

MODEM OPERANDI

By Paula Span
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The welcome-home party for Phiber Optik -- celebrated rebel computer hacker, consummate nerd, convicted felon -- began when a performer named Violet Snow announced, "Few men have suffered for their beliefs as he has!" -- and then launched into a strange ditty about Oliver Cromwell.

"It's still early," said Phiber Optik as he embraced well-wishers he hadn't seen since his release from federal prison recently. "It'll get crazier."

Most of the celebrants who'd gathered at a downtown club were denizens of Echo, the New York-based computer salon that employs Phiber Optik as its chief engineer. His probation officer had been invited. His girlfriend (handle: cafephreak) was on hand. So were a local TV crew and a small flotilla of photographers and reporters.

The guy who had inspired those "Phree Phiber Optik" buttons had come home, and that was news. Like many fabled outlaws, Phiber Optik looks quite unthreatening in person: He's skinny and rather pale, with large dark eyes behind large dark-rimmed glasses. His actual name is Mark Abene.

He was still a teenager, a brainy high school dropout able to invade sophisticated computer networks practically at will from his bedroom in Queens, when he first came to the attention of a massive investigation involving the FBI, the Secret Service and corporate security teams. He was 20 when the indictments came down in 1992, alleging that he and four other young hackers -- self-dubbed the Masters of Deception -- had gained unauthorized access to a startling array of computers: phone company systems, credit reporting services, a global data network. The feds, using wiretaps against hackers for the first time, had been monitoring the Masters' calls and transmissions.

It was a high-profile case, intended as a warning to hackers everywhere. "The judge said it himself: We're sentencing you as a symbol, to send a message," Abene recalls. As the most famous hacker of all, able to defeat mighty security padlocks with a few keystrokes, Abene would be watched by the kids who trade passwords, fiddle with red boxes and boldly go where no unauthorized users are supposed to.

The last of the five to plead guilty -- he copped to one count of conspiracy and one of tampering with a Southwestern Bell computer -- Abene served the most time: more than 10 months. He left a minimum-security prison in rural Pennsylvania a few weeks ago.

Incarceration was not, to hear Abene tell it, a meaningful experience. "Reading and sleeping are the only things to do," he says. "When you're not breaking your back. Shoveling snow all day, every day. Pushing a snow blower. Mopping floors. Cool stuff." He passed his high school equivalency exam, though not with enthusiasm. He still has 600 hours of community service to perform. But if the judge hoped a prison record would tarnish the hacker's legend, he may have been disappointed. Abene, who had always been willing to appear on talk shows and computer-industry panels and to demonstrate his illegal skills for reporters, has grown even more famous among fellow hackers -- and he's seen as a martyr, to boot. "He was kind of the poster boy for the digital underground because he was arrogant, because he said what he thought, because he talked to the press," says Joshua Quittner, coauthor of the just-published book "Masters of Deception: The Gang That Ruled Cyberspace," in which Phiber Optik plays a starring role. "He came out of jail a hero."

He also came out unrepentant. "I haven't been corrected or reformed," says Abene. "In my opinion, there was nothing wrong with me in the first place. ... Corporations are really paranoid about their computers." Understand that Phiber Optik operated by a particular hacker code: "Don't damage, don't destroy; if you're in it for monetary or personal gain, you're in it for the wrong reasons." Two of the other defendants were accused of using their computer skills to commit credit card fraud, which Abene denounces as "thievery, no question." His own motivation, he insists, was always the kick of learning how things worked, and sharing the information he gained. (Though there was the matter of thousands of dollars in long-distance service that he obtained for free) "There's something very pure about Mark," says Mike Godwin, staff counsel for the Washington-based Electronic Frontier Foundation, who wrote the judge in the case asking for leniency in sentencing. "Unlike many people who've gotten into trouble for computer crime, Mark never cared about money or power over other people. The beauty of the game, for him, was understanding the complexities of these vast, arcane networks." Godwin, who came up from Washington by Amtrak for tonight's celebration, is among a number of people in the online world who think Phiber Optik deserved punishment, but not a year behind bars.

The prosecutors who put him away acknowledge that it was the potential for harm, more than actual harm, that brought the government down on the Masters of Deception. "Whether it's motivated by curiosity or otherwise, {computer intrusion} poses a very significant threat," says Stephen Fishbein, a former assistant U.S. attorney. "It's little comfort to the people administering a system to know that some guys just want to look around."

Even such adversaries respect Abene's knowledge, the way he taught himself using a puny little Radio Shack TRS-80. They just hope he'll now use his experience "productively." Abene, about to turn 23, does show unsettling signs of maturity. He's beloved at Echo. He's getting other job offers, though none, alas, in electronic security despite his matchless qualifications. He's about to move out of his parents' row house and into a Brooklyn apartment with cafephreak. "It's very well wired," he says. But when it comes to role modeling, the guy's not preaching the precise message the feds had hoped. "I'm not appearing on TV saying" -- stern countenance, wagging finger -- " 'Don't hack,' " says Phiber Optik. "I'm saying, 'Continue learning. If that involves bending the rules a little, fine. Just keep in mind what happened to me -- and be careful.' "

CAPTION: Master hacker Mark Abene, alias Phiber Optik, at the Echo office in New York: "Don't damage, don't destroy." CAPTION: Mark Abene, a.k.a. Phiber Optik, in his office: a nest of modems in his lair. (This photo ran in earlier edition.)

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