ALEX JONES WILL NEVER STOP BEING ALEX JONES

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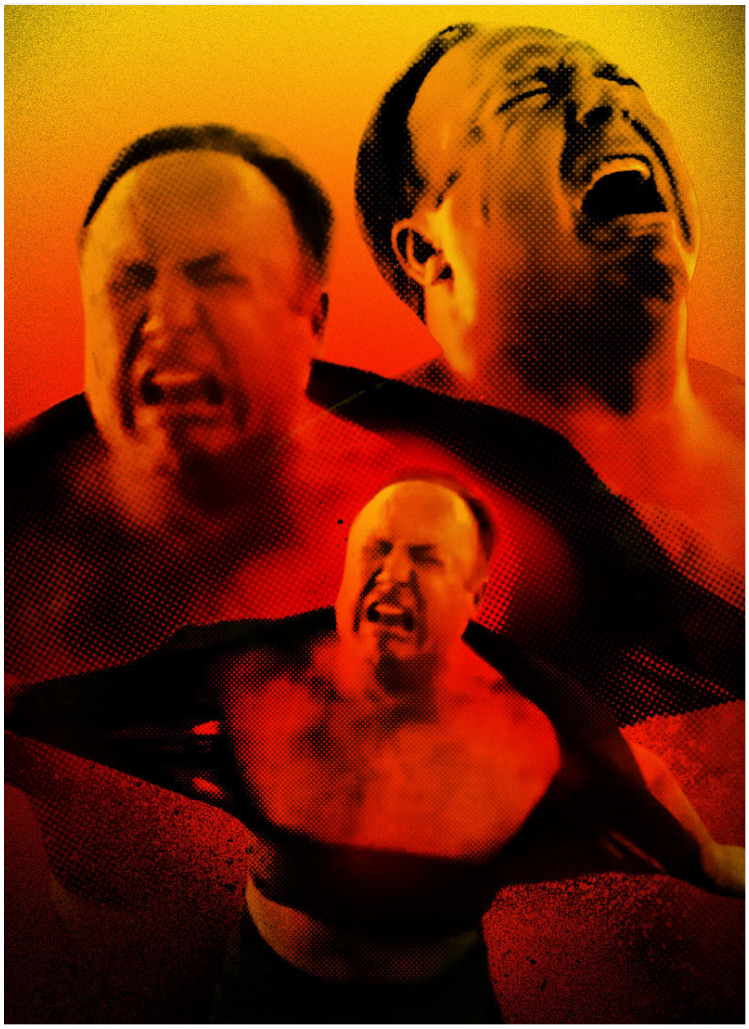
By Charlie Warzel



Josue Evilla for BuzzFeed News

Alex Jones Just Can't Help Himself

After two decades toiling at the fringes of politics, Alex Jones and his Infowars media empire have architected the current moment and helped usher a president into office. Now, the only person standing in Jones' way is Jones.

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Charlie Warzel
BuzzFeed News Reporter

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AUSTIN — It was the winter of 1997 and Alex Jones couldn't stop getting punched in the face.

Out on the cracked asphalt of Austin Public Access Television's parking lot, under the sprawling Texas live oaks, Jones was very much losing a fight to a man known affectionately in Austin's alternative media scene as "SpaceHitler."

According to multiple reports and interviews with two eyewitnesses, for months, SpaceHitler — real name: Clayton Counts — had been prank-calling Jones' largely unsuccessful public-access TV show and mocking the exasperated host as "Jarhead Jones" until his call was disconnected. On this particular day, Counts and a gaggle of friends showed up to an ACTV open house with the intention of taunting the 22-year-old host in person.

According to one witness, Counts's crew traded insults with Jones for a few minutes until one of Counts's friends started back in with Jones' least favorite barb: Jarhead.

It's not entirely clear just what happened next — a police report tells only Jones' side of the story — but witnesses to the brawl said the broadcaster bolted to his car, rummaged under his driver's seat, and mimed tucking something in the back of his waistband while muttering about using a gun for self-defense.

"Go ahead and shoot me," one of Counts's friends said, before knocking Jones square in the face with a surprise haymaker.

"Alex tried to fight back but was throwing wild punches with no form," one witness, Charlie Sotelo, said recently. "The guy is no fighter."

