

**PLAYBACK:****My Personal Experience of Chaos Magic with William S. Burroughs, Sr.***Cabell McLean***PART 1**

It was the summer of 1976, and after six long years of working my way through an undergraduate degree in a southern university, I knew I wouldn't make it through the additional year or two I needed to obtain my Master's degree down in the steamy south. I badly wanted a change of environment, and I thought the West would be the place to go. I finally decided on the University of Colorado at Boulder because they had a fairly good post graduate program. In addition, Naropa Institute, a local Buddhist retreat there, ran a School of Poetics that brought in many of the most gifted writers of the day to teach courses in creative writing. Among these was William S.

Burroughs, Sr., my personal all-time favorite Beat writer, who that year taught a course in screenwriting.

Naturally, I soon made the acquaintance of Bill, and we grew to like and respect each other to such a degree that by the end of the summer, I was invited to share rooms with him for the next year. During this time we developed a close personal relationship. That year he was working on the first of his famous *Red Night* Trilogy, *The Place of Dead Roads* (perhaps best described as a "science fiction cowboy story"). I was some small help with that effort, but most of my time was taken up learning directly from the master how to write, about his cut-up techniques, and doing various random/automatic writing experiments with him. These were without question the most exciting months of



my entire writing career, and opened new areas of interest for me that I have still not exhausted some twenty-five years later.

Socially, the scene was equally thrilling. I well remember the Fall and Christmas seasons that year, which were spent entertaining fans and celebrities who came to see the “Old Man.” Bill and I also traveled to New York City and I will never forget the constant stream of famous characters who regularly dropped by. I would prepare meals and entertainments in both Boulder and New York for these visitors, after which we would sit and drink until the small hours, while I listened in fascination to the many stories told by these now-historic figures.

Often our visitors would bring the most remarkable and bizarre gifts. I recall once we received priceless Civil War era cap and ball revolvers from an admirer who lived in the mountains outside Boulder. We actually used them in a bit of impromptu target practice on the man’s property during a visit there. Many guests would also bring various exotic drugs, as “Old Bill” had the reputation of being the junkie “godfather” for my generation. The most remarkable of these would have to have been a chunk of raw Thai black opium weighing about half a pound that we received from a fan who was a drug importer. He had never met Bill before, but treated him as a sort of godfather, deserving this gesture of respect.

Typically, Bill was quite nonchalant about this huge quantity of “O,” and he kept it casually in the very back of our freezer. Whenever he or I wanted some, we just chipped off a small one-gram hunk. We’d let it thaw until it was tacky enough to form a ball, then coat the ball with vegetable oil and swallow it. We enjoyed drinking Earl Grey tea afterward, which warmed the “O” further and helped to activate it. When we did this, we usually started feeling the effects within about 10-15 minutes.

Needless to say, at a gram or so per dose, this huge hunk of opium lasted us many months. Naturally, we kept it’s existence a strict secret within a very small circle of friends. Even so, it still managed to intrude upon our lives in an odd series of events that served to reveal a hidden force of what I can only call chaos magic, a force that Bill had described to me and others on numerous occasions, but one which I never thought I would witness first hand. That force was “PLAYBACK.”

## PART 2

During my time living with Bill in Colorado, I naturally made a number of other close friends from among the crowd at Naropa. One of these was a beautiful young woman named Poppy. When I first met her, Poppy was part of Gregory Corso’s entourage. Her



particular job was looking after Gregory's young son, and thereby hangs a tale. Apparently Gregory couldn't keep his hands off the boy's previous babysitters, so his wife (and I assume his several other girlfriends) decided to find someone who could keep him at arm's length successfully. Enter Poppy, who is supposed to be a "confirmed" lesbian, then living with another young lady. This fact, and Poppy's evident good natured disgust with Gregory's slovenly drunkenness, seemed to be enough to fend him off, and though he did continue trying, he never was successful with Poppy. Somehow this never pissed him off as it probably would have done with another woman. They managed to keep the peace between them, at least until I came along.

