

Hakim Bey / Mordecai Watts Telephone Interview

Hakim Bey and Mordecai Watts

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MW: I just got the *T.A.Z.* album—after listening, I dreamed of a commercial for an amusement park ride that carried its passengers through a rapid sequence of images appropriated from Dali and other surrealists.

Bey: There was such an amusement park. It wasn't really appropriated from surrealists. The other way around, if anything. It was called Dreamland, and it was at Coney Island around the turn of the century. Jim Koehnline knows a lot about it. I don't know if it was deliberately meant to be surrealist or not, but the effect certainly was. There's a book about old New York, or old Coney Island, that has some pictures.

MW: I believe Kim Deitch did something about it in one of his comics...

Bey: Yes, he did. You're absolutely right. He's a fan of it, too.

MW: One of the points in *T.A.Z.* and on the album is that imagination has been co-opted by the media, almost as if people no longer have imaginations of their own... imagination is now something people are fed, as opposed to what they used to excrete by nature. You mentioned virtual reality in passing, referring to it as the latest form of entertainment the least amount of imagination to date...

Bey: It just seems to become more and more apparent to me... I have to admit I felt a certain intense interest, perhaps even amounting to a potential enthusiasm, when this tech was first being discussed. I'd read Gibson like the rest of us, and I certainly understood his dystopian point, but nevertheless, when Tim Leary and people like that began to get enthusiastic, I had to investigate on that level. I haven't seen much evidence that what Uncle Tim thought was going to happen is really happening. Once again, any technology could be democratic if it were distributed, you know what I mean? It's a simple Marxist thing about means of production. There's nothing inherently authoritarian—at least at first glance—to any technology, although one could argue about how technology then shapes the society that has already shaped the technology in a kind of feedback loop that can move towards greater and greater authoritarianism/lack of autonomy. And in fact, I think that something like that is what's happening with communications technology. The potential for what, back in the '50s and '60s, people were calling electronic democracy, is obviously still there as a potential structure, and you can see certain elements of it in the Net, but when you're talking about the high tech involved in virtual reality you're really

talking about something that is not accessible to most people. And I think it probably never will be. There's never going to be any cheap VR kit that's going to allow a dock worker in Manila to get on some kind of cyberspace Internet, much less a dock worker in Atlanta—or me, for example. So to talk about electronic democracy when you're still dealing within a capitalist framework that deliberately prices things along class lines, you know, we're going to have an information highway but it's going to be policed by the likes of the Democrats and the Republicans. It's not going to be any more of an electronic democracy than America is now a legislative democracy.

Also, on the subject of the recuperation of the imagination, I would say that my thinking has gotten more gloomy over the past few years in relation to VR and VR type technology. I think that even the Internet—although I've had some enjoyable moments myself in connection with the Internet, and I certainly don't want to put it down in and of itself—it's a fascinating phenomenon—and it does show some features of what an autonomous, non-hierarchical Web could be like in cyberspace—but it's also under assault from power, as we all know. And eventually, power will win, because power has the power. It actually owns the kilowatts, not to mention the big battalions, as Stalin said in relation to the Pope. So I'm a little gloomy about the future of the Internet if Carter—not Carter, I keep calling that asshole Carter—Clinton and his assholes are really serious about the information highway and about the policing of the information highway, I think you'll see that even the smiley-faced liberal Democrats will act in no wise different from cyber-fascists. In fact, they are one and the same thing. So there's still room for contestation, room for struggle, whatever you want to call that, and the Internet is an interesting area of contestation, but 90 per cent of what goes out over the Internet—correct me if I'm wrong, I don't play on the Internet myself—my impression is that 90 per cent of what goes out over it is completely unrelated to any kind of freedom interests or autonomy proposals or projects, or struggles for genuine non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian group dynamic. Most of it is just chit-chat—banal chit-chat that could just as easily be carried out over an old fashioned party line phone. You're probably not old enough to remember those, when there would be five or six people on a phone line, there'd have to be signals so you'd pick up when it was for you, and so forth... I don't see that there's been any kind of great advance there over my dear old Aunt Janice who used to pick up the phone and listen to other people's conversations when she wasn't supposed to. If that's autonomy then we've had it.

