

Interview: Tim Young, [GALO Magazine](#) (2012)

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Berlin's [Marcus Speh Birkenkrahe](#) does not have a new book, movie, or record to promote. His old, new, and ever ongoing project that he has devoted his far reaching, scientific, business, and artistic life to is evidential and complacent in none other than the man you are about to meet.

While many creative types typically scan the horizon for the next clue in what direction to move their craft, Birkenkrahe in his wisdom and 48 years, has already left the horizon crowded with important achievements and accomplishments that all add up to one exceedingly busy Renaissance man.

Being a writer is probably the logical extension of his incredibly diversified background. A physicist, professor of computer science, consultant to high ranking CEOs and a husband and father, have helped to plant the certainly prolific seeds needed to nurture the literary life.

Chatting with the man via Skype, with video cameras blazing, was the perfect ambience needed to capture the wide angle musings and energy of the never spread too thin, always captivating Birkenkrahe.

GALO: What's the correct pronunciation of your name?

Marcus Speh Birkenkrahe: In Germany you would say 'Sshpee.' But in America you would say 'Spay.' My sister who is Texas born and who is a professor in the US, her name is Alice Speh (Spay).

Birkenkrahe is a completely made up name. If you Google it, all the Birkenkrahes you get are us. Because my wife is an American, Cherokee, she's got Cherokee ancestors and my Native American tree totem is the Birch, which in German is 'Birke,' and her American Indian animal totem is the crow, which in German is 'kra-

he,' which became Birkenkrahe. So we just decided to adopt the new name instead of taking the name of the other person.

We lived in England for a long time [and] in England you can choose your own name, go to a solicitor, and he would allow you to adopt any name you like. You could call yourself 'pigtail' tomorrow if you like. In Germany, the name belongs to the State and not the individual, so you have to ask the State for permission to change your name. So we did the name change in the UK because we lived in London for ten years and then took the name to Germany. When I began to write online, I first used a pseudonym Finnegan Flawnt that is completely made up and then when I 'came out,' so to speak, as my real personality I decided to use my father's name, which is Speh, my birth name. So in other words my actual surname is Birkenkrahe and Speh is just a name I use as a writer - to keep those two personalities separate.

GALO: In Berlin, specifically, and Germany, in general, how wide is the gap between the have and have-nots?

MSB: I listened to a broadcast the other day, which said the gap, is certainly widening. My perception from having lived in England is that it is considerably less, certainly less visible and certainly smaller than in other European countries. I mean Germany is by far the richest European nation and finances about a third of the total budget of the European Union. Friends of mine who lived in Munich, the south of Germany, say that poverty is a lot more visible in Berlin. I wouldn't have really noticed it but I can imagine it; partly because the city was split into the eastern part and the western part and unemployment in the eastern part is worse, a lot worse. There's not a have/have not divide but there's still a visible east/west divide, which goes straight through town. It goes straight through the republic. But the big difference, for example, is that in London where the occupy movement is quite strong is that Germany still is not really a class society. It's much closer to the United States in that respect. If you make it here [Germany], then you'd be accepted if you have a

funny accent, a funny dialect-that's not a problem. In England, if you come from the wrong class background or you have the wrong accent you're done with; you're lost. There's no way you can connect. If you ask, did we feel the crisis (the world wide depression) of 2008; my impression is in Germany it hasn't been felt very much at all compared to the US.

GALO: In an interview at the site *Voices* you are quoted as saying, "...life keeps changing more rapidly for more people than ever before in human history." What makes you think that and might it have anything to do with the so-called 'Arab Spring'?

MSB: Not actually. That interview was before the Arab Spring in the summer of 2010 and I wasn't thinking so much of political movements or changes. I think it's something that came out of a discussion with my wife who, coming from the US, has a very different background from mine. It came from the thought of my father - what kind of stability in terms of conditions of life, patterns of communication, mostly technology, he could rely upon in his lifetime and the previous generation, and the generation before that. I mean this has a very profound effect upon stories. If you look at stories as the end of it, you will notice that the individual story, at least in Europe, is so much more important now than it used to be. And I'm sort of improvising here to talk that through, but it seems like the story is much more coupled to the individual, where in the past it was much more an ancestral thing.

You would have to work to disengage your story from the tribe and the family. And for a number of reasons I think stories have become much more individual and that, for me, is an indicator that you know things are speeding up. If I look at the conditions of life of my father and my grandfather and my great grandfather, which are well known to me because in Europe we don't move around so much, then I recognize how vastly different my story is from my father and grandfather.

When I look at my grandfather, his story and the story of his forefathers were all much more similar. So, somehow, I think from a writing perspective, from any other

perspective, politically or whatever. You have to come to grips with speeding up of process. And the fact that our kids have such different communication habits and patterns than our parents or us is just the tip of the iceberg, a sign of something much deeper.

