

# EVERYONE GO PISS ON THE GROUND STAKE—THE STORY OF DR. MEGAVOLT AT BURNING MAN

DR. AUSTIN RICHARDS



**The Megavolt truck, 1999**  
PHOTO: AUSTIN RICHARDS

I have been building Tesla Coils since 1981. I built a big one in 1992, and first brought it out to Burning Man in 1998, along with a metal suit I created to protect me from the 13-foot long high-voltage discharges from the machine. I ended up doing nine years of Megavolt shows at Burning Man, and became quite well known there. The title of this article was inspired by the strange things we did to make the shows successful. In 2001 I asked my campmates to urinate on a piece of rebar driven deep into the playa surface to improve the electrical connection of my Tesla Coil. Many did, women included, though we did not allow this activity to be photographed. Electrically speaking, Burning Man is one of the absolute WORST environments in the world for a Tesla Coil, or any high voltage machine. Playa dust is a very poor electrical conductor when it is dry; the stuff is corrosive to many metals used in electronics, and gets into everything. My Tesla coil has critical moving parts exposed to the elements, and the main coil is a PVC air duct wrapped with ordinary electrician's wire. This coil assembly gets a million volts impressed across its length, which pushes the insulation to its limit. When the coil has been set up on the playa surface or even close to ground level, there is a fair amount of windblown dust that lands on it all day and gets under the wire turns. There is also always a small amount of moisture in the air out there, and after sunset, it condenses on the coil and mixes with the dust to make a slightly conductive layer. Chaos ensues when the machine is run hard in a dusty state—flashover and arcs occur and slowly burn the wire insulation. It's happened over and over again—the Tesla Coil is in constant need of field repairs out there.

Spiritually speaking, Burning Man is one of the *best* environments in the world for a Tesla coil. Tesla coils like the one that zaps Dr. Megavolt have no real practical use. Nikola Tesla invented the device to transmit electrical power

through the air at a time when copper was extremely expensive (compared to today) and the cost of an extensive copper power cable infrastructure was prohibitive. But it was a failure: Tesla coils don't work very well as power transmitters—there is too much power lost to space and dissipated in the ground. However, Tesla coils are fine entertainment devices, producing bright, loud discharges that evoke real lightning.

Many animals feel a primal fear in the presence of lightning. We have evolved to fear dangerous things, and lightning is very, very dangerous. It is a force that has been worshipped for thousands of years of recorded history, and probably since the dawn of man. Thunder gods are always prominent in every pantheon that has one: Zeus in Greek mythology, Thor in Norse, and Cauac in the classical Mayan culture. The participants at Burning Man, already out of their comfort zone in so many ways, are primed to feel this delicious fear.

## 1999

It's night in West Oakland, California, late August. The freeway roars in the distance. We work under the yellow-orange streetlight coming over the high wall around an industrial space that was once a metal plating company, then an abandoned Hazmat site poisoned with chromium and other toxic metals, and now an illegal living space for various East Bay characters. The Ryder box truck I've rented is getting a subtle transformation that will add four inches of height to it. A platform made of plywood and two-by-fours takes shape on the roof, held down by six yellow nylon cargo straps. Later that week, an employee of Ryder reports it to the company, and weeks later I get a nastygram from the company: no putting stuff on the roof. The platform stays attached during the nine-hour drive to Burning Man, the straps humming in the wind and sounding like an Aeolian harp. The platform is eight feet by 16 feet, just big enough for a Tesla Coil and a performer.

It is night in Nevada two days later, my third year at Burning Man, often considered the best year for veterans of the event. The dust is almost non-existent, the playa surface slightly dusty and hard—like the concrete slab in the basement of the Victorian home I grew up in. We are working on a dome in the dark. Some of the cars in our camp have their headlights pointing at us, and I am using my new Home Depot ladder and work lights. The people with me are a mixture of new friends and old. My girlfriend, 13 years older than me, is working on the dome, handing us tools and fasteners. She is high energy but also high maintenance. That night, she forgets to drink water and gets seriously dehydrated, then after recovering starts a trend of drinking way too much water all day and all night, necessitating constant broad daylight urination on the playa in front of all my friends (but that is how it is—there were rarely any porta-potties within 300 yards of wherever we happened to be). The truck with the platform is our RV. The dome crew is made up of friends who live in the West Oakland industrial space. I have only known them for two years, and my relationship with my girlfriend is about four months old and already winding down. The next day the Tesla coil goes on the roof, courtesy of the original Megavolt crew, a group of Bay Area creative types.

