

**FREAKS & FIRE**  
**THE UNDERGROUND REINVENTION OF CIRCUS**

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**SOFT SKULL PRESS**



I WALKED INTO a diner in south Austin one hot Sunday afternoon to meet an acquaintance I knew from the Burning Man festival. My friend Brett—a philosopher also known as DJ Princess Death Bunny—was already waiting there, the glass of water in front of him piled high with ice and sweating in the sultry Texas heat. He was beaming and obviously happy to see me.

“Hey I want you to meet one of my friends,” he called to the waitress as I sat down. The heavily tattooed, pierced and pink-haired girl walked over, looking a bit uncertain. “Meet Dee,” Brett said. He added in approving tones, “She’s one of us. She’s a freak.”

A freak. I’m not sure at what point that became a term of approbation, but there it was. I had been kissed with the freak seal of approval and something in me glowed. Possibly because I don’t look anything like a freak—no tattoos, no special appendages, I even stopped wearing pierced earrings years ago. It made the bestowal of the name even better: I had been acknowledged for my inner freak.

I kept thinking about that introduction long after we ate lunch, paid the bill and left the restaurant. Freak has come to mean something slightly different than its original definition. Freak implies both a larger community in which the individual is shunned, or at least regarded with vague suspicions, for his or her peculiarities, and a smaller community in which those peculiarities are embraced. It’s about relationships, not just physical anomalies.

To the extent that all individuals, at one time or another, feel they are misunderstood, alienated, or just have something weird growing on their bodies (What is that lump on your neck? The beginnings of a second head?), everyone carries within them a sort of latent freak. That is, freak has its place; it’s a part of human nature and not just the lot of a sad few. But in what location or context does the inner freak find expression?

## THE GATHERING OF TRIBES

An ancient caravan creaks into view, wooden wheels turning, a mixture of animal smells and tinkling bells all washed in a mysterious rosy light that is ever cast over the horizon by the dawn of civilization. This is the place. Or rather, the non-place, for as we see, this rolling compound of people/animals/babies/tools is nomadic, and it stops only to trade. This string of wagons is the ancient, archetypal tribe.

Anthropologists plot this image early in the timeline of the development of human civilization, early in the trajectory that leads from blood-related family units, to tribal villages, to nation-states, and finally, only recently, to the global economy. The place of the freak is with the tribe, a level of social integration that is larger than the family but small enough that the individual's personal peculiarities or proclivities determine their inclusion.

This level of tribal affiliation, and the experience of community it provides, is problematic in the modern world. Traditional forms of the tribe, like the village, have almost completely disappeared. Fewer and fewer people live in small communities where their daily interactions bring them in contact with the people they are deeply connected to, either spiritually or economically. Workers in modern corporations are replaceable and no longer bound to each other by the experience of a shared interdependence. The modern individual is preoccupied simultaneously by the isolating, immediate concerns of personal survival and the larger, often intangible concerns of war, terror and economic change as transmitted by a now-seamless global media network. The intermediate space of community is not easily reached.

Not by accident, many of the newer, emergent forms of culture include a specifically tribal aspect. A return to tattooing, scarification, fire performance and drumming, as well as a renewed interest in ritual, has occurred side-by-side with the formation of intentional (if temporary) communities such as the Rainbow Family gatherings and Burning Man festival, all of which focus on celebrating and integrating the peculiarities of their varied members.

It was at these kinds of festivals, in clubs and at underground raves, that alternative circus acts began appearing in the early 90s. The performers were young, crazy "freaks" without any formal training who used circus costumes, skills or themes as a performative means for expressing their own exaggerated personalities. Many went on to gain formal training or to study the history of the genre. But essentially their relationship to conventional circuses resembled that of outsider art to mainstream art circles. They didn't really relate to the modern-day circus. They took their cues from something much, much older: the caravan-pulling gypsies.

The gypsies, shunned by society at large, but fiercely loyal to their own clan, were the most tribal group of all in Europe. It was these wanderers who first produced circus-like entertainments in medieval townships, along with strolling players and minstrel shows. It wasn't until the 1770s that Englishman Philip Astley fused military equestrian drills with acrobatics and other entertainments to form the modern circus.

The phenomenon of alternative circus performance can be seen as the theatrical dimension to one generation's wholesale rediscovery of the concept of the tribe. Their position is reminis-

cent of the strolling players in Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. In the film, the traveling circus performers, with their innocence and play, are the only survivors of the plague, represented as a sort of disease of the human spirit incarnate in the Crusades. Circus, the tribal entertainment, eludes the modern world with its malaises and plagues.

This is not mere regression or a rejection of modernity. (After all, few "modern primitives" want to be without their cell phones or Internet access.) Rather, it is an attempt to embrace the root, to continue to hold tribal affiliation as a foundation upon which more complex means of relating can be built.

Throughout his many works, systems theorist and philosopher Ken Wilber maps out a course of human social (and spiritual) development as not merely linear, but "holistic"—in the sense of fractal-like holons. Each level of development, each holon, contains and expands upon the level of development which preceded it. Contrary to the usual assumption that progress gets rid of all the inferior, outmoded forms, Wilber suggests that higher levels of development preserve the lower while suffusing them with new meaning. But there are risks.