GALO: "There is much fright," you quote from William H. Gass in a preface to a short story collection. How do you deal with fright as a writer? What are you fearful of?

MSB: Death mostly. I'm increasingly afraid of death. I'm totally afraid of death. I just wrote a blog post about it because my birthday was yesterday (Dec. 29) because generally around my birthday I tend to think more about death than probably any other day, because I use the birthday to measure how much of what I really still want to get done; have I got done. And most of my writing is kind of connected to existential issues and my current or ongoing battle with myself and [with] grief, really; I'm probably not dealing well enough with my fright. I'm still pushing away, so to speak, and I think you really have to let them in to do the best writing that is possible to do if you want to write true. If you don't care about that, and you just want to write any old story or you just want to write for success, then obviously it doesn't matter if you get in touch with your deepest fear and stuff like that. It's a very good question because I think that probably how you deal with fright, your personal frights, is at least one source of true writing. I work a lot with, I mean I'm also a psychotherapist-that's one of the things I do and I'm trained for-so I work a lot with methods trying to get the unconscious out into the conscious and working with that material. Which, of course, every writer does and in my case I've thought maybe a little bit more about the mechanics of the unconscious.

GALO: You often post your work on the literary sites *Red Lemonade*, *Fictionaut*, and others. It appears you obviously enjoy all this connectedness and sharing of your writing. How important are these Internet social scenes to you?

MSB: They're vital. They're absolutely vital, more than important. I mean, for a number of reasons-but only after having been active online for maybe two years or so- I do now have an English-speaking writers' community in Berlin that I'm connected to. A small one, but in terms of size, it's nowhere near the community I'm connected to online. I think, if my first steps into writing in sort of coming out with old work would have been personal which is something I experienced in London over 15 years ago with poems, I would have completely bombed.

I mean, the whole process of bringing your writing out online is much more; you have much more control over it because like most writers I take rejection really badly. And when I started writing, I didn't know if people would absolutely hate what I did. So first I put up this pseudonym, so you couldn't see me. That was the only way in which I could actually stand to put any work out there. And then slowly as I realized that some people at least liked this stuff, I sort of took it down, and then the very last step, I even did public readings to actual people. But for me, the online writing community is absolutely vital.

GALO: Let's talk about the National drink of Argentina, which is 'Mate.' I understand it contains caffeine like coffee. Why Mate instead?

MSB: The thing with Mate tea is that you start it, [and] then you keep putting hot water on it and add a little Mate, so you can drink it for a long time. It's a wonderful drink in [the] summer, in the hot summer; I drink it all year round because otherwise I would drink coffee, and if I would drink coffee all day, I think I would die. I drink too much coffee as it is. I'm quite high strung as it is. I can't do that. But the reason why I drink Mate is of course [because] I followed a woman to Buenos Aires. Women have always been the pillars along which I have organized my life. I fell in love with the country [Brazil] but then returned to Germany because I hadn't finished my diploma in physics. I realized if I stayed down there, I would really stay down there forever, and I was a young man, 25, and I wasn't ready for that yet. But I've kept the Mate.

GALO: The saying in Germany, "eating and drinking keeps body and soul together," how does this figure into your life?

MSB: The south of Germany, where I come from, their eating and drinking is really very, very important. They're famous for their wines. It's a great tradition. You saying that makes me think I should write a lot more about eating and drinking. My characters particularly don't eat and drink enough. I realize that; I must make a note. It's really important to me but it doesn't really come through.

Only recently I've begun to have a little wine again. I was a teetotaler because I had too much when I was a soldier.

GALO: How long were you in the service?

MSB: Two years. I was a paratrooper.

GALO: Many jumps?

MSB: Many jumps. Yes I jumped with the Special Forces. I have the American Special Forces paratrooper sign too. It was fun actually. I couldn't do it now. Now even the idea gets my heart palpitating.

GALO: When exactly, and why in the world, did you decide to pursue the writing life?

MSB: Good question. I think I decided to be a writer of some sort when I was seven or so, very young, and I've written ever since. But to really seriously pursue it, I didn't do that until my mid-30s when I gave up my business career and moved into academia - partly because the academic schedule and academic working life is a lot more amenable to a writing existence. And sort of more and more of my non-writing activities are falling away from me, or rather I push them away, and what remains is more and more time to write, and so I would say it's grown rather organically. I got myself some stability first and a family.

I mean, I was first shocked when you said, "The writer's life," because the question on my mind was, am I living the writer's life? I thought 'yeah, actually I am.' A literary life in a sense that literature and writing is the absolute center of my life,

apart from family and personal things you know I sleep, shit, have sex, stuff like that, but the soul center of my life is my writing. I published my first piece in the summer of 2009, so that's not too long ago - makes me happy to say that.

GALO: In your career as professor, what institution are you affiliated with, and what is your focus as a teacher?