Poppy's dedication to Gregory was always a tenuous arrangement at best, and it finally started to deteriorate when Poppy left her previous girlfriend and became once more a free agent. For reasons I am still at a loss to explain, she started to take a serious interest in me, and not being a compete fool, I recognized my good fortune and reciprocated her attention. We became close friends and even occasional lovers, a fact that completely mystified the Naropa community. Quite a few people were spending an lot of time and effort trying to discover what was "really" going on between Bill, myself, and Poppy, and I have to admit to a bit of mischief when I let it be known that, I also had a boyfriend in Boulder and another in New York City! In fact, the Naropa gossips were driven to distraction by the strange relationships swirling around Bill, and we all had a lot of fun keeping them guessing. Ah, youth!

About twice or three times a week during that Winter and Spring, Poppy and I would spend the day together as a rule. For these outings, I would sometimes bring along a couple of grams of "O" already rolled into balls, oiled, and wrapped in foil. It was our habit to start the day at a small deli on the Boulder Mall. We would order two cups of Earl Grey tea, and before they would arrive, we'd open the tin foil wrapper and swallow our "O." We drank our tea until the drug started working, and then go on to the rest of our day. We made no secret of what we were doing, only taking the precaution of removing the tin foil when we left, just in case someone got inquisitive. The waiters all saw what we were doing, of course, but so many people there took nutritional supplements with breakfast that we never seemed to attract any interest. If things had remained that way, there never would have been any problem. But alas! This was not to be.

After several weeks, we began to feel so relaxed about this delightful morning ritual that we made a serious mistake: we began to stay longer and longer each time. Of course, this meant that we were slowly getting more and more intoxicated with the passage of time. "O" is like that. If you get up and move around, the effect wanes and



you seem fairly normal. However, if you sit in a nice warm place drinking tea, you can find yourself on the nod before you know it. In addition, we were only drinking tea, as “O” takes away your appetite, so we were occupying a table without providing much business, something sure to attract the attention of the owner. Of course, eventually the inevitable happened, and the next time we came in for tea, the owner pulled me aside for a little talk.

He went straight to the point. He knew we were getting high and he didn’t want it in his place. “I can’t have my customers subjected to this kind of thing,” he said. He wasn’t going to make a scene or call the cops (something I was deeply grateful for at the time!) but he would ask that I not come in today, and that I never bring drugs in here again. I could come back, but no drugs. I didn’t argue with him, again grateful that he wasn’t throwing us out entirely. He just didn’t want us to use his place to get high. I thought this was pretty realistic response, and generous, considering how the scene might have gone. I thanked him for his consideration and returned to Poppy, still standing at the door. I took her by the hand and told her I thought we should go elsewhere today.

We went to the mezzanine of the Boulderado Hotel, where the attitude toward drugs was considerably more enlightened and I knew we could take our opium in peace. Only when we were finally seated and had taken our doses and were drinking our tea did I explain what happened. I was somewhat amazed to find that she was totally pissed off about the incident. No amount of explaining would mollify her feelings. This was, of course, her nature; she was a fighter, and had come up hard in the street in Indianapolis, taken to the road at 14, the same age as I myself left home, and like myself she had fought all her short life for everything she had. But while I was simply glad to avoid trouble when it arose, she wasn’t about to let this or any other personal affront, pass without reply. However, I hoped that, with some time and a chance to talk things out, perhaps she would calm down. For that reason, I invited her back to my place later for dinner and drinks, telling her we could discuss the problem there with Bill. I felt sure that he would have a calming influence on her. Boy, was I wrong!

### PART 3

When we sat down to dinner and drinks that evening with Bill, I described what had happened in the deli that morning. I hoped that Bill, who had in the past always advised me to “take a broad general view of things,” would immediately see the futility and even injustice of any reprisal upon this shopkeeper, and would discourage Poppy from any reaction, if only to avoid trouble. Imagine my surprise, then, when he not only agreed



with Poppy that “something should be done,” but also had some suggestions for what that something should be! As I watched them gleefully plan retribution, I had visions of firebombs flying through plate glass storefront windows. But, of course, I should have known Bill had no such violence in mind. In fact, I now see that he was using the incident as a way to instruct us, in a relatively harmless way, in how to use a great and powerful tool. A clue came when I asked him what exactly he planned to use as a weapon. He answered, “You know, Cabell, sometimes the best weapon is *no weapon at all...*”

As Poppy and I pondered this cryptic statement, Bill described what he called “some early experiments” with a force called **PLAYBACK**. It seems that when Bill lived in London, he occasionally visited a certain bar there. Like the deli had done with us, this bar at first tolerated his presence for a time. But then a distinct change of attitude took place, and they started to treat him very shabbily. To strike back at their blatantly hateful attitude, he continued going to the bar for a few more days, enduring their abuse, while he tape recorded the sounds inside. Later, he would stand outside and film or photograph the premises from outside. Then he went back in and began to play the tape recordings at low or “subliminal” levels, and continued to take photographs on his way in and out of the place. This he did for several days. The effects were remarkable: accidents occurred, fights broke out, the place lost customers, the subsequent loss of income became irredeemable, and within a few weeks, the bar was permanently closed.

