

Under the Helicopters

An eyewitness account of the CrimethInc. barnstorming tours convergence, the attendant media and police witch-hunt, and the usual triumph of anarchy against insurmountable odds.

CrimethInc.

September 1, 2003

August 5 through 10, 2003, a gathering of touring theater troupes loosely associated with the radical publishing collective CrimethInc. took place around and within Louisville, Kentucky.

No, that's no way to begin. Fuck the dry A.P. press release tone, this has to really grab people, convey what it was like to be there — it should put readers in our shoes, not just "inform" them, as if it was possible to do so in an impartial manner in the first place. Maybe we could start in medias res, at the high point of the action:

The roar of the helicopter grew deafening as it circled lower around the house, the searchlight scouring the walls outside. Our host clasped her baby closer to her breast; we all shuddered. At that moment, the wail of a siren, the very sound we'd been fearing since the pigs had closed their siege around our campsite, rose from the direction of the road — the waiting was over, they were closing in for the kill. My companion took me aside: "What are we going to do about the laptop? Should we destroy it, rather than let it fall into their hands?"

But I can't do that quite the way I'd like to, either. While the court cases are still pending and the investigations in progress, who's to know what details are safe to divulge? That's one of the greatest tragedies of living in revolt: you can never speak openly about the most important things in your life without a look over your shoulder and a trembling thought as to who might be listening in. Think of all the beautiful stories we'll have for each other, all the exploits we'll brag of when capitalism finally falls! In the meantime, danger keeps our lips shut, and all too often our sagas die with us. That's the greatest advantage our enemies have — the further we go in our resistance, the less we can tell our stories, the less we can share what we learn and suffer and achieve, while even the murderers among them can talk freely and without fear, as if they have nothing to be ashamed of.

And so however afraid we are, we still must speak, we still must share everything we can without doing their surveillance work for them. For me, the primary lesson of our experience in Louisville was that we can't let ourselves be intimidated — the more we come under attack, the more vocal we must be. Security culture is more necessary than ever today, but misunderstood as a code of silence it can only defeat us. As the showdown between power and people intensifies, only more visibility can save us — less will just make it easier for them to pack us off to the

concentration camps one by one. So here, censored as little as possible (but without any further references to laptop computers, or other, shall we say, red herrings), follows the short version of what transpired that crazy week in Kentucky. For the juicy, tell-all version, catch me warming my hands at the last burning barricade on the final day of judgment — I'll be thrilled to fill you in.

We arrived at the convergence site, a private farm outside Louisville, Kentucky, at the end of a long road of alternating catastrophes and miracles. We had seen our van die a bitter death and our replacement vehicle break down, leaving five of us crowded into a tiny pickup truck with a van's worth of gear; we had performed everywhere from a rural intentional community to a teen center, had gone swimming in a lake improbably owned by a high-ranking politician, and seen a spontaneous anarchist street march break out and meet with police repression; on one occasion, we had stayed up all night bailing our companions out of jail, only to pack up and depart at dawn. Shellshocked as we were, we didn't dare expect the convergence to be more than a handful of us sitting around a campfire — so you can imagine how overjoyed we were to be greeted by a well-organized welcome center at the entrance!

We embraced our friends, old and new, and were just about to drive in when another vehicle appeared from down an adjoining driveway, speeding and swerving and kicking up gravel. Emblazoned on its side was a logo: Channel 11 News. Our friends were chasing it, running to cut it off, shouting at us to get ahead of it; we gunned our engine and sped forward, blocking its path. From inside two angry and self-righteous journalists were shouting accusations and demands at our friends, threatening to call the police if they were not admitted; our friends, covering their faces, adamantly insisted that they leave immediately, until finally the car turned and drove away. At the time, we thought this was just a freak occurrence, but it proved to be an ominous indication of what was to come.

We spent the first night catching up with our old comrades, exchanging accounts of the tangled trails and trials that had brought us there. There were just shy of one hundred of us on the campsite, though I'm afraid that, somewhat more than last summer, the proportions favored individuals that had showed up for the event alone over groups arriving from tours. All the same, it was a choice bunch — some of the cleverest, freest, sweetest people I've had the good fortune to see assembled.

