

# COYOTE

Coyote/ Tony Perez spent his early adulthood as a musician on the road for about 15 years. Originally from Michigan, he moved to San Francisco in 1979 and started a music career in 1980. His first Burning Man was '96. In '97, he got the first Burning Man laminate by Will Roger and started to seriously pound t-stakes as well as laying out the city itself. In '98, he became the Site manager of the just created Department of Public Works. He has overseen since then production of the city infrastructure. He was one of the first clean-up crew managers. He is part of DPW council of Darkness from the start. He became a full-time Burning Man employee in 2008. From 1998 to 2008, he would go back to his carpenter job in San Francisco after the DPW season. He lives in San Francisco with his wife Melissa and their twin sons.

Coyote is also a writer and storyteller; he wrote a book *"Built to Burn: Tales of the Desert Carnies of Burning Man"* published in 2020. His blogging and podcasts are accessible on his website: <https://www.tonycoyoteperez.com/>

This interview was conducted by "Flo", Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, in 2016. Most of Flo's questions have been omitted to improve reading flow. Coyote edited the text in 2024.

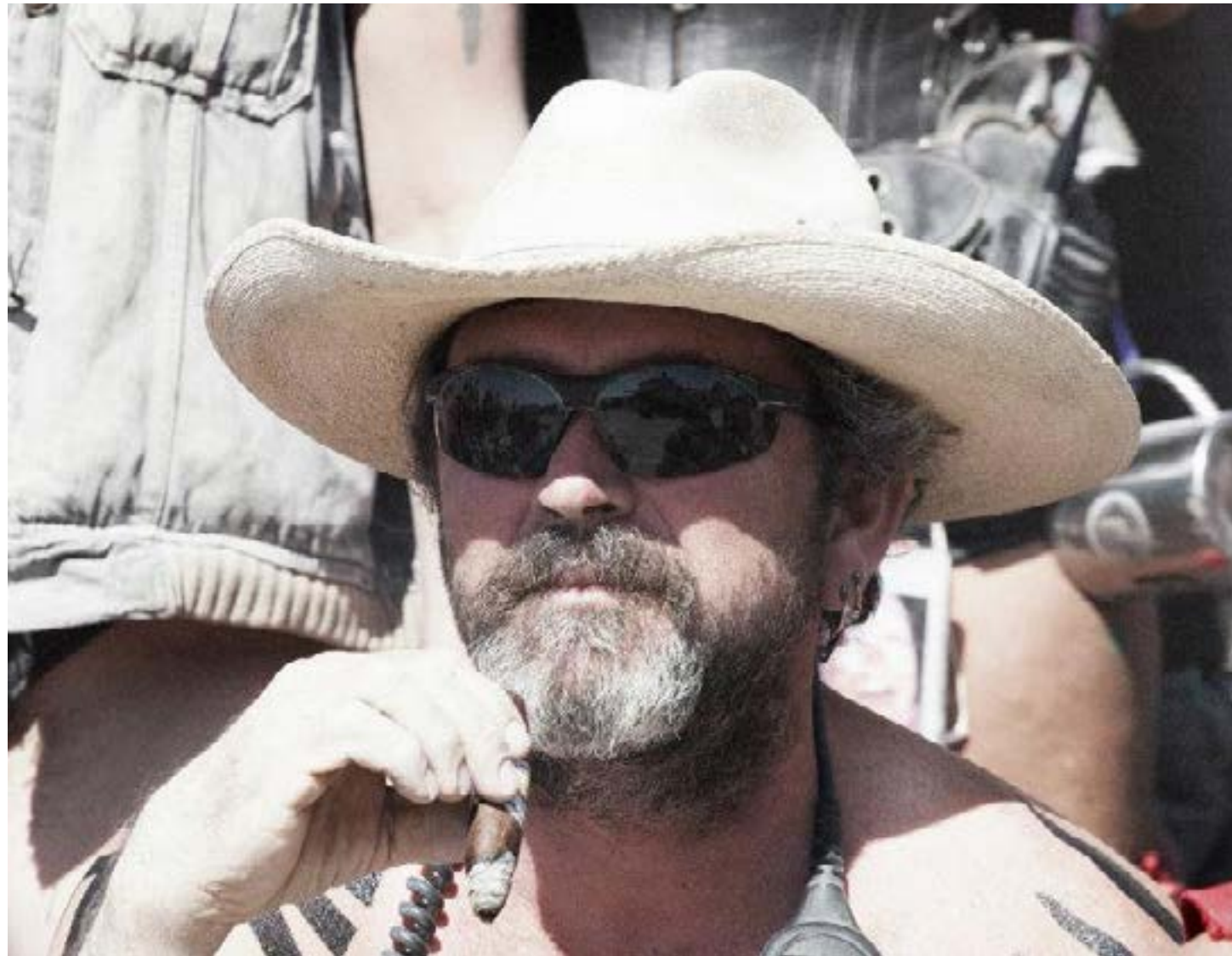
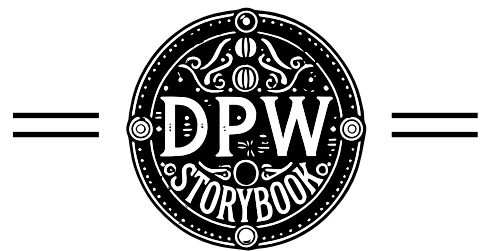


Photo credit: unknown,2012.

COYOTE My first year was '96, as you read. That was really just about four or five days that I spent out there that year. The next year I came back, which is what I'm writing about now. I came back early because Will liked my work ethic. So, he said, 'Well, we're doing Burning Man '97 now, and we have to prepare this ranch as our headquarters, and also as lodging for law enforcement, because we are now involved with law enforcement for Washoe County.' Burning Man before that had been way deep in Pershing County. Now it was going to be on private land in Washoe County, which changed everything. We acquired a permit process, so

I came up early to help set up this ranch to make it livable. That year, there really wasn't DPW yet. It wasn't an actual department, but it was the first year that Will put me in charge. I found that I had a knack with running crews. I believe I got those skills from being a bartender. I've been a musician my whole life. Michigan, yeah. I moved to San Francisco in 1979 and started a music career in 1980. I was a musician on the road for about 15 years. And then, after that I went out to Burning Man for the first time and started running crews. By '97 we got our first lammie here.

[Showing his first laminate]. This is a relic. It's the very first lammie that Burning Man had ever issued. This one. That's because Will had a printer and laminator and he just started printing lammies. I got the first one. And as you see, it's before I was even Coyote, because it says, 'Tony Perez, Site foreman.' So, I've always had the task of building the city. Back then there were very few people. At times in '97 it was just me out there pounding t-stakes by myself. But then as we started to gather crew members and people showing up, they put the word out that we needed hands out there. So, bus loads of people started showing up. Traveling shows started

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showing up. I was put in charge of them. So, I've always been involved with the set up and eventual tear down of Black Rock City.

