

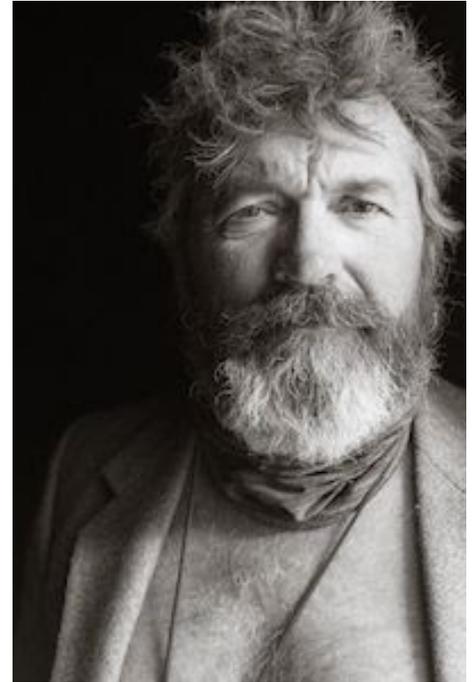
Q & A

BUILT TO BURN: Tales of the Desert Carnies of Burning Man

Tony “Coyote” Perez

Tony Perez came to San Francisco from Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1979, and forged a living as a singer and sax player for well over a decade before he started building the cities of Burning Man in 1996. He quickly became the City Superintendent of Black Rock City (BRC), supervising the production of the city infrastructure, and was part of the founding management of its Department of Public Works.

Tony also boasts a longtime career as a construction foreman, a beloved inner-city bartender, and yes, a working blues and R&B musician. He was the first recipient of a Burning Man Storytelling Fellowship for his many tales of the history and the inner workings of the event and its culture. Visit him online at <http://tonycoyoteperez.com>.



TOPICS: Building Burning Man; early history of Burning Man in the Black Rock Desert; surveying the city; Department of Public Works; Gerlach, Nevada; construction; bartending; the blues; playing in bar bands, touring as a musician.

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Tell us how your campfire stories of early Burning Man days became your first published book. How did *Built to Burn* come into existence?

Tony: A few years back I was attending our annual Senior Staff retreat, an annual gathering where we unpack the season and brainstorm for the future. At the end of this retreat, as we do every year, we have time for storytelling, performances, music, and fun. This year I had decided to write a story that I had been telling for years about my first 24 hours at my first Burning Man back in 1996. In the spur of the moment, I decided to take the stage and read the story to the full crowd. It was hugely received! A few weeks later I was called into the Burning Man headquarters and offered a Fellowship grant to continue writing toward a book. I had compiled hundreds of stories—the challenge was shaping into a narrative that would carry a full memoir.

After telling these stories for so many years, did you find anything surprising about compiling them all into a book?

Tony: What surprised me was that three overall narratives emerged that told their hero's journeys and they intertwined: my story of becoming the builder of Black Rock City, the emergence of the new age of BRC, and the founding of the Department of Public Works. It was like dumping a zillion puzzle pieces out and in assembling them, these odysseys emerged.

Burning Man has changed so much since 1996, that first year you hopped in and went on the adventure depicted in *Built to Burn*. What keeps you returning to work so hard building Black Rock City, now a full-fledged city of 80,000 people, every year?

Tony: I've always been a social creature and building together can create bonds that are sometimes even closer than family. I mentioned early in the book that I quickly discovered the real reason I was so willing to jump at a road trip into the unknown —I was lonely; something I hadn't realized until I was thrust into a powerful world of camaraderie. It was the excitement of creating something new. People naturally want to feel inventive and useful beyond pulling the levers of commerce machines. Figuring your way out of a dust storm, broken down truck, missing bolts situation, and making it happen in a new clever way makes for deep satisfaction. It was a more genuine feeling of accomplishment that I ever got from a paycheck.

"I was being asked to do the seemingly impossible with the most improbable. Problem-solving and situational maneuvering made up the machine oil that my brain gears craved!"

It's Burning Man's first time publishing books on its own imprint. Did you ever think about self-publishing? What made you decide to work with the Project to release *Built to Burn*?

