



KAYO LACKEY

IN THE JESTER'S COURT

PAUL KRASSNER ON THE VIRTUES
OF IRREVERENCE, INDECENCY,
AND ILLEGAL DRUGS

DAVID KUPFER

PAUL KRASSNER has been spreading his witty, sometimes snide, and often political brand of humor since the late 1950s. His publication the *Realist* was the underground journal of the counterculture during the sixties and seventies, breaking political stories and covering topics that were taboo for the mainstream press. Krassner became known for interweaving current events, social criticism, and satire in a manner not previously seen in print.

Born and raised in New York City, Krassner was a violin prodigy, and in 1939, at the age of six, he became the youngest person ever to perform at Carnegie Hall. In the 1950s he worked as a writer for comedian Steve Allen and for *Mad* magazine, and he became friends with stand-up comic Lenny Bruce. Krassner edited Bruce's autobiography, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*, and at Bruce's encouragement began performing stand-up comedy himself at the Village Gate nightclub in New York City.

As editor of the *Realist*, Krassner approached journalism not as an objective observer but as a participant in many of the stories he covered. After he interviewed a doctor who performed illegal abortions, Krassner ran an underground abortion referral service. He wrote about the antiwar movement while he was an active member of it. And in addition to publishing articles on the psychedelic revolution, he took LSD with the revolution's unofficial leader, Harvard psychologist Timothy Leary, and the spiritual teacher Ram Dass, a former associate of Leary's at Harvard. Later Krassner joined novelist Ken Kesey's *Merry Pranksters*, who traveled the country spreading the gospel of psychedelics.

In 1967 Krassner cofounded (with Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin) the *Yippies*, a countercultural political party that led theatrical demonstrations outside the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. At the height of the Vietnam War, Krassner was on an FBI list of radicals to be rounded up in the event of a national emergency. His friends John Lennon and Yoko Ono financed a 1972 issue of the *Realist* that exposed the Watergate break-in before journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein did so in the mainstream press. In 1978 publisher Larry Flynt hired Krassner to take over the pornographic men's magazine *Hustler*. The job lasted only six months, during which time Krassner appeared as a centerfold in the magazine.

In 2004 Krassner received an American Civil Liberties Union Upton Sinclair Award for his dedication to freedom of expression, and at the fourteenth annual Cannabis Cup in Amsterdam, Krassner was inducted into the Counterculture Hall of Fame by the publication *High Times*. His articles have been published in *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Mother Jones*, *the Nation*, *the New York Press*, *National Lampoon*, *the Village Voice*, *the Los Angeles Times*, and *Funny Times*. The *Realist* printed its last issue in 2001, but Krassner is still active as a writer, contributing a monthly column to *High*

Times and a bimonthly column to *Adult Video News Online*. He is a regular columnist for the *Huffington Post* website and has been actively involved in movements to end the Iraq War and to legalize marijuana. ("Cigarettes are legal, and smoking them causes the death of twelve hundred people a day," he says. "Marijuana is illegal, and the worst side effect is maybe you'll raid your neighbor's refrigerator.")

Krassner has released six comedy albums and authored numerous books, including his autobiography, *Confessions of a Raving, Unconfined Nut: Misadventures in the Counterculture (Touchstone)* — which he is currently updating and expanding for a possible new edition — and *One Hand Jerking: Reports from an Investigative Satirist (Seven Stories Press)*. His most recent collection, *Who's to Say What's Obscene? Politics, Culture, and Comedy in America Today*, will be published by *City Lights Books* in July of this year.

Krassner lives in southern California's Desert Hot Springs with his wife, Nancy Cain, whom he married on April Fool's Day twenty years ago. When I arrived at their home, just prior to last year's presidential election, he answered the door wearing jeans and a black T-shirt that said, "Stop Bitching — Start a Revolution." He walks with a cane because of a beating he suffered at the hands of two San Francisco cops during the riot following the voluntary-manslaughter verdict in the trial of Dan White, who had assassinated Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk. Krassner's dark, curly hair and youthful demeanor make him appear younger than seventy-six.

On the walls of Krassner's home office hang a portrait of Albert Einstein with the maxim "Imagination is more important than knowledge," a photo of the Great Pyramid of Giza (from when Krassner traveled to Egypt for the *Grateful Dead* concerts there in 1978), and a trickster icon from a healers-and-shamans expedition in Ecuador. Outside the window, in a part of the yard he calls "Birdland," doves, finches, and starlings were bathing, and hummingbirds hovered by huge blossoms. We were serenaded by a mockingbird Krassner had nicknamed "Plagiarist." True to form, halfway through our conversation, Krassner lit up a fat joint.

Kupfer: Who are your influences?

