

# Peter Coyote Interview

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During the Cuban Missile Crisis, a bunch of friends of mine got together. We stopped going to classes, we cut our hair, we put on suits and ties. We scuffled a couple of hundred dollars and bought an old '49 Ford and a '48 Chevy, and we went to Washington on a three day hunger fast, picketing the White House, protesting the resumption of nuclear testing, and supporting Kennedy's peace race – being quite cunning in attending to the public relations aspects of our quest.

Kennedy saw this and invited us into the White House – the first time in the history of the White House picketers had been invited inside. This made front page headlines. And we mimeographed these front page headlines and we sent them to every college in the country, which was the preface to the 25,000 student demonstration in February of '63, in Washington.

We had created a lot of controversy at school, a little quiet mid-western college, Grinnell College in Iowa, very good, but kind of out of the mainstream. [We] were the first Easterners who'd come in with long hair and John Coltrane and be-bop and marijuana and folk music. The football team had jumped one of our friends and shaved his head, so we stuck together. But many faculty members and many students wore black armbands in support of us. Some people fasted with us.

But on this day, Mark Raskin came over. We were in Washington, in a flea-bag hotel. Raskin took us to meet McGeorge Bundy. I was asked to be the spokesman by my friends. And I remember, as I was talking to him and explaining cogently why we were against this, I looked at this guy and I realized nothing I could say could influence this man. Nothing. This man was operating on another set of agendas; he had another peer group, another set of priorities. And it came home to me indelibly that I was never going to change anything in America by walking around carrying a sign. It was a great revelation. It saved me a lot of anxiety and a lot of wasted energy.

Anyway, it was one of the first times that I had helped conceive and plan an event, where all of my planning had paid off. We knew that we had to be clean-cut looking: we had to appear middle of the road. We knew we had to support Kennedy. And everything worked like a charm. It was the first inkling that I got of Peter Berg's great phrase: "creating the condition you describe." Doing something so that no matter what the media said about it, your message would get across.

**EBA: "Creating the condition you describe?"**

Magazine photo: three kids sitting out on the stoop in the Haight-Ashbury, smoking a joint, wearing rough clothes, kind of street-wise looking – looking like they're their own people. Caption underneath, "These poor misbegotten abandoned children..." Who cares what the caption says? Anybody, any kid looking at that picture, knows: San Francisco, you can dress how you want, you can smoke dope, you're out on the street, you're free. That's creating the condition you describe.

A perfect example is the "Death of Hippie" celebration in the Haight, around 1968. You walk down the street, you've got a coffin. The coffin says: "Death of Hippie, Son of Media." People are throwing dollar bills in the coffin. They're wearing black hoods. They're hippies, they're blowing whistles, they're playing with mirrors, holding them up in the faces of bystanders. All you have to do is describe it. No matter what judgement you try to put on it, no matter what spin you try to put on it, it gets the message out there.

So, in a way, [Washington] is where things first came together for me. I understood how the game that was described, the politics of America that was described, was not the real game. The media was insatiable for news and consequently vulnerable to manipulation – as every president has discovered who's ever given a false story, or manufactured the Gulf of Tonkin, or [discovered] a car, conveniently with Nicaraguan passports, machine guns, and ammunition, caught in El Salvador.

I got out of college and I went to get my master's in creative writing at San Francisco State. I was working as an actor at the Actor's Workshop, being abused as an intern. The San Francisco Mime Troupe was renting a theater from us and I went down to look at that. The lobby was full of photographs showing their confrontations with the police in Golden Gate Park, these great, busty women in low-cut dresses, people tumbling and playing music – and it just looked like fun. It also looked like one hundred percent

effort. So, I went to the powers that be at the Actors Workshop and I got them to give me permission to do a photo exhibit of the play that we were opening, which was "Edward the Second" by Brecht: a world premiere. I printed and mounted and enlarged eighty photographs of the company building sets, rehearsing, sewing, etc., for the lobby of the Marines' Memorial. It was a really nice exhibit. On the night of the gala opening and for two weeks thereafter, nobody said a word. Nobody even mentioned it. And I thought: "I'm in the wrong place here."

So I went down and I met Ronnie Davis. I'd seen the Troupe a couple of times, and I fell completely in love with Kay Hayward and Sandy Archer, two of the most beautiful women I had ever seen in my life. And Sandy Archer was probably the most talented I've seen since, a real genius, just the fastest, funniest, loosest, most responsive actress I'd ever seen.

