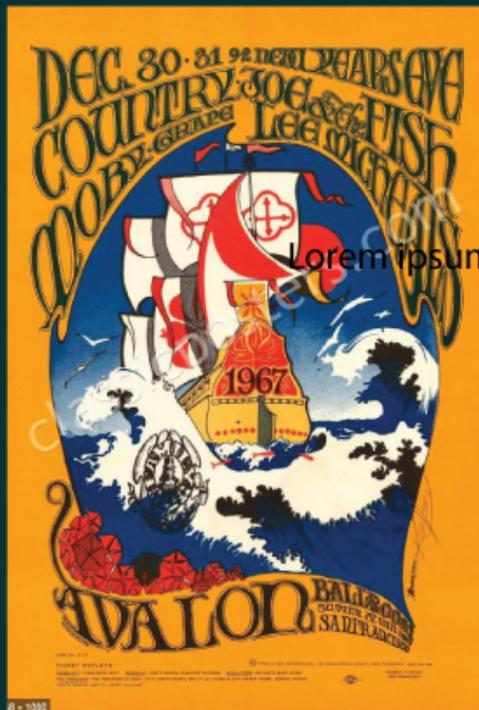


Alton Kelley

Interview



by Walter Medeiros

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

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Poster Artist -- ALTON KELLEY: Interviewed

by Walter Medeiros

We've all heard about the hippies and San Francisco's stoned dance hall scene of the late '60s. Alton Kelley, one of the original Family Dog dance promoters, later became one of the famous "First Five" psychedelic poster artists - we all know that, too. During those high times Kelley freely indulged in all the pleasures and adventures he could find, and he hardly missed a weekend at the Avalon. It would seem that if anyone fit the image of "hippie," it was Kelley.

We've also heard that hippies were not literate; they disdained books and such linear modes of communication. Certainly, it was a culture in which the sensory modes were in ascendance. Although, from the media image, intellect may have appeared dead (and numerous bright but unstable or unlucky people slid down the rabbit hole forever), among the stronger, creative people (artists, musicians, and just plain folks - who generally disregarded the media label), respect for and practice of intellectual activity endured.

It's true, at that time only comics and hot rod magazines could be found in Kelley's apartment. But for many years, roughly between Hiroshima and Sputnik, curious Kelley spent a lot of time with books. And, about the time The King wiggled on stage, Kelley picked up a signal from outer space, a revelation about Intelligence and Idea. Wes Wilson, who has talked with Kelley about such matters, asked me to record his thoughts. In February 1992, Kelley, his wife Marguerite and I met at their home in Mill Valley, California.

The interview began with recalling his remark to me in 1971, when I was researching the poster art.

M: You Said, "The only thing in the universe that doesn't exist, yet exists, is an idea. And an idea has the power to move you." Would you still say that?

K: Yeah. The Idea is everything that does not exist in the universe. Ideas are unlimited; everybody has them. They are the only thing that's unlimited - and which makes us different from everything else. They are the only thing that doesn't exist, that is more than what physically exists.

M: When did you start pondering this, or getting such insights?

K: When I was a kid, about sixteen.

M: Anything in particular that generated it?

K: Oh yeah, sure. Me and some friends were up on a roof one night, in summertime, drinking Miller High Life. And I looked up at the sky and said, "Jeez, ya know - that's the universe, itself, looking at itself. What a weird thing that is!" It really flashed me. I said, "Jesus, I'm really a funny thing!"

M: That you are part of the universe, looking at the rest of it?

K: Well, no. It's the actual universe, itself, looking at itself. It's really a strange thing. But that's exactly what we are; we are this funny thing. There couldn't possible be another thing in the universe that is more powerful - this Intelligence is all there is. There isn't any other kind, there isn't anything greater. This is it!

M: You mean this human intelligence?

K: There's only one kind of Intelligence. There's no such thing as human intelligence -

there's only one kind. And it asks any question there is, and there couldn't possibly be anything in the universe that does anything other than that. I mean, if there is another intelligence, it's exactly the same Intelligence. It asks any question there is. And if there aren't any, it'll make them up! (chuckles)

M: Did you talk about it then, with your friends? Did they dig it?

K: Oh yeah. Yeah. 'Cause I just looked at the stars, and I said, "Jesus, ya know? I'm really the stars...looking at the stars." Wow. That was so far out. That was it. And I've always wondered, people always talked about God - and I could never figure out what they were talking about. I had no clue what all this religion was about. I was growing up, and I had no...I had nothing! I had never seen any magic, or gods. I mean, what is everybody up to? What in the hell is everybody talking about? And that's essentially what they're talking about. They put it in funny terms, and they make boogie men out of it, and it's really a shame. Essentially, that far out thing that everybody is after is that thing. It is just the Idea, itself - there is no other thing. All the gods are just somebody's far out ideas.