It wasn't until '98 that it became the Department of Public Works. My job title changed to Site manager, and in '98 and '99 I was to do the layout of the city. I'm the one who surveys all the roads and all the streets and soon after, they gave me the name of city superintendent. What that generally means is that I oversee the infrastructure of the city itself. The actual grid that Black Rock City sits on. Its signs, its streets, its intersections, its lamp posts, its fences, its airport. All

the plazas, all those different things. I supervised the actual construction of it. And then afterwards, it's all about striking the city. I was one of the original cleanup crew managers. It was soon after that DA took the job and renamed it Playa Restoration. I used to supervise that, but DA just has such a solid hand on that. Now, DA and I are members of the council that runs the Department of Public Works. One of the council members jokingly called it "The Council of Darkness" and it stuck.

It changed in 2003, when Will stepped down as the chief of staff. We formed a council to run the department because it was becoming way too much for just one person to do. The rest of the event was becoming departmentalized. So, our council consists of a project manager, a logistics/business coordinator, a construction manager, a ranch manager, I'm the city superintendent, Playa restoration manager, and the labor manager. I think that's everybody. And the pavilion manager sits on council as well. And we steer the Department of Public works that sets up and tears down Black Rock City. So, that's in a nutshell what my job is, and in the meantime, I've been watching the culture grow and change, develop, and evolve. Some of our traditions hold the same, and other stuff come and go. But essentially, we're the desert carnies. The book I'm writing is called "Built to Burn: Tales of the desert carnies of Burning Man.." So, we're the ones who are working blue collar behind the scenes. We work hard, we play hard.

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[About a “cowboys in the bar” story, Flo’s read in Samantha Krukowski, Playa Dust.] They said, ‘I don’t give a fuck about Burning Man, but I do respect that you put that fence up to the end of the day like you do.’ I was expecting a pie in the face, but instead I got a kiss on the cheek. So, we’ve come a long road with all of this. It’s been quite a challenge on our quest to become more professional. I think we’ve gotten to the point where we generally get worldwide respect for what we do out in the desert, and how we do it. I think a lot of that respect comes from the fact that the participants are so involved with the whole part of it. It’s not just us putting on a show. It’s all of us coming together to create a community. We throw the word ‘community’ around all the time to the point where people don’t really grasp what you’re saying when you said, “oh, it’s a communal thing, it’s a communal effort.” But it’s what it is.

When I’m back in San Francisco or traveling around and people find out that I work for “that Burning Man thing,” a lot of people who’ve never been and never will go—which is fine, we’ll have fun without them—a lot of people still really haven’t grasped that it’s a city. They still think it’s a big, wild rave with a lot of drug use and orgies in the mud. I don’t know what’s in their heads. I know sometimes people are very surprised that I bring my children out there, because they think it’s some sort of R-rated adult party. But it’s not. It’s a community. It’s a city with neighborhoods. Where we gain respect is, for instance, you just went through the Playa restoration process. I’m sure when you were out there doing the line sweeps, picking up the litter—the MOOP, as you call

it—you were impressed that many of the camps were as clean as they were. Some weren’t, but many, many were. The Playa restoration would not be successful without the participation of the participants themselves. Well, that’s a pretty good example of how we’ve won respect from a lot of the people who really know what we do out here. Because they see that everybody’s involved.

DA has actually had conversations with the mayors of cities that want to know how we got people to pick up after themselves when almost any other event people go to, they just leave their litter. They leave huge messes. I do remember at one point when we were starting to gain a lot of notoriety, we were gaining a lot of tension and a lot of scrutiny. And we, as they say, ‘woke the sleeping

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Coyote and Melissa with their twin sons at the Ranch. Photo credit: Michael Garlington, 2010.





Coyote holding the framed cover (designed by DA) of his book. Photo credit: DA, 2023.

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giant. That was years ago when the agencies started filling up: here comes the health department, here comes the sheriff, here comes the permit process, you know, and the department of traffic was interested because we were impacting the highways. All these agencies started to really look into us, and the health department started to show up, saying—and back then, I guess our population would be about 10,000 by that point— “you have 10,000 people on the Playa, where are your waste baskets?”

I said, “we don’t have waste baskets.”

Said, “well then what happens to the litter?” Well, the people take it with them. That was a concept that they couldn’t wrap their heads around because no other event could boast that. So, they said we need to put out waste baskets. We said, “No we don’t, because if we put out waste baskets then we’ll have a huge mess.” We will be enabling people to just leave their trash instead of taking it with them. We finally convinced the health department. They were going to enforce us to dispatch waste baskets throughout the city. We pushed back and said, “no, we can’t do that. It would ruin the event. It would be the biggest mess we’ve ever seen.”

So, we convinced them you could get a cleaner city by not giving them waste baskets, which was a concept they had a hard time wrapping their head around. The biggest mess that we’ve ever encountered is when there is a dumpster there, and the dumpster becomes permission to leave your trash. So, that people are that involved with the cleaning of the city is one of the paramount things that people latch onto. Even our staunchest enemies, the people that just want to see this event go away for whatever moral reason that they have, they have to respect the idea that we are a leave-no-trace event. If you go out to the Playa—the inspection was today—if you drive out to the Playa just right now, and if you’ve never been to the Playa, you just drive out, see if you can go find where the city is. I bet you can’t...

[About relation with locals and politics] We stay away from politics with our event, but generally with the people who come out, it attracts an open-minded sort. So, sometimes

this open-mindedness will clash with the local politics that tend to be conservative. So, one of the things I tell my crew is “don’t talk politics in a local bar.” [laughs]. There’s a lot of “Make America Great Again” hats around here, yeah. But, you know, like I said, our event steers clear from politics. It’s not about Republicans or Democrats or Independents. It’s about the community that we have that we built that’s grown on its own.

I really enjoy my three-month stint out here where I’m not being barraged by the media. Especially in this crazy election cycle that everybody is really flipped out about. As a matter of fact, I was out here during the 9/11 incident in New York City. It was September. We were out here, striking Black Rock City. What year was that? 2001. It had to be before 2002, because we were still camped at the ranch. This is before. The crew now resides in a trailer park in Gerlach. Back then we camped at a ranch that was 12 miles north of the site. We were off the grid. We had no power, we had no septic. We had portable water that was trucked in. So, we were really living in the dirt back then. Of course, we had no cell phones, no television, no connection to information. So, we were having our morning sitting around eating our breakfast, getting ready to go on tour. One of the managers was flying down Jackson Lane at about 60 mph. Jackson Lane is a little dirt road that comes into our ranch where you really can’t do more than 20. He was doing 60; he was blowing a huge fucking plume of dust, and we’re like “what the hell is going on?” And he damn near ran the car right into the camp, shouting that America was under attack, and that one of the twin towers





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was down and the other was on fire. Well, my first reaction was “well, it’s about time. I’m surprised this hasn’t happened sooner with the amount of enemies we’ve made” [nervous chuckle]. So, we were all pretty blown away by this news. It’s heavy.