At that time I had been taken under the wing of Howard Gossage, who was a very famous advertising man in San Francisco. His wife was an actress at the Actors' Workshop. He liked me. I liked him. He was a smart, hip, older guy. Anyway, he was completely enamored of Marshall McLuhan – he had me squiring one of Marshall's daughters around town.

So I got to the Mime Troupe. Ronnie Davis was reading Marshall McLuhan and we started to talk about it. Well, I knew it cold. We had one of these frenzied collisions of like minds, and I was a little disoriented because Sandy was in the office at the same time typing. At the end of the interview Ronnie said, "What do you think of this guy?" She said, "He talks a lot."

Then I was introduced to the other actors. I was wearing a wonderful tweed suit which I'd had made by William Bill of London: a big hound's-tooth. I was an actor, you know: "My dear, there's no need to be mediocre." So here are these people running around in ripped longjohns. I met this guy, John Robb, who took a Pall Mall and broke it in half and put one half behind his ear. He looked me up and down and said to Ronnie, "Pretty ritzy looking for the Mime Troupe, don't you think?"

So it was in the Mime Troupe that I first really got introduced to a comprehensive world view, a way of looking at the world and analyzing it according to inherently Marxist principles. Not necessarily doctrinaire, but analysis: class, capital, who owned what, who did what, who worked for what. And it was like speed for the imagination. You suddenly started looking at the world in this whole new way. And that information affected the way you formulated your work. Suddenly, everything came together, your intellectual life correlated with your artistic life. It was illuminating and edifying, and to this day represents a kind of peak assimilation that I'd like to recapture, closing that gap between my politics and what I do as an artist.

I was given as much authority as I could take at the Mime Troupe. In short order I was acting and writing and directing. Guys like Peter Berg and R.G. Davis were teaching me a lot and spurring me on. And I've always been a good pupil. I've always found that you get the best from people if you just make them your teacher. Positively or negatively. You just accept them in a non-judgmental way and try to find from them what it is that they do best. Address that in them and they usually respond. I don't know how I learned that or how I figured it out, but it's just been a practice, addressing the angelic in people. They like to have that part of themselves recognized. I've lived with Hell's Angels and Black Panthers and all sorts of different people: some murderous and some psychotic. I'd say that practice, more than anything else, has carried me through.

There were a lot of teachers in this venue: there were Bill and Ann Linden, there was Ronnie Davis, there was Sandy Archer, there was John Robb. There was David Simpson, there was Bob Herwitt, there was Bob Flaherty, Gail Pearl, Judy Goldhaft. The Mime Troupe was a nexus for a kind of creative, funkadelic, street energy that was finding expression through it – perfectly appropriate to the times. There were other theaters that were doing this shoestring agitprop work, but I always thought that the Mime Troupe was the most zany and the most anarchic in the best sense of the word. Ronnie Davis had an extraordinary sense of humor. And when he wasn't beside himself with rage or political analysis, his sense of humor was madcap and inspired you to make him laugh. He was a willing and responsive audience and drove people to a kind of frenzy. If you could get him to crack up, you had really done

something. He had, fair to say, the discipline and single-mindedness to keep everybody on track and keep the company surviving.

I directed the first road tour of "The Minstrel Show". This show began as a traditional minstrel show, with black-faced actors in sky blue tuxedos and white gloves cake-walking across the stage. Three of us were white, three black, but you couldn't tell under all that makeup. The show quickly evolved into a parody of its minstrel show form and skewered hypocrisy and bullshit on both sides of the color line. It was flagrantly sexual and angry, even though it was very funny – and it scared, offended and bothered many people who saw it. It was very dangerous and, to this day, the most appropriate show to its time I have ever seen.

We were arrested in many places and we had a lot of adventures. But what finally kind of pushed me along, out of the Mime Troupe – the Diggers were beginning.

Emmett was the first guy I met. He came into the Mime Troupe office one day, and he was this handsome, ruddy, tough, street-wise, charismatic Irishman. We got so into each other, we walked three miles back to my pad just talking. He lived just across the street from me on Fell and Stanyan.

