

Thursday, June 9, 2011

Electric Prunes Interview with James Lowe



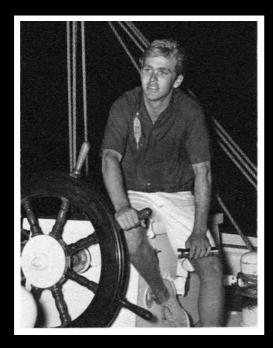
Interview:

I'm really proud I to have The Electric Prunes on my magazine. My first question is about your childhood and teen years. Where did you grow up and what were some of your influences?

Thank you. I was born and raised in Southern California.



When I was younger I lived in Los Angeles and I was influenced by the Latin music that had become the "Rock n Roll" of that area. Bands had horn sections then and if you went to a wedding or christening there was always a full group playing "All Night Long" in their own special way. Later we moved to the suburbs and people were playing folk guitars, I thought I would try my hand at it when I heard a guy who played the blues and sang. He would show me any of the tricks he knew and I thought music was pretty cool. We listened to Lightning Hopkins, Little Willie John, Muddy Waters, those kinds of things. I personally liked Les Paul and Mary Ford. Les invented multi track recording and his guitar sounded like it was in space and Mary's voice was out there too. It was like you were on their space ship with everything happening in another universe. Later in LA, surf music would use some of these same vibration techniques to get us "spaced out". Of course Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis had my attention early on too.

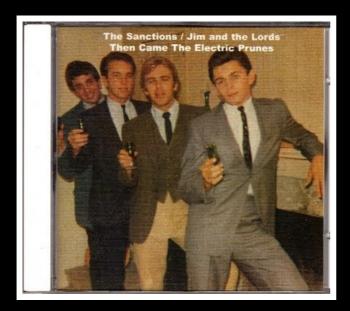


I sort of ran away from home at 17 and went to Hawaii where I worked on a Barkentine sail boat and played a little bluegrass guitar with a friend in clubs. We were terrible but no one cared as we murdered Flat and Scruggs. I also heard Slack Key for the first time and on our sail boat the locals would play local music. The Hawiian's are natural musicians and the music is very melodic. This was a nice relief from the Rock that was being played at that time on the radio. From my experience in Hawaii I found out I was

not too shy to get up in front of people, though I didn't really relish it and that I could play a little rhythm guitar and harp.

What can you tell me about the begging of The Electric Prunes? If I'm not wrong you were first called The Sanctions, and later, Jim and the Lords? Then finally The Electric Prunes. How do you remember some of the first sessions you had?

Moving back to LAI was 19 now and I saw that music could be a ticket out of real work. I played with a drummer and asked him if he knew any guys I could form a band with? He introduced me to Mark Tulin and Ken Williams. They were still in High School but that didn't matter to me if they wanted to play. The original drummer went surfing rather than play music but Mark, Ken and I stuck together and I brought in Mike Weakley, a drummer from Kansas City that I had met. We set out to get a record deal rather than play clubs. We rehearsed every day in Mark's garage. A keyboard player, Dick Hargraves, was brought in and Mark switched to playing the bass. This band became "The Sanctions".



An audiophile friend of mine, Russel Bottomly, offered to record us direct to disc and he ended up teaching us recording techniques. We would have to do everything live and one of our recordings became The Sanctions / Jim and the Lords (we changed our name to Jim and the Lords, I am not sure why?) direct to disc LP. This was probably the only recording we made at this time. We were terrible but we had a certain garage energy that kept us going.

A woman came by the garage one day while we were practicing and asked if she could listen. After about a half hour she said she knew a guy, Dave Hassinger, that was engineering recordings for the Rolling Stones, and she thought he was looking for a group to record, would we like to meet him? We hesitated, like for 15 seconds, and said YES! As unbelievable as it sounds she introduced us to Dave at a party and we signed with him to record.



Ain't It Hard / Little Olive was your first 45's release on Reprise Records. What can you tell me about these two songs?