The closest news we had was out at Empire. So, we all hopped in trucks and cars and drove the 30 miles into Empire to see if we could get around a television and watch some news. So, we all tipped into an Empire grocery store, and there was a TV there and a lot of the rest of the locals. Everyone was on the television watching this horrific news of jet planes flying into buildings, people jumping to their deaths, and firemen getting killed. That’s what got me is the fireman. So, we’re all watching pretty aghast, and everyone is wondering what is going to become of this. We watched the news for about an hour, hour and a half, maybe two hours. It was starting to repeat over and over again—as the



Coyote in front of the “Michael Garligton Fluffer van”. Photo credit: Haley Who, 2012.

news does—so, we got into our cars. So, I was driving back to the Playa and I was by myself. I was looking at the mountains. I thought, “these mountains don’t give a shit. They don’t care.” I was actually thankful to be in an environment that wasn’t completely barraged by the media blanket for the next year, really.

My wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, was bartending in San Francisco. She said after about a week of just nothing else but that on the television she shut it off, and everybody at the bar got angry with her. “What else are we going to hear?” she said. “What else do we need to know? It’s all been said.” But they still kept blasting us away with this 9/11 news. I was so thankful I was out here. Yes, it was horrible, and yes, it’s news, but I didn’t

need to be completely saturated in it. I went back to work. One of the things I was thinking as we were picking litter up off the playa was “wow, they got a much bigger mess in New York City.” [bitter laugh] I was thinking about the mess, you know? So, it was an example of what I like about coming out here. And it’s one of the things that partially fuels the event. People just get fed up listening to the same crap all the time. They wanna make their own news. They wanna meet each other instead of sitting in a house staring at a TV or Facebook. You know?

[About the bound between locals and DPW back then.] Even, in the times when a lot of the locals really would tolerate us at best—they were really annoyed with the amount of energy we were bringing from the area, because

they wanted to get away from it all. But still... the locals out here still believe in a handshake. They still wave at each other when they’re passing on the highway. You know, even though there may be differences in opinion, you still have graciousness and a “howdydo”, you know. We may get a sideward glance, but they’re not going to be rude to us. It’s just not the way it’s done. We do have a couple of... we have some people who’ve been living in Gerlach for a couple of years that are never, ever going to like us, which is... you know, that’s just the way it is. They voice their hatred of us from time to time at town hall meetings. But we’ve grown used to each other. It’s been 22, 25 years now that we’ve been coming out here and... we’re not going anywhere and they’re not going anywhere. They actually sit on their front porch and watch the parade of art cars go by.

But I do understand. You come out and you live in a small town like this. You really cherish a small-town life, and a wide-open space, and a way to get away. During Burning Man season, you have to stand in line. And if you’re at your local grocery store that’s taking up parking, it’s annoying I’m certain. But we’ve grown to tolerate one another and even respect one another over the years. And so, I have made many friends. I consider myself a resident of Gerlach, even though I’m just here temporarily. But I’ve been here enough that I’m a local. I got a lot of friends in town.

<sup>FLO</sup> So, I was actually thinking about the fact that when you were at Bev’s, when you were bartending there, some of the locals were hanging out and you were... yeah, you definitely

act like a mediator between DPW and locals. It seems like you have... being in DPW for my first year, I definitely have the perception that people view you as a paternal figure. Yeah, and you have a respect that doesn’t come from your title. It comes more from you personally and the energy that you reflect on DPW.

<sup>COYOTE</sup> [chuckles warmly] I take that as a very high compliment. Well, I am the sort of ambassador or liaison... if a local, for instance, if farmers got an issue with one of my crew member’s dogs or something like that, they’ll come to me. And I’ll take care of it. I’ll make sure that everybody is talking about it and so on. But... [laughs] I don’t know if I can say much, but I do know that over the years I did gain a lot of respect, and I am sort of a... like I said, I’m an ambassador. I’m the one you can come to. In the very wee hours, it’s often my trailer door that’s getting knocked on when there’s a bit of an issue going on with the crew members. There’s a lot of crew members that stay in a small, confined area doing really difficult work for a long time and partying hard. So, there’s conflict. A lot of times it’s either me or it’s Logan, who is the labor coordinator. We’re sort of like the pops. We’re the ones you can come to.

We do have a very robust HR department in Burning Man, but they’re able to be out here full time. They do have to go back and take care of their business in San Francisco. So, we become HR. It’s not my job description, but yeah. I’m kind of on the spot a little bit right here, by your words. But, I suppose I am in that role. Not through anything that I planned



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on, but it’s just sort of the thing that’s developed.

<sup>FLO</sup> Do you think that it actually changed your experience over the past years, having phones, Facebook and all?

<sup>COYOTE</sup> I think the core is the same, though. We’ve had our working cell phones over the past... I think cell phones started working out here two or three years ago. It’s worked its way into our—it’s become a tool for us. You know, we have a pretty elaborate radio system out here, because we’ve got hundreds of people off comm. But we’re finding that having the cell phones working, a lot of the times you’ll get on the radio like “‘Logan, Logan, this is Coyote, come back.’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Is your cell phone working?’ ‘Yeah, let me catch you on the phone’” and get off the radio. It’s become a tool.





Coyote at the 2018's DPW Parade. Photo credit: unknown, 2018.

As has the internet. But I don't think it's... you don't see people walking around Gerlach poking or lost on their phone. They're up and looking around, they're where they are, they're talking to one another. They're sitting on a front porch.

Sherry works in the office. I'm actually going to write about this concept. I've asked her permission to use it. But, she said, things changed worldwide—especially in our country—when people no longer sat on their front porches, and went into their backyards and shut themselves in. I agree. If you go through suburbia right now, nobody's on the front porch. In

fact, most of these houses don't have front porches: they have these huge backyards, and everybody's locked into their backyards with super high fences. It's no longer a cooperation between people. It's a competition of who has the better backyard. So, you have no more social interaction, you have no more communal interaction.

Black Rock City is a city of front porches. Camps are open. As a matter of fact, if camps close themselves off, they get social pressure to open their doors and become part of their community. This is what's going on with some of these rich camps that are coming out. We don't care if you're in a

rich camp. If you can afford it, bully for you! You can fly sushi in. Wonderful. Just become part of the community. Bring more than your money. Open your doors. Sit on the front porch. So, that's the way it is in these small towns. There are front porches everywhere. You go into Black Rock Saloon, which is our place where we hang out—our private social club—it's got a huge front porch. If you go inside, there's no television. People are talking to one another. If you wanna go back [in the TV room] and watch a movie and sit on the couch it's fine. But the main social area does not have a flickering TV behind the person's head that your eyes keep getting diverted to.