Krassner: I come out of a tradition of American humorists that includes Mark Twain, H.L. Mencken, and Will Rogers. My first modern influence was Lyle Stuart, who published the *Independent*, where I did my apprenticeship in journalism and wrote a column titled "Freedom of Wit." Another of my mentors was Jean Shepherd, the radio humorist. In the middle of the night he'd talk about how you might explain an amusement park to a Venusian, or about a man who could taste an ice cube and tell you the make and model of the refrigerator it came from. Comedian Lenny Bruce was my role model as a stand-up performer, and novelist Joseph Heller was my big-

gest influence as a satirical writer. Heller explained to me how, in his book *Catch-22*, he used exaggeration so gradually that unreality became more credible than reality.

Kupfer: You have done stand-up comedy for nearly fifty years. How have your audiences changed?

Krassner: I think they're more aware now of the contradictions in society: the phony piety, the hypocrisy. And I've evolved right along with them. Performing, for me, is a two-way street. English is my second language. Laughter is my first.

Kupfer: Do you aspire to foster social change with your satire, or do you just want to see how far you can push the limits?

Krassner: In the wishful-thinking corner of my mind, pushing the limits and fostering social change are inextricably connected, but I don't have any delusions that I've inspired an epidemic of epiphanies. People don't like to be lectured to, but if you can make them laugh, their defenses come down, and for the time being they've accepted whatever truth is embedded in your humor. When a large audience of people are all laughing together, no matter how disparate their backgrounds are, it's a unifying moment. But who's to say how long that moment of truth or unity lasts and whether it leads to any action? It's one more positive input, but rarely a tipping point.

Kupfer: What pushed you into the role of *provocateur*?

Krassner: I couldn't help but notice the difference between what I experienced in the streets and the way it was reported in the mainstream media, which acted as cheerleaders for the suppression of dissent.

Kupfer: Was there some early life event that led you to this calling?

Krassner: I was a child-prodigy violinist and at the age of six played the Vivaldi Concerto in A Minor at Carnegie Hall. A year later I saw my first movie, *Intermezzo*, which was also Ingrid Bergman's first major movie, and I fell in love with the theme song. I couldn't fathom why it felt so good to hear a certain combination of notes in a certain order with a particular rhythm, but it gave me enormous pleasure to hum that melody over and over to myself. It was like having a secret companion. When I told my violin teacher that I wanted to learn how to play the movie theme, he sneered and said, "That's not right for you." His words reverberated in my head. *That's not right for you*. How could he know? For me, this was not merely a refusal of my request; it was a declaration of war upon the individual. In self-defense I drove him crazy during lessons, and after he died, I bought the sheet music to "Intermezzo" and taught myself to play it. That was the end of my musical career. I had a talent for playing the violin, but I had a passion for making people laugh.

A couple of decades later I heard different metaphors for that kind of experience. Timothy Leary talked about the way "people try to get you onto their game board." And Ken Kesey warned, "Always stay in your own movie."



PAUL KRASSNER

Kupfer: How did you maintain your integrity as the editor and publisher of the *Realist*?

Krassner: I didn't have to answer to anyone. There was no board of directors and no advertisers, and the readers trusted me not to be afraid to offend them — though sometimes they said, "Well, now you've gone too far." Money was always tight, and I had to subsidize the magazine by doing interviews for *Playboy* and speaking at college campuses. I was forced to stop publishing in 1974 when I ran out of money, but in 1985 I got a five-thousand-dollar grant to start it up again as a newsletter, which lasted until 2001.

Kupfer: What was it like in the early days of the underground press?

Krassner: When *People* magazine labeled me "father of the underground press," I demanded a paternity test. "Underground" is a misnomer, because it wasn't a secret who published those weeklies or where you could get copies. A truly underground paper was the *Outlaw*, which was clandestinely published by inmates and staffers at San Quentin State Prison.

Kupfer: It seems as if "underground" publications are even more accessible today. You can get *Earth First! Journal* at Borders and Barnes & Noble now.

Krassner: That's good news in terms of infiltrating the mainstream. Of course, with the possibility of Barnes & Noble buying out Borders, there may soon be one book giant: Barnes & Noble without Borders.

Kupfer: When you relaunched the *Realist* as a newsletter, you said in your editorial statement, "Irreverence is still our only sacred cow."

Krassner: I've had second thoughts about that since then. There seems to be too much irreverence for its own sake these days. In some cases victims, rather than oppressors, have become the target.

Kupfer: Do you have any thoughts on the *New Yorker's* cartoon cover last year picturing Barack and Michelle Obama as anti-American terrorists? Is this what you'd call "irreverence for its own sake"?

Krassner: No, although I understood how people with a pro-Obama agenda might worry the cover would be misunderstood by a severely dumbed-down public. I thought it was a brilliant parody of the inaccurate negative stereotypes perpetuated by the right-wing propaganda machine.