That night I experienced a feeling like the first time a rock band has a breakthrough show, where they sense fame and success coming at them fast. I was on top of the roof platform as the truck drove slowly down the back streets of Burning Man, towing a running construction-site generator. People came running from hundreds of yards away, cheering wildly. I felt the energy of the crowd surge through me like the electricity I was bathed in. The coil worked perfectly and does not stop working perfectly for the next four days. Compared to the year before, the

first year of Megavolt at Burning Man, this was a walk in the park. The previous year I had been consumed with fixing the myriad failures of my system since I had not provided a proper electrical ground.

A day later, John Behrens puts together a pyrotechnic effect, a charge of pyro powder in an aluminum foil packet that looks like a triangular turnover. The packet is mounted to the end of a metal rod with a wire igniter worked into its end—when the Tesla Coil discharges strike the wire, they will arc across a gap in the center of the packet of powder and ignite it. He gets up on the roof in the suit and holds the scepter out. A huge and shower of sparks goes off in his face, temporarily blinding him. The crowd goes crazy. It is the best side of him, the go-to guy on a rock tour, who earlier that day met up with a friend from the Bay Area roadie/tech crew crowd over at their camp and got some pyro powder. John provided a huge amount of production experience and personal energy to get Megavolt out there in 1999 and make the event a success for the team.

Over the next four days, we conduct a virtual “grid search” of the streets of Black Rock City. We drive up almost every street, because almost *no one* is out on the playa. The weather is so cold out there (20–30°F right before dawn) that all the poor saps who thought they were going to a burning hot desert find out just how inadequate their skimpy clothing is. Thousands of people shiver in their thin sleeping bags as we drive by. Many of them come running out in spite of the cold, and some of them end up following us around on foot for four hours, almost to the point of being stalkers, showering us with gifts, hounding us like fans with bad cases of Beatlemania.

The night of the Burn, we drive out to the burn circle early before the crowd settles in around us. People are swarming around the truck, waiting for the party to start. There are 14 of us on the roof of the truck along with the Tesla Coil; it was never designed to hold weight like that, but the platform distributes the weight to the back where the steel roll-up door-frame provides massive amounts of support. I make sure everyone is around the edges. Six skinny teenagers are sitting on the roof of my truck’s cab, crumpling it in, but luckily not permanently. I kick them off, but nicely. They are very sweet and innocent acting and it is hard to get mad at them—they all look about 17. An officious Ranger runs out to the truck and shouts at me that if I start the Tesla Coil show before the Burn he is authorized to confiscate my generator. I tell him “Bullshit” through my bullhorn and I whip the crowd up against him. This is a typical Ranger in the early days of the event—a wimpy nerd who gets a little power and lets it go to his head. Tonight John will perform in the suit, while I run the coil and watch for safety issues. Megavolt is really dangerous—a fact lost on many of the ignorant hippies who think that the high voltage electricity right in front of them is somehow safe. They are reasoning in their muddy THC-compromised way: “Hey, that guy is up there in a costume getting hit by it, man! It’s free energy!” Years later my entertainment lawyer asks why I didn’t perform more in the suit in those early days at Burning Man. Only now, older and perhaps wiser, do I realize that I had stage anxiety, not because I was worried about the show being a flop, but because I just couldn’t (yet) handle being in the high beams of the crowd energy directed at Dr. Megavolt.

1998 and 1999 were very significant years for Burning Man, not only because of the rapid growth in the population, but also because the tech crowd was discovering the festival and bringing their talents to bear on it. Suddenly fire and traditional fire art had some stiff competition for people’s attention. A number of engineers were making elaborate art cars and bikes with high tech lighting, especially electroluminescent wire, and there were complex laser and LED light shows, and flaming sculptures. The hippie flavor of Burning Man was morphing into something different. The early days of the festival were marked by drum circles, bonfires and bad sunburn. I had first heard about Burning Man in 1992

from some of the folks at Survival Research Laboratory, who told me it was a hippie festival and not worth my time. I tend to agree after seeing pictures from the early years. Also, there was almost *no shade!* Burning Man 1999 was so much fun that I thought of little else until it was time for Burning Man 2000.