Emmett was a masterful character actor and brilliant in a lot of ways, but he was eclectic – he tended to take from people what he needed. One of the seminal guys, but who was not in the Mime Troupe, was Billy Murcott. Billy was this quiet, uncharismatic, very smart guy that he'd grown up with. He always had graphs and charts of different historical events up on his wall. And I think Emmett created the appropriate personality to embody the insight that Billy had. It was Billy, as I remember, who crystallized something that was in the air, the notion of Free, I think, and the articulation of autonomy. And it was radical enough and extreme enough to take us even another step farther out than the Mime Troupe. That real power was autonomy and that all ideologies had some degree of bullshit in them. And that the left, the socialist left, was no longer a model of anything. It had degenerated into a bunch of old men yapping theory and ideology. That what was required was for people to be forthright and straightforward and to take responsibility for doing what they felt ought to be done, regardless of ideology – just do it. And that people like us were not going to be any more comfortable in a leftist nation-state than we were in a rightist nation-state. Billy wrote the first Digger Papers. The very first manifestos were written by Billy, as far as I remember. Billy was the unsung genius behind the Diggers.

So finally, the Mime Troupe went to New York, and I had a foot in both worlds. Because the improvisatory, political style of the Mime Troupe and the Diggers were quite in common. Compared to traditional theater, the Mime Troupe was very, very free and very, very lucid and appropriate. We went to New York, and in '67, I think, we won an Obie. It fried my brain. I thought: "Here we are are, writing these plays, excoriating the middle-class, and they're giving us medals."

Anyway, with the clarity of one's early twenties, I decided that theater was no longer an adequate vehicle for change, because the fact of paying at the door told you that it was a business. When you bought a ticket, you knew in your deepest culturally resonant center that this was a business and that while you may not like the message of the play, you knew that it was just like going into a store and not liking the merchandise. You turn around and you walk out. You're not questioning 'store-ness'. We wanted to question 'store-ness': What is the nature of business? You can't do that from within a business. So from that perspective, Free was simply the appropriate, efficacious tool for the kind of investigations that were going on. When it wasn't a business and people were doing something just because they felt like it, it threw the whole subject of coercion into the light. It forced you to take responsibility for being coerced or remaining coerced if you didn't like what you were doing.

It was the same reason you had to be anonymous. If you received recompense for what you were doing, fame, then it wasn't Free. If you were building a career, even though you didn't get money, your activity was an investment. So an extension of Free for the Diggers was that it had to be anonymous. You had to be doing it just for the fuck of it.

A big key was Gregory Corso's poem, Power, where he said: "Power is standing on a street corner doing nothing." Because what we were about was autonomy, finding what authentic, autonomous impulses were. And then being responsive to them, and not making excuses, not waiting for the revolution.

If you couldn't do it, or if you didn't do something, because the revolution hadn't happened, you were a bull-shitter. You were manufacturing an excuse not to do it. So you create a post-revolutionary society by saying, "We won. It's over. Now let's do what we want." And you do it. And that was the central thing that people misunderstood about the Diggers.

People find it safe to assume that we were the Salvation Army. But what they don't understand is: the Free Store was done because some people wanted to do it. The Free Food was done because some people wanted to do it. And it was a way of making people step through the yellow, six foot by six foot, Free Frame of Reference – to say: "Hey, do you want to play this game or what?" The first time I was offered Free Food, I so completely missed it, I said, "Oh no, I can afford to buy lunch. Let the people who can't afford it eat." And Emmett took a look at me like, "Oh yeah?" And I got it.

So, the Diggers set out to create the conditions they described. And the condition we described was: eternity is now, if you have a fantasy, take responsibility for it and actualize it, build or imply a society around it. And if it's nice, people will join you.

**EBA: And the revolution is already over?**

Uh-huh. There's already enough stuff for everybody. The money is a way of creating scarcity. There's machinery that can create a television set for every man and woman and child on the planet. If you don't have a TV because you don't have the money, the money is a valve that's been put between you and the TV. A valve, like ... that you can turn off. Right? Now I can also critique this position from the hindsight of being older, but at the time, and even today, it's still quite compelling. In a world of surpluses, you need new inducements, other than 'stuff', to get people on the treadmill. And our feeling was that many of the revolutionaries were bull-shitters. You scratch a revolutionary, I'll show you a guy who thinks that he should be in charge.