Kupfer: There seems to be a cottage industry in humorous coverage of contemporary affairs these days: The satirical newspaper the *Onion* is distributed nationally. Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert both have satirical "news" shows on the Comedy Central network. What is the state of irony and irreverence in the U.S.?

Krassner: Reality keeps nipping at the heels of satire — and lately outdistancing it. That wasn't a satirist who said there were dinosaurs on Noah's Ark; it was an earnest creationist trying to reconcile science and religion.

I WAS SEVENTY-SIX IN APRIL, AND THE REASON FOR MY RELATIVE LONGEVITY IS THAT I NEVER TAKE ANY LEGAL DRUGS — EXCEPT A FEW MONTHS AGO. I WAS AT A PARTY, AND I TOOK AN ASPIRIN. I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A HEADACHE. I JUST GAVE IN TO PEER PRESSURE.

The more repression there is, the more need there is for irreverence toward those who are responsible for that repression. But too often sarcasm passes for irony, name-calling passes for insight, bleeped-out four-letter words pass for wit, and lowest-common-denominator jokes pass for analysis. Satire should have a point of view. It doesn't have to get a belly laugh. It does have to present criticism.

Kupfer: Presidential candidates have been eager to appear on *Saturday Night Live* and the Stewart and Colbert shows. Does humor have more influence in the world of politics now compared to when you began in comedy?

Krassner: I wonder if that sort of humor only pacifies the audience, an effect philosopher Herbert Marcuse called "repressive tolerance." After all, appearances on comedy shows are intended to humanize political candidates. In 1968 Richard Nixon said, "Sock it to me," on *Laugh-In* and defeated his opponent, Hubert Humphrey, who'd turned down an invitation to be on the show. Forty years later Jay Leno tosses softball questions to politicians, and David Letterman's writers supply Hillary Clinton with a "Top-Ten List" to read off the teleprompter. Politicians go on *The Daily Show* so Jon Stewart can interrupt their stump speeches with his compulsive punch lines. I get frustrated when Stewart sucks up to war criminals like Henry Kissinger and Pakistan's former dictator Pervez Musharraf. On the other hand, he has had Jimmy Carter on to assert that any presidential candidate must be approved by the pro-Israel lobby. That video is "no longer available" on YouTube.

Kupfer: The Left in the U.S. is sometimes accused of being humorless. Is this true?

Krassner: I find it unfair to generalize about the humorlessness of any group, whether it's the Left, the Right, the feminists, or, for that matter, comedians. It's true that the old Left criticized the New Left for being too frivolous, but that had more to do with respectability than with humor or the lack of it.

Kupfer: You used to write for *Mad* magazine. What's your assessment of its impact on generations of Americans?

Krassner: All I know is that it stimulates kids' natural sense of irreverence and their desire to share it. At a certain point, when the circulation reached 1.25 million — virtually all of them preteens and teenagers — a few of the ideas I pitched as a freelancer were rejected because they were "too adult." (I

said to publisher Bill Gaines, "I guess you don't want to change horses in midstream," and he said, "Not when the horse has a rocket up its ass.") That's one of the reasons why I started the *Realist*; there was no satirical magazine for adults.

Kupfer: Through your writing and comedy, you've helped a generation or two of young people develop a jaded, questioning attitude. Is this what you set out to do?

Krassner: All I wanted to do was communicate without compromise. Abbie Hoffman once chastised me, saying, "You're not a leader; you don't urge people to do things; you're just a social gadfly." And he was right. I'm not a leader, except by example. It's gratifying, though, when I hear from someone who was inspired by my work to take a progressive, humane stance. But there were also *Realist* readers who were professional assholes. As Rod Serling said when a fan of his TV show *The Twilight Zone* committed a copycat murder based on an episode of the program, "I am responsible to my audience, not for them."

Kupfer: You associated with so many cultural icons of the sixties and seventies, from former Beatle John Lennon and his artist wife, Yoko Ono, to men's-magazine publishers Hugh Hefner and Larry Flynt. How did you come to meet them all?

Krassner: The *Realist* resonated with their sensibilities. I had even interviewed several of them for the *Realist*. My favorite moment came when I asked Ram Dass, "If you and I were to exchange philosophies — if I believed in reincarnation and you didn't — how do you think our behavior would change?" He hesitated for a second, then replied: "Well, if you believed in reincarnation, you would never ask a question like that." And then his low chuckle of amusement and surprise blossomed into an uproarious belly laugh of delight as he savored the implications of his own Zen-like answer. I found myself playing that segment of the tape over and over again, like a favorite piece of music.

Kupfer: What's most upsetting to you in the world today?

