

The Bad Shaman Meets the Wayward Doc

Erik Davis

Alfred Savinelli, John Halpern, and the Silo Bust

The following piece regarding Halperngate was written by my buddy Erik. Something to chew on for another viewpoint. I've been asked to share it, and would presume that it is intended to be forwarded liberally.

-- Jon Hanna

At the recent Basel conference celebrating Albert Hofmann's hundredth birthday, Mark McCloud stood up during a [presentation by Dr. John Halpern](#), a Harvard researcher with close ties to MAPS, and began haranguing the doctor. Waving a handful of [documents he'd received anonymously](#), McCloud revealed to the crowd that Halpern had acted as an DEA informant during the investigation of William Leonard Pickard and Clyde Apperson for the manufacture of LSD--the infamous "Silo Bust" case. Though Halpern's snitchery was known to some, many in the psychedelic community were unaware of Halpern's involvement with the DEA or with Pickard.

In the storm of controversy that followed McCloud's announcement, Rick Doblin offered up one defense of his decision to work with a DEA snitch. Leonard Pickard, he claimed, had given him the green light to work with Halpern; and Leonard Pickard, Doblin implied, was the only one hurt by Halpern's actions. (Doblin replied to an earlier version of this document by pointing out that he never directly made this claim.) This implication bugged me because I am good friends with Alfred Savinelli, and Alfred was once very good friends with Halpern and was peripherally involved in Pickard's LSD operation. According to documents in Alfred's possession, Halpern's early reports to the DEA considerably exaggerated Alfred's role in the criminal operation. Alfred's embroilment in the subsequent investigation and prosecution of the case was severe. As Alfred puts it, "John Halpern ruined my life."

Savinelli thought of Halpern as a close friend. He trusted the younger man, invited him into his home, helped him in his career, and even advised him, before the bust went down, to extricate himself from Pickard's dangerous game. But in order to maintain career and liberty, Halpern sacrificed Savinelli and offered inflated claims about his involvement. The case cost Savinelli a "tremendous amount of money and personal pain and aggravation." It put excruciating pressure on his family, and essentially destroyed his social networks.

But the deepest wounds for Alfred were emotional and psychological. "I saw John as a surrogate son, and bent over every which way to accommodate his work and his personal needs. He was more than a friend, which is why for me the betrayal was at such a level that I found it hard to comprehend... The code of silence to me is something that goes unsaid. For John, well, he just bent over backwards to nail me to the wall. So I got social phobic issues, I got all kinds of stuff that if I ever recover from... For me to be able to trust people has gone out the window. Having seen that side of human nature leaves me with a great vacuum in my life."

This article is a modest attempt to understand the context of Alfred's comments, and to give a brief portrait of the excellent character that some of us call the Bad Shaman.

MEET THE BAD SHAMAN

I first hung out with Alfred at Burning Man 2000, when the audacious dome we helped set up at Tranquility Base was toppled by the fierce Friday storm, rendering the camp "Humility Base." Despite having never previously attended the event, Alfred came in style, with a galaxy-class ski suit, fine noise makers, and the appropriate attitude of slap-happy psychonautiness.

With his long straight hair, twinkly grin, and half-Native ancestry (the other half is Italian), Alfred radiated an undeniable shamanic vibe, an energy composed equally of gravitas and mischief. The mischief, in particular, is key. One outstanding incident involved a coffee cup, certain residues, and an unsuspecting Spanky, who proceeded to fathom hell and soar angelic with an alacrity heretofore unknown to him. The incident, it could be said, reflected Alfred's commitment to the visionary

potential in us all, as well as his liberal, if not always forthright, generosity. It also led Yeti to dub Alfred the [Bad Shaman](#). Bad as in naughty, not as in incompetent. Later I would hear Alfred soothe souls lost in an inter-dimensional purge. He is most competent.