I always used to joke that Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman would be the people to shoot me. The communist party would be the people to shoot me. Not the FBI. All those architects of the revolution, the Tom Hayden's of the world would have blown my brains out, because we stood for the sanctity of the individual and the irreplaceability of the individual. As Peter Berg used to say, "It's not enough to say we've got twelve cars and twelve gallons of gas. Everybody gets a gallon." One car's a Ferrari and one's an ambulance.

Free Food was something that needed to be done. The media was publishing all these articles about the Haight, seducing and attracting young people to come out there, and creating a phenomenon. The city was capitalizing on it and taking no responsibility for it; telling all these kids – our age, a lot of them younger – to get lost. And our feeling was that they were our kids. You know? This was America; these were our kids.

The Haight-Ashbury, unlike the Lower East Side, was nobody's turf – it was really free turf. It was kind of a non-descript university, lower middle-class, working-class neighborhood. It wasn't like the Lower East Side, which was then flooded by a lot of kid from the suburbs and Westchester, kind of displacing the poor people who'd sought refuge there. The Haight was a little more neutral than that. So these kids were coming in and staking out turf, and the city was taking an authoritarian police view of the whole matter. We started feeding them and sheltering them and setting up medical clinics, just because it needed to be done. And the mainstays of that really were the women, who could go to the Farmer's Market, because the Italians would not give food to young, able-bodied guys, but they would give it to the women. They were the ones getting up at 5:30 to go out to the market and get the food and cook it.

**EBA: How'd they do it?**

Charm, beauty, wit. They're truly great women: resourceful, cunning, tough-minded, street-wise, beautiful. I love them to this day, all of them. They were the real back-bone of the whole deal, the real unsung back-bone; not only doing the scut work, but the audience that you'd want to impress, the people that you'd want to charm, the people that you'd want to win for.

The women made a role for the men. There were inklings of a model for the men in the beats, but the women did something that was braver – they had children out in this void. They put money for

their babies food and clothing in the Free Bank and had to argue with the guys who wanted truck parts or money for a bag of smack, to get it back. And the women kept the households running and did the cooking and knocked the bullshit out of the men and kept them honest.

They did whatever they had to do, and they did it with style. They got up at five o'clock in the morning, they got the fucking truck running, got enough gas in it to get there, meet the old Italian and Chinese green-grocers, they weedle and deedle and dance and charm. And they get back and they bring it to somebody's house and have these huge, steel milk containers that they'd fill with various Digger stews. And they'd get it out to the Panhandle and set up the Free Frame of Reference. We would be there by then, and we'd ladle it out, serve it, take it back, clean it up, make the Digger coffee can bread. You know? Day after day. No vacations. No overtime. No nothing – except some sex-crazed speed freak crawling into your bed at three o'clock in the morning. To me, they're still the best women on the planet. I'm in awe of them. They were really, and still are to me, the best of the best. Free women.

**EBA: What were the guys doing?**

Creating mythologies, dreaming, scoring dope, scoring goods, money, fixing the trucks, fixing the houses, creating events. The guys worked hard too, don't get me wrong. The women took care of the food, but the guys would be scoring building materials, lumber. I don't think we had a truck that was newer than 1960. They were mostly '40s and '50s vintages. So there were endless forays to junk yards and days spent taking one old truck apart to scavenge parts to keep another one running.

The guys held down a lot of the visionary, metaphysical end of things. You know, like in an orthodox Hebrew community. The men are studying Talmud and they're looking at heaven. The women are taking care of the household and paying the bills and cooking the food. There's a joke, "My husband takes care of the important things in the world: balance of trade, international relationships, the national debt, draft policy, and our relationship to South Africa. And me, the wife, I take care of the unimportant things: the rent, the mortgage, the groceries, the children's education." You know, it was that kind of deal.

We were accused of being pretty chauvinistic by some, but I'm not the guy that can answer that. All that I will say is that my perception was always that the women had all the authority that we did. Basically, in an autonomous system, you're on your own. And certainly in a communal house it was no fun to live anywhere with an angry woman, or women. So, accommodations always occurred. The men tended to be stud peacocks and flaunted and puffed more than the women. But our authority was not based on ownership or status or bringing in the bacon. The 'bacon', more often than not might have been food stamps or welfare that one of the women had brought in. Now thirty people might live in a house that one welfare check paid for – but still it was a woman that got it.