Krassner: The creeping — no, *galloping* — fascism in this country, specifically the lack of accountability in government agencies, multinational corporations, and organized religion. Nobody wants to take responsibility for the injustice and anguish they cause. Power without compassion is the name of their game, and dehumanization is their modus operandi. They reek with arrogance. There's a trickle-up effect, from the brutality permitted in the prison system, to those federal officials who approve international torture. And there's a trickle-down effect, from Karl Rove's refusing to testify under oath about the political firings of U.S. attorneys, to the court system in which a just-released African American spent twenty-six years behind bars because the prosecutors withheld evidence of his innocence. And yet those prosecutors cannot be legally punished. At the very least we should give them empathy implants.

Kupfer: Do you really think the U.S. has descended into fascism under George W. Bush?

Krassner: I'm sorry, but the PATRIOT Act won't allow me to answer that. I'll just say this: Everything that Hitler did was in keeping with laws that had been recently passed.

Kupfer: When the counterculture becomes enveloped by the culture, what gets lost?

Krassner: Idealism gets replaced by fashion, from tied-dyed T-shirts to lava lamps. People who've never ingested LSD refer to something as being "like such-and-such on acid." The whole baby-boomer generation has now become a marketing demographic. Who ever expected R. Crumb, whose comics were underground in the sixties, to have three-page spreads in the *New Yorker*?

Kupfer: Well, wasn't the mantra of the flower children "Join us"?

Krassner: We called that out to spectators in a lot of marches. The irony is that while [former Republican and current publisher of the Huffington Post] Arianna Huffington, for example, did join us and has become a powerful voice for rationality and fairness, some former flower children who have grown thorns of cynicism criticize her as an opportunist. When opportunity knocks, don't knock opportunity. Huffington joined us because she's been a good listener with an open mind and a proactive spirit.

Kupfer: The mass media have painted the hippies as purveyors of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, not as social and cultural prophets.

Krassner: Too much has been made of the hippies' association with hedonism as opposed to fundamental cultural shifts. That's just an example of history being distorted, transforming the prophetic into the pathetic. Fortunately a more comprehensive rendering of countercultural history is still in progress.

Kupfer: What is the healthiest cultural shift you see developing today?

Krassner: There seems to be a mass awakening in process, comparable to the evolutionary jump in consciousness that took place during the sixties. It gives me a sense of hope, as well as a sense of continuity, that countercultural values have "infiltrated" the mainstream: the peace movement, organic food, protecting the rain forests, environmental sustainability, growing hemp, recycling waste, racial equality, feminism, animal rights, renewable energy. The seeds that were planted then continue to blossom, and the counterculture that began in the sixties continues to be celebrated at such annual events as the Rainbow Gathering, Burning Man, Earthdance, the Oregon Country Fair, and the Starwood Festival. And all the psychedelic relics I know have not stopped serving as agents of change.

Kupfer: Can you give an example of that mass awakening occurring in the next generation?

Krassner: I think the best example is how the entire eighth grade at a school in New York City's South Bronx — 160 students — refused to take a three-hour practice exam for a statewide social-studies test. They handed in blank exams and submitted petitions and a list of grievances to the principal and the Department of Education. One of the protest leaders, a thirteen-year-old girl, complained that the school system was just treating the students like "test dummies" for the companies that make the exams.

THE CIA ORIGINALLY ENVISIONED LSD AS A MEANS OF MIND CONTROL. INSTEAD, FOR MILLIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, ACID SERVED AS A VEHICLE TO EXPLORE THEIR MINDS, DEPROGRAMMING THEMSELVES FROM MAINSTREAM CULTURE AND CREATING AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURE, WHICH INCLUDED THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT. SO THE CIA'S PLAN BACKFIRED.

Kupfer: What role have drugs played in your life, and do you still use them today?

Krassner: I was always high on life; drugs just got me higher. It's the same today. They also help relieve pain. The last time I took Ecstasy was about a year ago. I smoke marijuana every day. Listen, I was seventy-six in April, and the reason for my relative longevity is that I never take any *legal* drugs — except a few months ago. I was at a party, and I took an aspirin. I didn't even have a headache. I just gave in to peer pressure.

I find it ironic that one possible side effect of legal antidepressants is suicide. Did you know that one in eight U.S. soldiers in Iraq is on antidepressants? Imagine popping a Prozac so that you can feel better about battering down doors and killing innocents. Is this what's meant by "support our troops"?

Kupfer: Why is it we remain unable to fully decriminalize cannabis in this country?

Krassner: In a word: fear. Politicians fear not being elected. Voters fear the government propaganda they've been fed. The war on drugs is really a war on certain people who use certain drugs. And marijuana isn't even a drug; it's a weed. But I think decriminalization will spread state by state, despite the fear, and eventually there will come a tipping point.

