

# Prison Education from the Inside Out: An Interview with Casey William Hardison

WITH BRAD BURGE



Casey William Hardison

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE about Casey William Hardison is his winning smile. It's a huge grin for a man who has spent the last decade of his (still young) life locked in a prison cell in a foreign country.

In April 2005, Casey was convicted and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment under the United Kingdom's Misuse of Drugs Act for manufacturing and distributing LSD, DMT, and 2C-B. On May 29, 2013, after serving almost ten years of his sentence—3,395 days, by Casey's count—he received “conditional release” and was deported from the UK.

After his release, Casey returned to the United States with his English wife, Charlotte Walsh, and promptly got as far away from cages and walls as he could. Now, he's living in a cabin in the Idaho wilderness near Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. When we last spoke he was making extreme ski and snowboarding films, and watching deer, geese, and the occasional moose in his yard.

Long before his legal trouble began, Casey had already started using his own experience to illuminate new (sometimes psychopharmacological) pathways and challenge dominant ways of thinking. That's actually the second thing you notice about Casey: his spirit is unconquerable.

Prior to his incarceration, Casey was a contributor to the *MAPS Bulletin* (“An Amateur Qualitative Study of 48 2C-T-7 Subjective Bioassays,” Summer 2000), as well as to *The Entheogen Review* and *Erowid*. He's currently writing a chapter entitled “Cognitive Liberty: The Right to Alter My Mental Functioning” for Tom Roberts and Harold Ellens' forthcoming book *The Psychedelic Policy Quagmire*, and beginning a bimonthly column for *Erowid*.

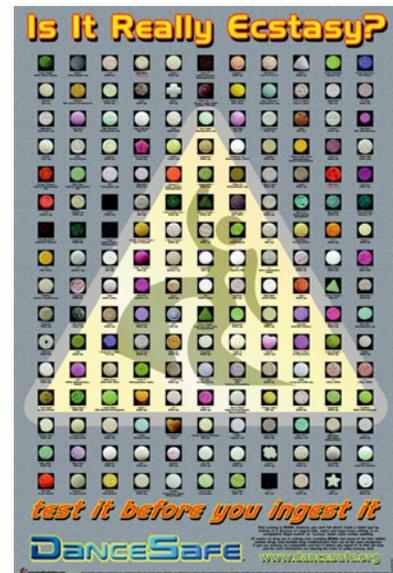
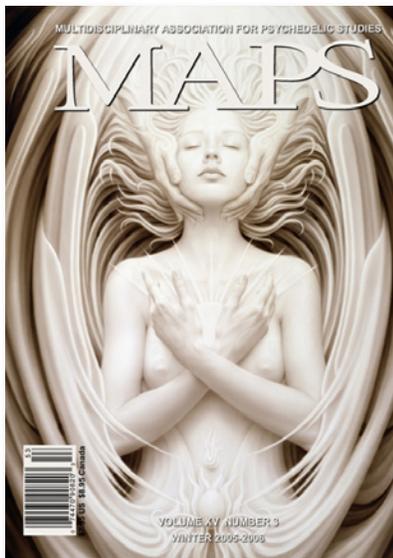
I spoke with Casey (and Charlotte) one warm and misty afternoon at the MAPS offices in Santa Cruz in July 2013. Casey had contacted us shortly after his release and offered to share his story, to help cast a bright light on both the terrors of the drug war and the promise of transformed perspectives. What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation.

*Fiat lux!*

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**BRAD BURGE (BB):** Can you give me a little background about how you came to learn about psychedelic research, and what first got you interested in drug policy?

**CASEY WILLIAM HARDISON (CWH):** I got interested in drug policy quite early on. I realized there was something funky about it as soon as I started being targeted by the War on Some People Who Use Some Drugs. I think it's actually Jonathan Ott's phrase, but it was used by the November Coalition ([november.org](http://november.org)) as well. It



Casey received the MAPS Bulletin, The Entheogen Review, and other publications, which often served as conversation starters while he was in prison.

just always struck me as another form of discrimination that is not focused on by the majority of people. The people who tend to focus on it, and understand it, are those that are actually using the drugs that are not preferred by the majority, although cannabis is becoming preferred by the majority.