I hang out at Nickie's in the Lower Haight. That's my corner bar. 17 screens. 17. I counted them. There's 17 fucking televisions in that bar. How do you have a conversation when there's advertisements just at you? So, as long as I supervise that bar it will not have a television in it.

I actually supervise the bar. The manager of the bar reports to me. Her name is Roachie. Roachie and Sailor run the bar and they do a great job. You know, it's not easy to run a social club that doesn't have a cash register, it just has free booze in it, and be able to maintain that nice, good atmosphere. Get everybody to work

in the morning. [chuckles]

It's like no other bar for several reasons. One is that it's the same people every night and, they've all worked all day together. So, there's a bond. When you go through hardship it aligns you. It's also a drinking club. I'll say that. People drink in there. And they handle it, for the most part. That's where Roachie and Sailor come in: they have to keep a close eye. We all have to watch out for each other. It's more so than you would at just a regular bar. If you're at a regular bar, you're not really that concerned if the guy down at the other end of the bar is getting blackout. It's not your problem. But,

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Coyote playing Sax at the Gerlach DPW Saloon. Photo credit: unknown, 2009.

in a social club it is: it's your friend, it's your coworker, it's somebody that you need to watch out for. So, again, community. Cooperation.

<sup>FLO</sup> I actually would love to hear your understanding of the definition of community, because there are so many definitions of it.

<sup>COYOTE</sup> It takes a village. What it means is that it takes more. Sometimes you have to reach out to the other people in the community or in

your neighborhood to help out with something. For instance, if somebody... it's like the old times, when one of the farmers' crops would die: the other farmers would kick in and help that one farmer that was having bad luck that year. That's where that "it takes a village" comes from. In some of the small villages, not just one set of parents raises a child. A whole village raises a child. That's gone. I mean, that's gone in a lot of communities. But it's returning.

For instance, in a set up like Black Rock City. Black Rock is a temporary city. But it's creating an ethos that we would like to see become permanent, which is one of the reasons why we purchased Fly Ranch. Because we'd like to make that ethos, that mentality of community and cooperation, become a permanent village. And so, one of the things that... the base word of community is common. That's when you have things in common. I think another big definition of community is cooperation. Capitalism is about competition. Community is about cooperation. Don't get me started on what I think about that. [laughs bitterly] If you have an entire economy whose whole purpose is to pit people against each other, it's eventually going to unravel the community and the society. So, we're watching it happen before our very eyes. The rich get richer. The people who aren't rich are filled with self-loathing and doubt, and they lock themselves into their backyards and try to compete: "why don't I have a better car?" Do you really need a better car? So, you know. I think one of the things that fuels Black Rock City is for just a moment there isn't right in your face media and that sort of thing. It's creeping in. It surrounds it. There's commerce all around Black Rock City. There's vendors that make money. There's money involved in Black Rock City. It's just not directly in your face for once. It's also not all there is. There's front porches. [laughs]

<sup>FLO</sup> So, would you define Burning Man—Burning Man attendants or Burning Man participants—as a community? If yes, would you also define DPW as a community?

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**“But we, the DPW has its sub-culture within the culture of Black Rock City. And I think a lot of the reasons for that is the amount of time we’re out here, which is different than everyone else. We spend 12 weeks, as opposed to... even some of the largest art projects are out here for four weeks.”**

<sup>COYOTE</sup> Yes. I think both are true. Black Rock City defines itself as a community. DPW is a community within that community. Or the other word that gets put out there is "culture," which is another word that can mean many different things depending on who's saying it. But we, the DPW has its sub-culture within the culture of Black Rock City. And I think a lot of the reasons for that is the amount of time we're out here, which is different than most others. We spend 12 weeks, as opposed to... even

some of the largest art projects are out here for four weeks. It incubates for a lot longer. So, the culture becomes more embedded. And people bond. They have a lot more time to bond.

That's why Resto—Restoration—is different than the rest, because everybody is on the same crew. It's one of the only times of the year that everybody's doing the same thing. The rest of the year, you have Shade crew, Spires crew, Sign shop, all separated out. So, the Resto bond is deeper. Also, it's a slower pace. You're walking along, you're getting to know each other better, you're talking instead of the rush, rush, rush of "we gotta get this event going." So, that's why the culture of Resto is even deeper.

<sup>FLO</sup> And how would you describe the culture of DPW vs. Burning Man culture?

<sup>COYOTE</sup> Well, like I said, it's a little more blue collar. It's always been notoriously more rough and tumble. And... I've actually been criticized for that, but hey, that's what it is. I do think that our reputation has more fun than we do. But we're still a little more on the rowdier side. We're not wearing so much glitter. We're actually not sparkle ponies. Somebody the other day called us "darkle ponies," which I thought was pretty funny. A lot of times during the event, you'll see a big event of DPW going through. They don't have blinking lights on. They're all wearing dark clothing and not exactly trying to shine or glitter. You know, you don't see... so, there's a little bit of a difference there. We seem to be like the... I don't wanna label it too much... but we do tend to stand apart in some ways. But, at

the same time, I feel just as much a part of the Burning Man community as anyone else. You know? I really enjoy my camps. I enjoy Black Rock City immensely. It just never ceases to blow my mind. It amazes me every year; the amount of diverse people coming in and the things they bring. If I had to put Burning Man in one word, it would be "endeavor."

Effort. Yeah. The things that people bring. Mostly everybody who's come to Burning Man had to work hard to do something. Even if you flew in on a jet, you still had to put some sort of endeavor into it. So. And the things that people bring. Sometimes they bring too much and bite off more than they can chew. They have challenges and struggles. They wanna do it better next year. Everybody wants to do it better next year.

<sup>FLO</sup> What about the cultural backgrounds that DPW people are coming from? Like, people are coming from a punk rock culture, or—

<sup>COYOTE</sup> Well, I think we do sort of attract a certain elk, simply for the reason that you have to be able to suspend your life for 12 weeks. A lot of people can't do that. A lot of people wish they could. But their jobs won't let them, and their lives won't let them. You know, you can't just drop things and go to the desert for 12 weeks. People can't. And so, it has a little bit of a... we attract a certain type of transient. I don't mean that like a homeless type of deal, because transient has a negative connotation. But people are in transition. A lot of people that come out here are traveling around. Like today. Everyone is packing and leaving. Everyone is supposed





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to say, “where are you going?” And usually it’s “well, I’m going to Reno, then two weeks in Yosemite, then I’ll probably go back to Seattle, then I’ll do some trimming in Oregon” so, you know? It’s not like they’re going back to their cubicle and waiting for their retirement. It’s a very youthful atmosphere here. Me? I don’t know what happened to me. I became a career person. I’m in my 20th year. I’m a full-time employee. I never got my “better opportunity”. It doesn’t get better than this for me.

