TOM DONAHUE

Opposite page: Tom Donahue and son Jesse in 1974

In that basso profundo of his that made teenage listeners think of Top 40 DJs as gods, "Big Daddy" Tom Donahue used to open his show with a rumbling but somehow friendly warning: "I'm here to mess up your mind and clear up your face."

He did that, and more. He wound up changing the face – and sound – of radio itself. It was Donahue who was most responsible for free-form radio and for the album-oriented format into which it ultimately evolved, and it was the success of his stations and their brethren elsewhere that jolted FM radio into commercial life in the late '60s.

In the early part of the '60s, radio was cut and dried: The grown-ups listened mostly to the middle-of-the-road format – pop hits and standards. And for teenagers there was Top 40 – a rock & roll hit parade hosted by screaming DJs. The jocks showed up at high schools for sock hops, at teen fairs or on local TV dance shows, hoping for the big time.

Tom Donahue didn't want that kind of big time. He wanted something bigger. Born in South Bend, Ind., in 1928, he was raised in Washington, D.C. His first wife, Grace, recalled that he was trying to decide on a career when he was 19. "He wanted to think of a profession," she said, "where he could make the greatest amount of money with the least amount of work."

So, of course, he became a disc jockey. He began in Charleston, W.Va., with a show called *Uncle Tom's Gabbin'*. A couple of stations later, having absorbed R&B and Elvis, he was in Philadelphia, helping turn WIBG into Philly's first Top 40 power. In 1960, he and fellow DJ Bobby Mitchell decided to split town and wound up at KYA, in San Francisco.

There was a hip veneer, a cockiness about Donahue and Mitchell that Bay Area kids liked. KYA soon bested its competition, and the two DJs began looking for new worlds to conquer. They set up a management and booking firm, a music tip sheet and a record label, Autumn, which had a short stack of hits and misses by Bobby Freeman, the Beau Brummels and the Great Society. Donahue and Mitchell's Tempo Productions presented the Rolling Stones at the Cow Palace and the Beatles in their last concert, at Candlestick Park in August 1966.

At the core, Donahue was a radio man. But by 1964 he could no longer stand Top 40 and those damned requisite teen fairs. In the second issue of *Rolling Stone* he declared that the format, so rigid and so deaf to the new rock & roll, was dead. "And," he wrote, "its rotting corpse is stinking up the airways."

By then, Donahue had been turned on, and he'd turned on to KMPX, a moribund San Francisco station on the largely ignored FM band.

KMPX sold blocks of time to whoever wanted to be on the air, and its all-night shift was occupied by Larry Miller, who brought in his own eclectic album collection and played folk, blues and rock & roll.

It was exactly the kind of approach Donahue had been pitching to various AM stations with no success. He took over the evening shift, and within six months, KMPX was full-time long-haired, and it was a certified phenomenon, pulling in listeners and advertisers with what a member of the Animals called "freak-freely radio." The DJs played album cuts from a limitless library of music, and KMPX dispensed news and advice on sex, drugs, politics and music, and aired commercials for head shops and waterbed dealers.

Because of a strike in the spring of 1968, Donahue and most of the KMPX staff moved across town to KSAN, which reached the top of the ratings, inspiring FM stations throughout the country to freak freely.

Donahue, along with his second wife and fellow DJ, Raechel, never idled. They consulted for other stations, produced records, did unofficial A&R work (Tom introduced Warner Bros. to the Grateful Dead) and in 1970 led a busload of musicians and freaks across the country for a film, *Medicine Ball Caravan*.

Donahue took top management positions at KSAN but bridled under corporate rules, and he was set to retake KMPX and start all over again when he died of heart failure in April 1975. He was a month shy of 47.

Free-form radio is no more. Programmers and consultants have made it a punishable crime for disc jockeys to pick their own music and articulate their own thoughts. Still, at college and noncommercial stations here and there, and during certain hours at selected commercial outlets, listeners can detect actual humanity – even a passion for music – over the airwaves.

It is during those moments that we know Tom Donahue's spirit is alive – and freaking freely.

