

Abbie Hoffman, Orphan Of America

Dissident Peasant

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Contents

Transcript	4
Podcast Links	13

Abbie Hoffman was the real deal in a world full of fakers.

Transcript

It is Thursday, September the 20th, 2018. This is the Dissident Peasant podcast, I am your host.

The illustrious Jeff.

On today's show Abby Hoffman, writer, activist, revolutionary full time.

We'll talk about him and his story. Mostly forgotten these days.

Want to thank you for joining me today. Just as a reminder the. Show is brought to you by people like you. At [patreon.com/dissident peasant](https://patreon.com/dissidentpeasant). These episodes take quite a bit of. Work to write way more. Than I thought they would. When I started. But I really like doing it and I feel. Like it's cool and it's. Good to pop out of the. News cycle now and then, and yet still maybe receive some political education. So thanks for joining me today. Enough of all that meta commentary, let's get to.

The man of the hour.

So as I said at the top, Abbie Hoffman was a writer, activist, full time revolutionary, for decades. Truly authentic member of his 60s counterculture that his most famous activities. Took place in. Now, just as a matter of record, for those who do not know, Jeff Georgia was born in 1985, so of course I deliver my perspective from. Both the perch in time today and a foundation formed by the culture that was around during the forming of my historical and political consciousness. With that in mind. I think 1 facet of the 60s counterculture that is often lost upon people today. Were specific efforts by the mainstream business politics journalism to Co, opt those movements? And totems of the 60s both for marketing and to obtain their votes. Which is a nice way of saying much of the nostalgia and imagery around 60s counterculture was actually manufactured. Phony, disingenuous, Co opted, let's say. Now whoever was first and whenever they were first to use the term hippie itself in the meaning of our modern vernacular. It was a term. At some point it became endlessly repeated by op-ed, Columnists magazine and newspaper men in 1960s America. And all the associated trappings and images, suggesting freedom nonconformity irony, youth vitality. Change of hippies. So used to sell everything from soda to the blue jeans automobiles. While conveniently shedding the more radical misches. Some of those hippies So those he's like, Abby Hoffman. Abby Hoffman was none of that. Whatever his flaws or limitations as a human or revolutionary authenticity was something he truly strived for and I think achieved. And like the best, most courageous and most authentic of revolutionaries for whom walking the walk becomes sufficiently important. He would eventually face the wrath, the. Forces of order more than once. For his life philosophy. Abbott Howard

Hoffman, who I will call Abby from now on as he was not the sort to be in formality anyway. Was born November 20th, 1936 in Worcester, MA stood. Shout out to my man Sam. Cedar of course another. What's the guy? How the Commonwealth? His family was middle class and Jewish Abby himself would later describe it as really an idyllic time and place to grow up to his recollection. He was born too late. To have any real memories of the deprivation. Of the great. Depression, or the horrors of World War Two? Now, his formative experiences as a child were with what he saw as the vacuity of middle class society. So like any anarchist worth, their salt and Abbie Hoffman was certainly worth more than a fair share of his salt to extend the metaphor. He would quickly develop a class incorporated political consciousness and philosophy. That said, in 1969 he wrote of. This experience thusly. The sons and daughters quote saw their fathers disappear behind the cornflakes box and hurried off to his other life in a distant land called downtown. They heard from their mothers over and over again about being respectable and responsible, and above all, reasonable. They monopolized the TV set with Bob Hope baseball games situation, comedies about people like them, and of course, Ed Sullivan. They like to keep up so they read Time magazine and the New York Times on Sunday. If there ever was a desolation row, it climbed into the front seat of the Oldsmobile on Monday morning, checked its passport, and headed down town. Desolation row of course referred to the Bob Dylan composition of the same name. He was also a story he told himself and others, so it's possible the following anecdote may involve a bit of exaggeration. But according to his own account, as smart as a whip 16 year old Abby Hoffman wrote an essay once. For a single class that was atheists, antitheist both maybe. Basically, he stumbled independently upon Epicurus's paradox and the problem with evil posed by the hypothetical existence of a God who is both all good and all powerful, and his teacher hated it. In fact, he allegedly hated it so much. He ripped the essay up in his face and called Abbey a communist before throwing the shredded remains of his work to the floor. Abby Hoffman tackled his ***, got expelled, had to finish up his high school education at a different institution couple years later. In between he spent a critical couple of years basically hanging out in Worcesters pool halls and dive bars where he maintained some of his first education of society from the bottom up occurred. Abby also described his childhood as a more or less indefinite state of warfare with his father. Some bitterness over his father's classification during the war as 4F that is physically unfit for service. Abby thought, why would you not take up arms against Hitler for our people? That as well as his father, never really confiding in him or her sharing any intimate feelings or secrets. Also mixed with Abby's rejection of the regimented lifestyle, his father attempted to impose upon his admittedly pretty delinquent son. To produce a man, history will remember as penning. Kill your parents in service of the revolution. Also pertinent to his character development, the atheist Abby Hoffman. Would face pressures, both internal and external, regarding his Jewish familial connections and history? He watched as his family members were assimilated and accepted to differing degrees by American Society. His mother's brother Sam or Shmuly Schaumburg was particularly much admired. Successful, prosperous married