My Burning Man crew and I visited Alfred a number of times in Taos, and once he introduced us to the secretions obtained from *Phyllomedusa bicolor*, a tree frog found throughout the Amazon basin. The procedure was simple, albeit odd: using smoldering incense sticks, we removed a few layers of skin from our upper arms, and then swabbed on a dab of the goo. Within moments I was overcome by a full volume niacin rush, a blood-pounding vasodilation in the neck and lower head. My throat felt scratchy and hot as the venom raced through my body, shooting tiny bolts of electricity along my arms and descending somewhat ominously to my gut. After five minutes or so, the blast was basically over. We lingered on the couch for a while longer, sipping Reed's Ginger Brew that Alfred handed us with a smile.

I was amazed by the thoroughly excellent if subtle payoff the venom had in store for me over the next few days: a persistently "up" level of energy and mood, but without the edginess of stimulants or the dopey, somewhat plastic cast of Big Pharma mood elevators. Later on, Alfred, whose upper arm looked like the cratered afterzone of a teenage acne scourge, loaded a bunch of us up again. Though he promised that the rewards depended on the heaviness of the dose, I still took a moderate amount. But Alfred blew out the stops for Yeti, who is a psychoactive hard-head and proud of it. After getting lathered up, Yeti was reduced to a quivering, sweating wreck whose only payoff, he later said, was the immense relief that he did not, in fact, die. The Bad Shaman just grinned at him. "Maybe you didn't get enough."

THE BAD SHAMAN AND THE WAYWARD DOC

The Bad Shaman is an old school student of the tea, one of the explorers who helped channel the pharmacology and knowledge of ayahuasca into the research underground in the 1990s. "DMT is mother's milk," is one of his mottos. He visited the Brazilian sects in the early '90s and later white-knuckled his way through Rick Strassman's intravenous DMT study. During the study, he met a number of researchers, including Pickard and, eventually, Halpern. Given the grief that ultimately came to him through these connections, Alfred--who I will now call by the more procedural moniker of Savinelli--now looks back at his submission to Strassman's study as proof that "No good deed goes unpunished."

Savinelli and John Halpern became friends. Halpern often stayed at Savinelli's place in Taos, with the older man playing a trippy big brother role to the Harvard boy (who somehow never picked up the tab). They founded a company together with the goal of marketing an extract of St. John's wort, and in 1995, the two co-authored an important contribution to the MAPS Bulletin regarding contraindications to MAOI drugs. Later they were both drawn into the web Pickard wove around his LSD manufacturing operation.

I will let Halpern--who I suspect must speak if he is not to remain pariah--explain his involvement in the case. Evidence suggests this involvement includes introducing Pickard to a high school friend named Stefan Wathne for the purposes of having said friend launder Pickard's copious barrels of cash. But perhaps Halpern will continue to hold his tongue, citing DEA agreements or whatnot, in which case I humbly submit that, at the very least, he consider enjoying Labor Day in Cambridge this summer.

Whatever Halpern did, he got a hundred grand a year from Pickard for three years, delivered in cigar boxes stuffed with cash. Savinelli also got a business loan for roughly the same overall amount from Pickard. Under the pressure of his debt, Savinelli says, he was later involved in the relatively pedestrian act of providing Pickard with solvents and glassware, acts which he admitted as a witness for the prosecution. (Hold your horses.) Savinelli did not supply the ergotamine tartrate.

Prior to 2000, the year the bust went down, Savinelli had already fallen out with Pickard because of what he perceived as deeply sketchy behavior, which may or may not have included Pickard dumping trash at his driveway following a mishap that involved Pickard accidentally dousing himself with liquid LSD. In the fall of 1999, Savinelli also warned Halpern to sever ties with Pickard, ties that Halpern chose to retain. "My frustration was that he was going to throw his career away for this stupid stuff. But the lure of fame and money was uncontrollable for him."

Shortly after Leonard Pickard and Clyde Apperson were arrested on Nov 6, 2000, Alfred received a call from Halpern. Savinelli believes the call was being taped, and that Halpern was leading him to make incriminating statements. Twenty minutes later, John called Alfred's partner Laura as well, and had an awkward conversation with her. (Doblin has admitted that Halpern taped some phone conversations, though these may not have included the calls to Savinelli or his partner.)

