

THE ANARCHIST

Inventor of FidoNet, guerilla ISP wholesaler, and all - around homo punk activist, Tom Jennings is looking for a suit.

It says something about our peculiar sociocultural moment that Tom Jennings - the out-there San Francisco homo punk activist possessed of tattoos on his skull and multiple piercings overall - is looking for a CEO. Or venture capital. Or some big corporate entity to sell out to, as quickly as possible. When Shred of Dignity, the skateboarders group Jennings co-founded, fought for skateboarders' rights against city hall, the group won. And though the analogy may seem a tad oblique, Jennings will probably meet with just as much success in his current efforts to cash in and cash out on the Internet. It seems these days that to succeed as an anarchist, you have to succeed as a businessman.

There's a kind of cheap theatric irony in the fact that Jennings first took control of The Little Garden (TLG), a San Francisco provider of Internet access, when he was on food stamps; yet now that TLG has more success than he and his staff can keep up with, he's looking for an exit play, to sell out. He wants to stop working the entrepreneur's 90-hour weeks and is talking about buying a piece of safe, income-generating commercial real estate.

"I'm just burned out," he explains, "though it's better since we started hiring people. With early microcomputers, it was more exciting - everyone was a weirdo. Then it got boring, all suits. The suits in the Internet business now are taking chances, and even the worst of them have some interest in what's going on. But in a few years" - after Jennings hopes to have departed - "they'll be terrible."

With a character like Jennings, however, you have to figure the probability for an uncomplicated retreat into the rentier class is low. Jennings, at the age of 40, has already invented the technology for the garage-band version of the Internet, FidoNet, which in scope, if not media sexiness, rivals the Net itself. And he's already figured out how to turn sound business practice and Constellation-class technical chops into profit

with TLG - simultaneously being a trust-busting populist who, in true Net style, has treated big-business mercantilist bad behavior as a network fault to be routed around.

So even if Jennings does succeed in snagging a suit and acquiring disposable income, his buying commercial real estate will necessarily have more to do with wanting a secure place to park himself as he gets older (and maybe provide subsidized housing for his friends) than suddenly wanting to live off what Marxists call the surplus. The Jennings Building might very well be the way he secures the proper bolt hole from which to launch his next adventure.

Jennings is simultaneously a Republican midterm-election nightmare (able-bodied white male eschewing family values and living off government assistance!) and a poster boy à la Newt (through drive and tech savvy, on his way toward lifetime financial security!). And while a few Clintonian Democrats might try to claim a creature such as Jennings as their own, the man is hardly a dependable liberal, rejecting mainstream assimilationist politics of any kind, gay or straight. It was at an anarchists convention that he met his card-carrying International Workers of the World customer-support employee, Deke Nihilson. And defying most pinko earth-muffin notions of acceptable recreation, he's also a National Rifle Association-certified firearms instructor.

Jennings, the proud owner of a couple pet rats ("one's smart and one's dumb"), never relinquishes his lifelong irreverence toward TPTB - The Powers That Be. He's an anarchist, pure and simple - which means he professes to no ideological purity of any kind. He espouses no doctrine, he says, about left or right, or about the marketplace: "I just try not to screw anybody over, and I like treating my employees well."

There is one place in the technocratic landscape, however, where you can count on Tom Jennings consistently ending up. Probably without ever meaning to, he always lands on the cutting edge of what's considered cool and now and happening (Make your fortune on the Internet! Go into business for yourself! Provide great customer support and the world - and cash - will follow!), because he's so damned technosmart and blessed with such sound instincts.

___ Here, Fido___

While he never attended college, Jennings still found work with many early computer companies in his home range of Boston. Among them was Phoenix Software (now Phoenix Technologies), where he ported MS-DOS to all manner of early-1980s

microcomputers. He walked away from lucrative employment at Apple Computer in the mid-1980s, after a year of getting more and more annoyed with work life within a corporation. But most important of his endeavors in those years was Jennings's invention of FidoNet, often called "the people's Internet," for which he won the 1987 Andrew Fluegelman Award for software excellence.

Proudly Yankee tall and scrawny (6 foot 4, 145 pounds), Jennings created FidoNet in 1984 as a cheap way to connect with a Baltimore colleague. A totally decentralized, easy-to-use, low-cost technology for linking BBSes, FidoNet in turn has grown to be the IRL information superhighway for BBS operators all over the world. Through a kind of mirroring software, FidoNet allows BBSers on remote boards to participate in each other's conferences and send messages beyond their local server out to the entire system. There are more than 50,000 public and private FidoNet nodes, showing up in places as unexpected as the Canada Post Corp. and the United States Forest Service. And while no one really knows how many more than 50,000 there are, it's pretty likely there are as many FidoNet nodes as there are Internet ones.