The next day, we met in a great circle to decide what our plans for the week would be, and that was when the first helicopter flew overhead. It was a news helicopter; the bastards, refused entry to our campsite and denied interviews with our number, had spent quite a sum to get (what we later saw to be blurry, unimpressive) footage of us from the air. We were outraged, of course, and some of us taunted the occupants of the machine as it circled us three times, but after it was gone we got back to the business of digging latrines, writing schedules, and preparing meals.

The helicopters continued over the next couple days: Fox News, Channel 11, other local channels, and a couple that were — this was somewhat more troubling — unmarked. We learned to ignore them as best we could while getting on with our affairs: sharing skills from across the anarchist spectrum, planning and networking for projects and actions to come, entertaining each other with brilliant routines and inventions — for example, one of our number demonstrated a mobile musical suit he had constructed, which would blast beats from speakers on his body while he freestyled effortlessly along in, say, a supermarket; others had driven from Alaska in a school bus converted into a mobile home, which was inspiring just to explore, let alone join in decorating with stencils. In those two days, we accomplished a lot of the goals we had in mind

for the convergence — which turned out to be fortunate, as events were about to develop in an entirely unexpected direction.

At a dinner meeting called to discuss our plans for downtown Louisville the following day — a low-intensity demonstration to call attention to the corporations that were polluting its land and exploiting its people — we got word from friends in the city that we had just been on the news. Not only had we been on the news, but, according to the rumors, the headline item at five o'clock had been that an army of dangerous anarchists was congregating outside of Louisville and preparing to attack — but that, not to worry, unbeknownst to them the police had them surrounded and were about to sweep in to foil their plans. Supposedly, the television news story even concluded with footage of police crouched in hiding places, lying in wait! Of course, as we joked then, unless they (rightly!) guessed we were some of the only people in the city without access to or interest in television, the stuff about the police preparing to surprise us was mere sensationalism and scare tactics — but all the same it was hard not to be a little shaken up. As night fell, some of us got together at the house owned by the family hosting us, to compose a communiqué to our communities about the harassment. It was there that this first chapter of the convergence reached its tumultuous climax.

In the middle of our discussion, the eleven o'clock news came on, and, temporarily breaking our ban on mainstream propaganda out of tactical necessity, we went to watch it. Yes indeed, we were the first item on every news channel at the top of the hour. There was blurry helicopter footage of us at the campsite, and the announcer referenced the episode in Columbia, Missouri in which a “flash mob” covered a federal building in graffiti and burned its flags as an example of what CrimethInc. was all about — and why law-abiding citizens had to be protected from us. As for what actually happened in Columbia, for now I'll leave that to the mainstream media to report (see the example at the conclusion of this piece for starters), but it had apparently got law enforcement agents and network media in quite a tizzy. Also, verifying the earlier rumors, the announcer reported that police had occupied the neighboring lands: we were surrounded.

It was time to work out how to handle the situation. We were on private land, so they hadn't been able to come in yet, but it seemed clear that the police and media were working to create an atmosphere in which the public would feel that repression of us “dangerous outsiders” was justified. I've long known that the mainstream media are basically police with cameras for guns, but I'd never been on the business end of them quite as explicitly as this. I was a little vexed about it — I'm not one of those anarchists who needs to provoke repression to feel that my politics count as revolutionary; I've always felt myself most effective flying under the radar, and prided myself on being good at staying there. Now we were locked in a standoff with the pigs without the masses anywhere in sight, like we were the Eugene Anarchists or something. How embarrassing!

Before we got far into figuring out what to do if we were invaded, a frantic report arrived from the welcome center: the car we had sent out to dumpster food had been stopped and the occupants harassed, and the police had now set up a checkpoint at the end of the one road leading out of the campsite — two police cars and a special “Investigational Services” vehicle. This was the opportune moment that the police helicopter appeared over the farm, armed with a scorching white searchlight and circling low. It seemed to us that this was either a particularly high-intensity intimidation tactic, or an indication that they were casing the campsite for an imminent incursion. Had the police sirens not begun in the distance a minute later, we might have been able to take the time to puzzle out just how seriously to take their swaggering; but

once they started up, we moved on to planning how to evacuate the individuals and items in our midst that most needed to be kept out of the hands of our enemies.