After the experience in 1999, I applied for and received a substantially larger art grant from Burning Man to be the “eyes” of the Man in 2000. I also got ten artist’s tickets that I used to support a much larger crew. The theme that year was the human body, and art projects that invoked body parts and organs were getting funding. I assembled the best Megavolt crew we ever had at Burning Man, all friends from the Bay Area, all Burning Man veterans with endless energy and enthusiasm. We went out with two Tesla Coils, a bigger truck, a bigger generator and a large, placed campsite. The two coils were like eyes staring up at the sky, if you used your imagination and pictured looking down on them from above. John Behrens and Greg Solberg had built a second coil based on my coil design. It was (nearly) electrically the same as my coil, but with a number of excellent improvements in terms of portability and weight. We installed matching 56-inch diameter toroids on the units. The visual effect was stunning, especially after two years of shows with a ghetto toroid made of an old, oddly-shaped truck inner tube covered with crinkly aluminum foil. This new coil rode in the front of the truck, and my coil was mounted on the back. When both coils fired together, black smoke poured out of the diesel generator’s exhaust in a barking roar, and a 50-foot long cloud of ions formed around the roof of the truck, pierced by 13-foot discharges.

My act has been copied many times over the years, but as far as I know, I’m the first person to wear a metal suit next to a large Tesla Coil looking to get struck by the discharges. The first time I did this stunt was in March of 1997 in Orinda, CA. I was hanging out with friends in Oakland that spring and trying to find an outlet for an artistic side through technology as a graduate student in physics. The metal suit was the best idea I had, and it came from watching the operators of the large Van De Graaff generator at the Boston Museum of Science running that machine from a giant dome-topped cylindrical “birdcage”. The Van De Graaff machine hit the cage with 2.5 million volts. Because of the very rapid time scale of the discharge, an electrical phenomenon called the “skin effect” kept the electrical fields inside the cage near zero—the person inside did not receive a shock, even when touching the inside of the cage. I realized that I could make a suit that would protect me from a Tesla Coil’s electricity—it would be the equivalent of a metal cage shrunk down to body size.

A high school student in Orinda had a large Tesla Coil he had created after seeing the big coil I had built in 1992 at UC Berkeley’s physics department. We went out to his house in Orinda to test the suit with his coil. The large Tesla Coil I had built five years earlier with a UC Berkeley undergraduate named Paul O’Leary was in the repair shop with a burned-up secondary winding, a serious nuisance. We started out in his garage with a small coil that made five-foot discharges. I was able to stand next to the machine and take the discharges with no effect. The ozone smell was overpowering; it felt a bit like being really close to a tiger in the jungle, smelling that powerful male cat smell, and trying to hold very still so as to not get eaten. The coil’s discharges seemed to be probing the defenses of the suit, crawling along the birdcage face, but miraculously failing to enter the birdcage front door, which I had accidentally left open. My mouth was just a few inches from a fat blue cobra’s head of electricity. I thought: “What if the discharges shoot into my mouth and out my ears like in that final scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where the Nazi troops get zapped by Old-Testament-style wrath of God?” But electrical death stayed out of the cage, restrained by the laws of physics that govern the motion of electrical charges through air and metal.

We went to the backyard, where the coil was set up. It was about nine feet tall and sent discharges at least 15 feet through the air. I asked the student to give me a short burst, then talk to me and ask me if I felt it. He fired the coil for about a half second. I felt no electrical shock at all, and at that moment an excellent feeling stole over me. I knew I could show off this trick to others, that it was something people had not seen or heard of before, a new thing to do with Tesla Coils that put a human spin on them. I asked him to let it rip and spent the next 20 minutes trying out different experiments. The best one was standing on a wooden lounge chair and watching the current flow down the wood's surface, burning a smoking black trench. How could something so destructive pass harmlessly on the surface of a metal suit with a person inside?