MW: Now you can do that with cellular phones. That's supposedly how they tracked O.J. Simpson, through cellular phone transmissions. Did you catch any of that media fiasco?

Bey: I didn't. I heard about it from other people. I don't own a television.

MW: Lucky man.

Bey: Not luck. Foresight.

MW: I had the feeling that something was terribly wrong here, and that I was a part of it by watching it.

Bey: That's exactly what my friend who told me about it said. For some reason, he turned on the game—he hadn't looked at sports on television for decades—and there was this weird thing going on. He was just sucked in and couldn't get away, couldn't get out of it, started feeling really terrible, couldn't turn the TV off. Must have been weird.

MW: The news crews were basically waiting to see if he was going to shoot himself in the head...

Bey: Of course. As Jerry Mander [sp?] pointed out years ago, death makes the best TV. And that's what everybody on TV is waiting for. It's the most exciting moment.

[Here **MW** brings up the Hakim **Bey** Web site maintained by Marius Watz (similar name, but no relation!) and must explain the basic notion of the WWW to **Bey**....]

Bey: That's why the stuff is out there in anti-copyright. I encourage people to distribute it by any means that they can.

MW: How are you handling anti-copyright with the *T.A.Z.* album?

Bey: At the minimum, there will be a statement from me that, as also representing the publisher of the book, Autonomedia, that the text is anti-copyright and can be copied and distributed at will. We're still working on the legal thing with the people who own Island/Axiom. I'm hoping that we can get the whole thing out with some kind of very obvious invitation to copy freely. Bill [Laswell] and everybody I've been working with with Bill is entirely in agreement with this, but on the other hand it's not worth their jobs. So they're not putting their jobs on the line over this, but they're trying their best to get rid of all the usual copyright bullshit. Even from a marketing point of view, in my mind that kind of stuff is largely irrelevant. People copy anyway. What we found out—oddly enough, this is something I didn't expect—but I think putting an anti-copyright on the book actually made the book sell better. When people got hold of an outtake from the book, and then saw there was an anti-copyright, they said, 'Oh, I can copy this,' so they went out and bought a copy of the book and then copied it. That way, three and four more people maybe got to read bits and pieces of the book, or the whole book, but it also sold one more copy of the book. I explained all this to Laswell and his crew, and they saw the logic of it, and I think it very is much the logic of the Net at work. Intellectual property, as a legal problem, might just evaporate if the net really behaved in this truly non-hierarchic fashion that we were talking about earlier. And as long as there is a net or a counter-net that does behave that way, it can raise its own money.

MW: Do you have any thoughts on how one could best realize the Internet as a *T.A.Z.*?

Bey: I'm led to believe, through conversations with people who are much more techie and active than I am, that cypher—unbreakable code—is the key. So the cypher-punks are the people to keep an eye on at this moment. And they also tend to be the ones who are most active around freedom of speech issues and so forth, whether legal or extra-legal. If Clipper were to prove impossible due to an ever-receding technological horizon of impenetrability, then this would—God knows what they would do, I suppose they would have to try to physically break down the technology in the households, and the actual people who were key and central to such a system. There certainly would be a declaration of war of some kind or another, I should think. I think there's one now. I think Clipper was a declaration of war on the Net. Now that the egg is on their face, because within ten minutes some hacker figured out how to beat the Clipper, is sort of an indication of—oh, let's call it an area of chaos. Within areas of chaos, either horrible destruction and disease and death occur, or, if you're flowing the right way, and if all hearts are beating in unison to a certain degree, then that area of chaos can become the *T.A.Z.* Now I've said over and over again, that there's no such thing as a *T.A.Z.* that's only on the Net, and I maintain that that's true. In order to have autonomy, you have to have physicality. Autonomy is not something that can only exist in the imagination or in the world of images. I think that it involves the entirety, the whole axial being, and that is rooted in the earth and concerns physicality, materiality, the body, mortality, if you like, as contrasted to the spurious immortality of cyberspace. But I still maintain that, at least in theory, the net could be an adjunct to the *T.A.Z.*, could be a tool or a weapon, even, if you want to look at it that way, for the construction of the *T.A.Z.*

MW: There was recently a net hoax about a Clipper-type rider to congressional bill—the goal was to make people realize that they should question the info they got on the net.