We were later to find out that we were being more uptight than our friends; the kids on the other side of the farm, never ones to take anything less lightly than need be, paused in their open mic circle to dance in the searchlight, chased after it when it moved on, and one level-headed fellow even used his digital camera to catch some hilarious footage of this spectacle. It was tense in that kitchen, though: with our host's civilian mother talking about which of our communications were tapped, the steady roar of the helicopter overhead, and the stress of figuring out under duress exactly what we needed to do to minimize the impact of an invasion, it felt a little like we were inside the next Waco.

The police never did close in; the siren wailed for a little while, and then was silent again. All the same, we put the process in motion to get endangered people out — starting with a few space monkeys to test the waters, then moving on to the ones in really precarious positions, utilizing a complex system of code to receive reports at the house as to how each expedition went. By dawn we had finished. Looking back, it seems really unlikely that they were actually prepared to raid us — such an undertaking would have cost them more police and preparation than they could possibly have mobilized on such short order; all the same, the harassment was becoming so distracting that, had we stayed, we would have been badly distracted from everything we needed to focus on.

We woke up the next day at various houses in Louisville proper, extremely exhausted. We were soon joined by the remainder of our number from the campsite — that morning, our hosts had supposedly received word in no uncertain terms that the farm was in fact going to be raided, and everyone had departed accordingly. Oblique references were even made to federal agents, who had supposedly been going to find bomb-making materials on our site. Yeah, yeah — you morons find bomb-making materials everywhere you raid, at least until your claims have to stand up in court.

Now began the difficult process of regrouping a bunch of freaked out people and deciding what to do next. Our planned event of the day, the protest in the financial sector, was called off, for a variety of reasons: people were afraid the police would take advantage of it to pick us off, that the security in organizing it hadn't been tight enough, that we didn't have a clear enough idea of what we were doing there. This was disappointing to the people who had been preparing for it, and reinforced the dynamic that we out-of-towners were coming in and depleting local resources without contributing to local struggles — and, for that matter, gave positive reinforcement to the cops for the scare tactics they'd been using, assuming they did know we had planned a protest; but with so many people still afraid, and the organizers having failed to inspire broad-based confidence in their plan, there was nothing for it but to cancel.

There was some discussion as to whether we dared act as a group in public at all after the media smear campaign that presumably had the whole populace thinking we were terrorists — and for that matter, how safe were we in these houses? did we dare even talk over the telephone? — but it was decided that the worst thing we could do would be to let them intimidate us into silence and invisibility. For our first tentative foray into public, we chose an art car show down the street from the site of the originally planned protest — we reasoned that the presence of presumably liberal art-lovers and artists would be a deterrent to serious police repression, and figured we'd be in our element among another creative fringe group, albeit car enthusiasts.

We showed up in small groups, and established a presence in the middle of the on-street exhibition: an anarchic orchestra that could be heard for blocks playing a variety of home-made instruments and found-object percussion, stilt-walkers making balloon animals for children and encouraging them to join in the chalk-decorating of the sidewalk, the omnipresent free literature table, and a number of us walking around starting conversations with the locals about the events of the past days and the ways they connected with local issues. Some of us had contacted the media to try to set things straight, but, revealing their true colors, now that they'd secured their ratings with alarmist, sensationalist tripe they didn't even bother to show up. The police did show up, however — first a single patrol car, then a number of them, including unmarked cars. In the process of monitoring them, I met a lovely old homeless guy, who, it turned out, had been running volunteer surveillance on them on our behalf already: “That’s an unmarked car right there, I know that guy — he arrested me twice. Don’t worry, he won’t do shit unless his boss tells him to. You kids are good people, I’m glad you’re here.” At that moment, I felt grateful again for the open wounds on my hands, the tangles in my hair, the dirt on my clothes, which had only seemed like liabilities over the preceding days when at any moment I might have had to pass for a civilian: these were signifiers connecting me to an entire world of other marginalized peoples, folks with the same natural enemies and longings.

And as it turned out, at the very moment that the police were assessing the situation, the organizer of the show was talking to one of us — expressing gratitude to us for showing up and enhancing the exhibition! She invited us to a parade they were holding through downtown Louisville the next day. Then, when the police approached to mess with us, she intervened, informing them that we were part of the event and not to be bullied. A long argument ensued, at the conclusion of which the police officers departed in frustration, leaving only a single car to circle the block.