Several of the Digger houses had a free bank, where you threw everything into a central pot. There was a bank book. I don't know who has the original, but it's a great document. Because you'd see people were exactly who they were. People would sign out, you know, "\$2.19, dental floss and toothpaste," might be one thing, "Nina." And then underneath it, it might say, "Emmett, \$20, to fix truck, Monday. Tuesday, \$20, to fix truck, Emmett. Wednesday, \$20, to fix truck..." I mean, people revealed who they were. The fact that it went on for as long as it did was amazing. You'd have these big meetings and the women would say, "No, the kids need shoes." And the men would say, "Well how are we going to get the shoes if we can't pick 'em up in a truck. We gotta keep the trucks running." And it was like the Pentagon budget fights on a smaller scale. But it was anarchic, it was cooperative, and it was collaborative.

**EBA: How did things evolve from '67 in the city?**

Well, I can only speak personally, but at a certain point, when Alioto was elected mayor, the game changed. Suddenly there was a lot of heavy drugs on the street. Kilos were replaced by bricks: instead 2.2 pounds of grass, it was a pound. One of our people was snatched from in front of Tracey's doughnut shop and left in a Thunderbird with the front seats covered with blood as a warning. And a bunch of us, Emmett and I, raided the house where some gangsters had captured one of our guys. All of a sudden, the game got real hard and real gritty and the city was overrun. That was coincident with the thinking

that a lot of us had been doing about the planet: about what the eternal reality was under this thin sheet of asphalt. And we were sensitive to the growing ecological crisis and the fact that a culture that was pissing in its life-support system couldn't continue. And so a lot of people moved out of the city to try to get in touch with the planet and those processes that seemed more long-term and durable and renewable. That's about when I moved.

**EBA: And then?**

Then we used to network from house to house. There were all these way stations where you were welcome and you were extended family. There was the Red House in Forest Knolls. There was Olema. There was Salmon River House. There was Black Bear. There was Trinidad. There was the Oakland Bakery. There was the Santa Cruz house. There was this loose linked sense of family and sharing of resources and alliances. You'd go someplace and you'd stay for awhile, and you'd pitch in and work there and live.

**EBA: So Free Food ended?**

Yeah, well it actually didn't end. Other people took it over. The Diggers were not very good at institutions. Things were based on what you felt like doing. After you'd hustled the food for a while and that got to be a drag . . . it's not like you were doing it because you felt sorry for poor people or something. It was a challenge: could you feed 1500 people or 500 people? Once you'd done that for a while you would stop, and then other people would take it over. The churches would take it over, or someone that felt like it. There's still Free Food going on in San Francisco. It's going on under a different rubric. It's given to communities which are basically looked at as derelicts or impoverished. But we didn't think of ourselves as impoverished.

**EBA: There's a big difference.**

Yeah. Emmett said to me once, "We may be broke, but we're never poor." Emmett had a lot of good lines.

**EBA: So how should we go through that history?**

Well, a guy like Peter Berg may be more useful for you at that than I am. He has this amazingly retentive and organized mind. My mind is like a bed sheet that's been blasted with a shotgun while it's hanging on the line. I have big holes. There were months where I was sort of asleep on my feet. Also, I went through this whole thing where I lived with Pete Knell, building motorcycles. I would just branch off for a while. Everybody would do that. Peter made this film, "Newsreal", and he just took off. He'd enlist some of us, and some of it would be on his own. This was a very loose linked confederation of people.

**EBA: Were you still attached to the Mime Troupe?**

I left. A lot of the Diggers were Mime Troupers, so we felt a particular affinity with them. But they went through an ideological upheaval. They became a commune, they threw Ronnie Davis out, they began hiring cast members according to racial demographics and sex. That wasn't interesting to me, although I still consider them confreres. But after we left the Mime Troupe, we were rolling stones, just out there: "no direction home."