Around the same time, Savinelli also received a call from Todd Gordon Skinner. Skinner, of course, was the snitch supreme, "the devil incarnate" according to Savinelli, the man who brought the whole house of cards down and is now awaiting trial for kidnapping, torture, and other nefarious doings. For Savinelli there is no comparison between Skinner and Halpern. "John wasn't the snitch. Todd was the snitch. John was just a mealy-mouthed, spineless piece of shit... John is a dupe and a fool but he didn't cause this all to happen."

According to the court transcript, Halpern was interviewed by the DEA and offered a signed statement on December 4, 2000, and came back for another round four days later. Many other meetings followed.

In January, Savinelli received an anonymous phone call suggesting that he meet someone at a coffee shop. Savinelli arrived to find a cup of coffee and a sealed envelope with his name. Inside the envelope were two documents. One included approximately 13 pages of handwritten unsigned notes that appear to be summaries of Halpern's initial interview with the DEA. The second document consists of three type-written pages that include a few paragraphs of summaries from a later Halpern interview, as well as two and a half pages of summaries with "CS"--"Confidential [or Cooperating] Source"--and which logic and the process of elimination suggests is Todd Skinner. In addition to these documents, Savinelli got an anonymous cover letter, which Alfred no longer possesses, suggesting that Savinelli consider leaving the country.

This batch of documents--which are not unlike the anonymous documents that Mark McCloud received and that led to his Basel outburst--make for interesting reading, and are not without their humor. (Pickard's code name, for example, is said to have been "Sex Maniac.") One of the most revealing claims in these documents occurs not in Halpern's testimony but in the CS's. Describing a telephone call he had with Alfred, the CS claimed that "Savinelli seemed worried that Halpern would roll on everybody. The CS believed that Halpern would roo [sic] because Halpern would not want to take the chance of losing his medical license."

Halpern spilled a number of frijoles in these 13 pages, only the first of a long series of interviews with the DEA. This is not the place to dive into the complexities of this fascinating case. Jon Hanna and I may go into detail about these and other documents in an article we are planning to research, which will not appear for a few moons. No-one is a saint in any of this. What is important here is the essential conclusion that, unless these documents are fabricated, which seems unlikely, then we have a clear indication that Halpern rolled fast, deep, and long, and that he did so on his friends.

In these documents, Halpern makes two strong claims against Savinelli. One is that Savinelli threatened to kill Pickard. Savinelli claims that he was just talking shit, and that it was Pickard who threatened his life indirectly through Halpern. The second claim was that Savinelli gave Pickard money to set up the LSD lab, a claim Savinelli strongly denies, and that the prosecuting attorneys decided not to pursue.

When Savinelli read these DEA summaries, which he believed had been sent from Pickard, he concluded that he was being set up as a patsy. "Obviously Dr. Halpern was trying to put me into the prime position." Even the suggestion that he flee the country, he realized, could reflect a deeper game of shifting blame. Shortly after getting the documents, Savinelli received a subpoena dated January 26, 2001, ordering him to appear in San Francisco for interrogation on February 22, 2001. The few pages of court transcript that Mark McCloud received anonymously include a passage that suggests that the DEA spoke to Savinelli two times a few weeks before he showed up in San Francisco; Alfred says he only recalls talking with the agents when they delivered the subpoena in late January.

Alfred visited me and my wife that February when he came to San Francisco. He was a changed man. His hair was shorn, his demeanor taciturn, wounded, and withdrawn. He was concerned about visiting us, lest we get tainted with the shitstorm brewing around him. He did attend Burning Man

the following summer, but seemed on edge, and left abruptly in the middle of the event after an argument with someone in the camp, telling no one he was leaving. He had already begun to fall out his social networks and friend groups, a process that continues to this day, in a manner that he admits was and is unhealthy.