Kupfer: What makes you so confident of this?

Krassner: There's increasing discussion about the injustice of pot laws. Law Enforcement against Prohibition [LEAP] is a national organization of former and current members of law enforcement who support drug regulation rather than prohibition. So even police, who are supposed to arrest people for violating the law, are speaking out against these laws. When the police switch sides in the war on drugs, that's a turning point.

Dennis Peron, the coauthor of California's medical-marijuana initiative, Proposition 215, has said — and not as a joke — that *all* use of pot is medical. In my anthology *Pot Stories for the Soul*, a woman writes that smoking pot helps her when she gets depressed; it raises her spirits and changes her focus. But the important thing is it doesn't help her avoid her problems. Rather it helps her uncover the source of her sad-

ness so that she can deal with the underlying issues. She says it heals her emotionally and spiritually.

Kupfer: You were an avid consumer of LSD. What do you think the drug's influence on Western culture has been?

Krassner: Science-fiction author Robert Anton Wilson called LSD a "psychological H-bomb." It has been a vehicle for self-exploration and creativity. It's also fun to take it and see music and taste ice cream in your toes. Of course, there are side effects. For instance, your awe of nature could be enhanced. If you're a parent, you might understand your kids better. But the outcome of a trip always depends on the individual who's taking it. Tim Leary once let me listen in on a phone call from a stockbroker who wanted to thank Leary for turning him on to acid because it'd given him the courage to sell short.

Kupfer: Do you think there was a relationship between LSD use and progressive political activity in the late sixties and early seventies?

Krassner: Definitely. The CIA originally envisioned LSD as a means of mind control. Instead, for millions of young people, acid served as a vehicle to explore their minds, deprogramming themselves from mainstream culture and creating an alternative culture, which included the antiwar movement. So the CIA's plan backfired.

All kinds of artists were influenced by LSD: painters, sculptors, comic-book artists, musicians, writers, dancers, filmmakers. I remember Tim Leary once telling me, "Someday people will be walking on linoleum with a design that was envisioned by someone tripping on acid."

Kupfer: You helped Groucho Marx take his first LSD trip. What was that like?

Krassner: Groucho played a Mafia chieftain named "God" in Otto Preminger's film *Skidoo*. The movie pretty much advocated the use of LSD, which Groucho had never tried, and he was curious. Moreover he felt a certain responsibility not to steer his audience wrong. He had read about my acid trips in the *Realist*, so he asked if I could get him some pure LSD and accompany him on a trip. I didn't play hard to get.

We had a period of silence and a period of listening to music. I was accustomed to playing rock-and-roll while tripping, but we were at the home of an actress whose record collection consisted entirely of classical music and Broadway-show albums. First we listened to Bach's Cantata No. 7. Groucho said, "I'm supposed to be Jewish, but I was seeing the most beautiful



MARTIN FISHMAN

visions of Gothic cathedrals. Do you think Bach knew he was doing that?" Later we were listening to the score of the musical comedy *Fanny*. There was a song called "Welcome Home," and the lyrics go something like "Welcome home, says the clock." And the chair says, "Welcome home," and so do various other pieces of furniture. Groucho started acting out each line, as though he were actually being greeted by the clock, the chair, and the rest of the furniture. He was like a child.

At one point Groucho somehow got into a negative space. He was cynical about institutions such as marriage ("legal quicksand") and individuals such as then-President Lyndon Johnson ("that potato-head"). I asked Groucho, "What gives

you hope?" He thought for a moment, then said one word: "People." He told me about one of his favorite contestants on his TV game show *You Bet Your Life*: "He was an elderly gentleman with white hair, but quite a chipper fellow. I asked him what he did to retain his sunny disposition. 'Well, I'll tell you,' he said. 'Every morning I get up, and I make a choice to be happy that day.'"

Kupfer: Do you have hope that the era of American arrogance will come to an end if the Democrats win the upcoming election?

Krassner: Barack Obama is already making compromises to get elected, but the Democrats have been doing that since they regained power two years ago. With the horrendous domestic and foreign disasters that the next administration will inherit, whatever optimism I have is kept in check by the old saying "The devil never sleeps."

Kupfer: During the sixties, when abortion was illegal, you published an interview with a doctor who ran a clinic, and afterward you got so many requests to get in touch with him that you provided a free abortion referral service. Didn't you nearly get prosecuted for that?

Krassner: District attorneys in two cities in New York State tried to bluff a confession out of me, but I saw through their attempts and refused to talk. In 1970 my attorney, Gerald Lefcourt (later president of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers), filed a suit on my behalf, challenging the constitutionality of the abortion law. He argued that the district attorneys had no power to investigate the violation of an unconstitutional law, and therefore they could not force me to testify. So I became the plaintiff in the first lawsuit to declare the abortion laws in New York State unconstitutional. Later various women's groups joined the suit, and ultimately the state legislature repealed the criminal sanctions against abortion. This was prior to the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*.

