

# The Passing of an anarchist Prankster

Linus J. O'Leary, 1956–2015

Bill Boyer

2015

Detroit lost a unique anarchist prankster, mechanical genius, underground musician and reluctant sage, Linus J. O'Leary, after a two month battle with multiple complications from a brain aneurysm on February 25, 2015. He was 58.

Linus grew up during the 1960s in a large working class Catholic family (with proud Irish roots) in Dearborn, Michigan, exposing him to one of metro Detroit's most infamous examples of bitter segregation, while developing a radical political consciousness against racial injustice and other forms of oppression.

In 1982, a family tragedy profoundly affected him for the rest of his life with the death of one of his activist sisters, who died in a freak New York City high-rise elevator accident while canvassing for a communist party. Such hardship strengthened both his commitment to more anarchist activism and his awareness (bordering on paranoia, according to some) on how dangerous such dedication can sometimes be.

While always a familiar face at anti-war and anarchist demonstrations, Linus also entertained more covert actions of political expression and misdemeanor vandalism such as graffiti on billboards or unlicensed use of a certain class of fireworks.

His inventive touches frequently enhanced the local protest scene. Once, he created a deafening explosion simply by attaching a fifty foot extension cord to a TV hurled from the roof of an apartment building while it was blaring the spectacle of the 11:00 News).

His mere presence also often aroused interest from law enforcement, including an arrest at an anti-OAS demonstration for wearing a baseball helmet (humorously documented in a syndicated cartoon) and a gun-drawing, stop-and-frisk by Detroit police after pulling over Linus seated on a bus due to another rider mistakenly identifying his cigarette roller for a loaded handgun. At a protest in Atlanta against former US Secretary of State (and war criminal) Henry Kissinger, Linus rather daringly vented his disgust with some well-aimed spit at close range.

During the peak years of activism against the Detroit trash incinerator (1986–1991), Linus could be heard in marches banging on varied make-shift percussion instruments or seen in creative costumes, including an elaborate smokestack assembly belching actual fire and smoke. The festive contraption unexpectedly almost engulfed his wavy reddish brown mane. Undaunted, he marched on with his characteristic hearty giggle.

A passionate punk rock musician and fan since the early days of The Clash and Sex Pistols, Linus wrote several songs, including two favorites, "Fireball," defiling the ill-fated Challenger space-shuttle crash, and "Tylenol Kills," satirizing the fatally contaminated pain-killer. As lead singer for a year in a Detroit alternative rock band, The Blanks, his vocal fervor remains preserved on one topical recording against the Detroit incinerator, "Where There's Smoke."

His short-lived band career evolved into two decades of sound engineering live shows, most frequently at the Old Miami, a bar whose clientele is an admixture of vets and punks, in the heart of Detroit's fabled Cass Corridor.

His unusual combination of mechanical expertise and a heartwarming generosity also made Linus a common community repairman, dispensing friendly advice while salvaging car engines, appliances and assorted electronics, usually in trade for just a warm meal and a beer (ok, maybe several).

Although Linus could count at least 18 different addresses over the past 30 years, including stints in New Orleans and Naples, Florida, he never strayed from Detroit for too long. A longtime “spiritual atheist,” he nonetheless took residence for a few years as live-in caretaker of the leftist Central United Methodist Church.

At the height of the Occupy movement in 2011, he spent many days distributing food, Fifth Estate magazines, and timely wisdom to the busy Detroit encampment.

The now ethnically diverse city of Dearborn became his final residence in 2013. Neighborhood youth sought him frequently for childish fun and informal advice, yet Linus, without any partner or children, dreaded growing old, grumpy and alone. He dabbled in various social media but understandably found such connections trite, even staging a mock suicide by slowly deactivating his Facebook account so friends could say goodbye.

Solitary probes into the world of Anonymous and other cyber-activist sites seemed to coincide with his slowly fading health, a shadow of someone who once biked some 250 miles from Detroit to Sleeping Bear Dunes on Lake Michigan with one of his ankles in a cast, with crutches artfully attached to his bike.

His reclusive later years and premature death leaves behind many disturbing questions, such as what happens to aging activists without sustainable associations to any community, organization or meaningful work, nor any partner, children or close family ties. Unconsciously, his varied services seemed to be no longer needed, even his quiet hobby of copying bootleg CD and DVD copies for friends and relatives.

Most of us had moved on with our own shrinking families in faster, digital domains of typically less personalized and less unified action. Linus had openly insisted on no resuscitation in case of intensive hospitalization, yet he suffered miserably during his final two months, mumbling repeatedly about wanting to go home while shackled to a bed with cloth restraints, psychotropic cocktails and the intravenous technology too common in such institutions of managed death.

This heartbreak gives a surviving best friend a kind of permanent pause; a mourning endless in memory, not just of an idealist or anachronism, but of a close companion with too much soul and too few connections to these troubling times.

Bill Boyer teaches high school in the Detroit area.

Also, see [corridortribe.com/obits/linus\\_oleary.htm](http://corridortribe.com/obits/linus_oleary.htm)

# fifth Estate

Bill Boyer  
The Passing of an anarchist Prankster  
Linus J. O'Leary, 1956–2015  
2015

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/394-summer-2015/the-passing-of-an-anarchist-prankster>  
Fifth Estate #394, Summer 2015 — Technology

**[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](http://fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net)**