Bey: [laughs, assumes sarcastic tone] Well, gee, thanks! Gee. I never thought of that.

MW: But a lot of people, enthusiastic about the Net as an information resource, bought the story hook, line and sinker.

Bey: Well, sure, and it's going to lead to all kinds of spy story bullshit. But when the Zapatista thing started down in Mexico, I was desperate for information because the *New York Times*, which was the only paper that was reporting it that I knew of, was clearly lying about everything. I found better information on the net. That's actually the one example I can give you of when I felt that I was getting something concrete and solid out of the net. Of course, a few weeks later it was all in print, in various 'zines and underground magazines, *Covert Action Review* and all that sort of stuff. But at least I had it a couple of weeks early.

MW: Speaking of the *NY Times*—do you get *Lies Of Our Times* ?

Bey: I see it from time to time. I know Marty Lee [sp?] pretty well.

MW: Regarding power and VR: David Blair has pointed out that VR technology actually emerged from military flight simulation technology.

Bey: Absolutely. Everything's always emerging from military technology. I just found out the other day... you know what Taylorism means? [It's] the rationalization of factory production by rationalizing the workforce with time clocks, what have you... the guy who invented it, Taylor, figured it all out while he was working in an arsenal for the army, around the post-civil War era. Do you know the work of Manuel Delanda [sp]?

[**MW** sheepishly confesses his ignorance.]

Bey: *War In The Age of the Intelligent Machines*. This is a major thesis that Manuel is working on, and I think a very, very important one, that we have to question all technology if we're questioning the militarization of consciousness, because all technology is suspect from that point of view. It's not all guilty, maybe, but it's all suspect.

MW: Have you launched the Atlantean Society yet?

Bey: Well, we've been trying. I have to admit I've been remiss. I expect to get it going some time soon, God willing.

MW: Has James Koehnline put out more issues of the *Mad Farmer's Jubilee Almanack*?

Bey: Yeah. I'm working on a couple of Atlantean projects. I've got a project going about the European converts to Islam who fought with the Barbary Pirates in the 17th Century in Morocco in a kind of pirate Utopia that lasted for about forty or fifty years.... There's an Irish connection there, so it's a North African-Irish connection there from the 17th Century. I'm also working on the thesis that the ancient Celts had some kind of soma ceremony, some kind of ritual psychedelic, which would conceivably also involve the indigenous, non-Celtic people, who we believe—we Atlanteans believe—are the same people as the Berbers and the Iberians. So my work is going on... but unfortunately, the Society hasn't really quite emerged from the world of the unseen yet.

MW: Is Bob Quinn's book [*Atlantean: Ireland's North African & Maritime Heritage*] available in the US?

Bey: I've never seen it here. I could give you the address of the publisher.

MW: I have it in the the *Almanack*. [Quartet Books, 27/29 Goodge St., London WP LFD.]

Bey: Are you interested in the subject particularly?

MW: Yes.

Bey: There's another book that you really should know about called *The Black Celts*, subtitled *An Ancient African Civilization In Ireland and Britain* by Achmad Ali and Ibrahim Ali. It's published by Punite Publications, Box 478, Cardiff, Wales, UK. It costs about nine English pounds, I think. It was reviewed in the newsletter of the London Psycho-Geographic Society, which is a great little publication. It's a very valuable addition to the Moorish Empire in Ireland thesis. A very disorganized book, but full of interesting stuff.