Kupfer: Where do you get your news, and how do you sidestep the cabal of narrow interests that shape the mass media?

Krassner: The Internet is my antidote. I monitor the mainstream newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV, but I also monitor the Web. They're two different worlds. What interests me is the interaction between those worlds, the way information rises to the top faster and faster. Even the rate of acceleration is accelerating. Websites I like are Progressive Review, Boing Boing, the Huffington Post, CounterPunch, Truthout, Truthdig, Common Dreams, Slate, Salon, Reality Sandwich, and Ironic Times.

Kupfer: Do you think the Internet is mostly a positive development?

Krassner: It can be either positive or negative. Let me tell you a story: In 1970 I finally decided to move from New York to California. The day I moved, I went hiking in the Sierras with a few friends. There was a waterfall near our campsite, and I wanted to stand under it, but the water was painfully cold. I knew that, if I were to dive in, it would symbolize my commitment to the move. So I ripped off my clothes, counted to three,

and ran screaming into the waterfall. We spent that night on poet-philosopher Gary Snyder's land. He was building his nonelectric dream house with the aid of meditation students. I ingested a tab of LSD to enhance the change my consciousness was already undergoing. The acid was coming on strong when Snyder asked each guest to pump his water pump a hundred times. I did it all right; keeping count was the hard part. That evening we all sat around a campfire, making music and telling Indian legends. I was peaking when Snyder read a poem by Robert Duncan, and I focused on one particular line: "If the possibilities are infinite / That means in both directions." So a hammer is a tool that can be used to build a house or to bop somebody on the head. And a computer is a tool that can be used, and is being used, to both help and hurt humanity. I feel that the battle between competition and cooperation is increasingly being fought in cyberspace.

Kupfer: Do you think this informational shift of power, from the mainstream media to the Internet and bloggers, will lead to meaningful sociopolitical change?

Krassner: Yes, because the Internet is a source of information, and maybe even inspiration, for the mainstream media. Of course there's no guarantee, but the alternative is to say and do nothing.

Kupfer: Do the Yippies still convene?

Krassner: That depends on what you mean by "convene." Whenever I go to New York City, I have dinner with a group of friends from my Yippie days. The second generation of Yippies still organizes annual marches for the legalization of marijuana, among other things. In fact I just got an e-mail from A.J. Weberman, the Bob Dylan fanatic who became infamous for sifting through celebrities' garbage. He's forming a group called "Yippies for McCain." Its motto is "Elect a war criminal president! Move the White House to Gitmo!"

The Yippies were part of an age-old tradition of tricksters, and that spirit lives on in those who taunt smug politicians. We borrowed a trick from the CIA: you don't have to manipulate the media if you can manipulate the events the media cover. The Yippies did guerrilla theater, such as throwing a couple of hundred one-dollar bills from a balcony onto the floor of the New York Stock Exchange to create a new contact sport: diving for dollars. Another infamous Yippie prank was when we announced our plans for spraying Washington police with a "contact aphrodisiac" before levitating the Pentagon. Then there was the 1969 Valentine's Day Caper: sending thousands of joints [paid for by rock musician Jimi Hendrix] to various mailing lists, including the media, each with an enclosed fact sheet about marijuana. And — oh yes — nominating a pig named Pigasus for president at the 1968 Chicago Democratic convention.

Now technology has changed the nature of protest. It can be done cheaper and quicker and reach a wider audience on the Internet. A YouTube parody of the Obama campaign's "Yes We Can" video pokes fun at John McCain's pro-war campaign. MoveOn.org has created the "Bush-McCain Challenge": they present a series of quotations, and you have to guess whether each statement was made by George Bush or McCain. Until

I DELVED SO DEEPLY INTO CONSPIRACY RESEARCH THAT I WENT NUTS FROM INFORMATION OVERLOAD — AND THIS WAS BEFORE PERSONAL COMPUTERS. I ACTUALLY ASKED A NEW GIRLFRIEND IF THERE WAS A MICROPHONE IN HER CAT'S FLEA COLLAR. TWENTY YEARS LATER, THOUGH, I WOULD READ THAT THE CIA ONCE WIRED A CAT TO EAVESDROP ON CONVERSATIONS.

recently I was contributing a blog titled “Assholes of the Week” to the Huffington Post, but I became weary of it. So many assholes, so little time.

Kupfer: Do you think the irreverence of the Yuppies created a reactionary backlash?

Krassner: A backlash is merely people’s attempt to justify feelings or positions they already had. If free speech gets stifled for fear of creating a backlash, then there will be no progress. The goal is to spread the truth, and if that pushes some people too far, well, that’s just the risk of being outspoken.