**BB:** Is there something that separates the drugs that are preferred by the majority and drugs that are outcast?

**CWH:** I would actually say that some of the drugs that are preferred by the majority cloud one's judgment and do not have one looking at the unconscious contents of their mind. Some of the drugs that are not preferred by the majority, psychedelics in particular, have you look at the unconscious contents of your mind. I certainly looked at my mind as a result of consumption of those, and started questioning authority in a way that those in the majority probably wouldn't appreciate.

I don't want to create an "us and them" out of it, but the people that made the legislation for the drug war, that became the culture war, were probably concerned with the health and safety of their children and thought they were doing the best thing. It turned out many years later that probably wasn't correct. If you read [David F.] Musto's [1973] book on the origins of the drug war, *The American Disease*, you can see that the early movement for the Opium Wars in particular was simply economic, a way of keeping Britain out of the market with China. For it to continue to this day, it still seems economic. It seems like a way for the U.S. military and its friends to get involved

in countries so that they can control resources and people. The idea that we're spending so much money to imprison two million people for drug offenses alone in the United States seems absolutely ridiculous.

**BB:** When was the first time you felt you were personally a target of this drug war?

**CWH:** The first time I got arrested was in my car on the Fourth of July, celebrating freedom, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in downtown Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. I got pulled over and I had a small jar, a glass handmade blown glass jar from a friend of mine with marijuana in it, and they didn't like that, so they arrested me. This was '94 or '95, and I realized this was not going to stop. This was going to keep going until people stood up and said, "No, this is not acceptable." I think that's when I first realized that I was a target, properly a target. I mean, there were hints that I was a target as soon as I started proclaiming I was going to school to make drugs. People were like, "Shhhh, don't tell anyone," and I knew then that I was involved in something that was going to leave me subject to the law.

**BB:** So why, when you felt the hard hammer of this law coming at you, did you not say, "Okay, I'm just not going to use weed anymore," or "I'm just going to go find another career?"

**CWH:** I doubt I could have articulated it at the time, but I thought what they were doing was wrong; I knew it wasn't fair. They can grow their weed—tobacco—and they can sell it to



*“The so-called ‘war on drugs’ is not a war on pills, powder, plants, and potions, it is war on mental states—a war on consciousness itself—how much, what sort we are permitted to experience, and who gets to control it. More than an unintentional misnomer, the government-termed ‘war on drugs’ is a strategic decoy label; a slight-of-hand move by the government to redirect attention away from what lies at ground zero of the war—each individual’s fundamental right to control his or her own consciousness.”—Richard Glen Boire, “On Cognitive Liberty”*

everybody, and yet I can’t grow this weed and smoke it. It just didn’t seem right. I don’t think I could articulate that effectively until I heard Richard Boire’s “cognitive liberty” argument: the idea that I had the right to alter my mental functioning as I see fit. I enjoy the mental states produced by cannabis and psychedelics, and I didn’t see why, if I enjoyed this and I’m not harming anyone, I should be stopped from doing so.

**BB:** How did you come across the idea of cognitive liberty?

**CWH:** I think it actually came from a pamphlet, just a simple pamphlet from the Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics [[cognitiveliberty.org](http://cognitiveliberty.org); formerly the Alchemind Society] in 2000. I found it on a table at the Palenque Entheobotany Seminar. I thought, that’s brilliant, this is the centerpiece, the key to unlock the whole thing, because inside the speech that we have the freedom to speak is thought, and inside that thought is so much authority and power. I don’t want to say it so simply, but the church and institutions have, over time, tended to want to control what people think.

I realize that there was just a long thread of connection through that idea. I think Jonathan Ott attempted to articulate it in the intro to *Pharmactheon*, where I think he attempted to envision the future of religion. Thomas Roberts also talks about academic and religious freedom, and the study of mind.

I think Richard Boire took the idea and ran with it, and wrote a series of articles, and they were just epic, they were beautiful, and I was converted. I’m a shameless proselytizer as

it is, so I made up these flyers that had Alchemind on one side and MAPS on the other, and I also had Alchemind paired with Erowid flyers, so I was giving these away at all the festivals that I was going to, thousands of them.

**BB:** Around 2000, when you were handing out these flyers, MAPS was still trying to get a lot of the research started that we’re now conducting. What for you was the value of scientific research for changing the war on drugs?