Getting someone to record you professionally was not as easy then as it would be today. Dave took us to Leon Russel's house, where he had a recording studio. We could waste time there learning how Dave recorded and spend some inexpensive time working up a few songs. From the beginning I wanted to take us to those places I had heard on the Les Paul and Mary Ford records. That echo and delay had become a musical fantasy for me. Every week we would have new song Friday and each guy would submit their songs for the band to consider. This became like a homework nightmare for everybody but Mark and I. We would come with new songs, everyone else came with excuses. They didn't understand that it would be our songs would drive the band. From these exercises Little Olive was born and Dave found a song, Ain't It Hard, that he liked for us. We recorded the basics of these two cuts at American Recording. Now all Dave had to do was convince a record company! I think everyone turned us down but Warner Bros./ Reprise was interested in signing Dave as a producer and they agreed to let us have a single release of these two songs.

As we got ready to go into the studio Quint would not sign the contract with Dave so We replaced him with Preston Ritter and added a guitar player named Weasel Spagnola.

We had been calling ourselves "Jim and the Lords" and we knew we did not want that name on a record. The production company gave us one weekend before "Ain't It Hard" was going to be released to come up with a name for the Reprise label. Electric Prunes started out as a joke (what's purple and goes buzz buzz ... an electric prune), I know, I know, but the more we said it the more "out there" it became to us. We could just not forget it and it was certainly absurd enough for us to like it. Remember, this came at a time when people were still saying..."what does BEATLES mean?" In short, we chose Electric Prunes because it meant nothing and was hard to forget once you heard it.



My mom bought a copy of Ain't It Hard but I don't think anyone else did. We were dropped from the label. Easy come easy go? We felt we had failed everyone. We had a few more songs we wanted to record and Dave found this song and he liked the title, I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night. It was a western ballad written by two girls from LA and he said, "do something interesting with it". So we arranged it with breaks and a lot of punch and some weird sounds. We went back up to Leon's house and played around with a blues number I had written in Hawaii called, Luvin. At this point we were 5 members, Mark, Ken, James, Weasel, and Preston. During one of the sessions up there a weird accident in the studio resulted in the arresting opening of I Had Too Much To Dream Last Night.

Soon after you released your most well know 45's release with I Had Too Much to Dream / Luvin'. Would you like to tell me how did you write this two numbers and how do you remember recording sessions?

The engineer at Leon's place had forgotten to hit the record button on a four track machine as we were rehearsing our recording and flipping the tape over to save money. Ken Williams was fooling around with his Bixby arm and an overdriven amp as the tape ended. He was just making vibrating sounds and stretching them out as long as they would last. When the tape was turned around backward and it hadn't been erased it came over the studio speakers as the loudest backward attack sound I have ever heard. I went into the control room and asked what the hell that was? I had them cut that great effect sound off the four track reel and we carried it around with us till we needed an opening for TMTDLN! That is the giant bumble bee vibrato sound you hear that starts the record. It got everyone's attention!

TMTDLN was recorded in pieces at American Recording. We would go up to a break and stop and do the next part. It was kind of hard to imagine what it was going to be at this stage because we would just say, "there will be a scream in this spot" or "a crash here" then the drum break. We then physically edited the tape with a razor blade to create the complete record.

People say they can hear a hit but no one knew this record was anything but weird. We would play it for people and they would say, "where are you going to get something like that played?" It didn't seem that weird to us and Dave convinced Reprise to let us have another try. Luvin' became the B side. I remember I played bass for some reason on that cut? Maybe I couldn't pick and sing or something? FYI: All our recordings from the 60's were recorded on Ampex 4 track machines.

TMTDLN continues to grow in popularity and by January we have a full-fledged national hit record, peaking at number 11 on the Billboard charts. The record is possibly the first psychedelic hit record. The band hustles back into the studio to record our first album at American Recording in North Hollywood. It is at American, along with engineers Richie Podolor and Bill Cooper, that the band will do the remainder of their recording in the 1960s.

Soon after that you started recording your truly stunning debut. What can you tell me about recording and producing the first LP. There is noticeable different mixes between mono and stereo exist over the entire LP. The mono mix tends to accentuate the guitar parts (as is so often the case), and generally sounds better than the stereo mix, despite the incredible stereo effect advantage in sound quality.



Stereo had just come around to the market and there were not many places where a rock record was going to be heard that way. We had a transmitter at the studio and would park a car in the lot and send our mono mixes to the radio from the mixing console hto get an idea what the song was going to sound like. Lots of bass and punch were the order of the day and the stereo mixes tended to sound kind of puny compared to the mono. At this time you couldn't continue recording unless you had a record on the radio so a lot of emphasis was placed on the time, under 2:45. If you came in over that the stations would not consider your record.