"The fact that evolution always produces greater transcendence . . . means that a factor of *possible* pathology is built into every evolutionary step, because transcendence *can* go too far and become *repression*—the higher does not negate and preserve the lower, it tries only to negate (or repress or deny) the lower, which works about as well as denying our feet."<sup>1</sup>

A return to tribalism is taking place—but reinvented from the perspective of the holon which follows it: that is to say, without the ethnocentrism, without the fear of outsiders, without irrational taboos, without the many flaws which flowed from the original form of tribal affiliation. Tribes are sought that sustain the individual, in all his or her peculiarities, while preserving access to global consciousness.

We have become nomadic again, by car and by airplane; and are primitives once more in our quest for the primary things (values, relationships) that define us. The nomadic, primitive, tribal circus has re-emerged to entertain us on this journey.

#### CIRCUS AS SHAMANISM

Art and medicine are often one and the same at the tribal level. The healer and performer were embodied in a single character: the shaman. Circus in particular makes direct reference to the shamanic arts: the journey to the upper realms on the trapeze or the nether worlds marked by fire (led by the Ringmaster, often a sort of demonic spirit guide), dismemberment (knife-throwing), and transformation resulting in various supernatural powers—such as the ability to fly through the air with the greatest of ease.

Clowns, for example, are full of shamanic references. "The ability to take on a different persona or personae while in an altered state of consciousness is typical of the trickster or sacred clown in tribal cultures. They 'shift' shape and, at times, their antics become very extreme," comments art historian and critic Mark Levy in his book *Technicians of Ecstasy*. Referring especially to the sacred clowns of the Pueblo Indians, he continues, "In tribal societies, where a

strict hierarchy of social conventions prevails, the trickster extends the boundaries of the permissible and interjects a much needed spirit of disorder."<sup>2</sup>

The shamanic journey was traditionally undertaken in order to bring healing to the tribe, and it was done by someone who had been set apart as "different," either because of sickness, visions or a particularly arduous initiation. Some current-day alternative circuses, composed of people "set apart," consciously make community healing a part of their work as well. This is particularly noticeable in groups that adopt mythological themes for their performances.

An Austin-based fire performer with the stage name Arashi, who is a member of the fire troupe Tantien, provides an example. "The people I am family with are mostly shamanic people who cultivate their own spirit and magic," he says.

"I don't feel separation from society. I feel like I'm trying to provide my piece of the pie. It is the job of the shaman to keep people aware of other worlds and other possibilities. It's a service to society for me. I try not to have a cosmic schism through anger or rebellion . . . I know I'm a freak and I know a lot of people may not be open to shamanic stuff (although I'm not saying I'm a shaman—that would be pretentious). But I'm all about trying to break down barriers between people.

"I'm an artistic person. I've got dreadlocks and piercings and everything coming off my body. In my younger years I was a punk rock kid and I hated authority and I still don't agree with a lot of things people in authority do. But I went through my own internal process about hate and realized it wasn't going to solve anything. I'm kind of out of that whole negative thing. When [Tantien] first started, our shows were integrated into trance dancing—outdoor dance parties out in the woods. People would come to dance and we would bust out our fire in the middle of it and make it into a communal rite. People would come up to us afterwards and say, "This has changed our lives."

Rogan P. Taylor, who provides some of the most intriguing links between circus and shamanism in *The Death and Resurrection Show*, says, "The enthusiasm which the audiences showed for these archaic relics of magical consciousness seems to bear a direct relationship to the progress of modern technology. It seems that the more embroiled we became in the rationality of materialism, the more enthusiastically we sought our entertainment in the irrational worlds of magic. The more isolated we felt from the new priesthood of scientists, the more we liked the shows which encouraged direct participation. For another hallmark of these shaman-oriented performances is the readiness with which the barriers between the show and the audience are broken down."<sup>3</sup>

#### PURE PLAY: CONSUMERISM AND THE DO-IT-YOURSELF CIRCUS

"Circus is about play—the rediscovery and affirmation of play, much more than it is about skill," says a fan of Circus Contraption, a Seattle-based indie circus. "Cirque du Soleil is about skill, to a level where it almost doesn't seem human. But when Circus Contraption performs, you can almost see yourself up there."

The deliberately homemade feel of some of these troupes is endearing to some, dreadful to others.

Gypsy Snider is the consummate circus insider. She was born into a circus family (her parents, Larry Pisoni and Peggy Snider, formed San Francisco's long-running Pickle Family Circus), entertained audiences around the world herself as a performer for many years, and is now director of the regrouped New Pickle Circus. She is skeptical of the new generation of alternative circus performers.