Eventually, someone called the police. Counts and his friends left before they arrived. Sotelo stayed behind with a bleeding and increasingly belligerent Jones, who was pacing back and forth, raving about "counterculture Generation X types" and spinning up the sort of conspiracy-soaked rant that would decades later make him famous and rich. "Alex is hopped up on adrenaline and he couldn't compose himself," Sotelo said. "He's claiming to everyone there are more people than there were and that one of them had a knife. Total lies."

Sotelo — who'd so far managed to stay out of the scuffle — told Jones he was full of shit. Jones kept ranting, the blood from his busted lip misting onto Sotelo's brand-new shirt. Jones threw a punch and missed; Sotelo threw a punch and did not. Police soon had to separate the two, leading Sotelo back into the studios.

"When I came out, Jones was unhinged," Sotelo recalled. "He just can't help himself — he can't shut it off and he starts yelling at the police." At some point, Jones' father showed up. He calmed his son down and wrote Sotelo a $100 check for the ruined shirt. (Sotelo later gave the shirt away on his own public-access show: "The joke was that you could use the dried blood to clone Alex," he said. "It went fast.")

"He just can't help himself — he can't shut it off."

In the end, no one pressed charges. Later, when he spoke about the incident to a local reporter, Jones first suggested he'd been the one who was attacked, and then denied the incident ever took place. In a statement to Austin Police Detective Dusty Heskew, Jones said he was unfairly "taunted" by four to five men, one of whom had "eyes that look like a goat's…and pasty white green skin" and wielded "a double edged military type killing knife." According to Jones, Counts was dangerously "obsessed" with him. "I am not an easy person to scare, but I believe that he bears me incredible malice," he said at the time. "I am in fear of losing my life."

Though that statement predates by decades the Infowars media empire Jones would later create, it now looks like an early playbook for his wildly successful libertarian- and conspiracy-news juggernaut: Take a kernel of truth, warp it and its context in a funhouse mirror, and set it against a heavy backdrop of conspiracy, while raising the stakes with a generous dose of fear. The strategy has made Jones — a stocky central Texan with a penchant for clamorous outbursts, fanciful digressions, and meandering stream-of-consciousness monologues — a celebrity. It's also made Infowars — his broad kingdom of media properties, including a website, webstore, and four-hour daily broadcast — a required part of the far-right's media diet.

In 1997, it was a statement to Detective Heskew. Post-9/11, it became a daily broadcast to an audience of millions with a singular message: There's an imminent war for your mind. Evil, powerful forces have rigged the system. And Jones — blustering, outrageous, utterly captivating — is the one who will stop it, if only Americans would wake up and stop dismissing him as a jester.

After two decades, they have. Jones has today found a place in a United States he helped create, led by a president he helped push into office. From the beginning, Donald Trump was a human distillation of Jones' anti-establishment, anti-globalist, pro-libertarian, massively paranoid worldview; Jones, meanwhile, was an enthusiastic messenger for Trump's campaign. There was Trump's appearance on Jones' show, in which he praised the host's reputation as "amazing"; Infowars' "Hillary for Prison" T-shirts, ubiquitous at campaign rallies; Jones' championing of WikiLeaks's emails dump and his characterization of Hillary Clinton as, among other things, "a complete wanton power-tripping self-worshipping devil worshipper"; and finally, in the earliest hours of November 9, a tearful Jones outlining Trump's plan to "build a better world" while clinking champagne glasses with Trump adviser Roger Stone and listening to Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

After 15 years of obscurity, Jones has the audience and the influence he always wanted. And yet he is, somehow, off his game. He spent the first 100 days of the Trump administration — what should have been the honeymoon period — apologizing for his role in promoting the "Pizzagate" conspiracy theory, retracting his claims to stave off legal action, and, perhaps most unexpectedly, trying to convince a jury that some of his most salacious on-air diatribes were really just "performance art" all along.

Jones, an unwavering professional conspiracy theorist, is being interrogated about his true beliefs just as his golden age of conspiracy is ascendant. But conversations with 25 people in Jones' orbit indicate that his troubles don't stem from a split between the character and the human, but from the fact that Jones is eminently and unquestionably himself at all times. Jones has been this way since he was brawling among parked cars. It's made him a fortune, but now that his moment is finally here, it could be his undoing.