

Ten Million Light Years Over the Milky Way

Excerpt from Hippie Hippie Shake, 1995.

LONDON 1967: I was overjoyed to be re-united with Louise and no doubt disguised the fact. We moved into to a basement in Palace Gardens Terrace, a tree lined backwater between Kensington High Street and Notting Hill Gate. A kitchenette entrance, a living room, a bedroom: £7 a week. Unpacking our bags, we could hear thumps and grunts from over the walls of the nearby Soviet Embassy. Torture, I speculated, but it turned out to be the staff thumping a volleyball. The rising damp had risen above the ceiling and a dank corridor led to a showerless bathroom. I scurried off to Whiteley's in Queensway and bought a Do-It-Yourself Shower Installation Kit. The counter was packed other Australians doing the same. Louise and I stuck a double mattress in the corner of the front room, a table under the window, which overlooked the garbage bay, and tacked up a wall sized stone rubbing Martin Sharp had acquired in Angkor Wat. Oz had opened its London office.

Leading hippie artists, Michael English and Nigel Weymouth, came to the door with a complex gatefold of a couple in a kama-sutric embrace. "All our ideas come from trips", they said, and I thought they meant to India. "Oh no, psychedelics...." The pair presented a splendid gatefold cover, to be printed with gold metallic ink. Martin had produced a set of tarot cards, also to be printed in gold, plus luminous scarlet, which suited the reverse side.

"O.K." I said daringly. "Into the mystic."

In May, on a tip-off from News of the World, the police swooped on a country house party and arrested two of the Rolling Stones. Mick Jagger was handcuffed, harrassed and hauled before a magistrate for possessing four pep pills, and Keith Richard similarly treated for allowing his premises to be used for the smoking of marijuana. The News of the World congratulated itself on doing its duty. The moment they were bailed out, the Drugs Squad rolled another Stone, Brian Jones. In June, 1967, Jagger and Richard were found guilty at the Sussex Quarter sessions and sentenced to jail - Mick openly tearful as he was put in the van for the Brixton nick.

That night, 300 stoned protestors flooded out of UFO, the psychedelic dance club in Tottenham Court Road and converged on Piccadilly Circus. Some held an all night vigil under the statue of Eros, others swept on to the offices of News of the

World, to jeer at the staff and to blacken the screens of delivery vans. Oz was already at the binders but I decided on an emergency insert.

Thumping at the Olivetti on the basement table, I introduced readers to the "faceless" editor of News of the World, Stafford Sommerfield, aged 56, and disclosed his home address. "It would be inadvisable", Oz warned, "for our readers to mail him cannabis resin and then tip off the police in an effort to have him busted". Even the London Times was taken aback by the hostility directed at the Stones and published an editorial which admonished "those who would break a butterfly on a wheel". Mick and Keith were freed on bail, pending the hearing of an appeal.

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In lieu of reasonable fees for contributors, Louise and I often held dinner parties - a leg of New Zealand lamb, a jug of Fosters, a stack of scratchy Lp's. A few days after Robert Hughes had returned from Florence, having helped rescue the artworks threatened by the floods, he strode into our basement in thigh-high anglers pants, still caked with Arno mud. Germaine embraced him, and while we accustomed ourselves to the marshy scent of Renaissance sludge, the pair spent the rest of the night shouting at each other in Italian. A new Oz contributor, Angelo Quattrocchi, was mystified. He whispered, "Why does that woman speak like a slut?" - a comment on Germaine's accent. My sister laughed and asked what had lured the diminutive Italian to London. "Three things only in the world do I care about", he said, staring into her eyes as I cruised by their glasses with a bottle of plonk, "love, poetry and the revolution". Jill's sigh was audible. The next morning she ended her affair with an overly drycleaned Frenchman.

On a sunny, still Saturday, Louise and I walked to the Legalise Pot Rally at London's Hyde Park with armfuls of Oz. The Times' metaphoric butterflies, so far from being broken, had metamorphosed into a field of fluorescent flower children; dancing, hugging and swapping colossal joints. Allen Ginsberg sat cross-legged on the grass playing a Tibetan squeeze box chanting : *Om Mane Padme Hum, Om Mane Padme Hum.....*

My feelings were mixed. I was suspicious of all religions, including imports from the East, but I could not deny Ginsberg's tranquil authority. The beat superhero, unfazed by the police trying to squelch his live music, chanted on, throwing his full weight behind the budding of flower power.

The new Oz, shimmering gold in its kama sutra gatefold and celebrating free love and spiritual alternatives, matched the mood of the moment. The issue sold like hash cookies. Louise and I stood there, the mags flying on a magic carpet ride out of our hands, and we no longer felt like unwanted immigrants floundering in a damp basement with little to offer.

“Rush back and get more copies”, I barked at Ian Stocks, a volunteer from Melbourne. This was more than a changing mood. A new culture waited in the wings. Pop music and street fashion were merely the outer trappings, a clue to a deeper wellspring. *A new generation with a new explanation*, sure, but what explanation? The politics of joy, maybe. A vision in search of a voice. I wanted that voice to be Oz.

On Monday morning, July 24, 1967, while I lay in bed drinking tea and reading The Times, I came across a full page advertisement inserted by SOMA, the Society of Mental Awareness. The headline was stark and true: THE LAW AGAINST MARIJUANA IS IMMORAL IN PRINCIPLE AND UNWORKABLE IN PRACTICE. It was a petition to the Home Secretary calling for the legalisation of cannabis ("the use of which is increasing and the rate of increase is accelerating") and backed by a quote from Spinoza - "All laws which can be violated without doing anyone any harm are laughed at [this] will foment crime rather than lessen it". The sting in the ad came from the 68 signatories - clergymen, doctors, MP's, publishers, The Beatles, Ken Tynan, David Hockney, Francis Huxley, RD Laing ...

The page in The Times sparked a heated debate in the media and the House of Commons, but failed to impress Scotland Yard. The Drugs Squad raided the home of Stafford Sommerfield, the editor of the News of the World, and, despite the strict instructions to our readers, the officers claimed to have confiscated a number of "suspicious envelopes".

Meanwhile, much to the irritation of my friends, I was still not a user of pot.