

Interview with Peter Young

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Peter Young was arrested March 21, 2005, after a seven year stint on the FBI's Wanted list for a string of fur farm raids. He was sentenced after this interview took place, on November 8th, 2005 to a two year prison term. Here he takes time to talk about his case, direct action, snitches, and what the future holds. For all the latest news on Peter's case and how to support him visit SupportPeter.com.

No Compromise: You were wanted by the FBI for seven years. What led to your arrest?

Peter Young: My only "mistake" was moving several copies of the same CD across the room at a Starbucks while an off-duty cop observed from outside. By no stretch of the imagination was it "shoplifting," but when a search turned up items deemed suspicious (such as a book titled "Evasion" and what they thought was a handcuff key taped to the rear of my belt), they decided to arrest me anyway. Fifteen minutes after the cops ran my fingerprints, the warrants from 1998 came up and this new chapter of my life began.

NC: With so much disparity among media reports of your case, give us the nutshell version — from the actions to the recent plea agreement.

Peter: It was just before pelting season 1997, and within a month all mink on American fur farms would be dead. Given the heat in the Northwest from reports of recent successful and failed mink liberations, as well as our visibility as Seattle activists, we looked towards the Great Plains. When the smoke cleared two weeks later, six fur farms had been visited with 8,000 mink and 100 foxes released. There were several close calls, such as when Tom Fasset walked up on us as we opened one of what was to be 2,000 cages. (I always wondered if they caught that one mink, and I found my answer in the FBI evidence turned over last month: She got away.) There's no question that we exceeded the bounds of safety — moving from one farm to the next, even hitting two farms in one night. And while it proved in the end to be our undoing, I can say I appreciate the sense of urgency that drove us this far. As bad as jail can be, I'd have always felt worse doing nothing.

Eleven months later, we were indicted on four counts of Extortion (20-year max sentence, each) and two counts of Animal Enterprise Terrorism (one year max., each).

Seven years later I was arrested. Factoring in my famously harsh judge, if found guilty I was told to expect eight to ten years. The case against me was mostly circumstantial, resting on a list of fur farm addresses, bolt cutters and Justin Samuel's testimony. I was moved from California to Wisconsin, where it became clear that they were more interested in who my friends were for the last seven years than in an old case, even offering me a deal of one year if I would tell them.

Their case fell apart when my lawyer filed a motion citing a 2003 Supreme Court ruling that "extortion" could not apply to political cases. Those charges were dismissed, and my maximum sentence unceremoniously dropped from 82 years to two. The feds lost interest, and in the end I settled on a deal of two years for the mink releases and one count of obtaining a driver's license with forged documents.

NC: Why did you target the fur industry, and what effect did your actions have?

Peter: We hit the fur industry because, in terms of immediate effects, I know of no action with greater yield than a mink release. The most common criticism of live liberations — that the liberated animals are just replaced — does not apply. A mink farm's closed breeding system means that when its animals are gone, they're gone. At least one of the farms we visited is now closed. Above all, we raided fur farms because we had no excuse not to raid fur farms. It's just too easy. Two people can liberate 1,000 mink every 15 minutes. I believe if most people knew the simplicity of these actions, they would spend a little less time on instant messenger and a little more time tearing down fences.

NC: It's important to evaluate not only our victories but also our failures. Can you offer an analysis of the mistakes which led to your indictment?

Peter: The plan was to hit as many farms as we could in as short of time possible. After the second release in Sioux City, it became clear the Midwest fur farming community was on alert. They began waiting for us, and we were followed several times in the coming days. The first mistake was not admitting we were too visible to continue. I have nothing to offer in my defense except that we were angry and very determined.

Mistake #2 was working with an emotionally unstable, dogmatic pacifist. I found out the hard way that being an informant for the FBI falls safely within a code of Gandhian nonviolence.

Our two-week campaign ended when a farmer followed us as we passed the Zimbal Minkery in Oostburg, Wisconsin. She called the police from her cell phone, and in minutes we were surrounded. After refusing consent to a search, our vehicle was confiscated. Above all, I regret not cutting through the fence of the Sheboygan impound lot that night and removing the evidence from our car. That would have solved a lot of my problems.

NC: Take us through a few milestones of your activist history.

Peter: Becoming vegan in 1994 was most significant, no question.

My shift to activism was inspired by the mid-90s straight-edge scene. Bands like Abnegation brought me from the “self-hating vegan” phase to one of action, and understanding this was not another “single issue,” but something much more urgent than I had admitted. We listened to the Earth Crisis demo every night before masking up and hitting those farms in 1997. I’ve been vegan and straight edge for 11 years.

The moment I knew that this is war came when we discovered a chicken slaughterhouse operating in a non-descript building just outside downtown Seattle. Animal liberation was suddenly no longer an abstract struggle but one to be fought in my own neighborhood. We crouched in the bushes, looking through a cracked window, watching the massacre. It was this image—flailing birds hung by their feet and carried to their bloody end—that branded into my mind a promise that I would dedicate the rest of my life to seeing it end.

Lastly, a crucial milestone came later that year while reading the paper and learning that anonymous activists had broken into a Seattle-area pig slaughterhouse and removed the bolt gun used as a killing device. Soon after, a second article appeared reporting another local slaughterhouse had its office ransacked and three chickens rescued from the killing floor. It was these reports of simple actions with life-saving effects that imparted upon me a profound message: While we may not win in our lifetime, there can be many small victories along the way.