MW: I recently spoke to a musician named Stephen Kent, a British musician who started out as a French horn player. He grew up in Africa, wound up working with Circus Oz in Australia, and he's now, after fifteen years of practice, a didgeridoo virtuoso in a group called Trance Mission, as well as a semi-defunct group called Lights In A Fat City. He told me that a female shaman aborigine told him that in ancient times the didgeridoo had actually been given to the aborigines by Tibetan lamas.

Bey: Good grief.

MW: They do play horns which use similar breathing techniques....

Bey: I've seen them...

MW: He was also very interested in the Atlantean theory when I told him about it... but in Ireland, sometime in the past, they found a cache of ancient Bronze age brass instruments in a tomb... nobody could figure out how to play them until someone had the bright idea of applying didgeridoo techniques to them. Apparently there is now an album out that has some fellow playing these ancient instruments along with a pair of Australian didgeridoo players, one white, one aboriginal. If I ever track it down, I'll get back to you on that.

Bey: I could arrange to have that played on the radio. That would be fun. The strings of the original Irish harp were also metal, and apparently this puzzled people quite a long while to how to reconstruct the original Irish harp. I think Derek Bell from the Chieftains finally achieved that. Or at least he used an all-metal-stringed harp in some of his recordings. But these were wind instruments?

MW: They were horns.

Bey: Without holes?

MW: I don't know... I presume not.

Bey: Well, I'd love to know more.

MW: Any other projects?

Bey: There's another book of essays in the works, in which the "Immediatism" pamphlet would be included, and then on from there, another two or three times more. Three times more material. I hope that will be ready for press by autumn. Other than that, you know, Hakim **Bey** leads a a pretty shadowy existence.

MW: How deeply rooted is your work in Islam?

Bey: Well, personally, it is. No one has to interpret it that way if they don't want to, but for me, it is rooted in heretical Islam.

[Here mysteries are discussed. Media blackout in effect. We resume with a discussion of matters Irish...]

Bey: There's an Irish legend that says you can get the gift of eloquence if you drink water from the river Boyne in the month of June. I think maybe I should go next June, but I'd like to go before then.

MW: Sounds easier than doing the Blarney Stone routine.

Bey: That's clearly worn out. In fact, I don't think that ever was a real Irish tradition. I think it was invented by some English landlord. I'm not sure, I've never actually studied it. It's one of those things that annoys the Irish when you mention it, like leprechauns, so stay away from that...

MW: I'll bear that in mind if I'm ever there. Speaking of that, have you ever encountered any belief in that yourself?

Bey: My very shallow experience of Ireland is probably not worth much, but yes, a few individuals... I've met a few individuals who took all that stuff seriously, but I think at root everybody in Ireland takes it seriously. It reminds me a lot of Java in some ways, which is a country where the spirit lurks close to the surface at all times, but it's still very much part of the culture. In Ireland it's been suppressed as part of the obvious, open culture, but I think it's still very much there in the psyche. So to me, the whole place feels edgy and magical. But this could be entirely subjective. You could talk to some Irish person and they would say I was completely wrong. Maybe that's just my romanticism.

MW: I just read in the *Fortean Times* that the city planning department of Reykjavik, Iceland actually has an alleged psychic who provides an up-to-date map of areas where spirit folk dwell.

Bey: Yes, I saw that article. The other article I liked in that issue was the one about the 50-year-old Irish cow. It turned into this icon of worship. And if you go back into Irish folklore, you find mythical cows.... this cow is obviously a model of the mythical cow.

MW: Well, Cuchullain spent a great deal of his time rounding up cows.

Bey: Exactly. There's a famous cow from that legend, the name of which I can't remember, who was supposed to have lived to be a thousand years old, and the mother of every cow in Ireland... all this kind of stuff... it's obviously just a kind of rhetorical exaggeration of a famous cow like that Big Bertha that was written up in the *Fortean Times*.

MW: The film *The Field*, an Irish film, involved cows in a rather spectacular fashion.

Bey: I've head a lot about that film. I'd like to see it. It was a very successful stage play before it was a film.