On paper I became a full-time employee in 2008. But I’ve been working for Burning Man since... I think ‘98 is the first time they started paying me... seasonally. And for the longest time I would come out here seasonally and I would... either I was bartending or a musician. And then for the last 20 years I was an independent contractor: I’m a carpenter. So I’d go back to San Francisco and I’d pick up jobs. Which there’s always plenty of work.

I worked with a small construction company for about 20 years called



Coyote doing Survey. Photo credit: DA, 2018.

Bedrock construction. That was right in the Lower Haight neighborhood. There were maybe four or five of us. There’s plenty of work. All those buildings need work all the time. So, I just made money that way and... also I lived in—the apartment I live in is the landlord that I worked with—and so we got a... I kind of cut myself a little area in there. I got a nice two-bedroom apartment that’s part of the business that I worked with. So, I worked on the construction. The guy who owned the company just understood that I would be leaving every summer. Which is fine, because he’s always got plenty of help, plenty of workers. But I’d always have a place coming back. So, I’d come back, see “well, we’re working on this one over here,” and I’d just jump right in, put on my nail bags, and start working. So, that was a sweet deal. As of late I’m doing a little more writing. I’m hoping to make that my career. Wouldn’t that be something, huh? [chuckles] But, every other writer says, “you’re not gonna make any money!” I get it, I get it. Still gonna write though. It’s not lucrative, no. Unless you’re making movies, or are R.R. Martin or something.

FLO Yeah, but I mean you have readers.

COYOTE I did. My podcast got... I don’t know, in the thousands. Yeah, in the thousands. And... I’m going to be writing another one. We’ll see what that one does. I got a lot of promotion that went out onto the website for Coyote Nose. It was fun podcasting it, going into a studio and recording it.

FLO That’s pretty cool. And coming back to the front porches... so, of course it’s very important to have front porches.

But front porches wouldn’t exist if we didn’t have streets. And streets are of such importance to social organizers. When you take out streets from a city, then it’s a complete disaster. Or, if you take out a plaza it’s a complete disaster. So, that makes me think about the way that Black Rock City is organized and how you’re participating actively with the surveying of the city by actually marking the streets and marking the plaza. So, by doing this, you are actually the first person that is marking, the first social organizer of the city. Can you tell me about how you feel towards that, and especially the survey aspect of the city?

COYOTE I’ll help do that by reading you this excerpt of this is chapter two, part one, of the podcast. And I was talking about how back in 1996, my first year, there was one road. It was the first time that Black Rock City tried to do a road, a circle road. It said, “this new road that we were cruising on was a wheel of vibration, and the soul of something new as people milled about. Everyone had made a leap into the unknown. We all had a story to tell. Black Rock City was self-activating. Neighborhoods and suburbs were forming on their own without the struggle of zoning laws. Camps that had been on the outskirts yesterday were now in the thick of things. The clamor of a seaport: except people weren’t just brushing by with downward frowns. Their faces were up and welcoming. Everyone in town wanted to meet. The only thing we had provided was the most basic of enablers: a road. The event had gone from single cell clusters to multicellular organisms that now needed arteries to pump the oxygen around. This road was a stream where the blood cells



**“Me? I don’t know what happened to me. I became a career person. I’m in my 20th year. I’m a full-time employee. On paper I became a full-time employee in 2008. But I’ve been working for Burning Man since... I think ‘98 is the first time they started paying me... seasonally.”**





Coyote doing Survey. Photo credit: Editrix Abby, 2011.

of imagination simmered into the plasma of a community, so even then.” What’s happening now in the cities, as cities become more dangerous, as they are, it seems, people are becoming more fearful. Violence is on the rise. The streets are no longer a place to meet. It’s a place to be feared. “Get off the streets. What are you doing on the streets?” But the streets are supposed to be the cruise strip. The old marketplace where people are milling and meeting. But now it’s just... especially with all the fear that is being injected by the media that we’re being asked to fear one another. We’re being asked to police one another. “Watch out!” Like if

you’re at an airport: “if you see any suspicious activity by anyone report it immediately.” We’re all turning into police. You know? And so, what do you consider suspicious activity? Well, I don’t know, “I don’t like the way that guy is flicking his eyebrow. He’s got buggy, dark eyes. Let’s call him in.” It erodes the community.

[About the survey work.] It’s a huge job. The city is two miles across. The survey crew, there’s 18 of us, in one week’s time we go through 6,000 flags. Each flag marks a point. So, we do 6,000 individual measurements in one week. The only way that we can accomplish that is with a very

specific system that didn’t just get developed overnight. That system has been developed over 20 years. Each year it gets a little bit better. Each year we say, “let’s try it this way, let’s try it that way, well, we could probably cut time doing this.” Each year the city is growing, and growing and growing, but they still only give me one week to do it. [chuckles]. So, as it grows, we have to become more efficient. So, the actual system that we use to build the city, to survey it out, is pretty simple. It’s just pretty easy to get confused, because there are hundreds of intersections. So, it’s very easy to lose your place. So, when you’re on the Playa, there’s nothing

there but just the crew. Nothing. And you’re putting in red flags. If you just set back and look, you’re putting in a sea of red flags. It’s very difficult to know where you are. It’s... you can get very disoriented very quickly. And you’re drawing these huge circles: circles that are two miles across. It’s very difficult to hold an arch. It’s a two-mile circle. So, you have to be really big on communication.

Now, the actual mechanics are simple. There’s the gold spike that we drive. I don’t know if you know what a transit is? It’s called an automatic level. It’s essentially a telescope. It’s high-end optics, and the telescope

has a crosshair in it just like the scope on a gun. And the telescope sits on a platform that is graduated, meaning it marks a 360-degree circle. And so, the telescope swivels every 15 degrees. That’s a street. 2 o’clock. 2:30. 3 o’clock. 3:30. So, every 15 degrees, I move the telescope, or the transit to that position. The crew goes out in the field. They have laser range finders—these devices that are used by hunters and golfers, actually. We set up a station around the spike, which is essentially an octagon set of framing. And, because the laser range finder needs something to range find off of, and it has all kinds of material on it, the octagon, this becomes our campsite. It’s a very small area because it has to be small. Anything else on the Playa gets in the way. It becomes an obstacle. So, all 18 of us camp in this little area. The actual first camp. And we sleep out on the Playa so we can catch the morning light, because at distances where we are making these measurements, you have to do it at dawn and dusk. Otherwise, the shimmer shrouds. You can’t make the measurements. So, we work from 5 AM to about 9. Take a big, long break in the middle of the day. Come back out at about 5 in the evening and work until 9 at night, when the sun is at a slant, and we have high visibility. We have to work really quickly. It’s sort of like a daisy chain or a pinwheel, where there are people at each intersection, and they’re laser range-finding off of each other, and back to the octagon to get in range to get to the right distance.