**CWH:** I was promoting MAPS in particular for the experience that I had with psychedelics. I had experienced an exceptional catharsis that just felt like I cleaned out years of skeletons from my closet—you know, just put them out, a yard sale—anyone who wants them can have them. That came through my experience with LSD, but when I had my first experience with MDMA, I was absolutely blown away. I was in a world where communication became so simple, where it was so effortless to communicate with authenticity and integrity.

**BB:** Did that attitude of openness and authenticity help you while you were in prison?

**CWH:** Absolutely. Conveniently enough, in England I was able to decorate my walls as I see fit most of the time. I was receiving the *MAPS Bulletin*, *The Entheogen Review*, and other publications, and was able to put my iconography up on my wall, which often led people to wanting to talk about what that iconography meant. I had one of the back covers to one of the

*Bulletins*, the pill chart. There was a serious amount of pill-taking in England, so I could always interest the prisoners and prison staff alike. The prison staff might be wearing that nice uniform but many of them had experienced MDMA or Ecstasy, as it is in the pill form in England.

So there was always a way of bringing people into the conversation, the idea that there is healing to be found through this stuff, that you can strengthen the bonds you have in your relationships, that you can get through difficult conversations that you might be having with your friends, family, and loved ones through the use of psychedelics, or in particular MDMA. I was able to enlighten a few people directly as to the experience and effects of some psychedelics as a result of generous individuals being kind to me whilst I was in prison; that's coded, and anybody can decipher that how they wish. Most importantly, I think I promoted a spirit of open and direct communication with people.

The people that would congregate around my cell were into taking a look at their life. I mean, they were in prison, they had six walls to focus their energy. I hunted for people that seemed open, seemed like they were on the path. I'd pick 'em out, single 'em out. I'd just do that, as often as possible with anybody who could stand still long enough for me to do it. So many people in prison experienced the effects of clown shamanism, a sort of impromptu therapy, whether it was iconography or words.

**BB:** So there's a therapeutic aspect to the education that happened in prison about psychedelics?

**CWH:** Generally. I was able to take over a philosophy class in prison for a couple of weeks. I was able to teach, tutor science and math, for people that were in prison who were trying to better their lives. I did a physics degree while I was there. We had an Open University room (Open University is the distance education that supplies a lot of prisons around the world, but we had our own computers) and we'd sit in there and have conversations for long periods of time. And there was a philosophy class and people would move just to be near me, just so we could communicate.

**BB:** Did you develop lasting relationships with any of these people?

**CWH:** I think I developed probably a couple dozen lasting relationships that will endure through time. I've communicated with probably a half dozen since I've been out in the last two months, but I've been on the road. I think several of them will look me up later in time, and if I ever get back on Facebook, some of them will come find me.

**BB:** What was the first thing you wanted to do when you got out?

**CWH:** I really just wanted to sit still for a moment, just breathe the air. I wanted to head towards the wilderness eventually, get in the hot springs, make love to my lovely wife, Charlotte Walsh, and just drink clean water, eat good food.

**BB:** If you could start honest and open conversations about psychedelics even in such a challenging and hostile place as prison, that gives me a lot of hope for our culture at large. How can people best participate in changing attitudes?

**CWH:** I think the best thing individuals who are interested in shining a light on these things can do is arm themselves with accurate information—though I don't even want to say armed. I don't want to answer a drug war with a war. I want to undermine it; I want to take its foundations away. It's founded on legislation, and if we look at the legislation, we realize that only Congress has the power to make such rules, and that only Congress is going to solve the problem.

I think that the real answers are going to come from the law. What the framers of the Controlled Substances Act in America were trying to come up with a rigorous format for regulating the production and supply

of drugs that they thought might cause harm were they not used wisely. I can understand where they would freak out and think "Wow, they're not being used wisely," because a bunch of hippies in the '60s took them and got really wild, and caused a lot of questioning of authority. I could see how that scared them, and they wanted to grab ahold of it as fast as possible.

The law isn't written badly—it's actually a very well written law. Both the United States Controlled Substances Act and the United Kingdom's Misuse of Drugs Act, both have the ability to create under them a regulated supply of all the substances that they say are controlled now.