to what Abby might call a beautiful shishka a snazzy red day with flaming red hair and a thick Irish brogue, he wrote. His uncle's ability to fit in among the Irish and Polish rednecks as Hoffman called them made him much admired by his nephew Abby. Regardless of this, craving for assimilation, his Jewish heritage was very important to him all his life and his rabbis's eulogy. At his funeral noted that he was to be compared in his social commentary. With the Jewish prophetic tradition. To comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. But in any case, just to finish up with his early life, he obtained a degree from Brandeis University of Massachusetts in psychology. We'll also get some coursework towards a Masters degree at Berkeley finished later. Now, Abby Hoffman was a brilliant guy, probably a genius in my his mission. And though he wasn't the type to really appreciate the cracking of books in general, as a young man, he did study under 2 professors of note. The first was a man named Abraham Maslow, a psychologist. You might have heard of his hierarchy of needs, which is a framework for understanding psychological health predicated on fulfilling human needs, arranged in a hierarchy of priority. Maslow himself labeled mentally unstable as a child, did much to create the perspective known as humanistic psychology that was then rising in prominence. And his work in the field of education. I am passingly familiar with, and was before the writing of this episode. Believe it or not. Man, those classes were expensive. The second guy was a Marxist philosopher, sociologist and theoretician named Herbert Marcusa. Those of you who have come here looking for a detailed and accurate synopsis of Herbert Marcusa might be disappointed. I'm afraid, to be frank with you in such waters, I am not really well equipped to tread. So if you're super well read on your marcusa. Give me a break for what? I'm about to say. Leaving you with nothing would be pointless, right? So whilst want? To bring him. Up now. The idea is in work of Herbert Marcusa, upon which much ink has and will continue to be spilled. Contain at least one important element that pertains to Abby Hoffman. Our here for today. It's a concept marks called objectification, which is basically what it sounds like. The conversion of human beings with all their contradictions, wants, needs, emotions, cultures, customs, instincts, neuroses, yes, they're logic and reason too, and to basically objects with a function for capitalism alienated from both themselves and each other. Now, Marcusa argued that as industrialization had advanced both widely and deeply across the peoples of the Earth. Folk have gone beyond this and have begun to see themselves actually as extensions of the objects produced under capitalism. Their consumer choices have become totems of identity, cherished as tightly as any archaic and meaningless religious custom you can think of. Because of this revolution cannot come from traditional allies of radicalized working class proletari. No marcusa instead laid his chips instead on an alliance with radical intellectuals and marginalized groups not yet integrated completely into what he called the one-dimensional Society. Hopefully you can see that a guy like Abby Hoffman, who had a propensity for acting out for breaking rules for doing drugs for mouthing off for hustling pool for not integrating. Was particularly affected by this perspective. Of course the ivory tower of the university is no place for Abby Hoffman. He worked at Liberty House for a time.