Kupfer: Some vocal former political activists of your era have grown the “thorns of cynicism” you spoke of earlier. Why do you think some progressives turn to more-conservative politics?

Krassner: There’s an old saying: “A liberal is a radical with a family.” But I’ll name a name, since he’s dead: Jerry Rubin. Jerry was a Yippie, but after the Vietnam War ended, he reinvented himself. He became a New Age junkie, cut his hair short, wore a tie — which he had previously referred to as a “noose” — studied finance, and finally settled into “multilevel marketing” (a euphemism for a pyramid scheme) of an energy drink that contained a lot of caffeine. In his defense, he said, “I’m not selling nuclear warheads.” Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin actually went on a debate tour together: Yippie versus Yuppie. I moderated one of their debates in San Francisco, during which I pointed out, “If Abbie were to throw money in the Stock Exchange again, this time Jerry would invest it.”

Kupfer: You’ve said, “Politics is just a missing link between the status quo and the force of evolution.” What did you mean?

Krassner: I meant that Thomas Jefferson was against slavery even while he continued to own slaves. The fact that Barack Obama has won the nomination as the Democrats’ presidential candidate is evolution’s answer to Jefferson’s cognitive dissonance. And now Obama himself is serving as the political buffer between the status quo and that force. He’s aware of the misery and stress caused by the insurance companies’ vested

interest in the current method of healthcare financing, yet he admits that the industry is so thoroughly entrenched in the process that trying to change it at this point in history would be futile.

Kupfer: A lot of taboos have been overturned. Are there many left?

Krassner: You mean like an openly gay president living in the White House with her longtime companion, the First Partner? Actually a Gallup poll found that 53 percent of respondents wouldn’t vote for an atheist for president, no matter how well qualified the candidate was. I even saw a woman on the news who said that the word *atheist* should be outlawed. So I guess that would qualify as a taboo. It’s a taboo to say that the troops in Iraq have been dying in vain.

Kupfer: As a Jew and a humanist, how do you feel about the Israeli government’s treatment of the Palestinians?

Krassner: First of all, I don’t consider myself to be Jewish, since I don’t accept the tenets of the religion, and, unlike the Nazis, I don’t believe that Judaism is a race. I don’t think that Jews are the chosen people, or even that people are the chosen species. But I’m not a self-hating Jew. Though I was circumcised against my will, I don’t plan to have my foreskin sewn back on.

As an atheist and an absurdist, I feel the most absurd thing I can do is to have a dialogue with the God I don’t believe in: “Since you’re all-powerful and you know everything that’s ever going to happen,” I say, “you had to know what would happen if the Jews immigrated to Palestine. You knew the Palestinians wouldn’t greet them with ‘Welcome. Please, take our land.’ You told the Jews that this was the Promised Land, but you didn’t have an exit strategy.” And then I hear the voice of God: “I never made any promises. I only said I’d see what I could do.”

It’s worth noting that when the Jews were trying to flee the Holocaust, they were rejected by Great Britain and the United States. I once asked Bob Dylan how he felt about the Holocaust. “I resented it,” he replied. On another occasion I asked him why he was learning Hebrew. “I can’t speak it,” he said. Dylan is a genuine minimalist.

Kupfer: Would you describe yourself as a completely secular person? Do you hold any spiritual beliefs or have any spiritual practices?

Krassner: I guess I’m a spiritual secularist, if that’s not an oxymoron. My paths of secularism and spirituality are the same: I try to do the appropriate thing at each moment.

One of my spiritual influences was J. Krishnamurti, who rejected any opportunities to become a guru. I once saw him speak at Carnegie Hall to three thousand of his nondisciples. Somebody asked him why there was evil in the world, and he answered, “To thicken the plot.” That inspired me to perceive reality through a theatrical filter, and now I just admire how skillfully everybody plays themselves, including evil people. On the other hand, another influence, Jerry Garcia of the Grateful Dead, told me, “There are no evil people; there are only victims.” The last time I saw Ram Dass, he told me, “I’m trying really hard to love George Bush.” I laughed and said, “Thirty years ago you told me, ‘I’m trying really hard to love Richard Nixon.’”

So the struggle goes on; only the names have changed.

My religion used to be Coincidence, but then Mae Brussell, the high priestess of conspiracy research, asked me a theological question: “How many coincidences does it take to make a conspiracy?” And I underwent a conversion. In fact I delved so deeply into conspiracy research that I went nuts from information overload — and this was before personal computers. I actually asked a new girlfriend if there was a microphone in her cat’s flea collar. Twenty years later, though, I would read that the CIA once wired a cat to eavesdrop on conversations. Microphones were installed in its body, and its tail became an aerial. So one person’s paranoia is another person’s vision of the future.