Tony: It was a natural course of action. Our stories are as unique as our event. Just as the agencies still struggle with our unorthodox ethos, I quickly discovered publishers find it challenging to choose a market for our story. As a matter of fact, when Amazon released it, we found that they had pigeonholed its genre as "Jazz Musician Biography". We all got a chuckle out of that one, but it did hold the "bestseller" slot for over a week in its first week. I was in the music industry for about two decades and have been on several album projects including major labels such as Warner Brothers. In shopping my manuscript around, I quickly realized that the publishing industry was very similar to the recording industry in having the mission of making your stuff marketable. And since there isn't a market slot for Burning Man, few would even glance at it as it was considered a roll of the dice (especially in the finicky times of internet and self-publishing!). And most importantly, I would be trusting final edits to editors that have a core directive of making money. By creating a publishing imprint through the Burning Man Project, the priority shifts to perpetuating a growing community. Now we were guiding the narrative, and this was a match made in heaven!

Some of these tales are downright wild and woolly, and you talk about some pretty unusual experiences, and even, occasionally, questionable decision making back in your

early days of Burning Man. Did you take any “liberties” with the storytelling? Change any names to protect the not-so-innocent?

Tony: Ha! That’s like a chef telling the secret ingredient. The very first page of this book has the quote, “These are the stories as I remember them.” The good news is that I never really *had* to stretch the truth on any of these stories. Things really were that crazy. This book is a hero’s journey and the bad choices are the crux of the tales. As far as changing any names, most everyone either had circus performance stage names or playa names; a tradition that goes back as far as the needed radio handles of the very first desert seasons. Many of the characters I never did learn their real names. This still holds true. Even now, few of the crew know my name is Tony. I do use some actual names for some of the characters, (one or two may not be too pleased with what I wrote), but I never slander anyone.

Are you still in touch today with the Burning Man people featured in the book? What about the Nevada locals?

Tony: Doing research and re-connecting with most of the characters was one of my favorite parts of writing this book. Of course, I wasn’t able to reach them all. There are a few that I would be very interested in looking up. And, sadly, a few are no longer with us. The nature of this book was to pay respect to the salty unsung heroes that clacked the first city grids together. Just hearing their voices made it all worth it. As far as the Nevada locals, this has always been a story of strange bedfellows who have more in common that either side would care to admit. But over the years, we’ve grown quite used to each other and have made some very close and cherished friendships.

Do you have plans for your next book or project?

Tony: I do. I have a couple of projects in mind, actually. My road warrior “Plymouth Volare” automobile of infamy is still in our midst and is still generating desert stories. I plan to start an episodic series called the *Volare Chronicles* that truly can go for years without stopping. I also am compiling the many stories of the struggles of being a professional musician in the eighties that will span fifteen years of roadwork travels across America titled: *Blue Collar Musician*. The core narrative on this one will be artists against the establishment as we become almost famous; a peek into the horrendous music industry long before the internet.

What would you say are the most important lessons or messages a reader will find in *Built to Burn*?

Tony: I think that Black Rock City truly is a city of possibilities. One of the most common conversations to be had in any camp of BRC is what they plan to do next year. Our event takes practice. We have armies of people that only dared to dream of “impossible” projects until they came and saw an entire city of makers and doers. “*Building together is as natural as the*

evolution that brought us here.” Even this book is a testament to the opportunities of growth that emerge from the fabric of our community that strives to weave in all the yarns.

Looking at your resume of careers, you are a “man of many hats” as they say, from the service industry to professional musician, to journeyman tradesman, to the builder of Black Rock City, to a published bestselling author. What would you attribute this to? Has this wide set of skills attributed to your writing and storytelling?

Tony: Even as a kid at the carnival, I wanted to ride all the rides. When I was old enough to leave home, I headed west with the intention of meeting everyone and experiencing all the things. I’ve always felt that my life was heading toward writing and storytelling, and as it turns out, all of these different vocations have given me many facets to view the world from. I don’t imagine that I would ever want to retire. I just keep trying something new.

Do you still play music?

Tony: Of course. I still have a band that I’ve had for about twenty-five years that plays once a month. It’s an R&B jam band called “*Tony Perez and Second Hand Smoke*,” aptly named because we do mostly cover songs.

A quote from a review of your book: “*We all struggle to explain why the Burning Man experience is so profound. Coyote doesn’t try to explain it. He simply shows you in a most personal way by sharing moments of his life.*”

What are your thoughts about the power of storytelling?

Tony: The hook in any story is when it becomes relatable. It’s when a person can actually imagine themselves in that situation. Sometimes it will be the smallest or seemingly insignificant detail that chimes with the listener or reader and transports them, instilling emotions. When this happens, it won’t be the words that they remember so much is how they felt when hearing the story. A well told story will open your heart as well as your mind and imagination.

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