Ken Kesey and one of the Merry Pranksters in the Bus

Ken Kesey's Psychedelic Bus trips over Owl's nest

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(Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters will give a concert in Brown College Thursday, March 16, at 8 p.m.)

The bus has the word "further" on its destination plate, written in letters from which radiances indicate a glow in the best comic-book fashion.

The bus itself must be seen to be properly appreciated, and even then there is a slight chance that the beholder might come away from the sight misbelieving his own eyes.

There is no other bus in the world like the Psychedelic Bus, but then there is a likelihood that there is no other group quite like the Merry Pranksters.

Permanent Excursion

Ken Kesey is the founder of the group, and his fame extends far beyond the world of the hippies. His novels, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Sometimes a Great Notion," have had a wide readership in literary circles; and Kesey was looked upon as a promising young novelist.

But Kesey does not see his future as a novelist, nor even as an observer in print of any of the phenomena of popular culture in which his part has been so great. His future will be a permanent excursion with the Merry Pranksters, a constant changing of scene and a perpetual jaunt to far-off and exotic places.

Standard Questions

Kesey was putting the finishing touches on the reassembly of a Fender amp, the final preparation for shoving off again. There was some talk as to what color the speakers that would be mounted on top of the bus would be, but the Pranksters were mostly sitting around, some playing pool, some painting, others looking on as the representative of the press asked the standard press-type questions.

After a time, it became apparent that those standard questions would not make the interview, and the conversation freewheeled, hopping from point to point.

Sour Utopia

The philosophy flowed a bit thick at times, and much of what was said came out a bit addled by interruptions, by change of context, but the net effect was that of a fascinating evening in the presence of a sincere and happy group in love with life.

Not much of the Threether's readership will ever get a chance to read the article published in the March "Ramparts" dealing with the hippie phenomenon in general and the San Francisco scene in particular.

In the article, Warren Hinckle, "Ramparts" editor, describes the history and what appears to be the direction of the profound change in the dropout culture. The Utopia growing up in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco is already showing signs of going sour, at first from the commercialism of many of the proprietors of the businesses catering to the hippie trade.

Destructive Influx

Kesey pointed out a greater danger, a danger that has brought many an unconventional society crashing down. The self-contained joyous community of the "First Human Be-in" will absorb a huge influx of kids this summer—a number Kesey estimates at 50,000.

With this mass of fresh raw material entering a society whose ground rules are rather vaguely defined at best, there is every indication that Haight-Ashbury will become "another Fort Lauderdale" and go the way of North Beach (once the hangout of the Beat Generation, now a center of pseudo-beat culture existing largely on the tourist trade) and fade from the scene of the true "happening."

Only Pioneers

And what will become of the origins, the groundlayers for so much newspaper copy and scurrilous articles and smear campaigns? Kesey thinks that they will move on to new things, regarding Haight-Ashbury as "a test camp," a jumping-off place for "the only pions in the world today."

The great "head culture" that grew out of the Bay area will cease to exist as it is currently constituted, and something quietly out over the world.

Graduates of the scene are already doing new things, Kesey said, and their dots are going to become more and more difficult to observe in the press.

Perception Lag

He foresees a continued large volume of hippie stories, but the pioneers of the movement—who will travel on in search of new scenes—will not be divulging much to the press, which he sees as more and more disturbed by the movement.

As for the actual goals of the psychedelic movement itself, Kesey could only speak for himself and the Merry Pranksters. He cited the awareness on the part of men that one never perceives the world now—there is always a lag between the event itself and man's perception of it.

Even if one were to be right at the site of the event, eliminating the gap between event and initial impact on the receptor, there is still the matter of reaction time—the one-thirtieth of a second needed for the nerve impulses to reach the brain and be transformed into the simplest form of reflexive response.

Seen as a far worse hang-up is the intellectualizing that necessarily follows the stimulus, the attempt of the rational being to make a mental construct in which to file the new occurrence. We are trapped in the framework of the past, always attempting to order our experience in the light of what we know so that we might draw a possible future from our present experience.

Acid Test

LSD seems to eliminate the rational part of perception, bringing a person as close as the physics of nerves impurities will permit to the event itself. It is seen as a kind of phone booth making a connection between man and his environment without the interference of the reason.

For this reason, Kesey became a sort of Pied Piper of the LSD movement in California, founding the Acid Test band turning on, by Hinckle's estimate, about 10,000 people during the 24-performance run of the Tests in 1965-66.

Listening to Angels

Those days are gone. The Merry Pranksters have survived but have become self-contained, keeping their drug-taking entirely within the group. There may be several reasons for this, but the prime one is one of caution.

"If we (r)uins our minds with dope," Kesey said, "it's out open enough (one will see it)." Ramparts suggests that this new caution may be a part of the judge's admonition to Kesey (after his latest release on marijuana charges) that he warn youth about the possible dangers of LSD.

And what do the new explorers do between phone boochs to the immediate experience? "Either waiting or reminiscing. Listening to the angels." The angels sing when everything sounds right, looks right.

It is a state of love. Love of people, of experience, of the surroundings. It has nothing to do with emotion as such, but is a visceral feeling that things are right.

The drug culture is too much a part of current events to need much further elaboration here. The saga of the Merry Pranksters is open-ended and may never be fully told. But we left the group with the words of Hugh (one of the Pranksters) ringing in our memory—"If the Bus is after the Grahl."

We can only hope that they will find it.