Among nonprofits, particularly in developing countries, FidoNet rules.

With FidoNet there is no centralized authority, but there is a power-to-the-people technology, store-and-forward messaging that takes advantage of late-night el cheapo telephone rates in the US to pass data from one board to another. FidoNet can be tweaked so that sysops keeping current with the latest telco pricing structures can route calls across state or national borders to keep costs down.

In true network-pioneer form, Jennings took FidoNet along the route that software and intellectual-property radicals are now advocating - but 10 years earlier: he gave away one downloadable version of the software or charged US\$40 (\$200 for corporate customers) to those wanting a software diskette and manual. While he enhanced FidoNet for free with "practically every feature anyone asked for," he also did custom work - for money - for those who wanted specialized implementations or who didn't want to do the customization themselves. Jennings scoffs at intellectual property radicals like Richard Stallman, who believe software makers should accrue revenue only for technical support. (See "Copywrong," Wired 1.3, page 48.) "I am not an ideologue," Jennings insists. "I think Stallman's 'Free Software' stuff is a fantasy, and he's being propped up by money that's not his own."

___ Free the Internet ___

The same instinct for how things ought to be in a sensibly self-governing world of unrestricted communications has come through in Jennings's management of TLG. Having already co-founded Homocore - an anarcho-gay zine - in the mid-'80s, having engaged in some serious hardware- tinkerer fun racing his converted-to-propane 1963 Rambler (at one time a spermobile, decorated with drawings of the wee beasties, now only embellished with stuff like a Rat Fink decal acquired from Ed "Big Daddy" Roth himself at a car show), and having written a booklet on propane cars (which Real Goods Trading Corp., the L. L. Bean of the alternate-energy and appropriate-technology set, took on as part of its line), Jennings next pretty much pioneered the concept of Internet protocol wholesaling. Meaning all the little Internet service providers offering stripped cheap Net access, springing up in the San Francisco Bay area and beyond, owe their existence in some sense to him.

Back in the summer of 1994, CIX (Commercial Internet eXchange), the consortium of big-time ISPs, wanted to charge small-time operators the same fee as large corporations - an unrealistic \$10,000 per year. Jennings felt CIX was acting like the media oligopolies the Internet has always worked around. So he went his own way, insisting on selling low-cost Internet access to the small businesses that have come to make up the largest percentage of TLG's customer base. CIX eventually came around; meanwhile, kazillions of little providers came into existence to service consumers and small businesses all over the United States.

TLG gets its bandwidth from MCI and Sprint and resells it to SF Bay area ISPs, such as Sirius Connections, and businesses, such as C|net - though, as Jennings puts it, his company also serves "lots of dumb businesses without even knowing what they do." TLG's business model is clear: "We are selling what was denied us - Internet connection that can be resold at any level, fair prices put in writing up front that do not vary, reasonable technology practices. And since we're dealing with the Bay area, businesses can work with a do-it-yourself mentality for Internet connection. Lots of businesses have staff to deal with LANs, so thinking they can deal with WANs is not so far-fetched."

At this point, TLG has become far and away the single largest Internet wholesaler/reseller in the San Francisco Bay area, with BBN Planet Corp. (based in Palo Alto) probably its closest competitor. The company experiences little turnover and continues to grow, says Jennings, because "we get lots of people doing massive upgrades, and customers who have been dissatisfied by other ISPs." Serving more than

35 providers, it covers a quarter of the market and has its eyes on other markets that are now only served by the more lumbering, less technically solid ISP giants such as Netcom and PSINet.

___ Company man ___

Jennings runs TLG in new-style, Net-entrepreneur fashion. Its office furniture looks like it's strictly from Value Village, and Jennings eschews wining and dining customers, making sales calls, or showing off the facilities. "Suits want to see suits, and nerds want to see nerds," he says, and evidently all clients, whether dressed in Hugo Boss or Jack Purcell, want to see an old-time, intimidating, spiffy computer room. But TLG has none of these things to offer: no suits, no classic geeks, nothing resembling high-tech interior-design statements or tours of corporate headquarters (this is not the IBM of 1967, after all). What TLG does have (taking its name, coincidentally, from a techie-hangout restaurant in Silicon Valley where early TLG members used to meet) is technological savvy. Says Jennings: "We terrify people because we're so technically astute."

