

# FAKIR MUSAFAR (1930–2018)

ANNIE SPRINKLE

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A FEW DAYS AFTER FAKIR'S SPIRIT LEFT HIS BELOVED BODY, I went to a salon in a mall in Syracuse, New York, to get my hair dyed. Every one of the six stylists, all in their twenties and thirties, had multiple facial piercings, visible tattoos, and brightly colored hair. I marveled at how things had changed since the 1970s and 1980s, when the only kind of piercings one saw in the US were in women's ears—and even those were rare, and tattooing was illegal in many places. I asked each of the colorfully adorned stylists if they knew anything about the history of modern-day body modification. Not one of them did, nor had they heard of Fakir Musafar. I was amazed, as they were obviously living it wholeheartedly. In the realm of body art, Fakir is legend.

At eleven years old, Roland Loomis had an irresistible urge to mimic things he saw in *National Geographic*. He stretched his neck with metal coils, bound his feet, reshaped his arms and legs with tight leather straps, painted his body, made and wore masks, and more. As a teen in the 1940s, he began tattooing and piercing himself, documenting his experiments in beautiful black-and-white self-portraits with a camera given to him by his uncle, who had used it in World War I. Roland was a really good photographer right from the start and taught himself to be a master darkroom printer.

As an adult, Roland worked as an advertising executive and lived in Menlo Park, California, with his first wife and stepson, whom he supported. Roland was straight as an arrow, a

total nerd before nerds were cool, with thick corduroy pants, suburban-style plaid cotton shirts with ink-stained pockets, and thick, bug-eyed glasses. But beneath his clothes lay a completely different story.

Gradually, Roland started to put some of his self-portraits out into the world for others to see. In 1977, the first magazine dedicated to body piercing, *Piercing Fans International Quarterly (PFIQ)*, trickled into the underground. *PFIQ* printed some of Roland's self-portraits, one showing his full-back-and-buttocks tattoo, which he had designed himself, drawn in all-black ink and referencing tribal styles. He was way ahead of the times, as most tattoos at that time were cartoony. People immediately started copying Roland's ideas.

One day, I wrote Roland a letter of appreciation with photos of my tattoos and invited him to visit me. He accepted. In 1981, I organized a visiting-artist lecture for Fakir in my Manhattan apartment for my friends and colleagues. He narrated an intriguing slideshow, after which the event morphed into a body-piercing party, likely the first mixed-gender piercing party on the East Coast (gay men did it first).

We had a ball together and even went ballroom dancing at Roseland. Roland told me he was happy to meet a woman who not only accepted his kinky side but appreciated it and was thrilled by it! He had mostly lived his kinky life in the closet, lest he'd been judged as crazy and sick. He'd had his struggles: He had been shunned by some of his family, his ex-wife didn't approve of his proclivities, and even some folks in the BDSM world found him way too extreme.

Over the years, Fakir and I did what he called "body play" together, sometimes documenting it with each other's cameras. He pierced my labia, I pierced his foreskin, I tattooed a diamond on his toe. . . . He took some of the best photos of me ever—in a tight lace-up corset he had designed and made for me, and me standing in a pair of black-leather-fetish, six-inch high heels he gave me, from the 1940s. Over the years, he did a lot of photos of many other kinky people, mostly in his home, and everyone loved posing for him. A collection of these and many other photos is beautifully reproduced in his book *Spirit & Flesh*, by Arena Editions.

Eventually, Roland quit his advertising-executive job and became a full-time freelance Fakir, coming out into the public sphere as "Fakir Musafar," kind of like Clark Kent becoming and staying Superman. Two projects catapulted Fakir into the spotlight: the publication of the book *Modern Primitives* by RE/Search and the documentary film *Dances Sacred and Profane*, by Mark and Dan Jury, in which Fakir steals the show with his transcendent outdoor flesh-hook-pulling scene.

Roland/Fakir finally met his perfect match in 1987, when he got together with Cléo Dubois, a French-born, San Francisco-based professional dominatrix and BDSM-lifestyle goddess. She was also a belly dancer and performance artist. They married in a redwood forest in 1990 and lived a life filled with creativity and artmaking, cofacilitating many group-piercing rituals in both private and public spaces. Sometimes I would cross paths with Fakir and Cléo at art venues in Europe and the US when we were booked into the same body-based performance-art festivals. Fakir and Cléo gathered a deeply devoted fan base that followed them and their work. The art world welcomed them. Eventually, Fakir and Cléo both moved into mentoring roles: She created the Academy for SM Arts, and he created the first accredited body-piercing school, which has been very successful and will continue, led by his longtime protégées and collaborators.

When word got out that Fakir had terminal lung cancer, he received hundreds of love letters from around the world. He had dedicated his life to helping people explore the boundaries between spirit and flesh, and people adored him for it. Body-art royalty came to pay their respects, such as performance artist Ron Athey, who credits Fakir as an early inspiration. Fakir's life is a testament to how following one's creative impulses—even when eXXXtreme, even when other people don't understand them, and even if people are completely freaked out by them—can still change the culture significantly, manifest one's unique vision, and leave one in death a really satisfied, happy camper surrounded by love. Roland had a vision of a society where people were free to explore and decorate their bodies without the stigma and limitations he had experienced. Today, in many countries, we have that freedom. Tattooing is now legal almost everywhere in the US, and there are body piercers and lots of body-piercing jewelry to choose from that can be found in most mainstream shopping malls.

I hope the young beauty-salon stylists I encountered at the mall in Syracuse will read one or two of the many obituaries and tributes for Fakir, and that these will pique their interest in his life and work. Perhaps some will want to go and visit Fakir's bountiful archive and photography collection at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, where they can be studied, enjoyed, and a source of inspiration for generations to come.

*Annie Sprinkle is proud to have been an official artist for Documenta 14, where she showed visual art and performed with her partner/collaborator Beth Stephens.*