—Ben Fong-Torres

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF RAECHEL DONAHUE

acid

The Grateful Dead well remember the first time they played music while high on LSD. Still known as the Warlocks during the fall of 1965, ☞

In the late '60s, a mighty mind-altering drug, LSD, swept through the counterculture and gave birth to both psychedelic music and the ethos of the San Francisco/London underground axis

the band was playing an extended engagement in the suburbs south of San Francisco at some toilet called the In Room, an undistinguished bar where the nascent hippies expressed their resentments by sneaking out to their cars and smoking joints between sets or, on at least one night, filling ashtrays on the bar with lighter fluid and setting them aflame. One night, the band members showed up after dropping acid and spending the afternoon goofing around in the nearby mountains. Still feeling the effects, they discovered the rapture of playing Jimmy Reed songs on electric guitars with their whole beings still plugged into the cosmos.

Some weeks later the band and its crowd showed up similarly blasted at Longshoreman's Hall, where the Lovin' Spoonful were appearing at the second Family Dog dance and concert. As at the first, a subterranean community was discovering itself. The thousand people who crowded the cavernous concrete room had been growing their hair and getting good and strange in the privacy of their own meager rooms all over San Francisco in the preceding months, and all of them experienced the same sudden shock of recognition when they arrived to discover hundreds and hundreds of like-minded miscreants dancing at this carnival of the willfully deranged. Long-haired freaks in Salvation Army clothing danced under pools of flashing strobe lights and billowing clouds of light projected onto bedsheets hung on the walls.

LSD blazed a path through the San Francisco underground that year. Wherever the psychedelic drug went, it left a deep imprint. Poets, artists, authors, teachers and musicians – especially musicians – all discovered the ecstasy of chemistry. Paul Kantner remembers a night long before Jefferson Airplane, during which he sat around strumming an electric guitar plugged into a Fender Vibrolux, visions of "Pops" Staples in his head, rapidly losing interest in the folk music he had been playing with each pass of his hands over the electrified strings.

At the beginning of the next year, following a handful of other public events mixing music and lights (including the fabled Acid Tests of Ken Kesey), Bill Graham, who had been running the business affairs of a guerrilla theatrical troupe, formalized these events with weekly concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium, featuring bands like the Dead, Jefferson Airplane and Quicksilver Messenger Service, who had sprung up seemingly overnight to supply the soundtrack to the acid cult. A sign above the bar read "No Booze," and nobody cared. These musicians, frequently performing under the influence of Albert Sandoz's magic elixir, broke through the three-minute wall in pop music, meandering and stretching old blues and folk songs into epic proportions, improvising their way through endless choruses as acid-soaked dancers responded euphorically.

By spring, when Graham's original partner, Chet Helms, a grandson of a Baptist minister who inherited his grandfather's missionary zeal, had split off and opened a second dance and concert operation at the Avalon Ballroom, a full-scale cultural renaissance seemed to be taking flight. These concerts were advertised on posters drawn by crazed artists whose fluorescent colors and geometric imagery came from the realm of LSD. The bands themselves became proselytizers of this acid culture, lacing their music with drug references and sounding a clarion call. The Dead moved to Los Angeles under the sponsorship of Augustus Owsley Stanley, the underground chemist reputed to have made millions of dollars manufacturing the drug. He ran a pill-pressing operation in a house on a residential side street – while the sound and fury of Dead rehearsals covered up the noise – before the band returned to San Francisco. The Airplane tossed out handfuls of orange sunshine, Owsley's latest batch, from the concert stage. A heady, exhilarating explosion was taking place, and LSD was at the center of it; all over the country, former folkies were dropping acid and plugging in electric guitars.

This newfound sense of freedom and discovery rifled through the international underground. Los Angeles' Byrds, whose tame folk-rock experiments had seemed radical the year before, suddenly soared "Eight Miles High." In New York, the Velvet Underground, with Andy Warhol in the lighting booth, dabbled in multimedia performances. In London, some enterprising hipsters opened a nightclub based on their conceptions of what a San Francisco nightclub might be like.