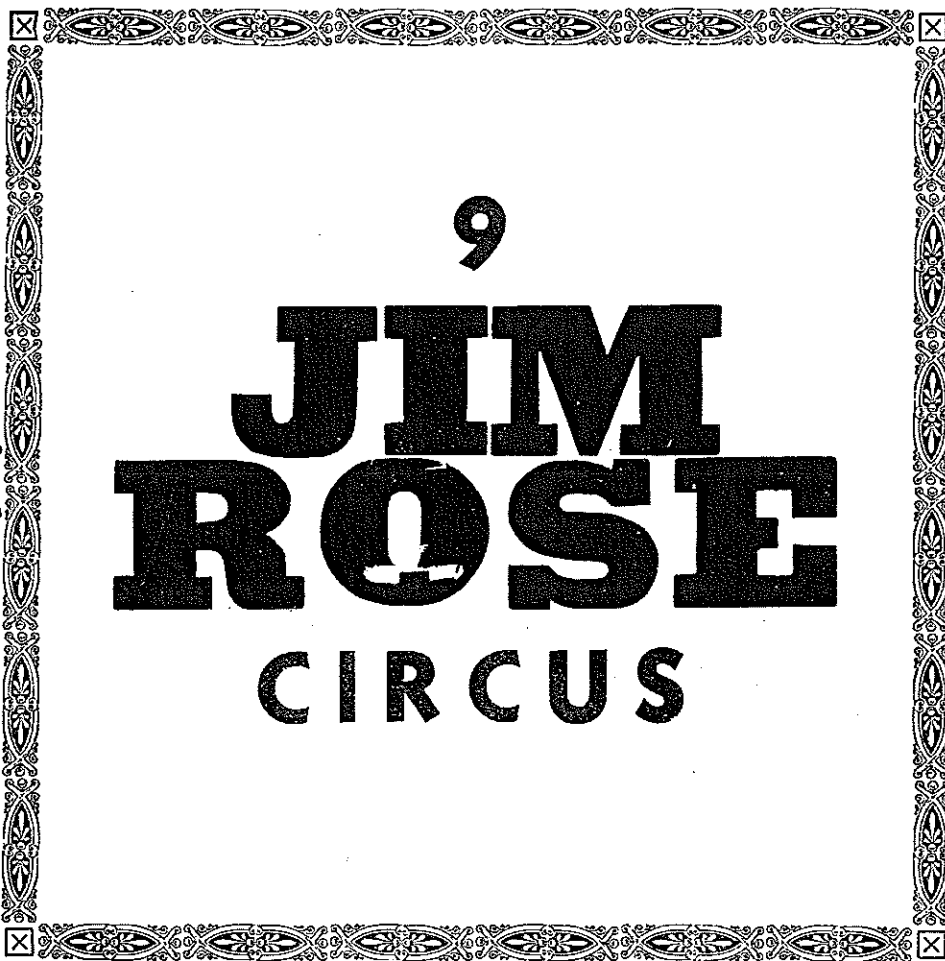
"What tends to bother me about people going, 'Oh, let's make a circus' is that it is an art form and takes incredible amounts of discipline and training," she says. "All too often people kind of take it lightly. They say, 'Oh, isn't it fun?' It is not fun. It is incredibly brutal on the body and the heart. In terms of small circus companies, I've seen a few that have completely offended me and some that have blown my socks off."

Take the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus,<sup>4</sup> for example. "I saw them once—it was raw, like a medicine/freakshow, which I actually loved as a concept," she says. "Unfortunately I felt it was really lacking in substance and missing a theatrical quality. It was like, 'what we're doing is so vulgar and out there that you're gonna love it.' I love to see ugly things because I believe a true beauty lies in ugliness, but you have to do more than throw that at the audience. There's an artistry behind the delivery that's important. I felt they just thought they were so cool they didn't have to master that artistry." But she goes on to add, "There's something beautiful in circus, in that you go into a different world and that's what was nice about Bindlestiff—we did go into their world, into this dirty kind of forbidden circus peep show."

For many of these new players, the level of artistry isn't the point. The point, much like punk rock, is that *they* are the ones doing it. They are making their own fun, creating their own entertainment rather than consuming it, and infecting the audience with a sense of possibility and participation. An anti-consumer ethic pervades the underground circus, along with performance styles that bring audience members onstage or even break down the performer/spectator barrier altogether. We see ourselves in their performances and cheer that much harder for the clown struggling to juggle another ball. And if the ball drops or the tightrope walker slips—so what? We're all tripping fools in ridiculous costumes anyway.

This sense of identification is closely related to the effectiveness of the circus experience as shamanistic ritual. Ritual, as opposed to entertainment, is effective to the extent that the audience believes that what is happening on stage is also happening to them. For the performers of the underground circus, the show is not about acting, it's about being who they really are—freaks—and uncovering for all the world to see their most mad, strange, divine selves.

—J. Dee Hill



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**JIM  
ROSE  
CIRCUS**









"HIS MOTHER WAS a Siamese twin that moved to England so the other one could drive...

"His father was a Philippine contortionist known as the Manilla Folder...

"He's got hair—in places—monkeys don't! While giving birth, his mother almost died from rug burn! Getting out of his mother was his first escape. Every time he got to the light in the tunnel—they added more tunnel! When he flopped out onto that operating table, the doctor took one look at him and said, 'If it doesn't cry in ten seconds, it's a tumor.' Well it only took him two hours to eat his way to the top of the abortion bucket!! He's got a wooden leg—with branches—only it's a wooden leg WITH A REAL FOOT! He's got ten fingers—ALL ON THE SAME HAND! Until one day something caught his eye—AND DRAGGED IT FOR FIFTEEN FEET! Now he's got a glass eye—with a FISH in it! He broke his arm in three places—HE'S NOT GOING BACK TO THOSE PLACES! So he married Lulu the Alligator Girl, who could introduce a lump of coal—into her hole—cross her legs and produce—a DIAMOND IN THE MUFF! Let's have a warm welcome for my hero—the AMAZING MR. LIFTO!!!!"