MSB: I work for the Berlin School of Economics and Law. And my specialization is Business Informatics. It's like computer science, computer science for business, but I teach relatively little now because I am also the head of e-learning and my research, and all of my time goes into directing e-learning for the school. The Berlin School of Economics and Law is Germany's largest business school, so basically I'm a business school professor. I also teach courses online. And like most schools we want to do a lot more in the e-learning mode. So my role in the school is to pave the way toward that future. It's clear that e-learning is going to be of much greater importance in the future than it is now.

In my class the students don't write papers anymore they blog and create websites and stuff like that, which would have been completely unheard of even five years ago. I started with that because I'm one of the original developers of the World Wide Web - a physicist.

GALO: Right. I wanted to ask how exactly you were involved with that-that's quite an accomplishment.

MSB: It was a historical moment and I stood nearby, let's say, I think that's more accurate. I was a physicist, a young physicist, doing my PhD in Hamburg at The Deutsches Elektronen Synchrotron (DESY), a particle accelerator lab, and I was in a situation which many physicists at the time were in, namely I was collaborating with people at large distances like the US and we needed to share information and later what would be called 'links,' so through my activity I got interested in anything new in long distance communication. In effect, I think I taught the first distance-learning course over the Web in 1992. I started something called Diversity University, which

was a virtual reality based university place. I started something with a guy from Texas called Globe Wide Network University, which was a catalog of all the available distance courses at the time. I think I started the first virtual library. But nobody knew why this would be so important ten years later or five years later. It was something I did as a graduate student. All the interesting things happen when you're a graduate student. So all of a sudden, the Web was there and I found myself as being one of ten people who had this very, very special knowledge in the world.

GALO: Might there ever be a situation or possibility do you think of a move to the USA?

MSB: I would think about it but I'm a tenured professor here in Berlin. So all I could do is probably get a temporary assignment, unless I wanted to completely move to New York, but I don't have any plans in that direction. But I will definitely come again. I love New York.

GALO: I'm a fan of Andy Warhol and saw that you quoted him as saying, "Good business is the best art." Could you explain what that means to you and are you a fan too?

MSB: He [Andy] liked making money, and thought highly of making money, and so do I. And that's rather unusual in Europe; in America you would find a great number of fans for that kind of view. And I think, even among artists or non-business people in America, people wouldn't shake their heads they would think, 'yeah, money is an important thing - the basic fluid.' But in Europe [and] England, money, business and art, are very separate things. To begin with, it's not a habit in Europe for the rich to support the arts. It's the State who supports the arts, and the people indirectly through the National Lottery. The National Lottery is a big supporter of the arts but the rich people in Europe basically keep their money to themselves. They don't chip in. The rich do pay much higher taxes, so indirectly they pay for the arts too. So in other words saying "business is the best art," is a much more contentious topic in Europe than it is in the US.

I'm very much so a fan of Warhol's art. My favorite piece is this wonderful pop art photo of Debbie Harry (*Blondie*) it's always on my mind when I think of Andy Warhol. It's interesting how the perception of someone like Warhol has changed over the decades. Another guy who I really love is—who is quite similar but sort of a European version of Andy Warhol—Joseph Beuys. I mean, people who basically took up areas of life to an artistic perspective that hadn't been considered artistic at all.

GALO: What interests or hobbies kept you busy as a teenager and what kind of student were you?

MSB: My father was a great collector. He collected absolutely everything with great precision and passion, and so I think I was an anti-collector. When I was a teenager, I wanted to be an actor. I went to acting school very, very briefly until my dad put so much pressure on me to be in science. He wanted me in science and so I basically did what he wanted. And from a relatively early age, I shaped myself according to his picture of me as a scientist. I suppressed the inner artist very thoroughly from my teenage years through pretty late in life. The only exception is music. As a scientist, you know, a mathematician, a theoretical physicist; you were allowed to dabble in music because most mathematicians are musical. I played piano and studied composition a little bit and even taught at Trinity College of Music in London for a year.

GALO: Beatles or Rolling Stones?

MSB: Damn. I thought you were going to ask Star Trek or Star Wars! I don't know, both. I probably know the Beatles a lot better. I think it would have to be Beatles. Because the Stones are just too obscene because all I can think about is 'stoned' and Mick Jagger's way to swing his hips. But when I think of Beatles, I think of peace and love and music. Very quickly I think of music. So I think musically the Beatles have a lot more to offer. But you ask me is it Beatles or Rolling Stones, I

would probably answer it [has] to be Pink Floyd - 'cause that's real music in my view!

GALO: With all that's on your plate how and when do you acquire the energy needed to carry on at your pace?

MSB: It's a very natural level of energy that I have. And I'm shedding stuff. This year, I mean next year, I'm giving up the executive coaching I've done for the last ten years. I'm giving that up, so I'm reducing slowly to find more time for writing because I really, really, really want to finish a decent novel in 2012. That's my next goal.