

Interview with Mack Evasion

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I'm not entirely sure when I first hear about Evasion, but I to remember it was to the sound of loud arguments and disagreement within the 'activist' scene, to an even greater extent than CrimethInc normally manages to create reaction. Intrigued I picked the book up and set about reading. I didn't really see what the problem was. It wasn't like the kid was telling people what to do, just recounting what he'd done. Regardless, the interview came about after I realised — by reading an interview in HeartAttack — that Mack (the person who wrote Evasion), was actually contactable. About 12 months after sending the questions, I'm finally laying out the interview. Its been worth the wait though!

RN: Ok, well I guess a fair few people reading this won't have any idea who or what Evasion is, so do you think you could give an intro to how the zine and then the book came into existence? Sorry I know that's always the first question you get asked!

Mack: I wish I was tired of the question, it would mean I did more interviews. Thanks for getting in touch... The first Evasion communiqué was brought into the world in a most raw and ungracious way as a rough, handwritten, 108 page photocopied zine written in my darkest hour. I made 50 copies which I gave to friends and people I met travelling over the summer, and put Evasion to rest. For one year the master copy sat unused, and I moved on to other projects.

Unknown to me, the zine was rapidly breeding a thousand heads within the DIY punk community. It began when the band Zegota stole one of the first 10 copies I made from the home of a kid I had given it to in Little Rock Arkansas. They took the zine on tour and distributed thousands of copies. Kids made copies of those copies, and in a year the world had thousands of poorly reproduced, 4th generation copies of Evasion. The first hints of Evasion's proliferation came in my email inbox (I had never given Evasion the dignity of a PO Box) 9 months after it's completion, when I began receiving a windfall of emails. It was no small surprise to learn that from those original 50 copies had grown to 5,000 or more others. For someone with little confidence in his own skill, or the strength of his stories, it was all a big shock. And it continues to be. Paul Maul, Crimethinc's eccentric and bearded man behind the scenes, soon got in touch and wasted no time in offering to put out a book, if I would write it. The whole exchange, from first-hello to book offer, took three emails.

After many months living in a broom closet, eating little and writing a lot, the Evasion book was finished. It was released in early September, 2001.

RN: There seems to have been a cult of personality that's sprung up around the "Evasion Kid", and the obligatory backlash that's bought about. Were you surprised at the level of notoriety that the book, and you as the author, received?

Mack: I was always the kid no one cared about one way or the other. In school, in the punk scene, anywhere and everywhere since my first breath. So being abruptly thrust into an odd position of having thousands of kids you're never met have an opinion of you — after 20+ years of being ignored by nearly everyone — has been a strange ride. There have been fistfights and winks, banishment from whole towns and many of my long time heroes suddenly wishing to be my friend. A very strange ride. I woke up the other day and an Evasion critic had scrawled a mean note on a street sign outside my house. Imagine it: Someone you've never met making a covert overnight strike on your home I scratch my head over these things daily.

RN: Are you surprised about the amount of flak that you've received from both the activist community and punk rock community for being well dressed and SxE?

Mack: Not long ago I was at Gilman St., a well known DIY punk venue in Berkeley California. The band Good Clean Fun was playing, and one of the opening bands was a rather monotonous grind band to which I paid little attention. Before their last song, I hear the singer say — "This song is about Mack Evasion, sitting in the back of this room. We're still punks, and you're still a chump!", then blasting through a 20 second grind song — about me. After their set I of course dragged the kid outside and asked him what his issue was. He told me I wasn't punk. I asked why. He said — "Just look at you." This is the level of critique I'm up against. So clearly it's easy to laugh off. What surprises me is that these kids go so far out of their way to embarrass themselves.

The whole buzz about a kid who wrote a book for Crimethinc, a kid living the “anarcho punk lifestyle” and having no interest in either looking the part (dreadlocks, Carharts, etc) or identifying with “anarcho punks”, has caused me much amusement. A lot of slanderous talk, cold shoulders, and hurt feelings from kids who want me to be the poster model for “the squatters struggle” or some such nonsense. While Evasion was never written for “crust punks” or anarcho-scenesters, it has unfortunately been appropriated by these crowds, and there has been much critical talk that has followed. I don’t wish to sound divisive, or draw an argument along scene lines, but it is an unfortunate window to the soul of a scene when you find yourself cast out for keeping your hair short and wearing a Vegan Reich shirt. These scenes (anarchist, pseudo-activist, etc) are as conformist as any other, maybe more so. Frat boys are allowed more range of fashion and lifestyle than most Crimethinc kids. You could say I’m pretty much “over it.” I’ll find my friends elsewhere.