Another thing distressing Savinelli in the winter and spring of 2001 was the pressure on his family. "It's one thing to take a bullet for yourself. But when your family gets involved it's another issue... I considered a lot of things at the time, including suicide, to protect those people around me." Particularly vexing was the issue of Savinelli's son. At the time, the young man was paying \$500 for a closet-sized room in Halpern's apartment in Boston, where the kid was researching hydrogen fuels at Northeastern. Savinelli's son had already watched his girlfriend run off with Skinner, who knocked up the girl and abandoned her after reportedly hiding fifty kilos of ergotamine tartrate in the wall of her parents' house. When the spring of 2001 rolled around, the DEA started visiting the home of Halpern, who was lying to the kid about what was going on. "My son basically had a nervous breakdown," says Alfred. Savinelli arranged for a relative to go to Cambridge and physically extricate the son from the situation.

When Savinelli decided to cooperate with the DEA, he was under subpoena. Skinner and Halpern had already been working on their stories with the DEA for months, and Savinelli had good reason to believe that he was being set up as a fall guy. Represented by an attorney whose fees were partially paid by Savinelli's friends Paul Simon and Sting, Alfred took the stand for the prosecution under a proffer agreement, which is less comfy than complete immunity. I don't know the exact terms, but the government reserved the right to prosecute Savinelli in certain circumstances, and this kept him on his toes. The defense attacked his veracity, accusing him of being a rampant drug user. Savinelli says he testified for about four hours. Skinner, by comparison, was on the stand for something like eight days.

Halpern did not take the stand, a fact some have suggested implies the modesty of his sins. Alfred has another perspective: "The reason John did not testify is because the DEA knew he was lying all the way through. They didn't want to ruin John. They knew he was a doctor and that he got drawn into it, but they knew he was lying all the way through. They didn't want to put him on the stand because it contradicted what everyone else had told them."

"Don't let [Halpern] say 'I didn't know anything and that's why I didn't testify, I'm just a bystander.' That's what he told Doblin and that's what he'd like you to believe. But he was up to it to his eyeballs."

THE BAD SHAMAN'S WARNING

Whatever the complexities of the situation, it is clear from Alfred's perspective that Halpern spilled the beans, rolled his friends, and exaggerated Savinelli's involvement to the point of betrayal, presumably to draw attention away from his own involvement in the manufacture of LSD.

We could speculate on what guided Halpern's decisions, and in the void left by his refusal to address this matter, speculation will fester. It is easy to see a certain archetypal story emerge: a privileged freak starts slumming with the coyotes, gets in over his head and then panics. It is also easy to see the DEA zeroing in on this weak link and snapping it with ease. One of the threads of Halperngate concerns the power of authority, about what constitutes "the law" in the most general sense. When the shit went down, the high-status Halpern almost immediately established an intimate relationship with conventional authority institutions--i.e., the DEA. The dark irony is that Halpern's intimacy with another kind of establishment authority structure is one of the reasons we have been asked to cut him slack.

Reviewing this material, one is hard-pressed to see why Pickard would be so sanguine about Halpern's continued involvement with the psychedelic research community about which Pickard cared so much. Perhaps all those trips left him with a heart of infinite compassion and forgiveness; perhaps, as some people suggest, he is a supreme game player and master of social manipulation. (Who sent McCloud that package of anonymous documents anyway?) But it is not only Pickard's place to forgive. And it is certainly not Rick Doblin's.

Even if Halpern was just a fool and dupe, his decisions and actions should be placed on the table during this current period of re-assessment and soul-searching. Admittedly I am biased, since I am friends with Alfred, and am, perhaps more than some, loyal to my friends, even if I do not always do all I can do.

Revisiting this painful passage in his life has not been fun for Alfred. Speaking with Jon Hanna and I for this article, Alfred has largely withdrawn from talking about the case, which depresses him. Though he is bitter he claims he is not speaking out of spite. "The reason we need to do this is so that the rest of community is protected. John has the potential to really to reduce credit and cause more trouble to the psychedelic research movement... John uses his Harvard credentials as a carrot to attract other people to him... From my experience, [John] suffers from megalomania, with a grandiose sense of self-importance. His ego is huge, and he just feels that fame is a magnet he cannot avoid. He's a pot head who thinks he is smarter than everyone else he ever meets. He's gonna hurt us, and most of the people he befriends.

"He is your monster now."