M: It's one aspect of The Idea, used for social cohesion...

K: Yeah. Yeah. And it's a shame, ya know? Religion, philosophies, nationalities, and all that kind of stuff are in the way of what really is going on - real Intelligence. It's a shame, it's so mishmashed into such awful stuff.

M: Yeah. That's the nature of humanity - to have categories and tribes...

K: The Idea is an absolutely, ruthlessly uncontrollable thing that is a lot more powerful than anything in the universe. I mean, it's just absolutely awesome in its ability to do anything. 'Cause, God knows, everybody has all kinds of ideas, all the time. I'm surprised the world isn't in total utter chaos! Somehow, there is a semblance of organization. Somehow, the Intelligence keeps things relatively coherent. I don't understand that part of it, how e don't' just go stark raving mad. (Chuckles)

M: You mean the interaction of individuals, and systems?

K: It's just that there's billions of people, who have billions of ideas, and they do billions of

things. I'm just surprised there isn't more chaos.

M: Well, most of them, most of us, fit within a set of social conventions, which limits behavior, the social friction, to some degree...

K: Yeah. Leonardo da Vinci said something, an ugly observation - he didn't like it himself. He said probably ninety-five percent of the people in the world are basically animals...something like that.

M: Without intellect, ideas?

K: Yeah - sheep. And about five percent of the people had ideas, created things, and the other people worked for them. That's an interesting observation - he was a pretty smart guy. It's not a nice observation, but...(chuckles)

M: In those times the educated were a very small minority. We have broadened that considerably since then, so maybe there's a larger percentage?

K: Yeah. Maybe so. Not much though. Because you can take in information, but if you don't use it, what's the point? People take

in all kinds of information, but they don't do anything with it.

M: So, was that flash on the roof a point of departure in your intellectual life? You started thinking about things?

K: Well, yeah. I guess. But I always read a lot. My mother was a teacher, so I read like crazy. By the time I was sixteen I had consumed, I don't know how many thousands of books. On everything, every kind of thing you can possibly read.

M: Including what's considered classics?

K: Oh, yeah. Everything. Shakespeare, all the great novels, like WAR AND PEACE, and Kurt Vonnegut. History, like THE RISE AND FALL OF THE THIRD REICH - almost anything and everything. Shakespeare is one of the most phenomenal examples of the Idea, itself, at its most brilliant.

M: You say, "the Idea, itself..."

K: I mean, the Intelligence that we are, this thing, in expressing itself verbally, to make you picture the idea. Well, Shakespeare is a phenomenon. Like, our vocabulary is three or four thousand words. His was fifteen

thousand! And when he says something, like his speech on suicide - you read that, there isn't anything else you could ever possibly say about it. I mean, there isn't anything more anybody can say!

M: He covered the idea of suicide.

K: Yes. He covered it! His speeches are like that. He says something, it's like, "bang" - you are hit solid with this thing that's absolutely it. It's weird. He is unlike any other writer. People write books and novels, are great geniuses, and so forth, but you can't ever compare him to "writing a book." His stuff...it's words that are spoken by people - on stage - that isn't like reading. He says it. You hear it, and it's totally different than any writing there is. He just says it so well, that's the end of it!

M: He strikes us dumb.

K: Yeah. I was blown away!

M: His capacity to articulate thought...

K: It's absolutely impossible to believe that one person could do this. It just doesn't seem possible that one guy could be that fucking smart! And Einstein's the same way - he's just absolutely unbelievable. That all these

years, right before our very eyes is this thing, the universe, and he goes, "This is what it is." The minute he had that idea, it changed the entire world. Everything changed - time and space...the very idea that the faster you go, the slower time goes, is...whew! His concepts are as remarkable as anything, ever. He stands all by himself, like Shakespeare; you can't compare him to anybody. And his $E=MC^2$ and all that...the guys who do physics - a phenomenal way of thinking, phenomenal.

M: That is an example of the universe discovering itself, isn't it?

K: Yeah. The fact that the universe is seeing itself so explicitly now. For the first time in history, in our lifetime, that it really started to happen. This whole process could have happened with the Greeks. Easily. Had they kept going, not been destroyed. They did have the idea, and the mathematics - they had their math down solid. And their architecture, and their ideas - like the Greek tragedies. Like Shakespeare, the Greeks also wrote at that level, to the ultimate of what could possibly happen, like "Medea." Yeah, had they kept going, the industrial age could have started then, and we could have had all this technology a long time ago. It's just real interesting that we got this far. Everything

we've done, everything the Idea does, is an extension of ourselves. We've made cars and airplanes - airplanes are like super, fancy shoes, right? (Chuckles)

M: Shoes with wings, Mercury's shoes...

K: Yeah, right. And our latest extension is the computer. It's another mind-blowing thing from the Idea. It's amazing, an amazing world to watch. I'm just stunned by it all.