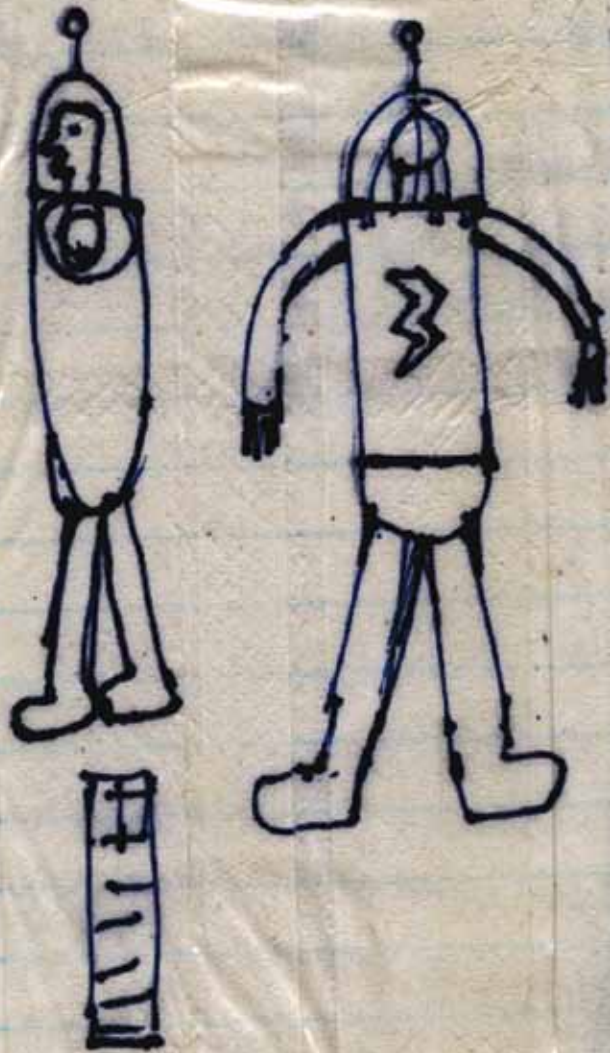
The idea of a metal suit protecting a person from a large Tesla Coil was an original idea<sup>1</sup>, and I am proud of it, but it's admittedly an idea that is not of much interest to the scientific community. Some of the physics faculty at UC Berkeley said things like: "Well, Austin, it's just nineteenth-century physics, you know, the skin effect and high frequency currents." They were of course right, but the real value of a metal suit and a Tesla Coil is in show business, not the physics research business. That's why I find myself in 2013 still performing this show for audiences worldwide. People have always wanted to see this live—it's an intense experience for me and an audience.

Hearing the negative comments from the physics faculty is when I first knew that I needed to leave academia. My creative energy wasn't properly focused on the right things in my life to be a research professor, buried in a windowless lab, writing grant proposals, fighting over diminishing funding resources, having to keep my libertarian politics to myself around liberal colleagues, and so on. It's not my destiny to be that person and I am glad I figured it out when I did, before going out to try to find a faculty job, or worse yet, actually getting a faculty job. My thesis work was almost purely academically oriented, which was not a good start to an industrial career, and it took me about two years to transition, but today I have a very satisfying and lucrative career in infrared camera technology and I don't regret not being a professor for an instant.

When I went to Burning Man for the first time in 1996, I participated as a Ranger. Aside from a few magical moments, like riding my bike for 30 seconds straight on perfectly flat playa with my eyes closed the whole time, or meeting a very pretty girl who happened to have a shaved head like Sinead O'Connor, I hated the experience, though most of the misery was my own fault. It was so unexpected, the intense light, heat and dryness, and I was so poorly prepared, with nothing but a sleeping bag and a blue tarp attached to the roof rack of my Jetta sedan flapping all night in the wind. The city was tiny compared to today and had very little shade anywhere, and no ice for sale! Most people were completely knocked out with sunburn, windburn and overheated bodies, and the event was extremely disorganized and chaotic at night. The night of the Burn, people stole bicycles and threw them on bonfires made of burning sofas. It smelled like a war zone with black choking smoke at ground level everywhere. At one point, some crazy person drove a pickup truck by at high speed, 20 feet from where I was trying to sleep in my miserable hovel. I got very ill with electrolyte depletion because I didn't eat for three days straight, and when it was over, I was pretty well convinced I was never going again.