**EBA: What about the Diggers? Was there an ongoing ideological discussion behind Free Food and autonomy?**

You know, I don't remember too many ideological discussions. I think people really stayed away from that, except maybe for someone like Peter Berg, who's so intellectual and so accute at that. But even when I said to Emmett, "No, I won't eat the food, I can afford to buy a lunch." He never came back with an ideology. He just looked at me like: "Don't you get it, you shmuck?" and left it for me to put it together. There was a certain amount of ramma-lammah that we would do for other people, certain dog and pony shows we would put on to hustle. But I finally think it was like a world view that we 'got'. You know, you just 'got' that it was about autonomy, and it was about honoring what came over the Spinal Telephone, what came through your own imagination. That the universe itself was inherently orderly, and you were essentially okay and plugged into all of it. What came through your imagination was okay and plugged into all of it. People were empowered by that. It's like: you don't see

artists sitting around a lot, talking about ideology. They find out what they believe, and what they're doing, by doing it. I think that's how we tended to operate.

So that's kind of how it began. And then what happens is you become a subset of people that's sharing this peculiar reality. You begin to develop similar perspectives and short-hand and common experiences that make you very tight. And that tightness and cohesion makes you powerful and, in a funny way, also cuts you off from a lot.

I was an actor. I was an actor then and I'm an actor now. But, from a very rigid Digger perspective, movies are the entertainment wing of multi-national corporate culture. That's true, but they're also something else. From that perspective it was inconceivable for me to go out and work as an actor – if I was going to be consistent. That point of view for all its freedom had a lot of restrictions. And basically what it restricted you from was participating in anything which the majority culture endorsed.

**EBA: There was no balance? There was no way to do both?**

No, they were mutually exclusive. Because, like our 'revolutionary' counterparts, we adhered to a one-sided vision. We excluded people who didn't see it our way. We created a dichotomous universe: us and them, good guys and bad guys. And to some degree, you define yourself, or one defines oneself, by what one's not.

It's a subtle trap which included an unconscious mandate to re-make the self. Because, I think, everyone acknowledged that we were the products of bourgeois culture, there was a lot of competition, certainly among the men: Who was more bourgeois? Who was less bourgeois? Who was more revolutionary? So I remember a friend of mine criticizing me once for not wanting to stay up all night. He said, "Why should a revolutionary need his sleep?"

So anyway, the competition to 'de-school' yourself, to continually transcend limits when you discover them, was an unending strain on the imagination – and fueled by drugs. A lot of speed, a lot of acid, a lot of smack. And there was a degree to which we fancied ourselves, and a degree to which we were hard guys. We were the only hippie group that was accepted by the Hell's Angels. I lived with Pete Knell, the President of the San Francisco Hell's Angels. I built my two motorcycles with him. They came to my ranch and lived in Olema. We were respected as stand-up people and as autonomous people. That respect meant a lot. We were respected by the Black Panthers. The first Black Panther Party newspaper was printed in my house by the Communications Company. I met Huey Newton and Bobby Hutton when Bobby was like sixteen years old. So we were into hard kicks, and smack and speed and acid were among them. The problem is, the body is an inviolable limit. And you have to really hurt it before you know that, till you discover that.

**EBA: Did you?**

Did I? Yeah, I hurt it badly and a lot of my friends are dead. A lot of people, including Emmett, Sweet Billy Tumbleweed, Tracy the midwife, Marcus the guy who delivered my daughter with me, Bill Linden the puppeteer from the Mime Troupe. And some of the carnage was not death, some of it was just dissolution. The guy who accused me of being a bad revolutionary clawed his eyes out on an acid trip and is in an asylum today.

So, there were real prices to pay, and sometimes the body, sometimes your life itself, was the coin. That's the point I want to make. My investigation of limits began when I was bedridden for fifteen weeks with my second case of serum hepatitis. And I was on a ranch, by myself, with no electricity, and I couldn't walk. I lay in bed and I thought: How did I get here? And it started me re-thinking about what was healthy. What was health? What did it mean? And once you accept anything as tacked down, then you begin to build a structure, to accept limits. Then you have to make a choice as to whether or not you're going to accept that structure. If you do, you give up the notion of total freedom. Your freedom only becomes meaningful within that structure.

**EBA: Freedom is the freedom to build that structure?**

That's right, it's the freedom to choose structures. Any structure is mutable, but once you've chosen it, then you have to accept it – if you're ever going to get any depth. Because depth only comes in the struggle with limits. If there are no limits, you're like a water strider skimming over the surface of the



water. It's only struggling against the geometry of a piano that you really find out what it can do. If you had a piano with unlimited keys, like a lot of this computer music – what's it mean? You know? It means you write songs that nobody sings and nobody remembers.