Dave never liked our songs so he would dig up these songs for us to do that didn't always match our style. The first album kind of bumps along with some rather corny material and then there will be something cool. This became an issue between us. We just assumed he knew what he was doing when he didn't.

TMTDLN took a long time to climb up the record charts and this gave us time to record the first album. "Get Me To The World On Time" is released as the second single from this album and becomes our second chart record.

Your next album was Underground which is in my opinion even better then the first LP. This one is much more representable of the band's vision, right?

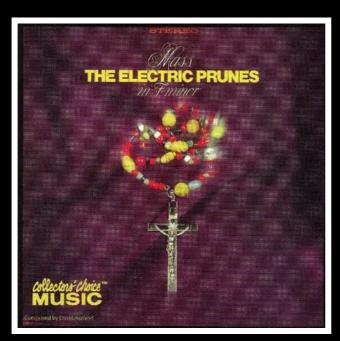
I would also like to add, I like groovy cover artwork very much!

Yes, we saw Underground as our chance to get to what we thought the band was about. Mark and I had to lie about who wrote the songs we brought in. It didn't matter who wrote them as long as it wasn't us. We would pay to do demos and present them as other people's material. We used other names on the lead sheets so Dave wouldn't know it was us. It was obvious Dave had lost interest in the group as he got the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane to produce. He spent most of the time on the floor of the control room reading the paper during Underground. This was our chance to do our own ideas. We did most of that album with Richie Podlor and Bill Cooper at American. Finally Dave just said, "do what you want then, but don't complain later." It is during the "Underground" sessions that relations with Dave Hassinger hit rock bottom. The band and the producer did not agree on the direction to take. Dave wants to turn out a hit, another "Too Much To Dream". The band wants to take their music even further outside, more experimental. During the recording of "Underground" Preston Ritter leaves the group and is replaced with the return of Quint. Later on in the year Weasel gets sick and is replaced by Mike Gannon on guitar. This was a trying time as we were not getting paid any royalties and the live proceeds never seemed to make it into our pockets. These issues would ultimately lead to the dissatisfaction of the members and dissolution of the band in 1968.



The first Electric Prunes album cover left me cold and there was no real title, i had expressed displeasure from the start and Dave knew that I didn't like it. Ed Thrasher from Warner Bros. was very kind and he saw I had ideas and a concept. He asked what the title of the album was going to be and I said, "Underground". I thought the musical youth movements of the time deserved an "underground". He just said, "do it". So we went in to Tom Tucker and took a picture I had seen in my mind of us running. We did some proofs and Tom asked what we were going to be running from? I looked down at his trash can below me and there was an exotic woman's face looking up at me from a crumpled glossy 8x10 with yellow/gold emulsion peeling off. It was actually a failed test sheet for some other project. I asked "can we use that girl?". Tommy said, sure. We put the running band over the top of it. That became the cover. When Underground is released it is to resounding indifference. No one likes it. We feel we have failed.

There's a lot of confusion among the fans of your band about Mass in F Minor album and connection you had with David Axelrod. Can you share a story behind it?



Our manager cooked up the idea for the Mass with composer/arranger, Dave Axelrod. I had taken Latin in school so it seemed OK to me? Maybe we could make it interesting? "Mass In F Minor" by Dave Axelrod, marks the beginning of the end for the band. After recording a few tracks it is decided the group, with Mark being the only one to read music, is taking too long to learn the songs; Hassinger brings in studio musicians to replace Ken and Weasel. Only Mark and Quint play on the remainder of the sessions. James, sometimes backed by a Canadian group, "The Collectors", does all

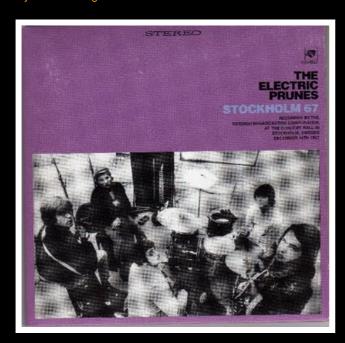
the vocals. We assumed we would be adding some of our weirdness to the recordings but the next thing we know they are handing us finished albums as we head off to europe for a tour. The Mass wasn't bad, it just didn't seem like we had much to do with it? And, we felt we had failed to live up to everyone's expectations.