Tendons stand out like jungle vines on the flushed neck of freak impresario Jim Rose as he hoarsely yells this tale of improbable provenance. Wild-eyed, manic, the master of the modern-day sideshow summons his sidekick Joe Hermann, a.k.a. Mister Lifto, with a flourish. Wearing only shorts and giant blue mountain-climbing carabiners through his pierced ears, Lifto bounces on to the stage, hooks his ears to a bar stool and spins around. The lobes stretch long, absurdly long, as if plied on an old-fashioned taffy machine.

He is a Human Marvel, this man who can also lift seventy pounds with his pierced penis ("that part of him that's most a mister"), 120 pounds with both nipples, and, when the day is done, neatly hang up his clothes on a coat hanger threaded through the central cartilage of his nose. He is an original, one of the founding members of the original Jim Rose Circus that first

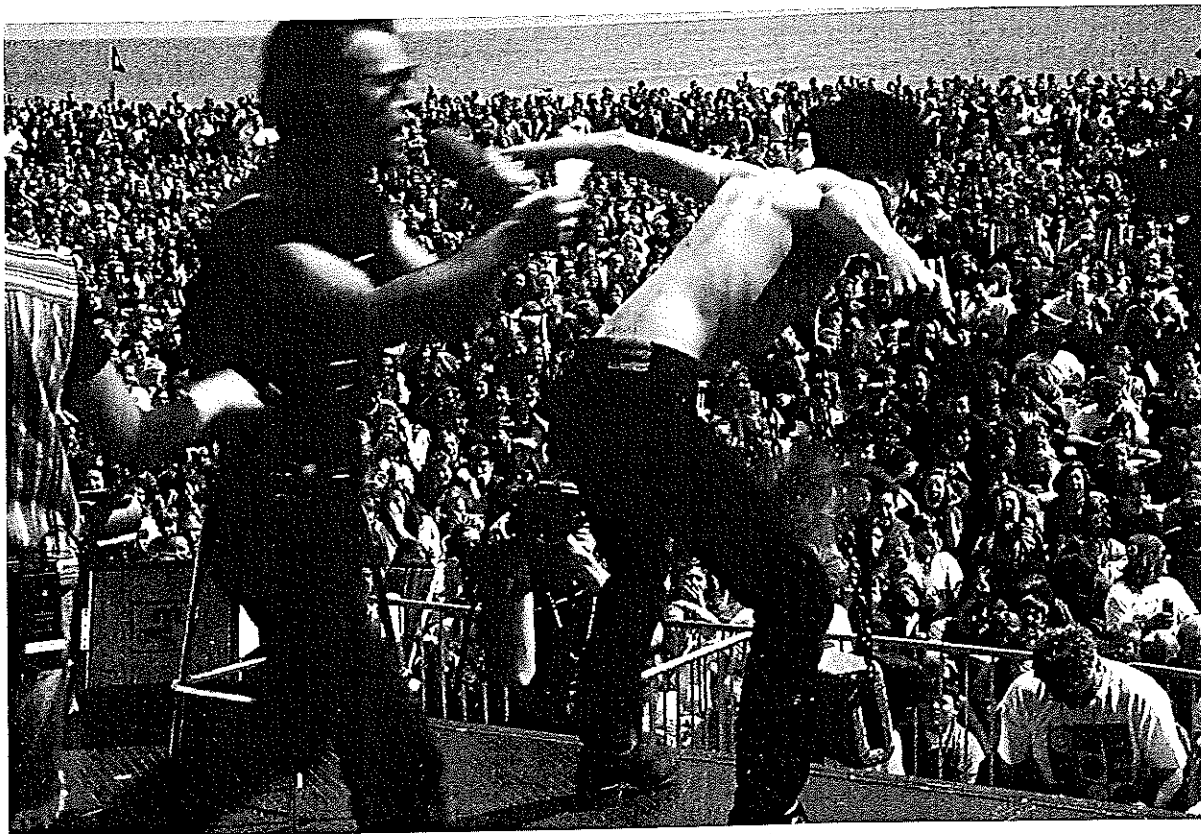
shocked the world, then inspired a whole generation to experiment with body play, extreme performance and a new concept of sideshow.

And Jim Rose, the sinewy man with the microphone, is the one who first brought together all these strange performers, these disciples of bodily adventure. His troupe of self-made Marvels met in Seattle in 1991. When they joined Perry Farrell's first Lollapalooza show the following year for a cross-country tour, the counterculture was introduced to a sick-out shock-fest the likes of which had never been seen before.

"Thousands of people drank vomit," says Jim Rose proudly. "I would offer it to the audience and they would rush the stage."

The audience also saw sword-swallowing and slug-eating by a curly-haired kid named Paul Lawrence who would later morph himself, through extensive tattooing and surgical procedures, into a living piece of art called The Enigma. Tim Cridland, a.k.a. Zamora the Torture King, performed mystical rites of self-abnegation, shoving giant needles through his face and walking up a ladder of sharpened swords. Bebe the Circus Queen, Jim's French wife, threw pointed darts into her husband's back. And Matt "The Tube" Crowley invented the first gavage act, sucking up a variety of liquids through a tube in his nose and then bringing up the contents of his stomach for an audience refresher.

