, even glorified to an extent but worship is something I just don't abide. Alien invasion is one I have dealt with thank to the David Icke crowd and I find they are best to simply move along away from rapidly. I haven't quite seen the level of fatwa and attack but I have been condemned by various flavors of religious zealots. Sexualization – many people do have mod fetishes and I get my share of propositions. Animation come to life would be a new take but causing people to suddenly recall something from a drug episode is not that uncommon. I have, intentionally and accidentally, toyed with people under the influence of various chemicals on several occasions. Enlightenment would be overstating the case but I one of the things I set out to do is to shake up people's ideas and perhaps help break them out of their mental cycles. What would really knock my socks off, as you say, would be someone very simply accepting me right off without even being curious.

**Thank
You**