For instance, the esplanade is 2,500 ft. away. And then each street is another 200 ft. after that. So, they all get aligned and... I look through the telescope, the transit. I get on the

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radio to tell them to go left or right. They have a big stick that they put right in the crosshair. When they’re in the crosshair, I say “mark it.” Then, they put the flags in the ground and mark that intersection. Now, the thing is, this radio protocols everything because I say, “marking 630 and G.” They say, “marking 630 and G.” I say, “mark it. 630 and G.” We say it three times. If they get lazy on that, I get on them. I say, “You didn’t say that. Say it back to me.” “But I’m at 630 and G?” “Then say it back to me so we know where we are at all times.” And then, a lot of breaks. You’re in the hot sun. There’s no shade. The survey was in the triple digits the entire week. 110 degrees at some points. It’s easy to get disoriented and dehydrated.

We have vans that travel around with the survey crew to make sure they have everything they need. The fluffers. That’s where fluffers started, was with the survey crew. That’s what





Coyote at the 2015's 4:20 Spire. Photo credit: Jen Erator Forbes, 2015.

started them because they were out walking the Playa. You know, great distances all morning long. So, you gotta be hardy. You gotta be desert ready. You know, you've got to be a certain mentality. You can't be a meltdowny kind of person. We just

don't have the time for it. You have to be paying attention, focused, all these things. That's why we give big, long breaks in the middle of the day. Everyone can go into Gerlach and sleep: I'll see you at 5 o'clock. I want you focused.

At nighttime [we sleep on the Playa]. We gotta a burn barrel. We sleep under the stars. It's a wonderful thing. Black Rock City: Population, 18. It's one of my favorite weeks of the year, because it's a real close-knit group, and none of the real complications have started.

**“So, all 18 of us camp in this little area. Actually, the first camp. And we sleep out on the Playa so we can catch the morning light, because at distances where we are making these measurements, you have to do it at dawn and dusk. Otherwise, the shimmer shrouds.”**

You just have one task to do. And then after that the fence goes up. And then once the fence goes up, everything happens simultaneously. The Café's going up at the same time as the main base, and the Temple crew shows up, and the DPW Depot is being built, and the Commissary is coming in, and it all happens. Transpo transfers, like 90 containers a day, come to the Playa. They're all placed into this Tetris puzzle that the placers do. They work within the grid that I give them. So, it's fascinating to watch the whole thing happen.

[The city] It had moved. That was all part of Restoration. That's DA's world. He interfaces with the environmentalists and the BLM. There were a lot of different strategies that we threw out. One of the things that was the school of thought for many years was that if we moved the city a half a mile or a quarter mile each year, it wouldn't superimpose. It was sort of like rotating your crops. But we started to find that that was moving the burn areas every year. So, now we're having several burn areas instead of one burn area every year on the same spot. So... DA lobbied and won his argument. So, now we're going to keep the city in the same spot for five years in a row and see what happens. So, this thing is still experimenting.

It will still be on the same spot all the time. But they were worried about the roads starting to cut in. We're finding that the winters have been pretty moist, so the roads heal themselves. It wasn't as much of a concern as several burn scars all over the Playa. Yeah. So, this is the first year that it was the same year twice, and next year it will be the same again. But, the Playa has this thing where it's actually heavier than the metals that are in it. So metals will actually burp up over the years. Something that was buried the year before starts to peak out after a while. It'll actually kind of squirt the metal back out. So, that's why you'll see a piece of a t-stake sticking out where a middle of a road might have been.

FLO I've read in the DPW handbook that the little presentation about what you do. In the handbook you said that “by the end of the blazing hot week, thousands of measurements have been marked, resulting in Burning Man's

largest art sculpture of all: Black Rock City itself.” And then I wrote down, “it seems that qualifying Black Rock City as an art sculpture instead of the result of tons of flags and spikes put together through fine measurement, method, and techniques is a good reflection of the volunteers who are putting themselves out there in harsh conditions within the build and also are staying with Playa restoration to pick up any MOOP.” In my mind I made this comparison because I felt that by defining the survey work as a sculpture that is the city itself, it seems like there is something more than just actually doing those measurements. There's something that is a common goal that's behind that. Can you tell me more?

COYOTE I think it is more than the sum of its parts. I think we put the flags in and... I think it becomes a place that's still very familiar to us. Like we go out there, we drive the spike... It's been my 20th time setting up the city. Maybe 21st. I don't even know. When we start to do the esplanade, we put the esplanade in by lunch of the first day, which it's always the first thing. The esplanade is always the most critical thing to put in because everything else is measured off of those points. So, those points are really critical. If I get it wrong, I'll shoot thirty feet out of a person's camp. [laughs] Which causes huge amounts of heartburn, so I have to get it right. So, we put the esplanade in, and we all take a break, and I always drive the esplanade just to get the wheel tracks in. When I drive the esplanade, it's just so familiar to me, and this whole city forms in my head. I just know what's coming [chuckles]. So, it's really not just flags anymore. It's the main drag. It's our first road.



You know. It's our cruise strip. So, I'm not sure what you're getting at, but I do know the city itself is a beautiful design. Rod Garrett designed it. He passed on about 4, 5 years ago. He was the original architect of the city.

It's designed to bring people together. It's designed to bring the energies into the cities. You'll notice that the keyholes actually act like these little vacuum cleaners that draw people in. And then the placers brilliantly place the camps so that there's all kinds of activity that goes out to the plazas in the back of the city. It's really beautifully designed. And yes, it's beautiful to look at, but it's also amazingly functional. So, it just brings people together. It's an amazing thing. I love building it.

FLO Why is Black Rock City an art sculpture?

COYOTE It's an etching. You know? The wheel tracks actually make the etching. And it's concentric circles. It's an amphitheater. It's certainly not the first... I mean, there are ancient cities that they've dug up that found that there's an icon in the middle with all these circular roads around it. So, it's not a new thing. I kind of say that sort of as a boast anyway to rattle the artists a little bit, because Burning Man... it's no secret that it's always been sort of a pissing contest out there. People are trying to bring the bigger stuff, and you know... it's true, people are always kind of bent on... one of these jokes that I don't know, David Best, has built several Temples. Back in the day—the Man is by far no longer the biggest thing on the Playa anymore. I mean, look at the mechanical mobiles. The Man is



Coyote with friends in front of the Thunderdome. Photo credit: Melissa Waters, 2012.

**“It’s no secret that it’s always been sort of a pissing contest out there. People are trying to bring the bigger stuff.”**

becoming dwarfed by a lot of these art projects going up. But, for the longest time this Man was the largest thing and the tallest thing on the Playa. The Temples started to get close to the Man's height. And David Best would always say, “oh, it's one foot shorter than the Man.” Then I'd talk to the crane operator, and the crane operator goes, “oh, no, no, no, the Temple is way taller than the Man. I'm the crane operator. I know this. I'm the one that put it up.” So, these artists were saying “well, my art project is bigger than your art project” then they'd go “hey, hey, hey wait, my art project is bigger than all your art projects!” It was kind of a boast.

