

Ken Kesey: Oregon's Great Author and Anti-Establishment Hero

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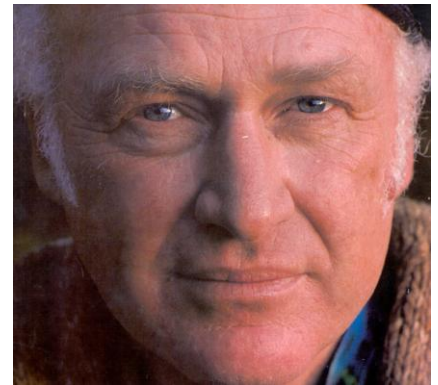
“Dearest Mister Curtis: My mind is so wet it’s like a—uh—like—my what? I—forgot...” April 1974



Ken Kesey has always been a hero to me. We’ve conversed on numerous occasions down through the years. We traded compliments at the early Portland Poetry Festivals, at the Bend in the River conference, at the Poetic Hoohaws. The above joshing remark is scrawled in my copy of *Spit in the Ocean #1*. I was slated to be, perhaps, the poetry editor, until boisterous comments in *One Dollar* magazine ruffled a few feathers. It didn’t bother me. I missed being around Ken and the Pleasant Hill crew, including Ken Babbs. Kesey was a hero to many folks in the state of Oregon, and he also was a rabble-rouser and a good soapbox orator, whether one agreed with him or not.

Ken Kesey is probably Oregon’s greatest novelist, and certainly one of the nation’s finest authors in the second half of the Twentieth Century. I realize it’s too soon to evaluate such a great writer and legendary human being. But I’m gonna take a shot at it! To know Ken personally was to love him. To read either *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962) or *Sometimes A Great Notion* (1964) and to comprehend them—was, and still is, life-altering. Ken Kesey lives in his books, in the characters he created, and in the struggle of the individual against the Combine. The spirit of Kesey is total freedom, and the right of the person to challenge the cosmos and the forces that be.

What do I mean? Well, on Valentine’s Day in 1974—Oregon’s birthday—the poet Marty Christensen, Lorna Viken, and I drove to Pleasant Hill with Ken. We talked wildly in the car about “Venusians”—folks without auras—Wilhelm Reich, UFOs, orgonic energy, and the burning of the library at Alexandria. Just back from Egypt, Ken was excited about the struggle going on for the human soul. Because we humans were compassionate, we would win, he emphasized. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. Marty and Lorna and I thought the car might pull off the freeway of its own volition. Kesey was absolutely convincing.



Ken mentioned he’d given a talk at a Job Corps camp. He loved empowering young people. For the first time I heard him use the indelible phrase: “Oregon is the citadel of the spirit.” It’s always stuck in my head. “Spirit”—that’s what Kesey was all about. When I looked into those sky-blue eyes of his, I felt the jolt of eternity. No one ever conversed with me the way he did. No one! In my forty-some years of adult conversation, he was the one to get the creative and mental juices flowing, without smoking a joint.

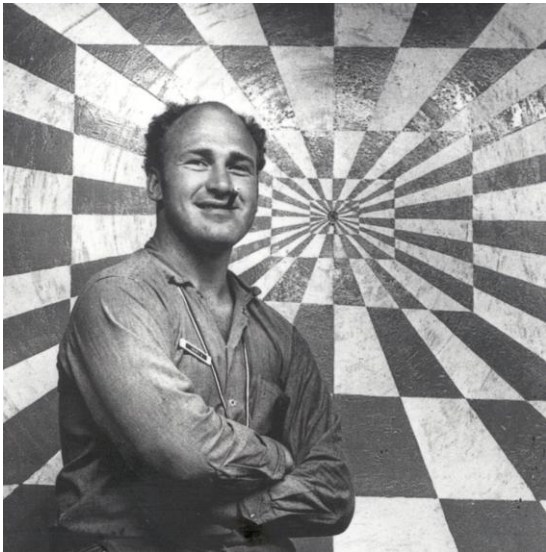
Ken Kesey was larger-than-life for me and many others. On this second anniversary of his death November 10, 2001, we Oregonians can celebrate two new commemorative books from Viking Press—*Kesey’s Jail Journal* and, dedicated to him, *Spit in the Ocean #7*—the final volume in the series he created with friends. I am happy to report my old writing teacher, Ed McClanahan, Kentucky author of renown, was the editor and interlocutor for both volumes. Kesey’s gone, long live Kesey! The King of Oregon writing ain’t goin’ away. The celebrity of Oregon’s man of letters suffuses any discussion of the great writer. I despair that, like Ernest Hemingway, author and his exploits will ever be separated. Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) immortalizes the creator of the Merry Pranksters. It detracts from our hero’s serious literary efforts. Yet he brought it on himself! Ken’s adventures with his friends in the Sixties rival those of Abbie Hoffman, Allen Ginsberg, & Timothy Leary. The painted psychedelic bus is an American