MW: I don't think they could have done on stage what they did with the cows in the film.

Bey: Ah-hah. It's about two brothers who quarrel over a field, about an inheritance or something...?

MW: No, a different story... although it involves a similar land-lust situation. Basically, Richard Harris is a crusty old farmer who's obsessed with the land he's been working all his life, and can't cope when the owner decides to sell it to an American for development... very involved with strangeness about the land.

Bey: Yes, that is indeed still very strange... since there's only four million people in Ireland, it isn't as intense as it must have been in, let's say, 1830, when there were about 12 million people in Ireland. Which is funny to think about.

MW: While the population everywhere else is going up...

Bey: And it never does in Ireland, not since 1848, when they had the potato famine and most of the population either left or died. Ever since then, Ireland's been underpopulated. That's why... you know this deal?... if you had an Irish grandparent and could prove it, you can get an Irish passport.

I think the Irish are so eager for people that if you said, 'Well, I don't have a grandparent but I'd like to apply for citizenship,' they'd say, 'Well, that'll take you two weeks longer.' They seem to be very, very eager to have people go and settle there even for part of the year—to the extent

that if you're an artist, and you're making your money through your art, and you live in Ireland six months and a day every year, so that you can become an official resident, then they'll exempt you from income tax. In fact, from all tax, on the assumption that just having an artist in Ireland is worth it.

MW: Does Robert Anton Wilson still live there?

Bey: No, but that's why he went there in the first place. I think he got a little lonely or something... actually, the decisive factor for his leaving was medical problems that couldn't be dealt with there. His wife was unwell.

MW: Getting back to the Internet, a while back there was the hoax obituary for R.A. Wilson... How did he feel about that?

Bey: Well, when I rang him up the day I heard, he was laughing. I hadn't heard him in such an exalted state for a long time. To survive one's death, after all... but that was a nasty stunt.

MW: It was. It provoked a lot of commentary. After the truth was announced, the controversy kept going on because people started claiming that was a hoax... carried it on to ridiculous extremes.

Bey: Well, let people get used to it, man. They were trusting what they heard on the news? What kind of idiots...? Everything is dubious. All information is potential disinformation, even when it's true.

MW: A lot of the behavior on the Net is fairly petty and infantile. Particularly in any of the groups that deal with sex.

Bey: Well, I've heard some of the ridiculous stories that go on here. And I really don't know where it's all leading, as I was saying before. I have no idea. I wouldn't want to predict that it's all leading toward some utopia or dystopia. Or if it's just going to be a kind of complicated telephone, just become part of our lives the way the telephone has, hot and cold running water and the telephone. Hard to say, really.

MW: You expressed some distaste for Clinton a little while back. Any further thoughts on him and his administration?

Bey: Absolutely. Just gets worse and worse, doesn't it? The worst thing I know is this bullshit about decriminalization of pot, this stupid rumor that *High Times* spread that Clinton and Gore were going to favor decriminalization and that all the potheads should vote for them. What a crock of shit!

MW: I was not aware of this...

Bey: The rumor that went around amongst hemp activist types that at some event, and details were given—who knows whether they were made up—some event where hempoids were tabling, and Gore showed up. It was some kind of political event and they were tabling outside, so Gore sidles up to the table and leans over and whispers to them a 'be of good cheer' kind of message. And then he slinks away. So then *High Times* printed this story, and I presume all the potheads dutifully went out and voted for Clinton. And I think that Clinton had advisers about every interest group in America. One day the adviser came who covered this kind of thing and said, 'Bill, you know I think you've lost a lot of credibility with this non-inhaling business, you've got to do something to get the potheads back. There's millions of them. And some of them are well-to-do, and they vote.' And so they said, 'Well, send out Gore to spread some disinformation.' And this is the way this regime has behaved on every point. On every point it's betrayed the interest groups that it claimed to represent, in the most obvious and nasty way. Furthermore, any president who can come in on an anti-Bush line and then immediately bomb Baghdad again