It was a store that sold products made by black women in the South. Who couldn't find any market for their goods in their home towns under Jim Crow? He was also involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the 60s civil rights body, dedicated to ending Jim Crow and resisting the war effort in Vietnam. Before they kicked him out in 1965, along with every other white member. He went on to a meeting with a radical Community Action group called The Diggers. Named specifically after that, same from Ye Old English history. After hanging out with them and learning all about both their ideology and their ways of getting by without, you know, paying for anything, he published a book about it in 1970 entitled Steal this book. Many people actually did steal the book, and consequently some stores refused to carry it, but it went viral via word of mouth among a certain set of people, which was good because no one did any advertising for it or reviewed it at the time it became a bestseller nonetheless. A lot of the advice and it was outdated, like how to shoplift successfully and days before they were sensors at every door or scanned vending machines and it really ***** the diggers as it basically exposed every hustle everyone was running at the time then. Causing these hustles overexposure and countermeasures from the forces of order to kick in. And he also refers to America as a pig empire. And states that not only is it not immoral to steal from it, it's actually immoral not to steal from it. But his first big public break, as it were, helps explain why he became to be known as a sort of Groucho Marxist. That rare thing in life, I think the pretty reoccurring character in Shakespeare's the Merry prankster, who's secretly the wisest character on stage. On August 24th, 1967, Hoffman was at the New York Stock Exchange. He was there, accompanied by a few Co demonstrators, including Jerry Rubin, the anti war activist and oftentimes partner of Hoffman, who will have cause to reappear many times later. It was also accompanied by a sympathetic magazine editor Marty Jezer, as Jezer tells it. He saw the idea of what they were about to do. As a little. Marxist ZAP to expose the greed of capitalism. And like any serious and conspiratorially minded Marxist, he of course put on a suit and tie and got a haircut in order to prepare for infiltration. Well, good effort. Everyone else was decked out in their most ostentatious hippie costumes. Paradoxically, Abby and folk like him were both hippies and not. The construct, the media sensation, the marketing demographic that is kind of what a hippie was. So play into it. He thought give them a show, except Lo Hark and not so fast. They were looked over by the guard at the door who told them that demonstrators were not permitted inside the exchange. Abby responded that they were Jewish, not demonstrators, and the guard because he was a liberal cook. I guess, let them through seriously. Abby and his band of merry folk made their way to the gallery overlooking the floor and began to throw fistfuls of bills down. How much money they threw is not known. A few 100 singles, perhaps, or a few real singles, along with many more fake ones. Maybe something like 300 bills or maybe even a couple \$1000. Whatever the case, the traders scrambled and tussled and fought with each other for the money, as trading ceased temporarily and the point was made. Hoffman emerged from the exchange to the media outside who were not permitted to witness the spectacle, and

Hoffman himself was cryptic to them. Calling himself Cardinal Spellman and burning a \$5 bill. All this only added to his and his band's mystique, of course, and accounts grew with inaccuracies and exaggerations successively. But the incident was definitely covered in the mainstream press. At a time, not just before the Internet, but before cable television. This was a big deal. What was a slightly less but still big deal was the bulletproof glass that was installed shortly thereafter, placed above the gallery to the New York Stock Exchange, reportedly costing \$20,000 at the time. Just too much later. Of course, for Abby Hoffman, and that was not enough, it was time to float the Pentagon through psychic energy. Truthfully, this is the sort of stuff a boring old empiricist, such as myself, has trouble grasping the appeal of sometimes. The often straight up religious, or at least spiritual nature of the counterculture of the 1960s. But basically, one extreme hippie type who ingested superhuman qualities of hallucinogens on the regular among a small but influential group of other hippie types got super into symbology. And he began to marry the apparent nature of an institution designed to perpetuate the meat grinder of Vietnam. The Pentagon, with what he thought was the innate evilness of the shape of the Pentagon itself. And so it was decided all of them together there, including Abby Hoffman, that they would stage their already in the works anti war demonstration, not in the capital, not in the halls of democracy, but at the Pentagon. At the site thereof, the situation got extremely comical with most of the organizers themselves not actually believing the Pentagon would levitate off the ground and dissolve into a cloud of vibrating orange dust before vanishing, whatever they might have said to reporters before and after the fact. Though a few participants did probably really believe. Opinions on their methods differed. 1 apprentice exorcist peppered a sexually suggestive monologue with commands for demons to flee. Hoffman himself arranged couples to surround the structure and perform public displays of affection. To fight fire with water. Hate with love as it were. Some others sprinkled cornmeal in traditional circles of healing and purification, while Allen Ginsberg recited Buddhist mantras and chants. Aramaic exorcism rites were read too. Gotta throw it all I guess. See if it sticks. By the by the iconic photographs you've probably seen before of young adults placing flowers into the gun barrels of soldiers there to confront them was probably from this day on October 21st, 1967. Or from a reenactment thereof. Quote we will dye the Potomac red burn. The cherry trees Panhandle embassies attack with water pistols, marbles, bubblegum wrappers, bazookas, girls will run naked and **** on the Pentagon walls, sorcerers, swannies, witches, voodoo warlocks, medicine men and speed freaks will hurl their magic. At the faded brown walls, Hoffman said. Over 100,000 people attended this March and of course not all of them were as heavy into the levitation. The drugs or going hard against armed men. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara literally watched this from his window. He would later write that he had turned against the war by this point, but that lot of good he did for anyone on count. Of it seems to me. Confrontations between the law and the protesters ran throughout the evening and the next day, but by and large the invincible ruthlessness of the American military was not present, and the organizers themselves felt quite embold-