Whether the city is a piece of art or not is arguable. You know? Say, what is art anyway? I consider it art. It's a beautiful thing. It's a beautiful, giant etching that people live in. You know, it's also the largest clock in the world. But I just kind of say it to urke people a little bit. Well, my art is bigger than your art, you know?

FLO Which is also very interesting because I feel like having... Well, working DPW...in my experience so far, I felt like that for some people it seems to be a privilege to work in something that's kind of artistic



more than actually building the city itself. For example, working Man base was something where a lot of people were—it seems to me—something that a lot of people were looking forward to doing. By actually saying and communicating to people that Black Rock City itself is an art sculpture, was very interesting. Because it was contrasting from maybe this aspect that people have that “art” is the only main art.

COYOTE Oh, I’ve said it many times before. Yeah. Absolutely. I actually kind of got into a semantics discussion, if you will, with an artist that was bringing out this giant laser clock. He was setting it up out there, and he wanted to enter his laser clock into the Guinness Book of World Records as the world’s largest clock. So, the Guinness book said, well, we’ll need some specs. So, he did know the specs of the city, so he went down to the Artery, and they said, “well, you’ll need to talk to Coyote because he’s the one who builds it.” So, I got called down to the Artery. This guy was fairly short with me. I kind of was put off by him right away by his attitude. He was treating me like help. You know? “You’re just one of the workers.” And, he was trying to do a very arrogant thing. He was trying to enter his art into the Guinness book of world records.

So, I said, “wow, wait for a second. You’re saying that your clock is the biggest clock in the world?” I said, “No, it isn’t. My clock is bigger than your clock.” [laughs] He says, “well, the city is not a clock!” I said, “the hell it ain’t. It doesn’t tell time, but it’s still a clock! You know? I know a lot of clocks that don’t tell time.”

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**“Last year I became an OSHA instructor, which really kind of surprised the shit out of a lot of people knowing what my history was.”**

“Well it doesn’t have any hands on it.” “Well, it’s still a clock!” [laughs] So, we went back and forth and back and forth. I don’t think he ever did get his artwork into the Guinness Book of World Records, but I certainly wasn’t going to help him because he was a shithead with me. But it was just kind of this bizarre semantics argument on who’s clock was bigger, and it just went on and on. But I don’t know. My clock was bigger than his clock. [laughs]

FLO You told me before that part of the DPW was also “Play hard, work hard”. I feel that are many things that are part of the culture too, such as this whole “Fuck you, I love you?” And also, the slogans like... “Safety first: my life is better than your vacation.”

COYOTE One of them was “DPW: Burning Man without the sparkle pony.” That was a bumper sticker for a while... Well, it started out a lot rougher. DPW has come a long way. I was their manager in the days when we were really having a hard time



Coyote and his sons at the Golden Spike. Photo credit: Kimba Standridge, 2011.

getting anyone to come out here at all to work in the hot desert with broken trucks and broken tools and try to pull a city out of our ass. So, it was hard to get... it also was just kind of a different mindset where there was... we were not really having to adhere to any rules or regulations. We just kind of lived on our own ethics. So, things were a lot rowdier. Quite frankly it was kind of offensive in a lot of ways, you know? But at the same time, we were

separated from everybody. We were sort of forsaken, because there was not nearly as much communication as there is now, and so we were sort of left to our own means out in the desert, and a lot of people didn’t even know that we were doing anything. There was a much bigger rift between us and the San Francisco office, because we were not able to communicate as much as we do now. And so, that led to resentment.

So, a lot of the times when the general event would start, we were kind of pissed off about it really, because we were misunderstood and forsaken and taken for granted. Also, there was not as much of a vetting process for the type of people who would be on our crew, because we couldn’t pick and choose. So, we had a lot of real noble people, but a lot of some rough ones. So, it took us a long time to develop it into something that was a bit more

professional. And the good one stuck, and the rough one’s kind of went along the wayside. But it took a long time. People would look at our crews now and say, “man, you guys got this great crew.” It didn’t just happen. We’ve been working for 10, 15 years on hand-picking and grooming and training and teaching and learning.

You know, even just recently: last year I became an OSHA instructor,





Melissa and Coyote. Photo credit: unknown, 2019.

**“Every year I have to get up in front of the crew and remind them that we are building this town for them. And we all know that. But it still requires reminding because it’s human nature to feel that you have ownership of something that you built. Especially when you’ve gone through such hardship to build it.”**

which really kind of surprised the shit out of a lot of people knowing what my history was. Because I came from a very dangerous background. But, we all learned, and one of the reasons I think I am a good OSHA instructor is because I have been in a dangerous environment and learned how to survive. The thing I teach in the class is, yeah, safety, but also just watching each other’s back. All those hard hats in the world are not going to help you if you’re not paying attention, or if you’re not watching each other. And so, it’s come a long way.

But it’s still has its snarkiness, if you will. Because when you’re out here doing really difficult work in difficult conditions, and then here comes the event, it’s human nature to feel like you have a bit of ownership for what you just built. It’s human nature. You built it. You built it with each other. No one else was there. And now here comes a bunch of people that have really no idea what went into building it. And so, there’s a little bit of “hey, man, this is my town.” So, every year I have to get up in front of the crew and remind them that we are building this town for them. And we all know that. But it still requires reminding because it’s human nature to feel that you have ownership of something that you built. Especially when you’ve gone through such hardship to build it.

Also, a lot of times, now that we have feed camps and early arrivals and other artists that are starting to join the Playa at the same time that we’re still working... there’s a lot of times where people get a little bit of friction by coming into a job site, not knowing what they’re doing, and standing in the wrong place when there’s a crane operating. So, they might get yelled at. “Get the fuck out of there, or you’ll get your ass kicked.” You know? Not beat up, but you’re going to get hurt by the nature of the work. So, DPW still kind of harbors that reputation because people will come out, they’re at Burning Man, they worked really hard to get there, and all of a sudden, they’re getting yelled at by this guy that’s driving a big truck. They said, “Goddamn DPW! They were rude to me again!” Well, you were standing in the wrong spot! You know? [chuckles] So, that kind of friction will always be there. It really

has come a long way. We are much more accommodating. I think that’s just isolated incidents anymore. Most people really appreciate what we do. And we appreciate their appreciation.

**FLO** It seems that people are also very attached to the image of, as they call it, “finest scumbags”

**COYOTE** Well, that’s fun stuff. You know. It does kind of come from punk rock. Burning Man itself comes from punk rock. It was not a hippy event to begin with, at all. It was industrial.

**FLO** I’ve read about the Cacophony Society and all of this background, and John Law, and all this. It seems like it’s important for the community to relate to this aspect of reputation to form their identity.

**COYOTE** It’s a reputation that we will always have. It’s a stigma we will always have. But, when you look at how things really are, it’s a very loving group. You were at the golden t-stake yesterday. You felt the amount of love that was in the room. It’s very strong... What’s the word I’m looking for? ... I don’t know. But it’s certainly nowhere as mean as it used to be.