I would like if you could share some concert stories you remember. Where did you play (any festivals?)?

In the 60's festivals were few and far between. Radio stations would put on shows and multiple bands would play but usually only for 15-20 minutes. We did tours across the USA with the Beach Boys and that was interesting. Good Vibrations and TMTDLN! We played Amsterdam with the Soft Machine and were booed off the stage because of the Vietnam War. We were not political so this took us by surprise. I should have known we were in for trouble when the Soft Machine drummer came off the concert hall stage in a jock strap!



We were unknowingly recorded at a concert in Stockholm in 67 by the Swedish Broadcast Company and a live album was later bootlegged and released. Stockholm 67 is the only live recording of us in the 60's.



I almost fell off the stage into the orchestra pit at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium when we played with Cream and Steppenwolf. They had lowered a floor after our rehearsal and where there had been floor there was just a big hole. As I teetered on the edge I kicked a large tom tom into the pit. The audience cheered, so I kicked

another in The drummer killed mel

We got paid 4000 dollars to open for the WHO in Detroit. We were supposed to play the night before but they asked us back for a second night. After the Who destroyed the stage the promoters were afraid the crowd would tear the place apart and came to us and said, we'll pay you another 4000 to play for 15 minutes". We did, and they paid! Hard to describe playing on a stage littered with Townsend's guitar parts and smoke and drums all over the place. Priceless!

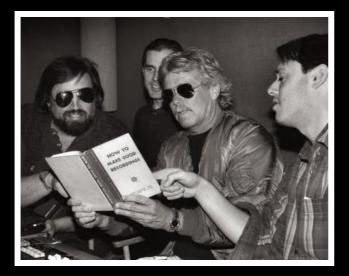


Mark Tulin, who sadly passed away a while ago went to join Strawberry Alarm Clock around 1968. Would you like to add a few words about him. He was an amazing musician!

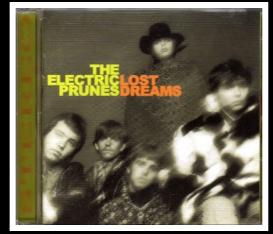
Mark was an amazing musician. He could play any instrument. We wrote songs together and could think ahead and anticipate each other's ideas. Because we were so close we used to get in these fights and would not talk to each other for weeks. We would be touring but never directly addressing each other. Mark was never in the Strawberry Alarm Clock. They went to the same high school so maybe that is the confusion? The Electric Prunes have also played live with them a few times in the last few years. Mark had been playing with the Smashing Pumpkins on recordings and on a short tour here in small venues in LA. I know he enjoyed Billy Corgan and their musical association. A few days before his death I asked Mark if we should continue playing and making CD's. He told me, "of course" it was the thing that made him feel alive. Mark left the planet way too soon. We had other places to play and other songs to write. I am thankful we got the chance to mend our 60's differences by reuniting. I miss him daily.



After a period of 30 years, the original quartet of Lowe, Tulin, Williams and Weakley met in the studio to consider a revival. You were joined by two new members, including James son, to reform the band. You began touring internationally in 2001, and in 2002 released a new recording titled Artifact and a DVD album called Rewired.



In 1997 I was offered the opportunity by a producer at Warner Bros, David Katznelson, to go in and remix our past material into a compilation album, LOST DREAMS. So many of the early cuts on the first album were just dreadful and did not really reflect the band's tastes. I contacted Mark Tulin, since he and I had written most of the band's material, and he agreed to come in and help out.



the original masters we were taken with how much we loved doing this BEFORE the greed and the "music business" set in. The music WAS the fun then. What if we got together and did some recordingjust as a joke? I had a small building on my ranch we could use as a studio. .



When we started recording again all past members we could find were contacted to see if they were interested in playing again. Playing in a band is a real commitment and we feel that the right people showed up and stayed on. Those that were not interested, vaporized. Ken Williams, Quint, Mark and I were joined by my son, Cameron on keyboards and Peter Lewis, of Moby Grape on guitar.

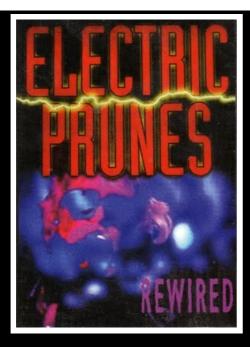




A reunion album, Artifact, came out of our little "Hole In The Sky" studio in the Santa Barbara mountains and we started getting offers to play live. We didn't know how anyone would respond to new material from a vintage band? We were surprised to find the audience was supportive. Steven Van Zandt of the E Street Band called me and dared us to come play his Cavestomp Festival in New York. He really got us interested in playing live again.