ened by the overall result. In the media of the spectacle they had created. Hoffman was more and more committed to his project of looking to continue the Counterculture's move away from largely apolitical or anti social ends towards affecting real change in the world. He and some buddies, notably Jerry Rubin, would well. I'll let him tell you quote. We needed a name to signify the radicalization of hippies, and I came up with Yippie as a label for a phenomenon that already existed. An organic coalition of psychedelic hippies and political activists and the process of cross fertilization at anti war demonstrations. We had come to share an awareness that there was a linear connection between putting kids in prison for smoking pot in this country and burning them to death with napalm on the other side of the planet and quote. After a bit of debate, they agreed on the name and Anita Hoffman, our hero spouse, at the time added the more formal youth International party in order to get the papers to take them seriously, ha. There are stated goals as a party where to get the United States to something like an anarchist collective with a decentralized nation state. But they were best known for their guerrilla theater and irreverence of process. One of the man dude. You might think there's no real reason to take them seriously, and you'd be wrong, or at least Uncle Sam disagreed, because like any revolutionary in America at the time who was of any consequence. Hoffman and Rubin would both come under the attention of that infamous body known as the House. UN American Activities committee. Now, this committee, whom we have had cause to. Deal with previously. It was getting a bit tiresome even before they started calling Rubin and Hoffman's witnesses in 67 and 68. That is both before and after the 1968 Democratic National Convention. Their appearances dressed as Santa Claus, Revolutionary War soldiers or shirts patterned as American flags culturally very different from now. Hoffman was arrested for wearing one of these as he was desecrating the flag. They did much to hasten that committee's decline. In fact, the next year they would have to change their name to the House Internal Security Committee before disbanding completely in 1975. So foolish did Hoffman and Rubin make these clown fascists appear. Speaking of the 1968 Democratic National Convention, in 1968, Abby Hoffman was there. Now of course. If you're passingly familiar with American history, this convention marks one of the most divisive and crystallizing events in politics that's ever occurred. In the latter half of the 20th century in America. The events and consequences of August 26th, 27th, 2020. Ninth at the International Amphitheatre in Chicago, IL, could probably fill an entire book. In fact, I'm sure it already me. I don't want to get sidetracked with the history of the 1968 Democratic National Convention, but briefly. By this time, the Democratic Party was incredibly divided by interfacial rivalry and not inconsequential differences and vision for the parties direct. President Lyndon Johnson had dropped out of the Democratic nomination process. Of course, he will not be seeking another term as President. His chosen successor, Vice President, Hubert Horatio Humphrey the third. Inherited his president's delegates and was the establishment choice. Humphrey pretty good on civil rights. Awful in the war, and aligned with the not really very radical, and indeed sometimes very corrupt mainstream labor unions at the time. Robert F.

Kennedy had entered the race that year to become president, and he was assassinated in June. Of course, his delegates remained uncommitted at the beginning of the convention. Eugene McCarthy was the 4th Carnival challenger, the anti war senator. Several states sent competing slates of delegates for in the Democratic Party in 1968, segregated all wide delegations from the South were challenged by integrated delegations over and over again. There was violence between protesters and police every night it was a mess and all the while Abby Hoffman was there. He was not really a Democrat. Anymore, but a yuppie. And they brought a candidate within these yuppies, Pegasus blessed be his name. Was the Youth International Party's candidate for president in 1968, the 145 pound domesticated pig was in the middle of having Jerry Rubin deliver his acceptance speech. When the Chicago PD arrested him and his campaign team of yuppies, the dastardly fascist bugs with no respect for the political process. Ultimately, less because of this and more for the sake of making an example of him, Hoffman and seven others would ultimately be indicted in the aftermath of the 1968 Convention for trying to start a riot more or less. Now, the riots that occurred naturally were police riots according to investigations by Uncle Sam himself, after the fact. If you've ever heard the phrase the whole world is watching in response to documented brutality, this is where it gets its big break as a phrase. So you're Abby Hoffman. Now you're in real trouble because your smart ass path has landed you in a courtroom and you're looking at decades in prison because these were federal statutes. For most, it might finally be time to put your head down, but not happy. He and Rubin in particular were relentless during the trial. In a certain sense. They showed up to court, dressed weird and lazily ate Jelly beans. Read newspapers mouthed. They had showed up at judicial robes one day, when in order to remove them, they revealed that underneath they were dressed exactly like Chicago Police Department members. Ultimately, the trial was a farce. And not just because the defendants themselves made it so, it really was a joke, never approaching anything close to fair and all its convictions would be overturned in time for unconstitutionality. In 1973, Hoffman was arrested again on charges to sell and distribute cocaine. Hoffman always maintained that undercover agents entrapped him and planted coke suitcases in his office. Now I might. Normally be disinclined to believe such a tale from a guy with a fondness for controlled substances, but on the other hand, I don't really think it's out of the question here to believe that he was the victim of a conspiracy in this, considering who he was and who his opponents were. Just saying it was possible. He skipped bail the next year and underwent cosmetic surgery to live as a fugitive before surrendering to authorities in 1980. He was sentenced to one year in prison, but served only four months, which seems an odd consequence for being caught with suitcases full of coke in an airtight case with undercover law enforcement as witnesses. In 1986, he gets arrested again with several others, including the daughter of the former president Amy Carter. Not in a coke sting this time. Instead, in connection to their protest of the CIA's recruitment on the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus. The university's policy required organizations recruiting on campus to be law abiding and the CIA on its face certainly