After Bill told us this story, I began to see where he was going. Poppy and I thought it would be great fun to try out the technique on the deli. But we did not want to close the place down! Only to try the method until we saw an effect, if any could be had, and then withdraw. Bill agreed this was the best course, and God bless him, I saw immediately that this was what he had intended all along: simply a way to educate us a bit in something he thought might be a valuable lesson for us.

The next day, after crawling out of bed and medicating ourselves for the brutal hangover we always had after drinking all night with Bill, Poppy and I still thought the idea was a good one. So we started thinking about exactly how we would proceed. By confining ourselves to only tape recordings and not including photography as part of the “assault,” we felt we could minimize any damage that might occur. Poppy also asked that Bill come along, and I was delighted to find him willing and even eager to do so. I must admit that I still had doubts that anything was really going to happen, so I was glad Bill would be there to insure that we did everything correctly. I needn’t have worried, though, as the procedure was simplicity itself.

We had waited a few days before we made our first sortie to the deli. In the interim, Poppy and I entered, had a meal at the counter nearest the kitchen, and made our



first recording of a little over one hour in length. The next day we came in for lunch and made another tape of about 45 minutes. During this last visit, I took the opportunity to speak to the owner again to reassure him that we would not be abusing his hospitality as we had done before. I felt it was important to normalize relations as best I could so that we would be guaranteed access when we attempted our experiment.

We now had sufficient tape time to start our initial run. We gathered up Bill that Sunday and went to the deli for breakfast about 10AM. We sat just about in the exact middle of the place, close to the kitchen and counter, and ordered coffee to start. Bill carried the small cassette tape player in his inside jacket pocket, and after we received the coffee and were deciding what to order, he turned on the first tape and began to play it at the very lowest volume. Over the next hour, he slowly raised the volume until we could just barely hear it, but only if we listened very hard. It blended admirably with the noise of the busy Sunday breakfast and brunch crowd. Even though the waiter came quite close to Bill on several occasions, he never seemed to detect the sound or differentiate it from the background noise of the place. I knew that Bill's utterly mid-western dead-pan composure naturally intimidated most people and would easily have served to deflect attention away from us should they have noticed anything, but they never did.

At first we didn't see anything unusual happening. We ate our meal, sipped our coffee, got refills and waited. Forty-five minutes passed and still nothing happened. I had just begun to think to myself that this playback stuff was pretty bogus when things finally started to happen. Initially, we heard a loud crash and the sound of broken crockery and a lot of loud voices arguing in a foreign language (Greek, as it turned out). Poppy was part Greek and could just make out the sense of the yelling: someone had dropped a full tray of food and drinks in the kitchen; apparently someone had come in the kitchen through the "out" door and smacked a waitress so hard she dropped everything. Loud arguments followed between the owner and the staff. We saw one of the waiters throw down his apron and stalk out with the owner following behind, yelling at him as he went down the street. Quite a scene, to say the least! I looked at Poppy and saw her eyes wide with surprise, just as mine were, I'm sure. This was all very dramatic and sudden, but more was to come.

The owner came back fuming, and started to scream at the waiters and waitresses, sending two of the girls running for the ladies room in tears. Then, the owner seemed to gain some small control and went to take care of the numerous customers now standing at the front and wishing to pay their bills and depart. Incredibly, within less than a minute, another violent argument broke out, this time between the owner and a customer.



Everyone in the place seemed to be going nuts! One of the waitresses was stopped by Poppy who asked her what was wrong, and all the poor girl could say was that the owner had suddenly gone crazy without the slightest warning. As she walked away with our check and payment (with a generous tip, to be sure!), Poppy and I looked over at Bill who was calmly smiling. He said, "I told you it would work! Now, aren't you glad we didn't take photos, too?"