Opening at the club one December night in 1966 was a band, Pink Floyd, who were under the sway of this burgeoning psychedelia, and they would virtually become the house band at the UFO, the new London underground epicenter. The band specialized in spidery instrumental improvisations with titles like "Interstellar Overdrive" that evoked the heavens themselves. The infection begun in San Francisco had spread. LSD swept through the hip circles in London.

Procol Harum psychedelically caparisoned. A textbook case of style over substance abuse?

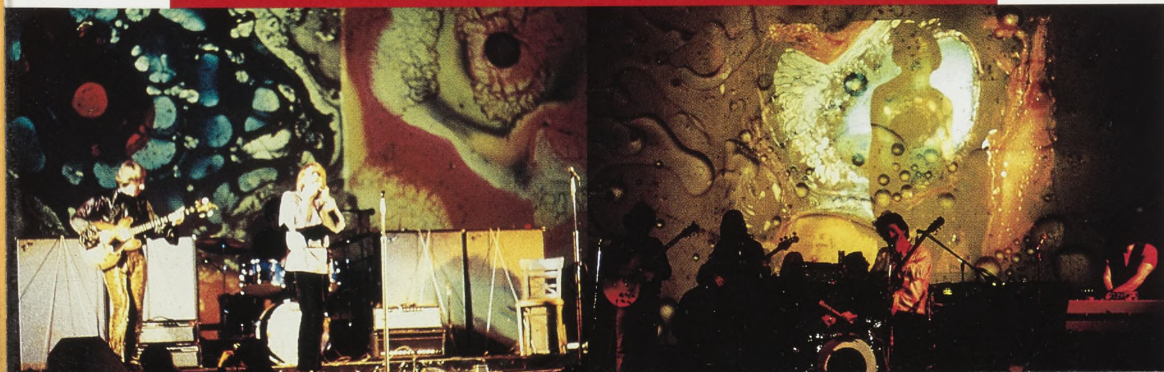
In January 1967, an emissary arrived in London in the person of Chet Helms, still the proprietor of the Avalon and now the manager of Big Brother and the Holding Company. He visited the hot spots of London's fledgling LSD underground like a minister of state and hooked up with the crowd that ran the UFO and published *It*, an underground newspaper in London.

At an *It*-sponsored fund-raiser at the Roundhouse, Helms watched a naked artist drag himself through paint and then across a canvas, after which 55 gallons of Jello-O were dumped at the feet of the revelers, including Paul McCartney and John Lennon, utterly stoned on LSD.

If Helms found the London underground somewhat less advanced than the Wild West he left behind, there nevertheless was a bond between the two cities forged in the ether of psychedelics. In June 1967, Hollywood hippies John Phillips and his manager, Lou Adler, staged the Monterey Pop festival, and the San Francisco and London alignment carried the day. While representatives of the Los Angeles scene like the Mamas and Papas, the Byrds, the Association and others passed across the stage barely noticed, San Francisco and British bands like Jimi Hendrix, Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Who, Country Joe and the Fish, Jefferson Airplane and the Dead established a beachhead in their short sets at Monterey that would soon affect the whole pop-music world. Paul McCartney, fresh from completing *Sgt. Pepper's,* borrowed Frank Sinatra's jet to swoop down to San Francisco, walked in on an Airplane rehearsal and spent the evening smoking DMT and jaw-boning with the princes of psychedelic music. By the time Pink Floyd reached American shores that fall, appearing at the Fillmore as the first stop on the band's debut American tour, the rock world was spinning on a bilateral axis.

Recordings were never kind to the fragile art of the psychedelic bands. The lacy improvisations of the moment did not translate well to the recorded medium, and the limited technology of the day couldn't capture the sweeping, transporting sound of the bands in full cry, unreeling imaginative, evanescent creations that evaporated as soon as they were let loose in the dense, cloudy atmosphere of colored lights and marijuana smoke. But the resonance never died away. *—Joel Selvin*

THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLIOTT LANDY/STAR FILE



Psychedelic onstage explosions: London's Yardbirds (left) and San Francisco's Country Joe and the Fish