“Ken Kesey showed us how to live when the hype is over and the tumult and the shouting dies, and life returns, as it does, to just muddling through.”

—Glen Love, *Spit #7*

icon like Thoreau's Walden Pond or the Statue of Liberty. It is a modern Ark of the Covenant, rusting in a cow pasture.

First, a few facts about the writer's life: Ken Kesey was born on September 17, 1935, to Fred and Geneva Smith Kesey. While in the Navy in 1943, his dad brought the family to the grandparents' place in Coburg, Oregon where young Ken developed a taste for buttermilk and blackberries. His father founded the successful Eugene Farmers Cooperative, retailing under the name Darigold. We should know about brother Chuck and his wife Sue's Springfield Creamery and Nancy's yogurt. Ken attended Springfield H.S. and the University of Oregon, where he was a star wrestler. In 1956 he married Faye Haxby, his high school sweetheart, and in 1957 they moved to Los Angeles. He wanted to become a movie actor, but instead worked on a never-published novel—*End of Autumn*.



Jack Kerouac's influential novel *On The Road* was published in 1957. Aspiring novelist Kesey was impressed by its style and the "vivid portrait of Neal Cassady." I am cribbing from an Ann Charters essay. Kesey badly wanted to meet the frenetic cowboy madman on speed who was disrupting the Beat scene in North Beach. As is well known, Neal would become the driver of the bus, a few years later. Ken wrote—*Zoo*—a second unpublished bohemian novel. In 1958-59 he enrolled in the Stanford creative writing program. His wife Faye was expecting, so he took a night job on the psychiatric ward at the VA Hospital in nearby Menlo Park. His friend Vic Lovell, a psych major, told him they were paying twenty dollars a session to volunteers experimenting with "psychomimetic" drugs. Ken tried everything: LSD, peyote, psilocybin.

These experiments definitely affected his writing. Kesey began working on a new novel about life on the psychiatric ward. One night he had a vision on peyote, of the hallucinated face of an American Indian—Chief Bromden! The schizophrenic Indian who pretends he is deaf and dumb and who walks away from the hospital at the end of *Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey returned to the Stanford writing class, and to his mentor Malcolm Cowley—who had just happened to be Kerouac's editor at Viking! Cowley helps Kesey walk through the narrative. A year later, back at Viking, Cowley gets the manuscript published. Ann Charters says of the hugely successful first novel, "That hallucinated but colloquial prose style was something new in fiction."

During the summer of 1962, he returns with Faye to Oregon. He works at his brother Chuck's creamery, and starts writing "Notion." He interviews loggers in local bars and rides crummies up into the woods. Faye and he go back to Perry Lane near Stanford. Neal Cassady shows up! Charters writes: "The summer of 1964 they drove cross-country for the New York publication of *Sometimes a Great Notion*, filming a movie of their trip." She explains how they met Leary and Kerouac, but neither wanted to get on the bus. Kerouac had called Kesey "another great American writer."

Enough background. I was an English major at Portland State University, taking a night class in creative writing. My professor Ed McClanahan drove up from OSU where Bernard Malamud was writing *A New Life*—sometime in 1962 or '63. How did I get involved in the Kesey saga? Destiny brought McClanahan (and Kesey) to a punk student like me, that's all! Ed became a member of the famous Wallace Stegner writing program at Stanford, in the early sixties, after he left Corvallis. He made lifelong friendships with Ken, Robert Stone, Wendell Berry, Larry McMurtry, and other important American writers. As a green Oregonian, sick of the rain, I visited him and his family in sunny California.

Ed took me to a Prankster party at Perry Lane (where I shared a joint with Cassady). Disappointed, I was looking for Kerouac, my writer hero as well. A year later our visit to La Honda was stopped by the cops, blue lights flashing. Hells Angels were roaring it up at the Kesey compound. Whoo-ee! My first taste of rebel lifestyle. I was certain marijuana was gonna drive me insane, but something else did. Shy, I never met Kesey at the time.