During our UNDONE european tour in 2002 we recorded a DVD titled REWIRED. It is the only visual document of the band's live show and reunion.



We continued recording and in 2004 another project "California" was born. It was a look back at the music of the 60's in California. I really like that album.



The trio of you, Tulin, and Williams released a new CD entitled Feedback. What can you share from this reunion of The Electric Prunes...



Our third CD release since the reunion was Feedback in 2006. This represents the simple bare bone recording of the band's past. If you look at any of these songs they relate to the past sonically as well as the arrangement ideas. Listen to TMTDLN and then to Morphine Drip. There is the Electric Prune pulse apparent in both without the burden of being a "copy" recording. We just recorded what we wanted on all these releases. This was unusual for us. Coming back and doing old material over and over is one thing, coming back and putting together 3 new CD's is quite another. We are really glad to have been able to do this and to play live again.





You always were a bit different band and had that hmm, how to say more dark atmosphere in your music. What do you think did assist to that?

Well, I personally like layering for the "space" effect when we record. I think darker subject matter combined with all these little sounds in the tapestry of the track make it a little mysterious. We understood that everyone was not going to like this approach but for those that did we were there. Our songs are eclectic, just like the past material and this can hurt you. In rock music people want you to keep making the same record over and over. It is familiar, and people like it that way because they "know it". If you make any move from the familiar they think you have changed direction?

What are some of your future plans, James?

Mark and I had been working on some recordings up at Billy Corgan's (Smashing Pumpkins) studio before his death. I am going to finish up that material and will probably finish some songs Mark and I had started back when we thought we were eternal. So there will be a vinyl or a CD or something coming out and we may play live a few more times. There are so many good bands out there now I think we are leaving the scene with very adequate representation from the new garage/psych groups.



I would like to thank you again for taking your time to talk about your band on my magazine.

You are welcome. Thanks for asking.

Would you like to add something else?

First, I would point out to anyone that I have mentioned,, "we felt like failures" many times in this process. It sounds corny but later in life you learn you were not as bad as you thought. I have decided not to beat myself up so much. Keep this in mind as you ready the Cat of Nine Tails!

(now a cheap commercial)

Yeah, I would. I encourage people to support their favorite bands by buying something from them on their websites or showing up when they play live in your town. For some, this is the only way they can continue to record and play live. If you don't want to order something, at least give encouragement and support for what they have done for you. It means a lot to get a nice email and this is all most musicians really want for their efforts. A little YES!!!! when it works.

James Lowe

http://electricprunes.net



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Posted by Klemen Breznikar at 9:29 AM 🔀 🥒

Labels: CA scene, Electric Prunes, Interview, James Lowe, US-psych

5 comments:

roger said...

thanx for this interview with james, i really loved it, simply fantastic. Roger@solarmusic.

June 10, 2011 at 6:29 AM

Anonymous said... Great interview !! Thanks for the efforts from both you and James. I sure hope there are more Electric Prune releases !! Mike in KC Captain Sensible said... Great interview, wonderful inspiring band and lovely chaps too. Captain Sensible (the Damned) November 22, 2011 at 3:25 PM Aristedes DuVal said... Regardless of what anyone says- I have always loved the ENTIRETY of the first Electric Prunes album, with its, Psychedelic, Bo-Diddley, Surf,1920's, and Romantic influences! A great concoction of fun, excitement, mystery & different tastes- the epitome of Eclectic Psychedelia. I have never tired of listening to this album. Now I've got to spend some time with the second album- Underground. I truly would love to put together some definitive videos of this music. Peace & Love & OCCUPY THE MUSIC INDUSTRY! Anonymous said... is stockholm '67 one of the best live albums of all the time? well i think so... thank you prunes and thank you sweden...