From the exhibition, we headed to Bardstown Road, the main commercial drag in Louisville. It was Friday night, and the district was crowded with bored teenagers hanging around, hip young professionals going clubbing, and older folks dining out. We began a parade up and down the road, complete with marching drums, singing, outlandish costumes, and runners giving out free food easily dumpstered from behind local establishments, much to the merriment of all. At the outset, there were perhaps less than fifty of us, but that number swiftly doubled as more and more passers by joined in off the street. We even came across a couple backpackers who had just hitchhiked into town in search of us. The police kept tabs on us, but again, under the eyes of a wide public, were unable to do more. Passing drivers honked and cheered, a surf band performing at a nearby nightclub came to join us with their great gong in tow, shouting out their own quirky versions of Seattle protest chants, and there was joy in the air as the urban environment everyone had taken for granted was transformed. At the end of our second circuit we quickly dispersed, and though some of us were followed by police we all managed to lose them.

Asking directions back to the neighborhood where we were staying, my friends and I had the most inspiring experience of the week. The middle-aged, lower-middle-class couple we accosted gladly directed us, then engaged us in conversation:

“Did you make that [impressive homemade musical instrument] on top of your [vehicle]?”

“Yeah, it’s the fourth one I did, the first one that’s really audible.”

“Are you all from around here?”

“No, we’re visiting. We were staying on a farm outside town, but — ”

“Oh my god, you are! Are you — THE ANARCHISTS?”

“Uh, yeah, but — ”

The woman, practically jumping up and down: “We saw you on TV! You guys are great!”

Us: !?!?

“Do you do graffiti, write on walls, things like that?”

“Um, no, we’re not really about — ”

“ — because I have to say, I love some of the stuff I see. I even do a bit myself!”

I break in here, over my nervous friend: “Well, maybe just a little...”

“Don’t let them scare you with their bullshit, OK? Don’t let them get you!”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m saying! Don’t worry, we’re gonna get them!”

“Yeah, that’s right!”

We drove off shouting and laughing and waving to our new friends, and at that moment it dawned on me — all those people that had joined in our parade that night, that had honked and waved or come out of the restaurants to watch us go by, they had all seen the news coverage of us, and they didn’t buy it, they didn’t care. If the networks said we were monsters bent on the destruction of everything America holds sacred, that just made us more interesting to them. Our enemies had brought out the big guns to discredit us, and it hadn’t been enough.

I returned to our safe house ecstatic, and spent the next hours dancing wildly to the soundtrack of Natural Born Killers, pausing to engage my friends in impassioned conversation about the implications of the evening’s events: “We were right to come out of the closet about wanting to smash capitalism and so on — we aren’t isolated, there are millions of us! All it’s gonna take is for some of us to get together and say it’s on, and it will be!”

The next day, we showed up at noon and filled the streets in the middle of the art-car parade, once again with drums and banners and free food. It turned out we were parading down the same route we had the night before. There was a problem with someone’s engine ahead — it would overheat if they drove too slowly — so the cars forward of us ended up driving quickly on, leaving us fronting the rest of the parade. Without really meaning to, we led the main body of the parade off its permitted route, along the commercial thoroughfare once again, to cheers and clapping from the sidewalks. Eventually a police officer, his hands full trying to supervise traffic, showed up to direct the drivers back to their route, and we were left alone, still occupying the street. We eventually regrouped in the parking lot where the art-cars had gathered for one more exhibition, and established a presence there as we had the day before, giving out massive quantities of literature and engaging in numerous conversations with locals about the police, the media, and the possibility of another world. Throughout everything, we felt exceptionally well-received by the citizens of Louisville, excepting the police, of course.

