

San Francisco's psychedelic rock posters established the graphic representation of the 1960s, with San Francisco as the hub for the hippie generation and psychedelic artwork. Young dreamers traveled from far and wide to the working-class district of Haight-Ashbury to establish an autonomous community founded on peace and love with the philosophical and spiritual guidance of hallucinogenic drugs. The use of drugs in this new community urged people to look beyond reality "to the opposite side of the mirror." The hippie movement of baby-boomer children, in contrast to the previous "silent generation" consumerist outlook on the American lifestyle, envisioned a utopic society free of government regulations and capitalist motivations in a 1960s America that was still living under the guise of segregation and oppression.

In 1960, John F. Kennedy was elected to the office of President of the United States of America, and with his election came a new hope. A new hope to end racial segregation, and address a forgotten population that lived below the poverty line, hippies turned to political activism to address changes in the political system that aligned with their new radical philosophy. Supporting policies of pacification and integration, protests took action, organizing sit-ins and marches that united people from all walks of life: students, people of color, feminists, and other marginalized groups all formed the New Left.

The American youth rejected war and the growing violence, breaking from the conformism of society to form their own community in 1960s San Francisco. Their way of life consisted of a counter-cultural outlook disenchanted by the political system from their parent's "silent generation," where taking drugs and sexual freedom were embraced as the new "American values." The basis for such a dramatic moral and political shift from the last generation was to remove themselves from the current world based in conformist and consumerist ideals, and create their own community separate and removed from American society. A society based in world peace and love. And, LSD was one method to achieve that utopia, freeing themselves from societal ties and the previous generation's social responsibilities.

LSD is most well-known due to one Harvard professor, Timothy Leary, known as the "High Priest of LSD." He conducted experiments on his students, introducing varied hallucinogenic into his classroom. Although the Harvard project was discontinued in 1963, Leary still believed that psychedelic drugs could play a vital role in therapeutic psychiatry, and bring about a new "evolved" human society during which we would all become brothers and sisters. The term "psychedelic" was introduced by Humphre Osmond, a psychiatrist, who researched the consequences of hallucinogenic drugs produced within the conscious mind by altering visual and auditory sensations. The term comes from two Greek words that were later combined to create the word "psychedelic." The first of the Greek words psukhe, "soul" or "mind," and the second delos, "clear" or "visible." This auditory and visual experience is the basis for the visual representation that comes about in psychedelic art and design. Even the Greek mythology character Psyche is represented in several posters, who "represented the soul in search of the ideal." Drawing clear parallels between the utopic ideals of the hippie generation and the drugs that took them there.

In San Francisco, the two temples of psychedelic rock were the Fillmore and the Avalon Ballroom. There, the psychedelic experience came alive. There was loud, rhythmic, and repetitive music, taking hallucinogenic substances, and watching the lightshows, which amplified the kaleidoscopic visions produced by LSD. And, it was at these two venues where psychedelic poster art was born.

The promoters of the Fillmore and the Avalon Ballroom were, respectively, Bill Graham and a collective named Family Dog Productions. The posters were designed by major artists, with the foremost famous being nicknamed the large Five: Wes Wilson, Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin, Alton Kelley, and Stanley Mouse, who went on to make Mouse Studios. But also, included lesser-known female artists, such as Bonnie MacLean.

Between 1966 and 1971, some hundreds of posters were produced to promote concerts by groups like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Hendrix, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Doors, the Velvet Underground, and Pink Floyd.

At the very heart of the counterculture, these posters are expressions of an aesthetic during which neon colors, spinning shapes, and dense, space-filling patterns translate the psychedelic experience. Bordering on illegibility, they are a deliberate contrast to the rigidity and hegemony of the posters used to advertise the clean and straightforward products of the consumerist culture.

As well as this formal quality, psychedelic posters also display the influence of Art Nouveau, with long-haired women and decorative motifs, curls, colors, and twists. The influence of abstractionism also can be seen within the use of optical effects. The creation of moving type by stretching out shapes, the ironic use of popular imagery, the interpretation of the Peace and Love theme through the utilization of floral decoration, rainbows, or maybe Native Americans, symbolizing an ancient culture that was "closer to nature."

What unites all of these posters was the imagination sparked by the influence of LSD and other hallucinogenic drugs. Although photography was the first medium from postermaking at the time, most psychedelic posters were hand-drawn and handlettered. And, through handlettering, there tended to be a greater organic quality to the poster composition, but also with the use of high color-contrast you were able to experience the wonders of imagination from the perspective of an "expanded mind" on LSD. Though the posters were relatively small in size, the largest usually 20 inches on the longest side, they had a stronger grasp of shock tactics that were essential to draw in attention than the large billboards of mainstream advertising. The posters demanded attention even after their colors faded. Difficult to read, the posters required an empathetic and curious audience willing to explore the surface's detail that was against the standard strategies of advertising.

Although, the golden age of the psychedelic poster ended with the closure of the Avalon Ballroom and the Fillmore in 1969. Still, the visual vibrancy and freeing philosophy behind the hippie generation and psychedelic art marks an unforgettable and influential time in the world.

Michael Bowen, Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley
Photo: Casey Sonnabend
"Gathering Of The Tribes, 'Human Be-In'"
Golden Gate Park, 1967

Wes Wilson
"Tribal Stomp," Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother & the Holding Company,
February 19, Fillmore Auditorium, 1966



The poster body text is typeset in Platform and the display text is typeset in DTL Fleischmann. The poster text is written, designed, and printed by Avery Youngblood

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