was not, and so they objected. Dozens of expert witnesses were called by the defense to prove this. Daniel Ellsberg, the man who leaked the Pentagon Papers about Vietnam. Former Contra leaders from Nicaragua, former Attorney General of the United States, Ramsey, Clark, among others, all painted a picture of an organization that did engage in illegal activities, persistently and in explicit defiance of congressional statute. I'd be lucky if I were measured 1/10 as great as Abby Hoffman, but it's a man after my own heart when acting as his own attorney. He delivers his closing statement in the case by quoting Thomas Paine. Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the ages and generations which preceded. Man has no property in man, neither has any generation of property in the generations which are to follow. Thomas Paine was talking about this spring day in this courtroom. A verdict of not guilty will say when our country is right. Keep it right. When it is wrong, right those wrongs.

End Quote.

It worked. The jury found he and his Co defendants. Not guilty. In April of 1989 he died after swallowing 150 phenobarbital tablets and some liquor. Now Hoffman in his later years did lots of stuff. Food critic, reporter columnist fugitive community organizer comedian. And he also regularly gave lectures about the CIA's covert suppression and elimination of political dissidents. It was and is natural to wonder if he truly killed himself, given who he was and what he stood for. But Hoffman, like many brilliant minds in history, had his share of psychological difficulties. He did seem to press near the inn. Some friends said this natural prankster who had reached middle age and had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder some years before. The radicalism of the youth of the 1960s had given way to the Reaganism of the 1980s. And there probably was no way to swallow that many pills without intent. His death was ruled a suicide and I tend to agree, though dissenters did and do still exist. Who Abbie Hoffman was is easier to tell. Than to tell of what consequence he was. As to the first. He himself put it this way, quote. You are talking to a leftist. I believe in the redistribution of wealth and power in the world. I believe in Universal hospital care for everyone. I believe that we should not have a single homeless person in the richest country in the world, and I believe that we should not have a CIA that goes around overwhelming governments and assassinating political leaders, working for tight oligarchies around the world to protect the tight oligarchy here at home. End Quote. But of what consequence was this man whose political party held no seats, and who never wielded public office himself? Abbie Hoffman didn't levitate and disintegrate the Pentagon, and he didn't stop the war in Vietnam. The United States of America is not an anarchist collective of cooperation and love and Pegasus was not elected president of the United States of America in 1968 or in any other year. Well, to expect a single man to move a mountain seems a bit foolish. The wise man. If he had mountains to move, would do better to grab a great many more people to work towards their common end. And in terms of doing this, Abbie Hoffman was a true pioneer. Before there were viral videos or message boards, he found a way to draw attention, get people to look, maybe join in and have fun. Maybe build something better, maybe start a revolution. What that revolution

was wasn't really nebulous that you might expect it to be. Abby Hoffman had a list of demands he read in court that was quite specific, if ambitious. But neither could the revolution ever be said to be static. I think Hoffman sounded very much the Jewish prophet when he said quote. Revolution is not something fixed in ideology. Nor is it something fashioned to a particular decade. It is a perpetual process embedded in the human spirit. When all today's islams have become yesterday's ancient philosophy. There will still be reactionaries, and there will still be revolutionaries. No amount of rationalization can avoid the moment of choice. Each of us brings to our situation here on the planet. And for him, that moment he described thusly in his autobiography. I still believe in the fundamental injustice of the prophet system. And do not accept the proposition. There will be rich and poor for all eternity. Thank you for joining me. I appreciate it.

Next time, who knows, we'll have probably radical communist Helen Keller David's sisters. Until then.

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