

## Drug War Follies - Skunk Magazine Issue #21

This column is coming in late and it's not the best I've written.. It's not even about the Drug War. It's about me and being sick in Peru and coming close enough to death to want to stay the fuck away from it for a good while longer. It's 4 AM and I'm sitting in a dingy room in the Hotel Isabel in the middle of Iquitos, Peru. Iquitos is a fantastic city in the middle of northwestern Amazonia. It's got a lot of character and managed to keep it because the only way in is by riverboat or plane. No roads. The hotel has a lot of character too: It's the oldest running rent-a-room in the city, having opened in 1912, during the height of the rubber boom here. There's no running water, air conditioning or television, but it's still a swell place. I'm not comfortable. I've got a lot of pain running through my gut despite having downed 1,000 mgs of codeine and having had a shot of Demerol just a couple of hours ago. What happened was this: Three weeks ago, in the middle of a trip taking tourists to the Amazon and then to Cuzco—a trip involving ayahuasca, shrooms, sapo and nu-nu (two Matses Indian medicines) and San Pedro—I busted a gut. An ulcer, really, in my upper intestine. And that spilled nearly 3-liters of shit and stomach acid into my body cavity in seconds and produced peritonitis within hours. I never saw it coming. Didn't have a clue I even had an ulcer, much less one the size of a large bottle of soda. So there I was with 11 tourists in the fantastic ruins of Ollantaytambo up in the Peruvian Andes, and then the next thing you know, I'm rolling around on the floor thinking, "I'm gonna die." An hour later I'm in the local clinic and two hours later I'm shipped off to a hospital in Cuzco, capital of the Incan Empire. Two hours after I arrive the docs come in with test results and announce that I'm having major surgery in a little while. I tell them I should think about that and maybe get a second opinion. They tell me to take my time and that I've got two hours to get surgery or I'd be better off just ordering a coffin. I guess that's how it happens, but I didn't ever expect to hear something like that about me. I mean I'm strong. I stay pretty fit and I eat tons of vegetables. But there it was: get the surgery or order the coffin. Just like that. No advance notice. I took the surgery, got shot up with anesthetic and woke up a couple of hours later with a cut mark from my sternum to my belly button and tubes coming out of places they ought never to put tubes in. Two weeks later they let me go, making me promise to wear a girdle till Christmas. So I made my way to Iquitos, where I had a short tour arranged with a small group, just for the jungle. I felt fine, so I did the tour. No lifting (I let my work crew do that), but I still got to oversee the medicine ceremonies and made sure everyone's head was on right when they were finished. Got back to Iquitos and had the stitches removed, then celebrated with some good whiskey. The bad news was the next morning when I went to have the wound looked at. They told me the whole thing had opened back up and that my guts were sort of hanging out behind the girdle, just ready to spill. It was bad enough that the surgeon was called and did the operation in my room. Then they brought me to the hospital. I've never been so scared in my life as when they peeked under the girdle and saw my insides. And I've never been so scared as waiting for the surgeon to show up. It's a mortality issue: I'm not ready to die. I'm not ready to stop raising my kids or ready to stop mowing the lawn. I'm not ready to stop making love to a beautiful woman now and then. I'm not ready to stop fighting the damned War on Drugs. I'm not nearly finished. But I guess that's not something we always get to decide. You can be standing there one minute, healthy as a horse, and thirty second later you're dying. I don't mean to feel sorry for myself. Heck, if this thing gets better it'll turn out to have been very, very lucky that it happened when it did, rather than when I was in the jungle or somewhere else out of reach of a decent surgeon. Of course, if this second surgery fails as badly as the first I don't know what we'll do. They can't just keep dewing up skin that won't seal. And I can't keep running around with my guts strapped in with a girdle. I'm sorry to go on like this but it's all I can think of right now. Probably feels this way to someone who got busted by a narc squad and is awaiting sentencing. It's about the lousiest feeling in the world. I'm hoping I'm up to par next month and come roaring back at you, railing against Drug War stupidity again. And just 'cause the bastards got off the hook this month, doesn't mean they should relax. The shit still stinks. It would all be funny if people weren't dying and the prisons weren't full.

## About the Author

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