I skipped Burning Man in 1997, and the week prior to Labor Day was spent in South Africa with a girlfriend, the event entirely forgotten. But then Chris Campbell, a friend from Oakland and a huge supporter of the Tesla Coil project since the beginning, urged me to let him take the coil out to the playa in 1998. He and his girlfriend drove to Santa Barbara, picked up the suit and the coil, drive them back to Oakland, then to Burning Man, then did that all in reverse on the way back

electrical suit concept 2/97  
Berkeley, CA



Original Megavolt suit concept on a napkin from Mel's Diner, Berkeley, CA, 1997  
DRAWING: AUSTIN RICHARDS

for a total round trip of about 2,000 miles. I wasn't going to go out at all, but at the last minute I decided to go with a friend and surprised Chris and the others in the camp. We camped in a dome-based camp called Toxixity, pronounced Toxic City. The coil was set up right next to it. We lived in the dome, which was blazing hot in the daytime. Chris' girlfriend cut slits in the dome cover to let out the heat (against our wishes, I might add, because we lost all protection from the dust and rain that made the floor into a muddy mess). I was very, very fortunate that Chris made that massive effort to get the coil out there, because even though it worked poorly, it ran long enough and well enough to be seen by Lady Bee, then the Burning Man senior staff member responsible for funded art at Burning Man.

## 2001

I can't sleep. I want to get up and start loading the truck, but it is 4:00. I live in a very tightly packed little compound of cheap Sears Roebuck prefab houses, rented to us by a miserly old landlord who donates his money, *my* rent money, to some annoying missionary charity overseas. At 6:00, I finally get up and start loading the truck. The coil is already on its way to Burning Man in a communal rental truck. All I have to do is load the truck with my own personal stuff, and boy, is it a nice crib.... I have an antique mahogany sewing cabinet next to my bed, an antique poster map of the world, a queen-sized bed all set up. A bachelor's pad for Burning Man.

23:00 that same night in Sparks, NV. I am falling asleep on my feet after an 11-hour drive. The hotel clerk gives me the room keys and tells the next people through the door that they are now fully booked (my luck—I have had so many serendipitous moments like that). This is the beginning of the best year of Burning Man yet. John is working for the Nigerian singer Sade this summer as a cameraman on her tour. His absence brings relief from what is becoming an increasingly contentious relationship over the future of Megavolt. Under the surface, we have been struggling for control of the act. I own the website and have already begun the task of trademarking the name, and I made the first suit and the coil and came up with the name, but John now owns a coil like mine that I helped him design, only better: lighter weight, simpler design, with some strange overcomplicated control box that John built. As I lay awake much later that night, thinking about the drive-in, I am thinking about how to move things forward with the act. I need and am getting a legal agreement together, an agreement that takes me a year to get signed. I am determined to forever associate my name, Austin Richards, with the identity of Dr. Megavolt, and I have worked at it, joining up with a crew of Burning Man stalwarts called the SINDicate, who are mostly LA-based. There is a real buzz within the variety act subculture of the entertainment world about Megavolt, and the soul of the event has migrated away from the hippie Bay Area flavor of the early years to a much hipper showbusiness vibe.

Four days later, 1:00: the wind has finally died down. It is warm and dusty, the surface like lunar crust under the feet of the standing-room only audience. Go-go dancers dance in cages next to the coil. A naked man drums in a bigger cage, controlling the Tesla Coil with an air hose system I devise. He plays the coil like a percussion instrument by blowing into the hose held in his mouth. I jump up and down on a small circular exercise trampoline in my suit, holding a burning stick of wood in my hands. The Subjugator, a giant nightmare of a radio-controlled robot, spins its claw furiously near the coil. The discharges follow the claws around in what looks like a struggle with an insane electric blue octopus of electricity. This is it, the best Burning Man Megavolt show that was and will ever be. It is downhill from here for Burning Man itself (in my opinion), but I don't know it yet.

