

Obituary

John 'Hoppy' Hopkins

By: GRAHAM WADE

Among the main players on the British alternative underground scene of the 1960s, John 'Hoppy' Hopkins, who has died aged 77, was pre-eminent. His multi-disciplinary career included spells as a nuclear physicist, photo-journalist, peace campaigner, educationalist, music promoter, video producer, publisher and editor.

Born in Slough, UK, in 1937, he attended a private school followed by Cambridge where he read maths and physics. His first job, as an Atomic Energy Authority nuclear physicist, came to an abrupt end after a peace trip to Moscow in 1960. He travelled to Russia with friends in a second-hand hearse emblazoned with a CND symbol. On his return, courtesy of a Soviet deportation order, he was questioned by UK intelligence who wondered whether he had leaked any nuclear secrets.

Subsequently he moved to London where he became a freelance photographer working for publications as diverse as Peace News, the Guardian, Melody Maker and the Sunday Times. Many of his subjects were musicians who often granted intimate access to their lives because of Hoppy's considerable charms. Among a list were the Rolling Stones, Beatles, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk and Ornette Coleman. He also played a part in the early career of Pink Floyd.

Next he was closely involved in the planning of the Albert Hall Poetry Reading in 1965, for which he created a memorable image of poets from Allen Ginsberg to Alex Trocchi sitting on the steps of the Albert Memorial.

The following year he helped establish International Times, a publication that became the mouthpiece of the underground movement in London and further afield. His boundless energy also gave birth to the London Free School and the UFO psychedelic music venue, as well as a short-lived marriage to Suzy Creamcheese.

At the peak of his frenetic activity Hoppy had become a widely known figure applauded by the counterculture and despised by the establishment. Consequently he was arrested for drugs possession and handed a harsh six-month sentence, which he served in Pentonville and Wormwood Scrubs. The sentencing judge remarked scornfully that he was a "pest to society". A vociferous campaign was launched to free him but its demands predictably fell on deaf ears.

Towards the end of the 1960s Hoppy developed a new interest in video production using relatively cheap and portable equipment recently launched on the market. This new departure was to engage him for the rest of his life.

He announced in International Times the launch of TVX, which he declared would make television production available to everyone and also spell the end of copyright. In 1969 he shot a video of the Stones in the Park free concert using gear loaned by John Lennon. Later came tapes of the squatting movement in north London, which gained an airing on the BBC's Nationwide news programme. This was a rare example of low-gauge video breaking into broadcast television.

All of this new activity inspired the creation of Fantasy Factory, an umbrella organisation for low cost video editing, production and research, which he ran in collaboration with his then partner Sue Hall. The enterprise relied mainly on public arts funding for its survival.

Typical of the man was his invention of the Centre of Advanced Television Studies, whose associated academic journal was taken by leading university departments of mass communications worldwide. Its distinguished editorial board was a subtle blend of real people, like me, and characters lifted from novels, including some by Hoppy's friend William Burroughs.

Hoppy was a natural anarchist who loved nothing better than engineering humorous scams that undermined conventional wisdom.

John 'Hoppy' Hopkins, polymath, born 15 August 1937; died 30 January 2015

Graham Wade is co-author together with Heinz Nigg of the first ethnographic research project on community video and photography in the UK of the 1970s:

Nigg, Heinz and Graham Wade. Community Media. Community communication in the UK: video, local TV, film, and photography. A documentary report on six groups. Zurich/London 1980: Regenbogen Verlag

Free download:

https://www.academia.edu/1101971/Community_Media_Video_local_TV_film_and_photography_as_tools_for_community_communication_A_documentary_report_on_six_groups

John 'Hoppy' Hopkins in memoriam:

http://www.av-produktionen.ch/av/John_Hoppy_Hopkins_in_memoriam.html