**EBA: What are the limits?**

Well for me, the limit was my body. I didn't want to die – and I was going to die. And furthermore, I didn't want to live and be ugly. I was skinny, and yellow, and fetid, and nicotine stained, and burned, and chipped. I wasn't even a beautiful mammal. You know, I had these two coyote puppies on the porch of my place, and I was looking at them one day, and they were laying in the sun, and their hair shone, and their eyes shone, and their teeth were white, and they were illuminated beings. And I realized that health was beautiful. It's just physically beautiful. And I thought: "What is it about my friends and me, all these charismatic geniuses, who are all sallow and sickly? We're smart, but are we healthy? We don't look healthy and beautiful. We don't look like vigorous, lusty, energetic mammals." And that startled me, I thought: "That's how I want to look. That's how I want to be."

Death is inevitable. It struck me as a maimed and lame existence to do anything but just absolutely resist death, absolutely fight it tooth and nail, since the conclusion was pre-ordained. Right? So what a sorry existence to turn around and deliver yourself to death. What a loss of potential and possibility – that if I believed in limits, there's an absolute limit. The only way I was going to understand what life was really about was to struggle, to fight, to do combat with it. And anything that I did that made me more vulnerable to death's intervention was an indulgence and opening of myself to a shabby death.

**EBA: And yet, this isn't the same thing as the yuppie preoccupation with the Nautilus machines, etc.**

There's a line: a little water is good for you, too much is not good for you. I think it's good that people value their bodies and take care of them. I think if you cross the line and begin using your body as an asset or as an extension of your vanity, you've gone too far. Now the irony is that many of us were championing the environment and other species and all of this, at the same time that we were degrading our bodies. But I think that that's like Odysseus's wife, Penelope, unwinding what she's weaving by day. And I certainly think that people who treat their body well are far more amenable to arguments about treating the planet well. I think you have a hard time talking to a guy who's smoking and drinking and physically out of shape. If he doesn't honor his body to some degree, how are you going to get him to honor the planet – because he's a part of it.

I sat in rooms and listened to people oppressing everyone in the room in the name of freedom. So all human beings, to some degree, are unevenly developed, more developed in some areas than in others. But at a certain point the idea of autonomy leads you to accept responsibility for those attitudes of the majority culture that you are re-creating in your own behavior. And if you don't at least admit that you do that, you're dishonest. In other words, to what degree, despite my stated aims and beliefs and ideologies – which very often can be a platform for self-righteousness – to what degree am I re-creating greed and hatred and selfishness and waste and sloth? Because if you really believe in the interdependence of the universe, you are the problem. The problem is not outside me. I'm the problem. So, that's not to discredit political agendas and organization, but it's to say that any political agenda and organization which doesn't begin with personal responsibility is just half the argument. It's just not going to succeed.

**EBA: I think the big question is: What are the responsibilities of free men?**

Well, I guess first I'd begin by saying that I no longer see anything as free. Because 'free' to me means 'without limits'. And free means not interdependent. I look at everything as a Buddhist, as a Zen student for the last fifteen years. Interdependence is a fact, it's not an opinion. If you look deeply at that chair, you can see the sunlight in it, you can see the clouds in it. Because you know it couldn't have existed without the sunlight and the clouds and the microbes in the soil that fed the roots. And so the wood does not have a separate existence from the sunlight and the clouds and the soil and the air. And neither do you and I. So the idea of freedom is a kind of imperfect understanding, because it's

only half the picture. The other half of the picture is complete and total interdependence. Within that there is some kind of freedom.

So to me, the responsibility to the universe is exactly the responsibility to yourself. They're not one and they're not two. They're not the same and they're not separate. I mean, the sunset, this blue sky, is here talking to you. How do I treat it?

Am I sounding incredibly pompous?

It's difficult for me to talk about the Diggers without talking about Zen practice. I said very early on in the conversation that I was talking with a kind of hindsight, that I can't talk about the Diggers without simultaneously talking about what I learned from that time, and how in some respects I'm at odds with that time. It's not to repudiate it or discredit it. I'm not a person who feels like I've yet lived the high point of my life. I mean, I think the sixties were an extraordinary time. My wife and I were talking about it in bed last night. I feel bad for the kids today who missed this wonderful confluence, which was simultaneously a confluence of the global and the mythological. Any possibility, anywhere on the globe or in mythology was accessible. You'd see the Lone Ranger walking down the street with a Shiva princess. You'd see Sam Spade with Pocahontas. It was an incredible flowering of global and mythical proportions. Kids today don't have that. It was unique, it was exciting, it was very high. But I'm not a fraternity boy who feels like I've lived the highest point of my life. I'm happy to be right here, right now. I'm really loving it. The Diggers were appropriate to a time and place.