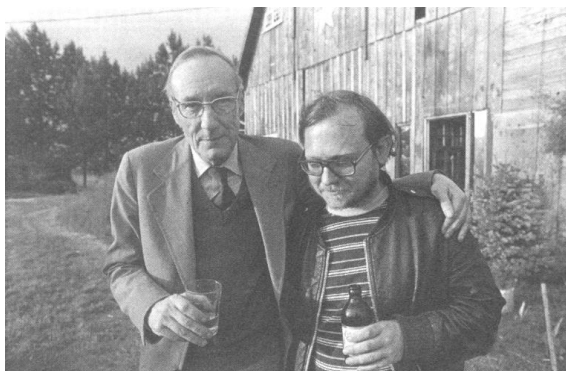
"I've enjoyed being a famous writer—except that every once in a while you have to write something."

—Ken Kesey

McClanahan covers this manic period well in his introduction to *Kesey's Jail Journal*. It's a good mini-history of the bus, Intrepid Trips, "The Acid Test," the pot bust, the escape to Mexico, and finally Kesey and Page Browning's 6-month incarceration in 1967 in the San Mateo county jail. Ed and his first wife Kit visited Kesey at the honor farm. She took him art supplies and Day-Glo pens. He put all of the furious, pent-up jail emotions and overheard racist rap, sex talk into the document. Thirty years later, Viking has published it in its raw, colorful, uncensored glory—a cultural and personal artifact from a legendary time. Kesey is pissed off at being in jail, out of his skull, probably coming down from drugs! Ed describes how "page after page is crammed with words and colors and faces and forms (which seem) ready to explode in your face like a letter bomb." He didn't know that Ken was that talented an artist.

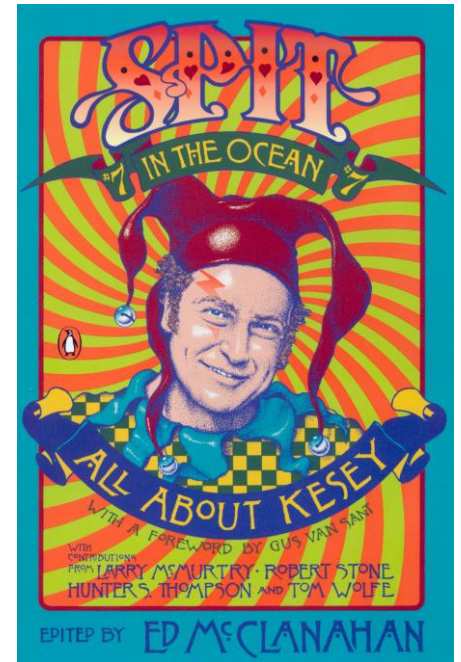
Lifelong friend McClanahan is the perfect editor for shaping Kesey's literary memorial. A match made in heaven! Ed's been published in *Esquire*, *Playboy*, and *Rolling Stone*. His stylish books are *The Natural Man* (1983), *Famous People I Have Known* (1985), and *Congress of Wonders* (1996). I recall the two friends around the table at the farm, cracking sly jokes and raconteur-ing about the business of literature and the joys of life. McClanahan is not quite from the Flannery O'Connor school of lit, but he's close. Cautious as a mama hen, he worked hard to honor his dear friend. The collection does justice to the hero in all of his incarnations. *Spit #7* is a collector's item and a philosophical and sympathetic read. Kesey is both Fool and King, the Joker in the deck of cards. High-powered writer friends riff on his extraordinary life and writing skill. Hunter S. Thompson praises the *Running* magazine trip to China article. Gus Van Sant writes the forward, shows off his magical photo of Ken. Shazam! Babbs, Bob Stone, McMurtry, Jim Dodge, Tom Wolfe—a rogues' gallery of American literati—hold forth. Editor David Stanford sums up the last years in "Working with Kesey." There are wonderful surprises from Oregonians Glen Love and Michael Strelow. Rosalie Sorrels wrote a song. Ed McClanahan wants it known that the elegiac work is cumulatively edited. "It's paced like a novel."