I had to agree with him there! I could just imagine us crawling out of a glowing radioactive crater where the restaurant had once been, had we taken photos as well! Bill just chuckled to himself as we left. And at that point, the desire for revenge just no longer seemed important to either one of us. If anything, Poppy and I actually felt sorry for the poor schlemiel. And that's really what I think this lesson from Bill was all about: a sort of cautionary tale in which the lesson is: "be careful what you wish for!"

#### PART 4

**So What's Going On Here?** Well, I don't really know, but I suspect that a great deal of power is somehow unleashed by the act of recording negative events and their subsequent playback. Bill described the playback effect to me quite simply as "recording the target's own base shittiness, and then playing it back to him at subliminal levels." The effect is subtle but profound, cumulative with time, and tends to multiply or magnify the negative aspects of the target far beyond the target's ability to control. The shittier the target's acts are, the more pronounced the effect of playback upon the target. Unconscious effects are equally devastating and may last for some time. The primary feature of this method is that it is not immediately recognized as an attack, if it is recognized at all. Most of the time, the target isn't even aware he has been hit, and that's the best kind of weapon, isn't it? "No weapon at all..."

Photography appears to greatly heighten the effect when used in conjunction with sound recording/playback. Something about making the photographic record seems to emit a power all its own, and this has long been known and understood. We all have heard of the near-universal superstition that a photograph somehow "steals the soul?" In the modern age, there is without question a sinister aspect to photography. Simple examples follow: It is considered highly suspect for anyone to be photographing any military installation, whatever their reasons. Such an act inevitably brings the scrutiny of the police and security apparatus, especially these days. And, of course, the police themselves require anyone photographing the scene of a crime to have the proper credentials. The police seem to have a real fear and aversion to the free use of videotape




and photography, and, as we have seen many times on the news, they have good reason to feel this way! The Rodney King incident largely seems to me to be an example of how much power can be released by playback. There seems little question that something more than mere graphic recording is going on in the very act of photography. We all feel that power if we think about it deeply enough. Perhaps that power, then, is somehow focused by sound playback and possibly also by the ultimate intentions of the practitioner.

**Further Applications:** In terms of *bang for the buck*, there are few cheaper and more powerful means of response available to the common man. Obviously, playback can be used by anyone to disable even very complex systems of social control, if used intelligently. Recordings can be made first hand, if possible, or from the news media, or from any number of other sources. The potential is unlimited nowadays. Information is available everywhere. Even a very small group of people, working in unison, could make all sorts of change possible. Now, the reader must understand that I am certainly not so foolish as to recommend in a public forum that such a thing be done. I am merely informing you that the potential exists. The technology costs only the price of a tape recorder, a camera, and recording media, so the applications are just about universal. And playback leaves virtually no trace whatever, unless someone is expressly looking for such traces, and even then it is unlikely they will discover what happened, or believe it to be possible if they do discover it has happened. How could such an effect be prosecuted or legislated against? At present, it is not and could not be.

As a tool in the universal fight for the right to be left alone, the freedom to do as we please with our own bodies, and the effort to establish a world in which **M.O.B. [Mind (Your) Own Business]** is the primary watchword and way of life, it may well play some sort of role. All that is needed is the knowledge of how to achieve the effect, and this can easily be taught or described, just as I have described it here. If it is to play a role in the future, it will be a potential forever held, as it should be and must be, in the hands of the individual. As Bill would so delightfully put it: in the hands of the *Johnson men*, and NOT the *Shits* of this sorry sphere we called Earth. Playback is only one in a long list of such comforting tools available to those with truly open minds and imaginations, the usefulness and full extent of which have hardly been approached in the past. Remember this: If it can be recorded, it can be played back. We are limited only by our own imaginations.



**More Information:** Those wanting more information on this interesting phenomenon can find Bill's own description in the book *The Job* by **W. S. Burroughs, Sr. (Interviews with Daniel Odier)**, published in at least three editions in 1969, 1970, and 1974 by Grove Press. Other than that, there is **Konstantin Raudive's** *Voices From the Tapes*, and a few other seminal works exploring the fascinating effects of tape recording, but these are merely general guides in an area still largely unexplored by the scientific community. Perhaps this lack of scientific investigation will spur readers to research the subject for themselves and produce their own papers.



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