Straight edge: Exclusion for being straight edge is as old as straight edge itself. I feel very fortunate to be rejected from any crowd as degenerate as the “get drunk and have sex” party crowd. Goodbye and good riddance.

RN: Have you received similar flak from the hardcore scene? There’s the cliché that it’s just full of white suburban kids who are too obsessed with themselves to think about others. Have you ever felt alienated from it because of how you live and survive, and your unwillingness to just ‘grow up and get a proper job’?

Mack: The Hardcore scene has taken a huge swing towards the right in the last decade. What you describe, while it may be largely true in 2004, was certainly not in 1994. White and suburban perhaps, but certainly not apathetic. The scene was a very volatile one of potent ideas that spearheaded a large animal rights movement, among other achievements. Despite the current climate of apathy in Hardcore, I would say most of my mail at this point comes from straight edge kids. This keeps me feeling that while I may feel alienated overall at most hardcore shows, there is still a small but strong political sxe scene. Sxe has been and will be a scene of change, even if bands like 18 Visions would like to run it into the ground by way of makeup and tight pants. Overall I feel that the “take back your life” ethic is still very alive in the sxe scene, and that my writing remains very accepted by that part of sxe that still has a brain. You have a lot of sXe kids who aren’t content just “growing up and getting a job”. I got a note from Tre who co-runs Deathwish records the other day, he’s been vegan sxe since dinosaurs walked the earth, and now he’s running a record label and doing exactly what he wants. Scott Beiben of Bloodlink Records is sleeping on my floor right now, he’s been sxe since any of us knew what it was, and he hasn’t worked since 1992. There are sXe kids working full time on the Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty campaign, being documentary filmmakers... it’s an endless list. It’s not Hardcore kids I feel alienated from, it’s boring and uncreative people... no matter what scene they’re from.

RN: Do you think that if say Soft Skull, or another independent publishers had printed Evasion rather than CrimethInc, that it would have been received differently?

Mack: The short answer is “Yes”. The long answer is oh god yes. There is no question. The Crimethinc affiliation is at the core of most people’s misunderstandings of Evasion. Nearly all critiques fall flat when it is understood that Evasion is a personal narrative. This is not Crimethinc’s master blueprint for total liberation. Crimethinc’s presence in the anarchist movement made Evasion translate — in the minds of most anarchists, activists, and punks — as a “Days of War, Nights of Love, Part II”. You can call it an oyster milkshake, it doesn’t mean that’s what it is. When Evasion was a zine, I never heard a bad word about it. In book format, Evasion was the round hole in which to fit every square peg opinion you could toss at it. It was the great punk Rorschach test. If you were a labour right activist, Evasion was classist, If you were transgender, Evasion was that rotten book that didn’t represent you once in it’s pages. To drunk punks, it was “that straight edge book”. It was like the punk scene had one shot at telling the story of it’s lifestyle, I had won the lottery, so therefore the rest had to tell me how I should have written it. Lunacy, and I credit all the drama to Crimethinc’s clout. Crimethinc was the best thing that could have happened to my work, please do not misunderstand. There is no other publisher in the world that would have brought Evasion to sell 16,000 copies. The volunteers at Crimethinc HQ spend all

day putting my book into envelopes and for this I am grateful beyond words. Evasion's relative success is entirely a riding of the wave created by earlier Crimethinc releases like *Days Of War and Harbinger*. At the same time, Crimethinc works against a clear understanding of Evasion which never of the by influencing an expectation of overt politics. Of being the manual that will set everyone free. If someone can show me the memoir that does that, I'll take my retorts back. But right now, all I have to say to the kids who spit their venom: Those that can, do. Those that can't, critique.

RN: Why did you turn vegan, and did you find it hard to sustain this lifestyle when you started to skip and steal your food? Likewise what are your opinions on freeganism, since it seems to be a slightly contentious issues among 'activist circles' at the moment?

