

THE ACID KING

Without the little-known éminence grise of LSD, Owsley Stanley III, 'the sixties' might never have happened. By Andy Roberts

On March 12, 2011, a 76-year old man drove his car into a ditch, in a remote part of Queensland, Australia, killing himself and injuring his wife. In the years leading up to his death, Owsley Stanley had become a reclusive, semi-mythical figure, refusing to give interviews and rarely photographed. Why the media interest? Because Owsley Stanley was the world's first underground chemist, the first person to produce LSD outside the laboratory and the man who dosed the psychedelic revolution.

Despite a prestigious background – his grandfather was Kentucky State Governor and a Democratic senator, his father a lawyer – Owsley's family life was troubled. He responded by being completely unmanageable at school, while displaying intelligence way beyond his years. He was expelled from military prep school for getting his mates drunk. Even so, the headmaster later remembered him as a 'brainchild, a wunderkind, tremendously interested in science'.

Owsley's early career was eclectic. After a short spell at the University of Virginia, a stint in the United States Air Force and a period in which he studied Russian and French, and worked as a professional ballet dancer, he enrolled at the University of California where, in April 1964, he first tried LSD. He was impressed, "I remember the first time I took acid and walked outside. The cars were kissing the parking meters."

Until then, LSD had only been available to those undertaking serious medical research and all the early psychonauts like Ken Kesey and Allen

Ginsberg took the drug as part of a federally funded volunteer programme. But it was never clear what drug they were being given or at what dosages.

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Owsley decided the only way to ensure the quality of what he took was to make it himself. At that time, LSD was still legal in America. Owsley was able to find a formula in the university library. He teamed up with Melissa Cargill, a chemistry student, and they went into production. By May 1965, Owsley had created his first batch of LSD, of a reasonably consistent dose of 2-300 micrograms, more than enough for a full blown psychedelic experience. Owsley's housemate, Charles Perry commented that the batch was, "devastatingly strong in an almost heavy-handed way that recalled Owsley's own insistent manner". This comment echoed Owsley's belief that the state of mind of an LSD chemist affected the quality of the product and the consequent experience of the LSD user. At crucial stages of later LSD production runs, Owsley often phoned a radio DJ friend and asked for certain music to be played to help him get in the appropriate mood. Owsley believed

that LSD chemistry was nearer to acid alchemy.

Owsley's fame spread and he met up with author and Merry Prankster Ken Kesey and began supplying Kesey's notorious Acid Tests, LSD consumed in orange juice, famously chronicled by Tom Wolfe. But while Kesey and his cohorts wanted to be as stoned as possible on high dose LSD, Owsley knew they were playing a dangerous game. Equating the acid trip with the altered states of consciousness associated with magical rituals, he said to Kesey, "you guys are fucking around with something people have known about forever...All the occult literature about ceremonial magic warns about being very careful when you start exploring these areas of the mind." He recalled later that they had simply laughed at him.

It was at one of these gatherings in 1965 that Owsley, also known as 'The Bear' because of his inordinately hairy chest, met The Grateful Dead and began using his LSD profits to further the band's career. He offered them accommodation, helped devise their famous 'skull and lightning bolt' logo and used his array of technical skills to build them a state of the art sound system for live performances that was the envy of every major rock band on the touring circuit.

That same year, he had his first run-in with the law. To help subsidise the costs of the raw chemicals for LSD, he had also been making bath-tub methamphetamine and his lab was raided. Fortunately for Owsley, what was seized turned out to be LSD, legal at the time, so his lawyer, the vice mayor of

Berkeley, successfully sued for the return of all Owsley's lab equipment.

LSD was outlawed in October 1966, by which time, Owsley's name became synonymous with cheap, high quality LSD. He produced 300,000 doses of what he called 'White Lightning' acid for the San Francisco Human Be-In event in January 1967 and in June, 'Monterey Purple' was consumed in some quantity backstage at the Monterey Pop Festival by the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones and Pete Townsend. Owsley recalls: "Brian Jones had a photographer in his entourage who brought a telephoto lens which had been gutted. He took it back filled with Monterey Purple. I asked Brian to share the stash between his Stones and the Beatles. So far as I am aware he did so." John Lennon was so impressed that he allegedly bought a lifetime's supply of LSD from Owsley.

But the high life couldn't last. Owsley was arrested in late 1967, eventually serving three years in custody. On his release, he kept a low profile, touring with the Grateful Dead and helping perfect their Wall of Sound concert system.

No-one, least of all Owsley, knows how much LSD he made. A reasonable estimate would be over 1.25 million doses. The USA and Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s was a world of beige conformity as a generation craved peace and stability in the post-War period. The cultural revolution of the mid 1960s was an explosion of primary colours made possible by an elite group of musicians, artists, writers, photographers and fashion designers inspired by the impact of their own LSD experiences. Whatever one's view of the sixties, its political, social and cultural impact rumbles on. To that extent, the influence of Owsley Stanley is hard to exaggerate. Perhaps Owsley's cultural significance is suggested by the fact that he has entries in both the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the Oxford English Dictionary, where he is enshrined as: *Owsley, noun, An extremely potent, high quality type of LSD.* His wry comment when he heard of this was, "Isn't that sort of surprising? I am like... 'Kleenex'!"

Owsley downplayed his influence, telling *Rolling Stone* magazine, "I just wanted to know the dose and purity of what I took into my own body. Almost before I realized what was happening, the whole affair had gotten completely out of hand. I was riding a magic stallion. A Pegasus, I was not responsible for his wings, but they did carry me to all kinds of places."

In 1980, Owsley moved to Australia,



ILLUSTRATION: JODY HOWGILL

driven by his belief that a new ice age was to engulf the northern hemisphere. He settled in the bush country near Cairns in Queensland, eventually becoming a naturalised Australian citizen. There he exercised his artistic talents, making and selling beautiful enamel jewellery and sculpture, a skill learnt in prison. The arrival of the internet enabled him to create a web site which allowed him to market his wares more widely and to publically espouse his unusual beliefs, producing essays on diet (he was a lifelong carnivore), exercise, war and drug prohibition, to name but a few.

While he was only too aware of the potential dangers of hallucinogenic drugs – he once produced a batch of

cosmically powerful STP from a recipe obtained from Alexander Shulgin – nonetheless he was unrepentant over his life as the peoples' chemist. In a rare interview given to the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2007, he said; 'I wound up doing time for something I should have been rewarded for. What I did was a community service, the way I look at it. I was punished for political reasons. Absolutely meaningless. Was I a criminal? No, I was a good member of society. Only my society, and the one making the laws, are different'.

■ **Andy Roberts** is the author of *Albion dreaming: a popular history of LSD in Britain* published by Marshall Cavendish.