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Klemen Breznikar

Is owner and editor-in-chief of It's Psychedelic Baby Magazine. I'm researching obscure and rare music, but I'm also doing many interviews with more well known artists. You can contact me at: psychedelicbabyblog@gmail.com

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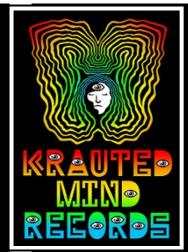


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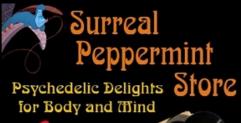


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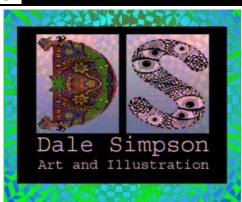






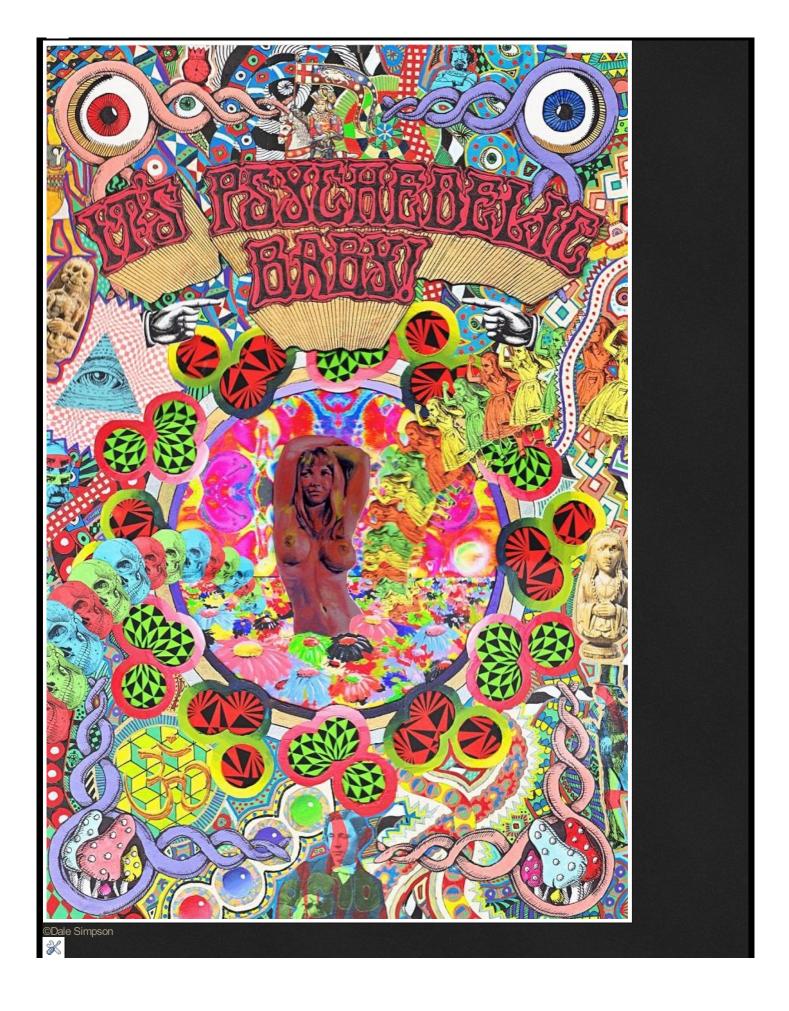




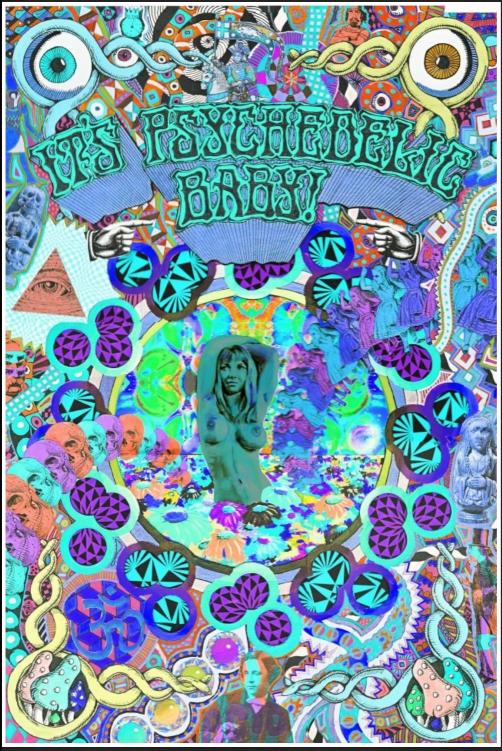












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