NC: Sadly, your co-defendant Justin Samuel turned informant. What are your feelings on him today?

Peter: He is a disgrace and I wish him the worst.

NC: As the victim of a snitch, weigh in on the subject of how they should be dealt with. Compassion, banishment, or something in between?

Peter: Any person that utters one word of excuse for an informant should ask himself how many apologies he would make if the snitch’s victim were a close friend, loved one, or even him or herself. The first step is confronting the privilege of distance.

I hope any snitch who works to bury a liberation activist in prison, yet still remains convinced he has a rightful place in our movement, will continue to work for animals. Absolutely. What pains me is that there would be one person willing to work by the snitch’s side. In Justin Samuel’s attempt at reintegration, there were a few. I don’t expect to regain trust in those elements of our movement that allowed Justin to move through it unchallenged, those who looked away for the sake of harmony and those who allowed Justin to be present in large groups of activists (such as David Agranoff’s wedding) without showing him the door with force. My concern is as much for myself as for the message it sends, for the snitch culture it breeds and its future victims.

NC: During the mid-90s, there was an upswing in activism and direct action. What are your memories of this volatile time?

Peter: A lot of hooded sweatshirts and cammo... I remember liberal use of the term “vegan revolution.” I remember communiqués that read like hardcore lyrics, with lines like “This is a warning to those who transgress the natural order.” It was a climate of militancy that perhaps lacked good strategy. In the mid-90s, direct action did surge in the actual number of actions, but it was very scattershot, most often occurring at the retail/restaurant level. A message was sent, but at the end of the day I’m not sure how many lives were saved. While we recently may only see a few significant actions a year, I’m impressed with a big action and good strategy more than I am with a brick and spray-paint.

NC: Over the years, have you followed direct action? What specific actions did you find most significant?

Peter: The 1999 raid on the University of Minnesota, number one. The activists' ability to liberate animals, do \$3 million damage with their hands and leave the FBI with no idea how they had gotten in was remarkable. Nothing like it had happened in ten years. If we assume those responsible were not active in the 80s, we can take a lesson from a group that started from scratch, taught themselves the skill, and went big.

And the Ellsworth, Iowa fur farm that was emptied twice in one week, shutting it down. This was an especially celebrated action to me, as someone who knows the pain of hearing of those I set free being recaptured, but not having the courage myself to return to settle the score.

NC: Offer your analysis of direct action today. What's missing from the A.L.F.'s strategy?

Peter: First, trust no one who claims himself an expert on the A.L.F. Mine is not an authoritative analysis, just a personal one.

Second, lessen emphasis on the "two-five person" cell structure, and reconsider the power of the individual. One person on a bike with a backpack can potentially do as much damage as several, without the burden of consensus and the threat of snitches. The biggest limitation of direct action will always be the lack of solid people to work with. One person will not be able to do large scale liberations, but silent actions for which a lookout may not be necessary, such as break-ins for the confiscation of data, would happen more often if people considered the one (wo)man cell.

Additionally, the 80s model of using actions to expose atrocities with video footage should be revisited. There's value in reclaiming the A.L.F.'s now -tattered Robin Hood image. I can think of two examples of chicken liberations in which footage was taken and played on the evening news, giving the public its first glimpse inside an egg farm. Merge education and liberation.

Taking out targets whose work is not easily absorbed by others is good strategy. The business of a demolished KFC can be picked up by the one across the street, but there are only so many labs that are genetically engineering chickens without legs.

What I believe would see the greatest surge of direct action is providing people with more names and addresses. This is what made The Final Nail so successful in the 90s, and it's what has made the anti-HLS campaign so successful today. It is something that would make animal abuse no longer an abstraction but something with an exact physical location, erasing most people's excuse for turning away. Knowledge bears responsibility. I would like to see a Final Nail for labs. This, I think, would really set things off.

And I won't win any friends with this one, but I believe that limiting our use of numbing agents such as alcohol, drugs, computers/e-mail, and television would go a long way towards eliminating distractions and keeping us motivated to act.

My faith in direct action has not changed, only my wish for the A.L.F. to go bigger and go for the throat.

NC: Rumor has circulated that the FBI believes you wrote a book. Can you comment?

Peter: The allegation that I authored a 'zine, later printed by a radical publisher out of Olympia as an anonymously-authored, travel-themed short story collection, is fairly well known in some circles. It's an interesting theory.

NC: How do you feel about your plea bargain?

Peter: I'll say this: Last night I read the FBI case file, added the number of animals never recaptured, and divided it by my sentence. It works out to about 12 hours per mink.

NC: Have you received adequate jail support? How could it improve?

Peter: "Adequate" would fall a little short. Within days of my arrest there was a website, support fund, phone-line assault on the jail to win me vegan meals, money, and a lot of mail. It's been incredible. To any activist with federal warrants, I would recommend an arrest in the bay area. The locals will

take care of you. When I was extradited to Wisconsin, one generous person even uprooted her life and moved to Madison to do jail support full time.

As overwhelming as it's all been, the best gesture of support came ten days after my arrest when 58 foxes were released from an Illinois fur farm, with the action claimed in solidarity with me. My vision of improved jail support? A better liberated animal-to-letter ratio.

NC: What are your plans after your release?

Peter: To be right back out there, doing my part. You'll never be able to count me among the ones who stopped fighting for change.

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