None of it, save the gavage, was new. All of the acts were once part of the sideshows that operated on fairground midways or in the shadow of traveling circuses. But those sideshows had died out almost exactly a decade earlier, and there was a whole new audience ready for the spectacle of the Jim Rose Circus.



"Jim Rose did a great thing by removing [sideshow] from the traditional context of an amusement park or circus and bringing it to the rock and roll venues—that definitely is Jim's creation," says Dick Zigun, who opened Coney Island's non-profit Sideshows by the Seashore in 1985 to perpetuate the nearly lost American tradition of sideshow.

Canadian sideshow performer Ryan Stock, a regular performer with Jim Rose, puts it this way: "Years ago the sideshow was the side act to the carnival and the circus 'cause that's where the people were, that's where the money was. But today, people go to bars, people go to nightclubs; I think that's where the show should be. The sideshow ends up being the side act to alcohol and dancing, which I don't know if that's a step up or a step down for the sideshow, I guess it's a matter of opinion. The way I look at it, if P.T. Barnum was alive I don't think he'd be herding patrons into a stinky old canvas tent. I think the club owners and the club promoters would become the marks, you know?"

Rock and roll was indeed the hallmark of the Jim Rose Circus, which went on from Lollapalooza to tour the world and perform with a number of groups including Nine Inch Nails and Godsmack. The presentation of the show was entirely fresh: it was scary and funny and moved as fast as a virtuoso guitar riff. The sideshow became a cult phenomenon, with a special episode of the X-Files written for Jim Rose, and The Simpsons treating the performers as cartoon characters. No one had seen anything like it in recent memory, no single sideshow or sideshow performer had been greeted with such adulation in almost a century. And yet...

"Nothing's changed in hundreds of years from the basic formula of getting crowds to react the way you want them to," says Jim, a narrow figure with intense brown eyes. "The only thing I did different was be the first guy not to have a waxy moustache and not to use my diaphragm to do the old—"he puts on a nasal voice—"All right ladies and gentlemen, step right up, what you're about to see . . . I just didn't do that. But I'm still using old-school formula. I'm just doing it with a few 'f' words, in a different voice than yesteryear.

"There's about twenty sideshow stunts that are classics. I like to call them insanity's greatest hits. This is your bed of nails, your bed of blades, your human pincushion, your completely tattooed miscreant, your human dartboard, eating glass. All of that was in my first show. It's all part of this genre to hype, incite and convince people that their lives are incomplete if they don't get in their car, drive to an unfamiliar venue, buy a ticket and watch something their better nature tells them they shouldn't."

A lot of people, thousands, did just that. At Lollapalooza there was something about this tiny side stage full of self-made freaks, proud of their strangeness, a last stand for sheer oddity, that just clicked with young people looking for their own ways of being alternative.

"I think Jim Rose is probably one of the strongest single forces that moved a particular part of our fringe society into the mainstream," says Scott Noe, a friend of Jim Rose and executive producer of his recent travel documentary, the Jim Rose Twisted Tour. "Our culture would be different today without the Jim Rose Circus. I doubt we would see as many tattoos and piercings. It would still be considered fringe and unusual, and today, in 2004, it's mainstream."

Certainly Jim Rose doesn't get all the credit for the changed appearance of America. Perry Farrell and the Lollapalooza show itself were actually responsible for bringing so many together, allowing people to visually sense, for the first time, the full extent of their tribe. Re/Search had recently published "Modern Primitives," a seminal work investigating contemporary experiments with tattoos, piercing and other kinds of body play. So there was a zeitgeist moving among the masses. But the sideshow made it palpable, and the whole notion of sideshow itself became cool again.

"With sideshow entering rock videos and advertising on commercial TV, it's just fully integrated or reintegrated back into American culture. It's probably as influential as it was when there were fifty sideshows touring the country," says Dick Zigun. "When Michael Wilson first worked, aside from being heavily tattooed, he did a shocking act where he hammered a nail through his tongue at every performance. He had a pierced tongue but that wasn't common then. Now every suburban sixteen-year-old girl in America has a pierced tongue and tattoos. And it's partially our bad influence. Really, that's been astonishing to watch, just how influential it's become and knowing how weird and unknown and isolated it was not that long ago."

Jim Rose agrees. "Back when I first started this thing information was obscure and hard to get hold of. There was an underground movement of people who were into this stuff before the Internet made it possible to just click on it. To become a human dartboard I had to watch Third World, grainy footage of an older, retired performer and take some pointers on it."

Jim Rose himself grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, where his first exposure to the carnie life was working at the state fairgrounds. "I'd already been around these Lobster Boys and shit—I had to go fetch 'em fucking Cokes." He studied business in junior college, worked as a car salesman and bug exterminator, and finally met his wife Bebe at a club in D.C. where he was channeling his angst in a spoken word performance. He learned how to eat fire from a street performer, then went to France with Bebe, where he became totally absorbed in the more developed European world of street performing, learning trade secrets and taking notes at every opportunity.