In 2002, I met my future wife Victoria and invited her to come out to Burning Man with me. We camped with The Mutaytor, a drum and dance band from LA. The Mutaytor was like a cult—the members labored in the hot sun every day out there, setting up the stage, rehearsing, then performing at night. Their leader was Matty Nash, a drummer and forceful personality who co-owned the Mutaytor brand with his wife Christine. The Mutaytor performers were perpetually exhausted, doing a lot of things the hard way, like renting a truck in LA and overloading it to the point where it was unsafe to drive. We got pulled into the endless work one memorable night when it rained, and everyone scrambled to cover the drumsets with tarps. John and I were starting to have some major conflicts over the way that we conducted the business of Megavolt at Burning Man. On one occasion, he wanted to rehearse the show on a fantastically hot day, when I was completely wiped out from the heat. I could see his point of view, but I was starting to regret having to share the decision making. I never imagined that Megavolt would get as big as it has or attract as much attention. The shows at Burning Man were starting to take on gravity. The Mutaytor wanted Megavolt to be part of the band and tour with them. Victoria and I, along with everyone else in the camp, ended up being roadies for The Mutaytor that year, and the two of us decided to not repeat that experience again, or ever tour with Mutaytor.

The novelty was wearing off after doing Megavolt at Burning Man for four years in a row and the harsh conditions were getting much harder to ignore. Burning Man attracts a certain personality type that loves to bond with other people during periods of hardship. These people venture out in huge rain and dust storms, taking refuge in passing art cars, ducking into tents or RVs, crouching down inside art installations waiting for the tempest outside to subside. I am not one of these people. The bad weather conditions at Burning Man always stop me dead in my tracks, make Megavolt shows impossible, and put me in a bleak mood, making me wonder why I am there. There must be a tremendous freedom in going to Burning Man with nothing more than a tent and a backpack. For my sins, I go with 6000 pounds of gear in a huge truck, towing a big generator. All that equipment requires weeks of work to clean and repair afterwards. Bad weather allows many people to have the best times of their life there, covered in dust, filthy and sunburned. The place is a perfect antidote for cubical life. But that stuff takes away from my experience—I like to be clean and dry and hydrated, and I hate getting sunburned.

But still I pressed on, feeling like I had to keep doing Megavolt at Burning Man to keep my place in the cultural hierarchy of the event. Plus, my entire social life now revolved around Burning Man and the people I had met through it. Burning Man 2002 was fun for Victoria and I, but so many people had seen Megavolt by then that the act was feeling stale. The audiences would not stick around for nearly as long as they had in prior years, since there were now so many other very interesting shows and spectacles competing for their attention. The plan for 2003 was to do an installation on the playa called the Cult of Saint Elmo. It would be interactive in a way that Megavolt wasn't. People would get inside a cage that would be struck by lightning bolts from a large Van De Graaff generator I was building. The generator was not working by the time Burning Man rolled around, so we ended up using John and Greg's coil next to a metal cage made out of wood and chicken wire. The themes of the Cult were anything to do with the word Elmo. We had a poster with a picture of St. Elmo's Fire, the phenomenon of corona discharge seen on ship's masts during electrical storms. We mixed in references to the 80s movie St. Elmo's Fire, and Elmo from Sesame Street. The installation did not really ever get finished, but we got a huge boost from the efforts of Playa Kitten and her friends who made a crucifix of Tickle Me Elmo dolls and other assorted props. Someone stole my strobe light out of the tent, and there was a sense of entropy about the installation. But the

coil ran very well, and hundreds of people went into the cage and experienced the electricity close up.

We took a few years off and did not go back until 2006. The general atmosphere at Burning Man that year was reminiscent of 1996—there was a sense of violence and chaos in the air in the nighttime towards the end of the week that was periodically very unpleasant. It seemed to us that there were a lot more people who were drunk or high on methamphetamine—not a good vibe at all. Law enforcement had cracked down on marijuana use, with its telltale smelly smoke blowing downwind that made it easy to arrest people in their tents. The event had grown substantially since we had last attempted a mobile Tesla Coil platform in 2000; now the playa was vastly more crowded at night with onlookers and other art installations. We drove around performing shows with the truck, and had a number of problems with the equipment. We also had a very small crew for a two-coil truck, which made it hard to maintain safety and security. My coil was incorrectly tuned and was discharging up and down the secondary winding until I retuned it. I never could solve the problem of the power generator we had rented, which kept shutting down whenever the Tesla Coils would strike a performer at close range. Maybe some circuitry was sensing a ground fault and was shutting down the generator to protect it. The tension between John and I was reaching a boiling point. He continually fought me on the driving issue—he did not want to have to drive the truck during the shows. He and his girlfriend were performing as Dr. and Mistress Megavolt. I was too, with my new bride, Victoria. The identity of Megavolt was a valuable commodity, so doubling up was problematic, and there was a conflict brewing over the ownership of the Megavolt identity. I also felt, rightly or wrongly, that I was doing more of the hard work in the hot sun while John flirted with girls in the camp. This was not entirely fair, but it was my perception at the time and it put a damper on the experience. After that year, I thought I was finished with Megavolt shows at Burning Man. John and I dissolved our working relationship and I now had complete control of Megavolt.