Kupfer: What is your take on the 9/11 truth seekers, who believe the U.S. government was behind the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001?

Krassner: I have no doubt that the Bush administration is capable of having been behind the attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. And historians have found that such plots aren’t uncommon. *Body of Secrets*, by James Bamford, reveals that in 1962 U.S. military leaders proposed to commit violent terrorist acts against innocent Americans and blame Cuba in order to create a pretext for invading the island and deposing dictator Fidel Castro. They even suggested blowing up a U.S. ship in Guantánamo Bay and blaming Cuba to create “a helpful wave of indignation.”

So I think the government is capable of such acts. And I also believe the White House knew something was being planned against the United States in 2001 that could retroactively serve as a latter-day Pearl Harbor to justify their own imperialist plans for the oil-laden Middle East. But I don’t agree with the truth seekers’ conclusions, and they distrust the motivations of anyone in the media who disagrees with them. They assume that reporters either refuse to acknowledge the truth, or remain silent so they won’t lose their jobs, or are actually part of the conspiracy. Amy Goodman, host of Pacifica’s *Democracy Now* and one of the best journalists in the country, has been attacked by the 9/11 truth seekers even though, like me, she says their claims should be investigated. The problem, I’ve found, is that if I mention to a 9/11 truth seeker the research project by *Popular Mechanics*, which deconstructed the theory of “controlled demolition” of the Twin Towers, the response is “Well, what do you expect? *Popular Mechanics* is published by Hearst.” I once asked a true believer, “If the Pentagon was really hit by a missile, and not by a plane, then what happened to all the people who were on the plane that didn’t hit the Pentagon?” And the answer was a triumphant “Aha!”

Kupfer: What about the theory that convicted murderer Charles Manson, who led the Manson Family cult, was a patsy set up to discredit the communal, back-to-the-land lifestyle that so many young people were pursuing in the late sixties and early seventies?

Krassner: I don’t give it any credence, although I do believe there was a campaign to neutralize the counterculture because it represented a threat to the economy. I’m trying to meet with a man who was in the FBI’s “hippie squad” — agents

who were taught how to roll a joint and infiltrate communes.

In my own investigation of the Manson Family, I’ve come to the conclusion that they served as a hit squad for mobsters who had befriended Manson in prison while he was doing time for statutory rape. Manson was never a hippie, and the Family’s victims were not selected at random. The motive was revenge for a bad drug deal the first night, and for unpaid loans the second night.

There’s also another layer of conspiracy. I interviewed a former deputy sheriff at the Malibu Sheriff’s Department, which had assisted the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department in the raid on Manson’s ranch. The deputy told me that Manson should have been arrested on parole violations long before the murders, because there had been automatic weapons at the ranch and complaints about machine guns being fired at night. But officers had been instructed not to arrest Manson or any of his followers. The deputy contends that Manson was left on the streets because the Malibu Sheriff’s Department thought he was stockpiling guns to launch an attack on the Black Panthers. And so it may have been racism in law enforcement that allowed the murders to take place.

Kupfer: Looking back at your life, would you offer your younger self any advice?

Krassner: Yeah: Avoid internalizing society’s sexism, racism, ageism — pick an ism, any ism. See things from others’ points of view. Watch less TV. Sing and dance more.

Kupfer: What projects are you working on these days?

Krassner: A few universities are interested in my archives — in other words, all the crap in my garage. I don’t have every issue of the *Realist*, so I’m pleased that they’re going online as the *Realist* Archive Project. Nancy and I are running a little cottage business, selling a digitally colored edition of the “Disneyland Memorial Orgy” poster and a few of my books through my website, www.paulkrassner.com.

Kupfer: I would think there would be serious legal ramifications for vending the “Disneyland Memorial Orgy” poster — an image of Disney cartoon characters engaged in various acts of fornication and perversity.

Krassner: Legally that form of parody is considered “fair comment.” It’s not a violation of Disney’s copyright, because it’s obviously an original drawing by the late *Mad* magazine artist Wally Wood. In fact the “Disneyland Memorial Orgy” itself is copyrighted.

I’ve just put together a collection of my recent columns and articles, *Who’s to Say What’s Obscene?*, to be published in 2009. I want to get back to working on my current obsession, my long-awaited (by me) first novel. It’s about a contemporary Lenny Bruce-type satirist. What my protagonist says on stage is taken from my own performances, and I find myself resenting this imaginary character for stealing my material. It’s a wonderfully schizophrenic process. I told my friend Avery Corman, the author of *Oh, God* and *Kramer vs. Kramer*, “It’s really hard writing fiction. You have to make everything up.”

“Come on, Paul,” he replied, “you’ve been making stuff up your whole life.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but that was journalism.” ■