

TAZ, the Album

Subversive Act or Active Sell-out?

Ellen Carryout

a review of

TAZ: The Album, Hakim Bey, Axiom Records, 1994

When I first discovered that anarchist author Hakim Bey had released an album of readings on the Axiom label, a subsidiary of the corporate monolith Island Records, I was both eagerly fascinated and smugly repelled. It would be easy to scoff at what, on the surface, seems like a calculated sell-out.

Recently, Island Records, Axiom's parent company, mounted a vicious and successful legal campaign against California independent experimentalists Negativland (and their comparatively tiny label, SST) for the subversive plagiarism of Ireland's superband, U2. The fact that a music industry machine like Island owns an ostensibly avant-garde label like Axiom, which functions under the tutelage of the experimental jazz virtuoso Bill Laswell and releases records like "TAZ," is concrete evidence of capital's capability for instant recuperation and the radical's culpability in the big fish eats little fish logic of the multinational money system.

Hardly an anonymous prank of poetic terrorism, "TAZ" (Temporary Autonomous Zone), the album, is a problematic prospect.

The very existence of this recording speaks to the dangers of mediation which Bey elucidates—the writer eloquently questions the means (book, c.d. or virtual reality, to name a few) by which we participate in art and music as tools of alienation, but provides the message in an "alienated" rather than "immediate" form. To hear the vital anti-commodity verve of such radical rants as the "Immediatism" manifesto, "Chaos," "The Tong," and "Boycott Cop Culture," recited by the heretical Hakim himself on a compact disc available in commercial record stores, suggests irreversible irony and the possible implosion of the disc's every proposition.

These fundamental arguments aside (which should appear in the anarchist press), I love the recording. The few reviews of this record I have seen in non-anarchist publications seem to treat it like some kind of exotic fetish or souvenir of counter-cultural fantasy. I know Bey takes his provocative proposals more seriously than that. I am a fan of Bey in the best sense of the word, but also a comrade, a fellow traveler seeking unmediated pleasure and the potential of the secret societies he invokes as insurrectionary cells. I benefit from this recording insofar as it contributes to my own enjoyment, informs and inspires my own projects, but all these things already existed in the printed versions. Did he produce this solely for the money?

And, as the listener should acknowledge, would you or I have done the same thing if opportunity came knocking? Most starving artists who self-righteously clamor about sell-outs are the first to eat from the capitalist pie when a piece is offered. But this doesn't necessarily make such compromises correct. All said, I doubt this record will be successful in commercial terms or that Island will be offering Bey a contract, a tour of clubs or stadiums, or any of the other bogus and bloated perks often associated with a corporate recording endeavor.

Also, don't be confused by the title; "TAZ" includes excerpts from Bey's "Immediatism" pamphlet (published by the Libertarian Book Club) as well as Autonomedia's book by the same name, but the book's tour-de-force "title

track” is nowhere to be found, not even a snippet. The “Amour Fou” (Mad Love) and “Poetic Terrorism” tracks are the record’s most accessible and creatively pithy tracts. Their brevity accentuates their creative brilliance:

“Amour Fou is always illegal, whether disguised as a marriage or a boy scout troop—always drunk, whether on the wine of its own secretions or the smoke of its own polymorphous virtues. It is not the derangement of the senses, but rather their apotheosis—not the result of freedom but rather its precondition.”

Like the best spoken word releases by people like William Burroughs, the sonic accompaniment coordinated by Laswell is almost incidental—the musical amalgam could have been a montage of mere found sounds, administered by a sinister deejay in an anonymous niteclub. Is this the anarchist contribution to the books-on-tape craze? Even as literary background noise for armchair radicals on long car trips or busy postmodern homemakers who want to cook, clean and be educated simultaneously, it is an interesting prank.

Also, I can’t endorse paying \$15 for “TAZ, the album” at your local record-mart. Bey has almost certainly been paid in advance for his readings. His future royalties, if any, must be a nominal fraction of the cover price, so, don’t support corporate corpses, especially when they are selling you a technological representation of your own desire for genuine rebellion!

But rather than use ascetic rhetoric to castigate Bey for “selling out,” I simply suggest to those who would like to hear the “TAZ” spoken get it by shoplifting or pirating a copy. I found my artificial artifact of authenticity masked as culture in the used bin of a big record store—a promotional copy still in shrink-wrap probably discarded by an uninterested music critic—and stole it.

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