Various political and social ideas were discussed, including communism, which evoked a strong response.

M: It looks like the communist experiment is all over.

K: Well, its never going to work.

M: It seems contrary to human nature. But when you read Marx's original writings, it's very altruistic, very humanistic...

K: Oh, yeah. But it still sucks. I can't stand it; it's just garbage.

M: How do you mean?

K: It's just too idealistic. His idea that the individual really doesn't count, then forget it!

M: Marx was responding to the worst aspects of individualism, its capacity to exploit people economically.

K: Sure. But, you know, so what? If I don't count, and you don't count...if you aren't the most important thing in the world, in the whole universe, then what's the point? If the individual isn't considered the ultimate thing, I mean the ULTIMATE thing, then what's the point? And I'd fight to the death for your rights.

M: What about aspects of ideas in your art?

K: Well, you mentioned Norman Rockwell's saying, "You ring a bell." Yeah, that's true, you really do.

M: When you get the proper artistic expression?

K: Yeah, 'cause you go through tons of ideas - there are those that really do ring the bell.

M: You may get it as a flash, or as a development of a basic idea?

K: Right. And there's an audience you're shooting for; you have to communicate with that audience. It varies, of course, like the difference between the cover for Wavy Gravy's book, and the cover for the "Yosemite" CD. Those are two different audiences. You've got to make it look right for who's going to see it, for who you want to see it.

M: You are a materialist, in the basic sense. You are strongly interested in material things, you love objects. Your place is full of objects of all sorts, from fin art to a funky plastic toy, all of which is somehow of interest, expresses an idea.

K: Yeah, or a feeling, or whatever. Yeah. Oh, yeah, I love stuff.

M: And on the other hand is your interest in the intangible, the idea, and how they come together in the object. Can you say anything about the links between those two...?

K: Yeah. Every one of those things is just an idea.

M: An embodiment of an idea...

K: Well, it's manifested, yeah. And that's what makes ideas so unusual, because they don't really exist. You could tear the universe apart and never get close to one. There's none there. But you can take that "nothing" and make it (tapping on bottle), make something - there it is.

M: Ideas take physical form in human constructions.

K: We make stuff that would never exist, the universe could go on forever and never come up with one of these (taps bottle).

M: Without intelligence of some type.

K: Yeah. This would never grow on a tree. This is totally different than anything in the universe. "Stuff" is so far out, for what it really is. And there's such a range of stuff, and who knows who will think of what next? (Chuckles)

M: We're really in that business now; commerce, industry generates new ideas. Just in that realm, for example, it's the stock in trade.

K: Yeah. It's phenomenal, really a trip. All the stuff that's going on in this world - Damn! I

just hope we don't blow the whole thing to hell. (Laughs)

M: Yeah, like the expanding hole in the ozone layer. It's recently been found over populated areas. That's shocking, isn't it?

K: Yeah. Things do get out of hand. But nobody knew, you can't blame anybody.

There was some discussion of the possibilities of catastrophic decline of civilization. Kelley is convinced that the basic principles of technology (electrical, automotive, etc.) are so widely disseminated that a Dark Age wouldn't occur. Looking to the future, he is optimistic about further scientific and technological development.

K: Technology is everywhere, so we'll never go back to pre-industrial conditions. All there will be is going forward. There's no going back: the world has changed forever. And things may change again. We will go out into the universe. We will figure out how to get around in it.

M: Physically, you mean?

K: Physically. We will figure out how to do it. There is a way to get across it. Technically, it may not be a big deal.

M: Something other than accelerating a spacecraft to the speed of light?

K: Yeah. It may be some totally different kind of thing. Once they figure out what gravity is, that may change things drastically. Gravity bends everything - light, electromagnetic fields, even space. Maybe, like you said about a sphere being turned inside out, mathematically, without breaking the surface, maybe that's what space travel will be like, bending you through a lens, a gravity lens. Maybe the light, the energy, that we are - essentially, that's what we are, an electrical-chemical compound (that knows that, which is weird) - put through a gravity lens, that might be it. Somewhere along the line somebody may make that work.

There followed some general discussion about the theories of particle physics, and its movement in the direction of metaphysics. Kelley cited the big bang theory of cosmology, the billions of galaxies, and recalled a dream which occurred in his mid twenties.

K: I remember having a vivid dream about the size of the universe. I dreamed that it was so enormous that I work up. I mean, I work up! I went, "WHAT? That big?!" It was startling. It is so big. Really, really big! It was like an opening of vast chambers, a series of expansions that became truly startling.

We talked of the unseen environment, of the theory of "dark matter," which may account for the missing ninety percent of the mass of the universe, and of the attempt to measure the mass of the neutrino, which may solve the matter.