Mack: It was never an issue of what was "hard". Not being vegan was never an option. It was no harder for me to be vegan than it is for me to not ride a purple elephant to Mars. It's not an option, and thusly not a struggle. Freeganism is a euphemism for weakness, a tag for kids who care nothing for animals or the earth but like to keep up the pretence they do. In a vacuum, isolated in time and space, there is no harm in eating animal products from a skip. It is waste and therefore out of the supply/demand cycle. However it quickly breeds a casual attitude about eating animal products. I have yet to see one person who has gone from vegan to freegan, who has not very shortly regressed to omnivore. If I could see just once someone maintain their ethical code of not harming animals and keep to a strict freegan "skips only" diet, I might be swayed on this. But as I've seen it play out, I find freeganism to be a disgraceful attempt to keep up an animal friendly front while trodding slowly down the path to selling out altogether.

RN: It seems — from reading *Evasion* — that you're fairly unconcerned about where you take your food from, and what products you steal (i.e. you seem to steal from health food shops, and organic produce) which some people might have a problem with. The argument running that though the little health stores still a business it's not as bad as the Asda down the road. Do you have any views on that?

Mack: There is a cultural gap here that needs to be addressed. In America we have a large, corporatized "Natural Foods" industry that does not exist in England. We have chains like Whole Foods, which is the fastest growing grocery chain in the country, it is almost totally organic and has an amazing amount of health food/ organic/ vegan options. While England is a decade ahead of the US in terms of a consciousness on animal agriculture and food politics, it appears that we have moved a little faster in the creation of a market for "natural foods". So when I talk about stealing organic produce, or vegan, fruit juice sweetened donuts, I am doing so from some of the largest supermarket chains in the country. The only profit loss in shoplifting comes at the retail level. The companies whose food is stolen actually make more money, as the store must order one item for every one that is stolen. So there is no loss to the food companies, only the chain that sells them. In *Evasion*, I was very sure to impart an ethical code regarding shoplifting. For example I gave an account of living on a boat in a small town for two weeks, and the slow starvation I endured rather than steal from the towns only grocery store (a small independent market). So in fact I am very conscious of these things, and wish others would be as well.

RN: Have you come across punkvoter.com yet? What are your thoughts on it, does it worry you that "punks" are trying to bring about social change through the electoral process?

Mack: I am not aware of the site. My wish would be that people would not give voting any more faith for creating change than, say, putting up a sticker or writing a message on a bathroom wall. It gives the illusion of change. The advent of electronic voting machines which are easily manipulated, and for which there is no paper trail, further erode the integrity of the electoral process.

RN: Finally you're currently working on the new *Evasion* book, what have you prepared for it, when's it gonna see the light of day, and are you going to be doing any printed work beyond the scope of *Evasion* #2?

There is so much on my table right now.

The first draft of the next *Evasion* book is complete. Right now I am looking for a publisher, which I've never had to do before so the process is moving slow. The next book will be a 75,000 work epic

account of six months spent living in the broom closet on the campus of a major university. My fingers are crossed for a late winter 2005 release.

Mack: Just out are a small mountain of new Evasion zines. Evasion #2.9, is a short collection of material I published, plus first draft excerpts next Evasion book. Evasion #2 is the number I have assigned to another just completed zine, which is a handwritten zine version of the Evasion book-only material — finally in a format I prefer after losing much of the text's personality to type in the Crimethinc book. Also included is a new layout and intro/outro material. Evasion #2.75 is a short precursor to a future project, which will be a (I hope) bound book on the mid-90s vegan sxe scene, featuring interviews with figureheads from that era. I have taken the first two interviews completed for this project and put them in a short zine (Evasion #2.75) as a taste of what's to come. It's a "coming out" issue of sorts, as I am still thought by most who know of Evasion to be one of the kids who panhandles for beer money outside gas stations and listens to Against Me. I enjoy passing the zine out at shows and hearing the confused responses. Also I have revised and re-released the original Evasion zine from 1999, which contains about 10 pages cut for the book. Just for fun, I've also screened Evasion shirts and had a friend do a website where all of the above is available — www.xevasionx.com Future: New Evasion book. Evasion tour documentary titled "Suburban Jihad", Evasion #2.5 supplement (no stories, all practical advice), the Evasion scrapbook issue (100 pages of first draft stories, hate mail, etc), and further down the road — taking things to an all new level. What comes at that point is going to rock the foundations.... The storm is coming.

End Notes: Interview — Edd. Images: Evasion. Buy a copy of the book from Active Distribution (active-distribution.org).

The Library of Unconventional Lives

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Rancid News #9. <archive.org/details/rancidnews9>

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