in order to revenge some insult to Bush—what the fuck is going on? Well, business as usual. It's just one scumbag after another. I hope I've gotten **Beyond** the point where I get upset to the stage of losing control of myself the way I did during the Gulf War, which really just blew my mind, and I couldn't function. So I hope I learned something from that, not to let these bastards get to me on the personal level. But my joke is that Clinton is simply a plant by the CFR/Bilderberger/Rockefeller/Kissinger types who are running reality for us, and they put him up there for four years to take the heat off of the Republicans because Bush had acted like such an asshole proclaiming himself the Freemasonic messiah. They told him, 'Look, you have four years to make liberalism stink like shit in the nostrils of the nation.'

MW: He's way ahead of schedule.

Bey: Way ahead! So I figure, in '86 it's Quayle and Noriega. And then we have Clinton to thank for that. And somewhere there's a Swiss bank account building up for the little creep.

MW: What about the other obvious candidate—?

Bey: Ollie [North]?

MW: He got the senatorial nomination in Virginia.

Bey: He did, did he? He's tarred with the brush of the extreme right to the extent where those powers, those central powers that I referred to as the Bilderbergers—which is just a joke, really, but who knows?—are not going to go with Ollie. They pensioned Ollie off long ago, and now he's out there bouncing around like some ping-pong ball from the Liberty Lobby to God knows what, with the cranks. So I don't expect him to win any more than Duke won. He's just a paper tiger now. He's just to keep everybody's eyes off what's really going on.

MW: Speaking of Gore, as we were, have you ever read anything by a novelist named Steve Erickson?

Bey: Yes... no, wait a minute... remind me.

MW: His most recent book was *Tours of the Black Clock*.

Bey: Go back a little.

MW: *Rubicon Beach*... well, no, his most recent was actually *Arc d'X*, which was about Thomas Jefferson. Or, it started out being about Thomas Jefferson, but it leaps into alternate realities, and involves Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, his slave/lover.

Bey: I've heard about that one, and I think I read *Rubicon Beach*, but I can't remember anything about it. Why?

MW: Well, he wrote a book called *Leap Year*, which was basically, in a sense, non-fiction, although there is a good deal of fiction in it too, about him attending both major political conventions in 1988. He has a lot to say about an unnamed senator who is obviously Al Gore.

Bey: He fictionalized it, you say?

MW: There's a lot of reportage in it of him at the conventions, describing things, but also, throughout the entire book, the ghost of Sally Hemings—her first appearance in one of his books—keeps haunting him, looking for her long lost lover, Thomas Jefferson. Which represents, to him, I guess, a metaphor for the conflicts inherent in America: love/hate, slavery/freedom, et cetera...

Bey: So he had some interesting take on Gore, per se?

MW: Yes, and not a very flattering one... he basically describes him as a pretty ambitious guy who's desperate to be president and to get into power.

Bey: Well...

MW: Since then, of course, Gore turned Green, you know, wrote his little book...

Bey: And thereby positioned himself to be the specialist in betraying everyone with Green interests, from the environmentalists to the hemp activists.

MW: There's one interesting scene where Erickson is in a bar—I imagine it's fictional, but you never know—and a drunken woman begins hitting on him and follows him back to his hotel room. One of her great ambitions is to be a rock singer, so she starts belting out some Janis Joplin song, while he's trying to get rid of her. There's a knock on the door, she crawls under the bed, and it's her husband, the Senator, looking for her. So this woman was Tipper... who the media seems to have forgotten was the spearhead of....

Bey: Oh yes, the satanic rock thing.

MW: Of course, maybe the scene wasn't fictional. I don't know. He blends fantasy and political reportage quite skilfully in that book.

Bey: It sounds like an interesting experiment.

MW: It's far more interesting than any of the semi-official "Making of the President" books that used to come out after every new president.

MW: I don't read those. It's a bunch of media jerks congratulating themselves on how close to power they got.

[At this point we wound down our conversation and said our farewells.]

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