## 2011

Night falls and there is not a breath of wind. The temperature is perfect, maybe 80°F. This is my twelfth year out here. The previous year, 2010, was the return of Megavolt to the playa after a four year break. It was very successful and we got a lot of good HD footage of the shows.

But that was last year. This time I am more on my own out there than I have been in years. Friends and campmates from years past have come and gone. Victoria hasn't come out with me this time, and my old friends are all camping somewhere else or haven't gone this year. I am camping with Area 51, a large group of friendly people from the southeast, especially Atlanta. But I don't know them at all. The only old-time crew member is Dannen Harris, a great friend who unfortunately is not camping with us. The Tesla Coil is right on the Esplanade, a perfect location to attract an audience. The big seventy-kilowatt generator that runs the coil is a hundred feet away. Some fat jerk named Big Daddy has locked the access panel to the generator controls, taken the key away and hidden it, and left camp for the evening. I can't run the coil. The padlock is sturdy, and cutting through it with the tools I have would be a serious chore. I am livid. The coil is set up and ready to go, and I am itching to do a Megavolt show. My friend Scott Hanes and his girlfriend are my crew, along with Dannen. Once again, it is a small crew which always makes the shows much harder to manage.

The next night. The city is almost unrecognizable viewed through the eyes of someone who was there in 1996. It's grown like a weed, like Las Vegas and Reno,



Austin Richards performing at Burning Man 2010  
PHOTO: JOHAN WINGBORG

massively popular now. There is never really any darkness now—the light pollution is everywhere and lasts all night every night. The sounds and music is all-chaotic and never stops. Scott, my main crewmember and Tesla Coil operator, starts the motor on the coil's spark gap. I stand next to him in my Megavolt suit, waiting to see if the coil works properly. If it doesn't, I may have to get out of the suit and go find my tools. But it works perfectly. Years of shows have taught me many lessons about how to make this machine "walk and talk". I mount the small stage and start the show. A crowd of maybe 100 people gather, but a lot of folks just walk or ride their bikes right on by. I gamely go on with the show, but inside I am grieving. Ten years ago, the coil was set up in much the same location and the crowds were 5–6 times bigger. Now I am competing with a homespun version of the Las Vegas Strip. The kids out here are ten years younger now, and they have web-surfing attention spans, or at least that is what I say to myself. The truth is that my coil is a little blip of sound and light in a vast ocean, and Megavolt seems to have left the building.

Will Megavolt ever go back to Burning Man? I don't want to say never, but it seems unlikely. At this point, I am waiting for a new festival to emerge, a festival with 10,000 people or so, in a location without endless dust. I'll take Megavolt there and "reboot" its festival incarnation. Money no object, I will create Dr. Megavolt's Laboratory, a fun house of high voltage devices and tricks. My sons were born in February of 2013. They will inherit Dr. Megavolt, if they want it, and we will go to this future festival when they are old enough.

## NOTES

1. As far as I know, no one has ever produced documentation of a performance like this with a Tesla Coil prior to my attempting it. Men in metal suits clean extra high voltage power lines that are electrified, getting lowered onto them via helicopter. They experience something

similar to Dr. MegaVolt when they are charging the helicopter through a metal rod they hold out to the line. I did not invent the metal suit that protects one from high voltage discharges or electric fields—that idea has been around since the 1950s.



Austin Richards performing at Burning Man 2011  
PHOTO: ELI REIMAN

EVERYONE GO PISS ON THE GROUND STAKE

DR. AUSTIN RICHARDS (AKA DR. MEGAVOLT)