K: We live in an incredibly energetic place. There are some powerhouse things out there. And all these new instruments being sent out into space. It's great stuff! (Chuckles) Those 3D computer maps of Venus - damn, that's hip stuff. And the computer. Our brain isn't good enough, doesn't function fast enough, so we made this extension, this fantastic data processor. That's amazing, amazing! This thing that we have - there isn't anything in the universe that's different than this. If it's intelligence, this is it - there's only one kind.

That's what blows my mind about people who believe in god, and all that. Because I don't think they get it. (Chuckles) All these

religions are so bizarre. I just find it to be truly bizarre behavior.

M: You don't find it understandable, at all?

K: No. I think it's just pathetic. It's horrible to see people snowed so bad.

M: You think it's related to people's capacity to think: It provides answers...

K: I think it's what Leonardo da Vinci said. It's a sad observation, but it seems very obvious, it really seems true. God, the world is just full of Pavlov's dogs! (Chuckles) It's awful. It's hard to believe, it's embarrassing. We're so damn smart and so awfully stupid at once.

M: There are those two sides...

K: Ah, God! It seems pretty one-sided; there's a lot more of them than us.

M: And don't some assholes get into high places...

K: Oh, fuck!! The world has always been run so bizarrely by religions. I think the guy who first thought of religion, whoever says the mooga-mooga's gonna get ya, ought to have

his butt kicked! (Aside) Whadda ya think, Wes?

(Marguerite (MK) suggests it was a matter of self-serving promotion.)

K: I know! (Chuckles) His own scam! Yeah. It sure got out of hand, it's still way out of hand.

M: There's a great will to believe. It's related to basic human insecurity - people want answers.

MK: It can also deal with the quest for self-realization, but people often accept too-simple answers.

K: Yeah. (In role-playing voice) "I can't figure it out." As if it's really hard to figure out. When I was on the roof that night, I had the idea: How come everybody's so damn stupid - can't they see this? It wasn't some big deal, some far-out thing, impossible for the "normal human being" to think about. (Another role voice) "You have to have faith, just believe!" Have faith in what? Believe in what? What are these people talking about? Could any of these guys explain this crap? It's like mumbo jumbo! It's just awful! And people take that as an explanation of what the universe is?!

(Chuckles) It's unbelievable. Like in the Middle East, there are religious fanatics like the Gestapo. It's unbelievable!

MK: Yes. You can get killed if you don't go along with them.

K: Right! (In voice of disbelief) "You mean you're gonna kill me if I don't believe this?!" (Chuckles at absurdity) Oh, Man! Unbelievable! We're living in a world that's so unbelievably primitive, and at the same time we're going to the moon...Like I said, I'm surprised this world doesn't collapse in utter chaos. It's absolutely crazy! Thank god for gravity, that's all I can say- it's the only thing holding it together.

M: Gravity and dope. (Laughter all around)

K: Though that's an interesting thing about the idea of drugs, too. What all drugs have in common is that they show you there's another way of looking at things. And that's a very important idea. If you can see differently it helps you understand that other people see things differently from you - that's a nice thing about drugs.

M: It can be educational...

K: Yeah, a very important thing. I think people who have never been out of their normal state are missing something, something valuable for the psyche.

Further discussion of traditional and modern usage of drugs led to the subject of mutation and human evolution.

K: We can be sure some mutation will happen. We will go from homo sapiens to something else.

M: A Physical change?

K: Yeah. In the last four million years we've gone from monkeys - literally - through all these changes. And it wasn't until the last change, the Cro-Magnon - which we are, homo sapiens - that the Idea developed. Animals are real close to the Idea, but they don't quite have it.

M: The capacity for abstract thinking, development of tools?

K: Yeah. The primates are really close. The chimp's DNA is the same as ours, except for one chromosome - that's it! So, I think they are very close to the Idea, they're on the edge

of it. And that's where we were for millions of years, then somebody...

M: That scene in (the film) 2001, he discovers the club...

K: Yeah! He probably just had a beer!
(Laughter)

M: Some kind of vegetable stimulant.

K: Yeah, whatever. But somebody, was back there, did have that first idea, whatever it was. And, you know, the guy with the first idea must have been really scary, a scary animal!

M: He had a power.

K: A power that I think other animals could see. Like, when somebody with intelligence gets mad at you, they're gonna get you! The other animals don't have that.

M: More intelligent determination.

K: Right. He must have been so scary - some hairy brute thinking, "I'm gonna get you now!" Anyway, the first Cro-Magnon who had an idea...the intention must have been there for a long time. The drive to get something, maybe.

M: Will as Idea...

K: Yeah. And that was it, we've been going in that direction ever since. And there's no stopping us, whatsoever.

Look out universe, here we come!

[Note: This article originally appeared in Wes Wilson's publication "Off The Wall," and is used with permission of Wilson and the author. Copyright © Wes Wilson and Walter Medeiros]