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Reprogramming a Convicted Hacker; To His On-Line Friends, Phiber Optik Is a Virtual Hero

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Three years ago, Mark Abene was a computer cowboy who roamed cyberspace when it was an unfenced frontier. A computer geek who was "wired" long before the term was coined, he considered the Internet too easy and looked for a bigger challenge. And he found it by breaking into the computer systems of some of the nation's biggest corporations -- a crime that landed him and three of his friends in Federal prison.

Since the four were charged in 1992 with the most extensive computer intrusions on record, the world has caught up with them. Getting on line is the height of fashion; it has become a gathering place for everyone from the Rolling Stones to the Speaker of the House.

And now, Mr. Abene has emerged from Schuylkill County Prison in Pennsylvania to find himself a folk hero -- the infamous Phiber Optik.

"Mark is famous in the on-line world," said Stacy Horn, the founder of Echo, a New York computer bulletin board that is a kind of high-brow electronic salon, visited via modem by authors, professors and museum curators. "He broke into every phone company computer in the world."

Ms. Horn, dressed in downtown black, was the host of a welcome home party for Mr. Abene on Thursday night at the dance club Irving Plaza. The night pulsed with radical chic as Manhattan artists and professionals feted the 22-year-old man from Elmhurst, Queens, the son of a union official and a department store billing clerk, who did most of his breaking and entering with an inexpensive TRS-80 computer from Radio Shack.

"They tell us to reach out and touch someone, but don't reveal it's forbidden to touch them," a flutist in the underground band Foamola, who was identified only by her cyber handle, Violet Snow, said from the stage. "Phiber reached out and touched them, and was exiled to Pennsylvania."

Andrew Johnston, 26, a computer graphics designer for an advertising agency, said: "I grew up with computers like many in my generation, and I always had lots of respect for the hacker community. I always felt they were exercising freedom and pushing frontiers. They were doing something very important for American society."

Many said Mr. Abene, a thin young man with a wispy goatee, epitomized the hacker credo that access to information should be free, not monopolized by big corporations, although they were quick to acknowledge that they didn't want anyone breaking into their own computers to peek at their hard drives.

In the deep baritone he once used to convince Nynex employees that he was a repairman working on a telephone pole and in need of confidential information, Mr. Abene said before the party that his 10 months in prison had been miserable.

Deprived of a computer for the first time in years, he was bored and made to spend his days shoveling snow and buffing floors. Ms. Horn printed out and forwarded his E-mail from Echo, which held a kind of on-line vigil for him until his release. Prison, he said defiantly, did not reform or rehabilitate him.

"I wouldn't do this again now, but only because I was caught," he said. "I'm not telling people not to do the things I did. There's always going to be people hacking. All I'm doing is cautioning them

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they've got to be careful."

Mr. Abene and his three friends, who called themselves the Masters of Deception, or MOD, all pleaded guilty. According to a forthcoming book about the case, "Masters of Deception: The Gang That Ruled Cyperspace" (Harper Collins) by Michelle Slatalla and Joshua Quittner, MOD members traded celebrities' credit reports that they stole from the computers of TRW "like baseball cards." The reports included those of Geraldo Rivera, Richard Gere and Tony Randall. They also sold some reports.

The book depicts Mr. Abene as the brains behind the gang, the one who cracked the code for navigating the phone companies' vast network of call-switching computers. MOD members were able to set up unbillable phone numbers, listen to conversations, and in a prank aimed at a rival hacker, turn a home phone into a pay phone that demanded "Please deposit 25 cents" whenever the receiver was lifted.

The public first heard of the group on Nov. 28, 1989, when hackers wiped out the information in the Learning Link computer system operated by WNET, Channel 13, in New York, which served hundred of schools. Teachers and librarians who logged onto the system read the message, "Happy Thanksgiving you turkeys, from all of us at MOD."

Mr. Abene and many of his admirers are at pains to distinguish his actions from what they consider the more serious crimes of other MOD members. Mr. Abene denied he was involved in the crash of the Learning Link or in selling credit reports. "Selling access to credit histories is unacceptable," he said. "You're crossing the line into theft."

He maintains that he broke into computers only to gain an understanding of how they worked; his friends used the knowledge to make money. "It was something that got out of control," he said.

Yet, Stephen Fishbein, the lead prosecutor in the case, said Mr. Abene's role went well beyond electronic trespassing. "He's not telling the whole story when he says he was just looking," said Mr. Fishbein, who is now in private practice. "He was altering files and he was getting free services."

Indeed, Mr. Abene pleaded guilty in 1993 to breaking into computers belonging to Southwestern Bell, installing "back door" programs to allow him to re-enter at will and making other modifications that cost the company about $370,000 to correct.

Ms. Horn and some others at the party denied that Mr. Abene was being lionized for his outlaw deeds, but rather, for his contributions to Echo. Before Mr. Abene went to prison, Ms. Horn hired him to debug her computer system.

"I'd literally consulted supposedly the greatest minds in the country, engineers for each piece of equipment I had," she said, "but nobody could fix the problems. Here comes this kid who says, 'I can solve all your problems.' I was nervous, but my gut instinct was he could be trusted.

"He did fix all the problems. How could I not think of him as my techno savior?"

Other Echo members have come to know Mr. Abene -- now Echo's chief engineer -- as a calm and helpful voice on the phone, talking them through problems with the Internet. Initially disdainful of participating in Echo's on-line discussion groups, Mr. Abene joined one for people under 30. He met with fellow users off line, and fell in love with a young woman.

"Mark is a valued member of the community," said Robert Knuts, a fraud attorney with the Securities and Exchange Commission who is a long-time Echo user. "I have a high level of confidence he's using his amazing talent to better the community.

The only discouraging words at the party came from a small contingent of hackers and former hackers, who watched as Mr. Abene was followed by reporters for Time, Newsweek, New York magazine, The New York Times and a local television news team.

A tall, thin young man, who described himself as an ex-hacker who now works in computer security, said that while growing up he'd worshiped Phiber Optik. "The hacker fight is a fight for freedom, for freedom of expression," said the young man, who did not want to be identified for fear of losing his job.

He sneered as a woman kissed Mr. Abene on the cheek and led him by the hand to meet her friends. The ex-hacker had recently met his hero in person and been disappointed. "He's gotten a swollen head now," said the young man.

Photo: Mark Abene, known as Phiber Optik, makes a point at his welcome home party at the Irving Plaza Club. He is one of the world's most celebrated hackers. "He broke into every phone company computer in the world," an admirer said. (Philip Greenberg for The New York Times)

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