

Psychodelia's Middle-Aged Head Trip

By JOHN LELAND

WHEN Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters made their storied journey across America in 1964, they included a pilgrimage to Millbrook, N.Y., the Hudson Valley town where Timothy Leary had turned a Victorian mansion into a lab for his LSD experiments. The meeting was supposed to join the two wings of the nascent drug culture: Kesey's woolly West Coast hedonists and Leary's League of Spiritual Discovery. But the vibe was all wrong. The Pranksters, spilling from a 1939 bus labeled *Furthur*, came on like unwashed trouble; the Leary crowd, with their meditation rooms and trip diaries, seemed no fun. Leary, engaged in a three-day trip on an upper floor, never even came down to meet his guests. The diodes of the electric drug culture remained apart.

Kesey, who died on Nov. 10 after surgery to treat liver cancer, might have been amused by the latest twists in the long, strange legacy of the psychedelic era. Talk about karma: eight days before his death, the Food and Drug Administration approved a pilot study of the club drug Ecstasy, also known as MDMA (3-4 methylenedioxyamphetamine), for patients with post-traumatic stress disorder. And F.D.A.-approved trials of another psychedelic drug, psilocybin, as a treatment for obsessive-compulsive disorder, are scheduled to begin at the University of Arizona in January. The studies mark the first therapeutic trials of psychedelic drugs in the United States since the 1970's.

They also mark the passing of the torch from countercultural renegades like Leary and Kesey to dutiful surfers of the bureaucracy like Dr. Rick Doblin, president of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, a nonprofit organization that conceived the two new studies. The group is also involved in overseas studies of two other psychedelic drugs, ibogaine and ketamine, to treat heroin addiction, depression and anxiety. Dr. Doblin, who holds a Ph.D. in public policy from Harvard, does not consider himself a drum beater in a bus. "What's different between now and then is that we're not self-selecting ourselves out as the counterculture," he said. "Part of my mission is to bury the ghost of Timothy Leary."

This mild mission carries the psychedelic lamp a long way from Kesey, who said the purpose of taking the drugs was "to learn the conditioned responses of people and then to prank them." During the 1964 presidential campaign, the Pranksters draped their bus in American flags and drove it backwards through Phoenix, hometown of Barry Goldwater, waving a banner that read, "A



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Bus stop: Ken Kesey and "Furthur" in Oregon.

Vote for Barry Is a Vote for Fun."

The clinical trials, in comparison, pursue a resolutely sober approach to intoxication: an acoustic Kool-Aid acid test. Instead of offering escape from the dull workaday world, the drugs are now being tested as a means to help people get back in. Pleasure and prank give way to paperwork and lobbying.

Yet Dr. Doblin, who says he has used MDMA for recreational as well as therapeutic purposes, has also confronted the legacy of his forebears, and found much of it wanting. In the 1980's, he followed up on two of Leary's Harvard studies with psilocybin (conducted between 1961 and 1963, when it was still legal), which claimed to show that the drug produced religious experiences and reduced criminal recidivism. Dr. Doblin found that Leary had either fudged the data or buried evidence of a bad trip.

Kesey's own history illustrates how slippery and unpredictable the mantle of the drug culture can be. In 1960, as a graduate student in Stanford University's creative writing program, he volunteered for government tests of various "psychomimetic" drugs at a veterans hospital. The C.I.A. and Army were testing LSD for a variety of uses, including as a truth serum. By the time Kesey got his doses, the agencies were starting to phase out LSD in favor of more powerful hallucinogens, said Martin A. Lee, co-author with Bruce Shlain of the 1985 book "Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD — The C.I.A., the Sixties, and Beyond." Kesey had other plans as well; he liked LSD so much in the lab, he brought it home for his friends. The merry prank, launched with government acid, was on. "The revolt of the guinea pigs," he called it.

That was then. Psychodelia and alternative consciousness — with or without the bad clothes — have long since seeped into the mainstream, from the celestial seasonings of Deepak Chopra to the disorienting swirl of music videos. Once a transgression, the Day-Glo rainbow is now as often a bore. Never mind wresting the psychedelic experience from the counterculture; it already has a booth at the mall.

Even so, today's researchers continue to face official resistance. The National Institute on Drug Abuse, an office of the National Institutes of Health, opposes medical testing of psychedelics, citing evidence that the drugs can cause brain damage and memory loss. And even medical cover may provide limited protection from the law. Just a month before the F.D.A. approved the Ecstasy study, federal drug agents in California, where voters have passed initiatives allowing the medical use of marijuana, raided a West Hollywood cannabis club, seizing medical records and 400 marijuana plants.

Dr. Doblin sees an opportunity in these conflicting impulses. "They're saying medical issues should not be resolved at the ballot box," he said. "I agree. But you can't on the one hand block research and on the other say it's the only direction. This resistance will have the unintended consequence of furthering research." Out of such clashes, let a thousand grant proposals bloom.

In these unintended consequences, perhaps, the merry pranks of Kesey will endure, not in the bus but in the gray realms of bureaucracy and paperwork.