When the optimistic pair returned to the states in 1990, they nearly starved while competing for tips against other performers on Venice Beach in L.A. All day in the sun, on their feet for hours at a time, they attempted to woo the attention of tourists. Jim didn't take too long to develop street smarts and realize that his best act involved his vocal chords. The former car salesman discovered that the trick meant nothing without the pitch, and that he still had a top-notch talent for selling. Soon the crowds were gathering around.

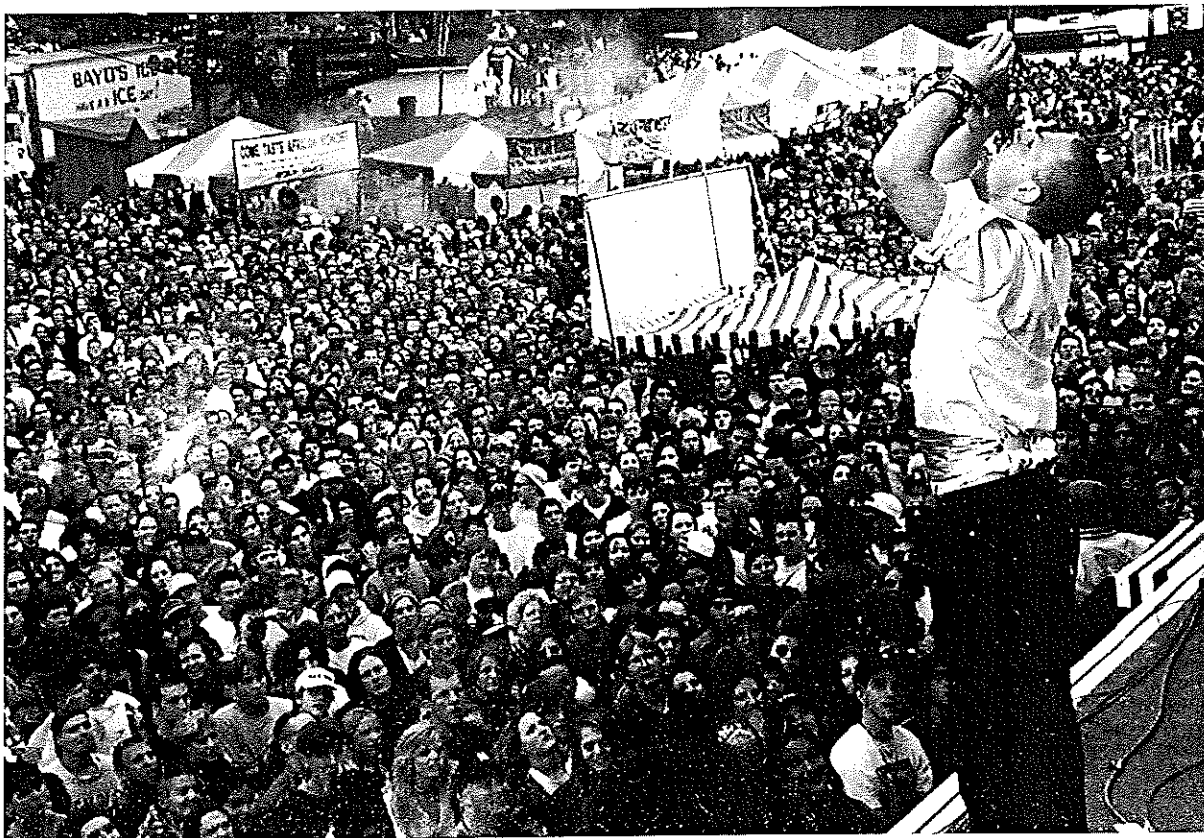
The Enigma recalls his first encounter with Jim in May 1991 at a Seattle street fair. "He was doing that old magic razor blade trick, where you thread the razors on a string inside your mouth. I thought it was really silly because he had this huge crowd of people and he was just doing a magic trick. I swallow swords; that's a real thing. But I didn't know how to be a talker at all. I was young. To be able to speak on stage takes a lot more than just being able to act. You have to be able to talk the talk and walk the walk."

Jim Rose's combustible energy and ability to sell anything, including vomit, to an audience were legendary. His skills made the feats of the Human Marvels seem even more extraordinary. His desire to sell the product was insatiable.

"I was relentless. That's one of the reasons my show was successful," says Jim. "No one would work harder than me. As a matter of fact, every city I went to I told the publicist, 'I dare you to give me more interviews than I can handle. I'll do two at a fucking time. I'll do 'em twenty-four hours straight. I dare you to outwork me. And no one could. I spent two straight years on about four hours sleep a night, relentlessly ensuring that this art form came back in vogue and that my brand name was attached to it so that I could reap some benefits from the work.'"

The ultimate salesman never really turns off his pitch. Scott Noe recalls the first day of filming a reality series that followed the group—Jim, Bebe, Lifty, Ryan, Cappy the 400-pound yo-yo master, and the Rubber Boy—on a thirty-day trek across the U.S. It was television on the run, with one production crew dashing around filming the freaks every time they stepped off the bus and another crew running around getting release signatures.