Here’s an example. We had a guy on our crew a couple of years ago. He ran our fuel trucks. And he was one of the main stays that was a super awesome friend of mine. His name was Johnny Blue Eyes. He was, as we’d say, old school DPW. He came back oh, I guess it was a couple of years ago, and hadn’t been around in a really long time. I came and checked in on him, and he was sitting on one of the couches in front of the Heavy equipment. The HEAT. And he’s sitting there, and I say,

**“It does kind of come from punk rock. Burning Man itself comes from punk rock. It was not a hippy event to begin with, at all. It was industrial.”**

“well, what do you think, Johnny?” He goes, “man, everything is so chill!” He said, “everybody’s in a good mood and nobody’s melting down, and nobody’s screaming at each other.” I said, “you know why that is? It’s because the trucks work, they’re fed, they have amenities, they have good trailers, there’s fresh water, there’s a place to take a shower, there’s good food, there’s beer in the fridge. None of those things that we had earlier.” The old school DPW, we didn’t have those things. And we’re still... so, it makes you grumpy, I suppose. We all got sick out of the kitchen in the old days, and we had trucks without doors or seatbelts, you know, hanging onto the steering wheel for dear life when you’re going down a highway. [chuckles]

The monkey pox went through. So, we had a lot of learning to do. I’ll be writing about these times. Some of the story, the history, is a bit dark. But that’s where we came from, and that’s where we learned. No one else was going to come out and build the



“[Johnny Blue Eyes] goes, “Man, everything is so chill!, everybody’s is in a good mood, nobody’s melting down, nobody’s screaming at each other.” I said, “you know why that is? It’s because the trucks work, they’re fed, they have amenities, they have good trailers, there’s fresh water, there’s a place to take a shower, there’s good food, there’s beer in the fridge. None of those things that we had earlier.”



Coyote holding his OSHA Trainer Certification. Photo credit: DA, 2015.

city. We were heroes. We felt like we were heroes. And we were in our own right. We were going up against major odds and still being able to do this stuff. So, yeah. We played a little rough sometimes. You know.

<sup>FLO</sup> I have this one thing that I would like to ask to conclude. I love rituals. I study anthropology of rituals. So, if you had to pick one that you feel very attached to?

<sup>COYOTE</sup> There’s so many. The 4:20 Spire has, for me, has been the one that developed the most. The reason I like that ritual is because of how involved everybody gets with it, and how it started. The quick story on that was in ’99 it was the first time that the city was a clock. That was the theme that year, it was called “Wheel of Time.” And that’s when Rod Garrett said, “Let’s make the city into an actual clock.” And it was such a good idea that it just stuck. So, I was out there surveying it,

and my buddy said, “Well, dude, you gotta survey 4:20.” I said, “Alright.” I mean, you’re aware what 4:20 is? I think it started as a police call or something like that, but now 4:20 is a marijuana thing. Everybody smokes weed at 4:20. I said, “Alright, well, let’s set up and let’s survey out 4:20.”

Then I thought, well, we could just make a whole alleyway down the city. Just call it ‘4:20 Alley’ and it’d be the alley that everybody smokes weed in. That never happened though. [laughs] Now we’ve found this spot for 4:20. So, there was this one spire that we had that was really twisted and wonky. It was, as the carpenter said, the wood was propeller-ed. So, he says, “well, we’re not going to use the spire for anything else.” So, Jason

grew. Then a little bit more, then a little bit more. Then we decided to put an octagon around it. Then, the Shade crew got involved and wanted to put some shade. Now, it’s grown to the point where many, many departments come down and represent themselves at the 4:20 Spire, and everybody has a little piece of something that they adorn it with. And so, it’s everybody’s chance to get a little goofy and a little dangerous. Autoshop brings a truck in on a forklift and drops it in. This year, Halsey brought her whole fucked up washing machine and threw it at the 4:20 spire. The Lamplighters even come with a ridiculous lamp and put it on. It just turns into how all the different departments wish to represent themselves. So, it just becomes this... everybody

participates in making this ridiculous piece of unscheduled art. It’s not on any of the art things. I didn’t pass it through the Artery first. Let’s kind of tick the Artery off a little bit a couple of times, “you know you need to register that as art?” Well, no I don’t. I was a bit defiant on that one, and they kind of just threw their hands up and said, “well, it’s the 4:20 spire, it’s its own thing.” This year it got spray painted. It’s everybody’s plaything that they can kind of fuck up. And punch a hole in the wall of it, make a big mess. Then, everybody was hitting the truck with sledgehammers. The party just grew that way. I think that I like that one because everybody gets involved with it. There are so many rituals that we have, but that one sticks out in my mind... Well, you know, it’s



Coyote (left) and Starchild (right) DPW’s tatoos. Photo credit: Erin Havlak, 2013.



“Everybody participates in making this ridiculous piece of unscheduled art [4:20]. It’s not on any of the art things [maps].”

was the guy that I wrote about in the first chapter, the guy who brought me up to Burning Man in the first place. As an artist, he painted the thing pink and wrote 4:20 on it. And then, we set the spire at the spot, and it was just him and I. We put some duct tape around it with a string. A big lighter. Over the years it stayed like that for the longest time. By the way, the 4:20 spire that you see at that ceremony is the same spire. It survived. Since '99. Yeah. So, little by little, the party

your chance to get your... you know, if you wanna take a sledgehammer to a truck, there's your chance. You've always wanted to do that, alright.

It is funny: one year I was coming by the 4:20 spire on foot, because it sits there all event. And it's really a sight to behold. It's a lot of chaos. There

are these two girls that were sitting, straddling their bicycles, staring at it, because it didn't look like art to them. [laughs] And... then one girl goes, “well, I don't know what this is?” and the other girl goes, “I think it's DPW?” and the other girl goes, “ooohhhhhh.” [laughs] That explains this hideous mess in front of me! Then,

they got on their bikes and pedaled on, looking for some other art. But it's not art! It's art that's not art, see? We never register it. We finally put some L wire on it to keep people from running into it at night. [laughs] Yeah, because they were saying, “Well alright, you got the 4:20 spire, but you need to light it up at night, because

people are running their bikes into it.” I said, “Alright, we'll put some lights on it.”

<sup>FLO</sup> Well, thank you so much.

<sup>COYOTE</sup> Well, I'm gonna go get a nightcap at Joe's.



Photo credit: Kimba Standridge, 2014.

“The theme that year [in ‘99] was called ‘Wheel of Time’ and that’s when Rod Garrett said, ‘Let’s make the city into an actual clock’ and it was such a good idea that it just stuck. So, I was out there surveying it, and my buddy said, ‘Well, dude, you gotta survey 4:20’ [...] I said, ‘Alright, well, let’s set up and let’s survey out 4:20.’”