In fact, the sixties was a wonderful moral re-awakening for America. And if you look at the number of ideas and movements that were either germinated or came into a fullness there, it's quite extraordinary: civil rights, the women's movement, ecology movement, holistic health movement, organic food movement, the peace movement, the anti-nuke movement. I mean, it's not that they were all invented at that time, but they all received substantial bursts of energy then. And as such it was a major reevaluation of the premises of capitalism, of materialism, of corporate culture, of devotion. It was intended to, and did, shake the culture to its roots. And one of the things that occurs to me is that we are, now in the eighties, the equivalent of the hipster be-bop'ers, in the fifties, that used to wear crew-cuts and charcoal grey suits and string ties – those guys with totally loose wigs, who were in a benificent masquerade. Who didn't feel like calling attention to themselves stylistically, so they could go on and do their thing. And what I see is that what we succeeded in doing was creating a world in which we were totally engaged, in which we were not alienated. And that engagement is such a richer, and more amusing, and more rewarding experience, that it doesn't matter what trappings it's dressed in.

So, you can see it, that engagement, in good restaurants. You can see it in a lot of the things that people are doing in the eighties. Whether it's creek enhancement, running Chez Panisse over in Berkeley, a fabulous restaurant, or growing organic food. It doesn't matter what it is, but you can see a kind of engagement that people experience, where they will no longer settle for operating in an alienated, disaffected fashion. So maybe they quit their big bureaucracy and they start their own company. I think it's as true for a guy like Chouinard at Patagonia, as it is for Alice Waters over at Chez Panisse. In the sixties you used to think that the style was important, because the style showed who you weren't. What turns out to have settled down to be much more important, I think, is the total commitment and engagement. Once you've experienced that, you can't settle for being a lunch-box johnny, except at the expense of great personal psychic damage.

**EBA: And yet, we're told, most people have settled for that.**

No, I disagree. The newspaper makes great hay over the Jerry Rubins who sell stock. But you know, Jerry was always a media junky. Abbie, who was a friend of mine, was always a media junky. We explained everything to those guys, and they violated everything we taught them. Abbie went back, and the first thing he did was publish a book, with his picture on it, that blew the hustle of every poor person on the Lower East Side by describing every free scam then current in New York – which were then sucked dry by disaffected kids from Scarsdale.

I mean those guys knew that for the Democratic convention, there were no park permits, there were no rock bands, there was no nothing. They called all those kids together to be extras in a piece of 'police

theater', as Berg calls it. And they did that to present themselves over the media to America as the new leaders of the radical left. That was as manipulative and conniving a piece of bullshit as anything Lyndon Johnson ever did. Of all of them, Abbie has really changed, I think, and grown up and figured out what his life is for.

So to me that is a difference. Once you've experienced something with the totality of your being, you can't go back. And a lot of people had that experience of being free, and those people are like an invisible virus in the culture at large today. Reaganism is just a kind of atavism, just a throw back. I think we pushed too hard and too fast on too many fronts, and we scared a lot of people. We raised a lot of questions for which there were no answers. And the culture threw the country to the conservatives for good housekeeping, because they knew the answers were not available and they wanted to buy time. But I don't think they really endorsed his [Reagan=s] neo-fascist, avuncular, mean-spiritedness at all. I think you can see, now as he's going out of office, this re-interest in the sixties and the activism that's starting to emerge – because it's more fun.

You know, once you've bought your BMW, and once you've had a hot tub, and once you've done all that shit, you still have to live with yourself. And it's not worth trading eight hours or ten hours a day of your life in thrall for. It just doesn't pay off. It's no fun. It has no grandeur. It has no awe. It has no drama. It has no passion. The self is just not a worthy enough vehicle to worship.



Etan Ben-Ami  
Peter Coyote Interview  
January 12, 1989

<[diggers.org/oralhistory/peter\\_interview.html](http://diggers.org/oralhistory/peter_interview.html)>

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