"The first place we stop is a Wendy's and they're like 'No, no, turn the cameras off, you can't film in here.' It was a complete meltdown. Jim, who was talent at this point, saw the manager and saw that she was being a complete hard-ass. And Jim grabs the piece of paper from the production assistant and charges up to her and says something that elicits a positive response. As soon as she says yes, he jams the paper in front of her and says, 'Ma'am can you sign this piece of paper?' And she says, 'Is that that location release? I can't sign that.' And he

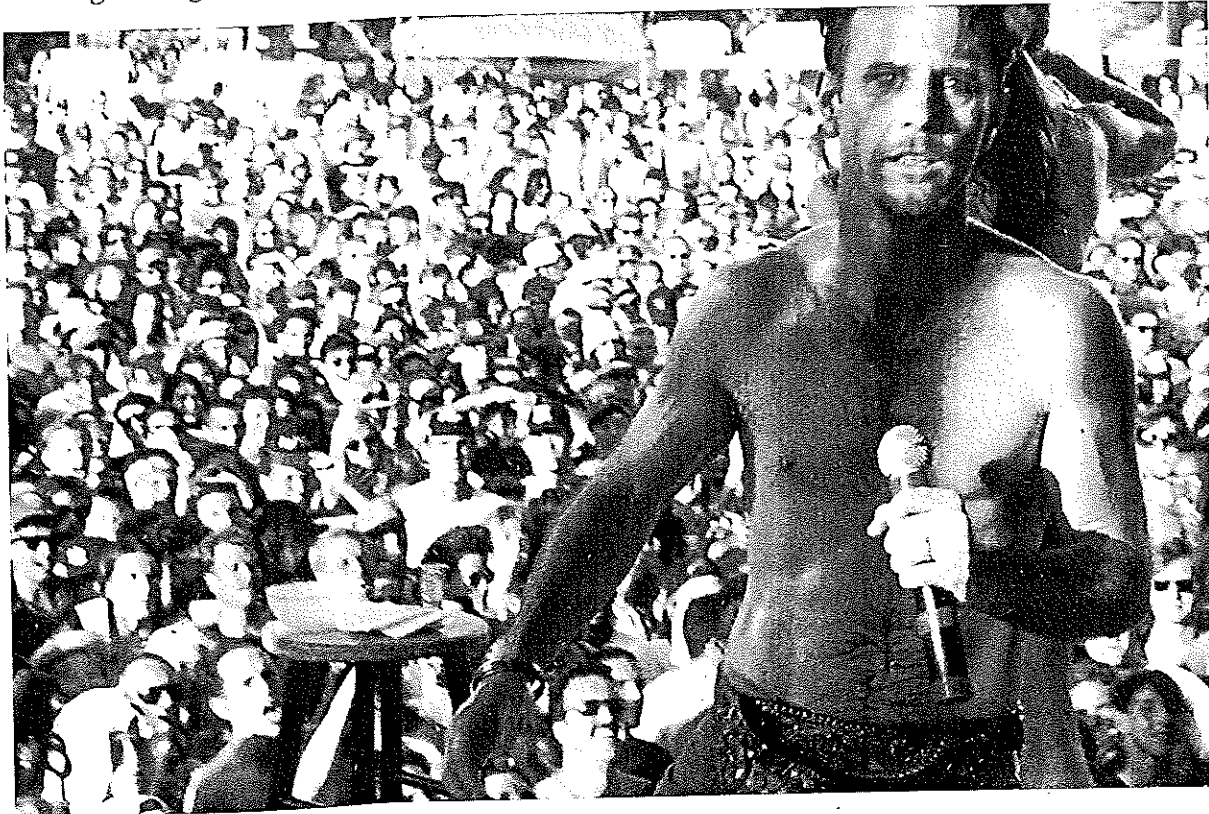


was like, 'Yes ma'am, it's a location release but I just need you to put your signature on it real quick.' She was like 'I told them I can't sign that.' And he says, "I completely understand that ma'am, and understand why you would have those fears, but let's just get your signature so we can make all of this stop and go away.'

"And I watched him just sit there while she was going 'I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it' and it didn't matter. He wasn't being disrespectful. It was funny; it was hilarious. But to Jim it was a big deal. Did the woman sign the piece of paper? No, she wasn't going to sign it, no one was going to make her sign it. Did that aggravate Jim for at least two to three hours? Absolutely. Did it make a difference at all? No, it was a stupid truck stop. But did it bother Jim because he failed? Yes. He spoke about it and yelled at a few people about how they set it up wrong. It meant the world to Jim and that's what separates Jim Rose from other people. As far as the promotion side of what he does, he really raises that to an art form. Convincing, selling, whatever you call it."

The Jim Rose Circus is credited not only with reviving sideshow to popular consciousness, but with presenting new twists on the genre. "You can't survive off of insanity's greatest hits," Jim says. "Even the sideshows of yesteryear had to continuously evolve. It's coming up with ideas for twenty-first century phobias—things that just didn't come into play during the time when this form of entertainment was prevalent. Like Super Glue. Like power tools. Balancing a running lawn mower on the lip and having audience members throw a head of lettuce at it."

Or like putting your wife in a plastic bag, sucking all the air out with a shrink wrap machine and watching her eyes bug out. Or turning out all the lights and sending masked men running through the audience with loudly buzzing chainsaws. But keeping some old-fash-



ioned goodness in there, as when walking a giant, wiggling scorpion over Bebe the Circus Queen's lovely face.