**BB:** Are there smaller steps that can be taken to make these big legal changes happen faster?

**CWH:** Speak honestly with your friends. Stand up and say, "I do this and I enjoy it. This has created benefit for me. I experience joy and liberation through the use of these chemicals. These molecules have shown me new ways of thinking and being." There's no more to it than that. I'm not saying go out and broadcast it to the police, but I'm saying amongst your friends and family, speak honestly and openly about it. There's nothing to be ashamed of. We are bags of chemicals walking around and we can transform the way we perform through our diet, which includes our food choices, our drink choices, our drug choices, the air we breathe, and the environment we feast on with our eyes. Our diet is not simply the food choices at the supermarket.

**BB:** So are there places and situations that you can see where people can feel comfortable sharing that?

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**CWH:** Obviously there's festivals and things like that, but that's not going to bring everyone together. That's not going to bring all the people that we need for this conversation. There's also the idea that as we age, this becomes less and less of a problem in society, that as the old guard dies off, we get an opportunity to transform the world.

**BB:** Was there anyone in particular who you remember being able to help by educating them about psychedelics?

**CWH:** I had one particular guard who was experiencing difficulty with his son and autism, and his wife and him were having difficulty communicating about it. He was reading some stuff that I handed to him in regards to [Stanislav] Grof's "perinatal matrices," and that started an in-depth conversation that lasted for several months about his child's birth experiences, and the mother's experiences during the birth process as well. That actually led to them opening up a conversation with each other. He never told me whether they actually went out and found some MDMA, but I get the idea that they did and that they broke through the barrier that they had about their son. I think they were blaming each other for the fact that the child wasn't what they expected, but that he was perfect in the way he was created, in the way he exists. And they let go of that blame and found more peace with each other.

I also had one particular prisoner who became a very good friend of mine. He'd grown up violent, in a violent household, on the streets, and he was in for violence. He hadn't killed anyone, but he was going to if he kept on the way he was going. I started talking to him. Strangely enough, underneath all that environment, all that shell, was this person that was very gentle and very pure and innocent. I sat for him one day when he smoked some DMT, and his whole outlook just shifted. Suddenly he was like, "Wow, I don't want anything to do with that world anymore." His whole word became about educating himself about science and mind and consciousness, and how he's going to make DMT in the future.

**BB:** The fact that he was in prison already didn't affect his potential future plans to illegally manufacture drugs?

**CWH:** By sending people to prison, you're giving them a "time out" in the corner. It's an occupational hazard for so many people that it's just part of the process. In Her Majesty's Academy of Crime, you meet new connections, you establish new relationships, you network, you get out of prison, you create bigger crimes. The prison system is a wonderful way of taking dangerous criminals, and sometimes making them more dangerous, and sometimes steering them into less dangerous occupations. There are people who have been in and out of prison 30 or 40

times that I've been with, and maybe through my interactions with them they'll be in prison less and they'll create less crime.

**BB:** So by talking openly with them about psychedelics, you were giving them an alternative viewpoint that they could use to change their lives.

**CWH:** In talking with these individuals, I really was creating Temporary Autonomous Zones, safe spaces for them to speak and just be themselves, where no one was judging them, no one was telling them what to do. I wasn't telling them they were bad, wrong, dirty or shameful—which is what a lot of them were really used to—but just creating a safe space where people can just unload and be themselves. It was pretty much my job.

I read a lot of depositions of people's crimes, and some people had done some absolutely atrocious crimes that I'm glad they're in prison for, but at the same time I had to live with these people and respect them as fellow human beings, someone who breathes and shares the same space I do. I think I survived the process quite effectively and quite easily by creating an attitude of minimal judgment.

Some of the people I was in prison with had never hugged a tree, never been in nature. They were city kids their whole life. They'd never seen the beauty of the world, never been to the beach, never breathed in a beautiful sunset, and maybe through breathing in some of the stuff that I encouraged them to breathe, they might transform their way of being. Get more honest with themselves. Clean their house and help others do the same. Nobody had stood still long enough to even hear who they were, to see them, and to encourage their potential. I did that a lot, letting people know, "You're not a failure, you're not a fuck-up. There's nothing to be ashamed of. You're a human being who's learning on this path. This is where you are now." 🌀

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