That night was the show for the barnstorming tour groups, which had been clumsily attached to a local punk rock benefit show. This was another trying, awkward situation: there had been some trouble with the show, only partly owing to our involvement in it and the subsequent attention it had received, and it had been moved over and over from venue to venue — finally coming

to rest in a suburban family's basement. We set up our literature table, started some good conversations and so on, but it soon became apparent that the hosts weren't interested in making it possible for us to participate after all. Still hoping to make something of a difficult night, we scrambled to find another venue, and eventually relocated everyone to another house. Exhausted but buoyed by the feeling of being among friends, the various remainders of the barnstorming groups showed off some of the agitational performances they had been doing around the country, to much rejoicing. The show ended up being mostly for us, the "converted," but it was still important that it happened under the circumstances, as an affirmation of our indomitable determination — and I think all of us there knew that the real deal is to get our artwork and activity out of the radical ghetto and into the public arena, whenever it is possible.

On the final day, ready to take it easy, the remnants of our group gathered at a popular Louisville park known for its unlicensed swimming. In the Fellini version of our story, the movie ends there, the camera panning from the "NO WADING — NO SWIMMING" signs to the fountains overflowing with laughing people of all ages and backgrounds — the everyday anarchists, taking their rights by storm without need of a manifesto for justification, the ones we can count on to ensure the success of the revolution once we manage to set its wheels in motion. When you're a revolutionary, of course, real life is always better than any movie, and so we still had time afterwards to hold a dumpstering and cooking competition that culminated in a great feast and dance party. It was not exactly confrontational politics, but we felt we'd earned the right to "indulge our desires" (as the straw men in the anti-CrimethInc. myths and rumors always do — boy, must they live high on the hog!) a bit after the harrowing situations of the previous days.

We exchanged contacts and oaths that we would meet again for further adventures, one of our number made one more useless attempt to contact the media (which was rewarded with a helicopter visit to our safe house, absurdly enough), and we were on our way to the next stop in tour — where we found the police waiting for us, once again. But that's another story!

So what worked this summer, and what didn't? Let me say this, first — our enemies fucked up royally by threatening us without following through. Being in a situation like that is intensely frightening — not that I haven't been under helicopters and surrounded by police over and over at demonstrations and so on, but this was the first time I'd experienced them coming for us — but next time it happens, I'll be calm and collected: "Sure, we're under siege and they're preparing to attack, but last time this happened everything worked out. Keep cool but don't freeze, as my friend always says." Any time they give us the benefit of a practice run without the usual costs, it's a gift — it's not easy to get field practice being an embattled revolutionary! Being able to gauge actual levels of risk and resist intimidation tactics is important, and now a hundred of us are better equipped to do so.

And despite everything, we did accomplish the greater part of our goals in converging: skills and ideas were exchanged, plans were laid, some crazy adventures of the kind you can't organize in advance took place, a little more visibility for the anarchist perspective was achieved (and a few more crazy stories entered circulation), and, perhaps most importantly, the bonds of existing and new relationships were forged in fire, to stand us in good stead in the future. In addition, we did reclaim a couple streets, our hosts and some others to experienced firsthand what the police state is like in action (a radicalizing experience if there ever was one!), and we got away without a single arrest during the whole week, despite intensive surveillance and the fact that perhaps more than half of our number were career criminals of some kind or another.

Things that could have been done better? There are some obvious ones. This year's format certainly didn't do much to enable the participation of anyone from outside the traveler-kid cultural context, that's for sure. And I think the witch-hunt could have been fended off early on if an experienced group had been doing police and media liaison work — those of us experienced enough to do so were unprepared and already overworked. The fact is — as much as we can turn the experience to our advantage — they did succeed in intimidating us, and we should have been able to resist such tactics. If the local organizers and the organizers of the barnstorming groups, especially the ones with the most previous experience in such situations, had worked more closely together in advance of the gathering, we would have been much better equipped to deal with such crises, and could then have concentrated our energy on precipitating crises for our foes rather than coping with them ourselves. Hell, things can always benefit from being better organized — there's never any shortage in room for improvement there.

But enough about the past — let's get out there and put these lessons to use. No longer particularly impressed by helicopters, but thinking more than ever about how they might be brought down to earth. —CrimethInc. Secret Agent F.G. Markem

“One must always aim to act in the full light of day, bearing in mind that the best way to obtain a freedom is to take it, facing the necessary risks; very often a freedom is lost, through one's own fault, either through not exercising it or using it timidly, giving the impression that one does not have the right to be doing what one is doing.”

— *Errico Malatesta, “Anarchist Propaganda”*

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