"I'm no dummy," Jim says. "I know how easy it is to find broken glass and to pound a couple of fucking nails in a board. That's the reason I change too. I knew I was going to get ripped off. That's why you've never seen anyone else bring Mexican transvestite wrestling or women sumo wrestling or a big power tool show. They can't afford to compete, logistically or financially, to do it. That's how you get rid of the competition, you just keep increasing your arms until they can't compete. I learned it from Reagan."

Jim seems unusually preoccupied with the competition generated by his own success, a global success that far outstrips any of the other fringe circuses or sideshows. "It's funny about the imitators," he says. "They all hated me. But the ones that are like twenty-one, twenty-two years old and just starting now—they *love* me! I think the first generation thought they could knock me off the block and were competitive. Everyone's got a 'Look at me! Look at me! Look at me!' situation going, that's why they're in this kind of show. [Performers] quit me. They go out and try to do a show and can't give a ticket away. Every one of them goes out after the show to meet and greet the audience, and eight out of ten people ask them, 'Have you seen the Jim Rose Circus?' It drives them crazy."

It's true that a lot of performers have cycled through the circus over the years—not particularly surprising in show business—and that not a few of them were disgruntled by the experience. Jan T. Gregor, his first tour manager, dished the dirt on Jim's legendary temper in his tell-all narrative *Circus of the Scars: The True Inside Odyssey of a Modern Day Sideshow* (Brennan Dalsgard Publishers, 1998), while many of his current and former employees won't even talk about their association with the sideshow. For those that do, the Lizardman's story is typical.

Erik Sprague, the Lizardman, took over Enigma's slot as the tattooed man in 1999, and rivaled his predecessor with the scope of his body modifications. In addition to wearing a full tattooed bodysuit of lizard-green scales; he also has horn ridge implants above his eyes, teeth filed into sharp points, a split tongue and the word "FREAK" tattooed across his chest. His appearance is so stunning that his photo was once circulated on the floor of the Illinois state legislature during a state representative's unsuccessful attempt to get the procedure of tongue-splitting banned, apparently in fear that all the susceptible teenagers of Illinois would soon be resembling reptiles.

"I don't like Jim's personality type. I never had a good time," says the Lizardman. "It wasn't horrible, but by the same token no matter how good things were there was always a down side. It was that guy over there. Literally now I don't speak his name as a general rule.

"Rikki Lake wanted me to be on the show in 1999 and the first time that they tried to set it up they went through him. And he got mad at the production assistant—he bitched her out because he wanted to make sure his name was on the screen every time I was on camera. Once he swore at her she hung up the phone. He was blacklisted off the show and me along with

him. Luckily I was able to set it up later and it worked out beautifully. That is very indicative of my experience and how my life was messed up being around him.”

“Owning a circus is like pushing a wheelbarrow full of bullfrogs,” says Jim. “We’re not the fucking Beatles. We don’t step into a room together and write ‘I Wanna Hold Your Hand.’ Everybody has their turn on stage and does something. They’re competing with each other. Unfortunately my position in this profession makes people hate me. If you need attention and you’re not getting as much as you think you need and you’re not able to blame it on yourself, you’re going to put the blame somewhere else.”

“The one part of my job I never liked was being a boss in such close quarters,” he continues. “A bus is a psychological test tube on wheels. You can’t get away from people in ways you would like to sometimes. And the very nature of the people I tour with—they’re in a freakshow for godssakes. They’re doing things their mothers told them *not to do*. Hell, I catch myself trying to talk ‘em out of doing stuff. I’m 47-years old now—older than some of these guys’ fathers.”

The circus has toned down some of its grotesqueries and actually plays to a theater crowd when abroad. The droves of people who used to faint during a show are much fewer. “We’re actually considered legitimate theater,” says Jim. “And we do a much better show when we’re in a theater, too. You don’t have to scream and yell and keep the energy so high. You can actually talk to [the audience] and be a little clever and it works.

“It’s really about the power of presentation. I could get a lot of people to faint doing the human dartboard, presenting it differently. In 1994 I presented a lot of the same acts with more comedy than maniacal depravity, and I started noticing there were less falling ovations.





This was just before Jerry Springer quit acting like Oprah—we had a real sea change once that happened. When Jerry Springer realized he couldn't make highbrow he went to the gutter. Which is where a sideshow is. From that point on, people got a bit desensitized. But right before that sea change I had changed my presentation and was getting *out* of the gutter while everyone else was going *to* the gutter. Which is basically my m.o. I'm a contrarian. And a decent train spotter."

The Jim Rose Circus may have seen its glory days. At the moment, the troupe only convenes for special occasions, and Jim Rose himself is living in Las Vegas, playing poker.

"Frankly I don't need to work anymore," he says. "If some hotshot kid came along and decided to put together something completely new and innovative together—if he's not trashing me—I'd probably support him. I'd love to find someone who can come up with a creative idea on their own, not just a rehashing of the same old stunts, so that it does continue after the Jim Rose Circus. Because I did what I set out to do. Now I'm just going around, reveling and having fun with my fans. I don't really have anything left to prove."