And the office environment is not the only sign of TLG nonconformity to the dominant paradigm. Jennings jokes that "we should do advertising that says, 'We hate the Internet.'" To Jennings, Internet access is "just business - nothing but business." If a potential customer calls asking about getting connected to the "information superhighway," TLG staffers know this is someone cruising on hype and not on business need. TLG's chief engineer, Edgar Nielsen, goes so far as to mock-pontificate that Tom wants information to be free - not. Or as Jennings says, referring to those visions of the Net as the New Jerusalem that many technophilosophes go on about, "There's lots of hot air out there. Email is boring but good. Like pencils, it just works. We provide zero content and are not into wacky Web ideas." Jennings sees TLG as the '90s equivalent of an old-school common carrier: just a conduit, nothing else.

In keeping with this no-hype, no-bullshit attitude, Jennings lets the excellence and technical soundness of TLG sell itself. In the early days, TLG had only one line, and with it the outages common to many providers. But today, TLG has built in multiple redundancies, and its technical record is impressive. As Jennings puts it, "We move fast, we don't lie to people, we're technically conservative in the good sense - and our prices are phenomenal." Posting its rates publicly on the Web as an indication of its straight-ahead style of doing business, TLG offers ISPs a T1 service for only \$1,000 per month, with unlimited reselling not only permitted but encouraged. This compares, Jennings

says, with competitor prices of anywhere from \$2,000 to \$7,000 with all sorts of restrictions. For example, BBN Planet's highest-end T1 service costs \$3,275 per month. And though the personal style and politics of six-person TLG might make standard business consultants extremely nervous, folks like Tom Peters would drool over the MBA case-history success of TLG: it does good work and, through word of mouth, is now turning away more customers than it can handle.

But in spite of his serious businessperson-type pronouncements, Jennings is still Jennings, the can't-miss-him-in-a-crowd, hair-usually-dyed-a-strange-color indie kinda guy. And while it may have been partly native technology-intuition that led him to bring aboard seasoned tech-wizard Nielsen, former sysadmin/IS director at Wired magazine, it was probably just as important that Jennings bumped into the self-identified queer/bi engineer at a benefit concert to fund a private investigation into the rape and murder of Mia Zapata, a Seattle singer-songwriter for the punk band The Gits. True to happy-mutant form, it was there that Jennings finally formally clicked on Nielsen to be his chief engineer. Never mind that he had already been introduced to Nielsen by Wired president Jane Metcalfe, for whom TLG installed the magazine's network infrastructure months before.

Tom Jennings established rules of the road for FidoNet that remain as simple and powerful as Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics: on FidoNet, do not launch pirated software, "do not become excessively annoying, and do not become excessively annoyed." Meaning, of course, don't attract the attention of law enforcement, and live and let live.

So it kinda figures that even though TLG, an autonomically equal opportunity employer, has been known to post job listings at Red Dora's Bearded Lady Cafe, the lesbian bar near the ISP's Mission District headquarters, Jennings says he and Josh Stehlik, his live-in MOTAS (member of the appropriate sex) of three years, are somewhat notorious for not being politically correct. Jennings the Discordian spoofer/ secular-humanist owns, for example, the domain names christian.org and christian .com - why not make a few bucks by auctioning off the coordinates to observant Christian groups that might want them?

Jennings's lack of ideological purity shows up in his thinking about the economics of the Net, too. Although he's hardly known for his admiration of wealth, privilege, transnational monopoly capitalism, or media conglomerates, he also doesn't have much

use for traditional lefty community activists who advocate Freenets and other freebie Internet-for-the-people schemes. "Freenets are such nonsense," he says. "No, the use of the Internet costs money; but yes, you can afford it."

So if our chiliastic end-times have got Tom Jennings out trolling for a CEO, it's not all that surprising. At the moment, Jennings has it figured: To find a suit, he'll either hire one (so he can continue to go about one of his favorite pastimes, which is playing with hardware), become one (if he wants to stay in the ISP game), or sell out to one (so he can go elsewhere and do something else). "I always have a pool of things I do, and either they take off or they don't. I'd really like to do some alternative-energy stuff," he says. "But then, if the sale goes through" - and he can get more sleep and hire more help, hardware guy that he's been for 20 years - "it might be fun to stick around and do this for a while...."

And since he has already succeeded at playing Internet Parcheesi, the Great Business Game of the 1990s, ingeniously making money off his foresight, you have to want to pay attention to whichever it is he'll choose to do next.