I loved Ken Kesey in the second half of his life, after he got back to Oregon. His wife Faye was his anchor and guardian. I saw them both at the first Portland Poetry Festival held in Washington Park in 1973. Regally, they were seated on a Hereford cowhide! Ken honored me by sharing my poem—"The Time the Drunk Came to Town"—with the crowd. In 1974, the second fest was dedicated to Pablo Neruda, and Kesey came dressed in drag as Grandma Whittier. (Whatever happened to his *Seven Prayers for Grandma Whittier*? Each issue of *Spit* contained a fresh installment.) He was touting the first issue of *Spit*—"Old in the Streets."



Dollar. Sorry to say that killed the editorship, although the fabulous Clyde Keller photos of me with Paul Krassner, and **William Burroughs with Marty Christensen** (above), grace the final *Spit*. So it all worked out over time.

I was in *Spit #2* with The Sunflower poems. Kesey especially appreciated the poem "To My Prick," in which I talk to my John Henry reassuringly—"Others might hurt you, but I won't!" Years later at Roseland when he was doing the play "Twister," he scrawled on a poster of the old bus—"For Walt, the man who was afraid he'd hurt his penis—Love, Ken"



The ink has faded. I know it's politically incorrect to write like this. His bald head was sweating. I watched him autograph in huge colored letters for two nubile teenage girls: "I-WANT-TO-EAT!-YOU!-UP!" I know he was probably referring to the bear in the kid's tale *Little Tricker The Squirrel Meets Big Double The Bear*. Or was he? Kesey liked to have fun.

Everyone has a "Kesey story," everyone who ever met him. As a performer, he made you love him, or get upset with him. He didn't care! He just wanted to work the crowd. I understand he was trained in sleight of hand. I saw him do coin tricks with those pudgy fingers. Kesey was a magician! Was he fake? Is story-telling a lie? I believe *Demon Box* (1986) is his most honest book, nearest to autobiography. Despite its cutesy Maileresque pseudonyms—Sir Speed Houlihan indeed! Devlin Deboree. Cassady was not a good influence on Kesey, nor his adulation of the Beats. *Garage Sale* (1973) is a disaster, except for the superb drawings. It's hard to understand, from listening to the bus tapes "rap," why Neal was such an icon to Kesey? Drugs cost Kesey a decade or more of writing potential, only starting to get it back in the Seventies. Didn't he harm the work by using speed to write?

Our hero would appreciate a little honesty here. He could look you straight in the eye. I really respect his later multicultural writing on Egypt, China, and the Pendleton Round-Up—*The Last Go Round* (1994) is a good novel. I loved *The Sea Lion*—Northwest Indian fable, the centerpiece of *Sailor Song* (1992). Ken used to dress up in a chief's regalia, like Lelooska, to perform the cautionary tale. A marvelous act! He felt that "literature" needed to go beyond words to reach a modern audience. In later years, more and more, Kesey was telling his stories in a theatrical and multi-media manner. He wanted to interact with a "live" audience. To hell with traditional literary venues and carping critics who were saying he could never write as well as he once did.

"The miracle of *Cuckoo's Nest* is, first, that a guy could write a novel while regularly blasting his head with hallucinogens, and second, that he could write a very fine novel in which psychedelic awareness, deftly and aptly incorporated, is essential to the tale."

—John Daniel, *Spit #7*

the "Where's Merlin?" tour to Stonehenge in England. We talked while he was showing video footage. Whenever we got together we always had intense metaphysical conversations. Ken said something like: "If you seek the spirit, the spirit will find you." I know we were both contemplating aging and death. What a far-out thing to do I realized—to take a painted bus to Stonehenge!—**like Merlin, the bard creating tales and legends to outlast the millennium.**



I am not one of *those* persons. However, I do see the problems Kesey suffered in his writing life—unbelievable celebrity and notoriety! As one gets older, the energy and drive it takes to write lessens. Family matters come up, and community ones. The Sixties had long faded. Material he was interested in wasn't grabbing the national consciousness. Too bad for them! No one can write a muscular and expansive sentence like Ken Kesey. Not even H. L. Davis in *Honey in the Horn* has such a jubilant and expressive style. Nor do I believe *Trask* by Don Berry is our best Oregon novel. Maybe all three of Berry's Oregon coast books rolled into one might equal *Notion*. Maybe.

I was at the Oregon Book Awards in 1999 when he was given the lifetime achievement award. He'd recovered from his stroke and I know he felt proud. He'd just returned with friends and family from

Ken Kesey — Selected Bibliography

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Photo: Clyde Keller



Walt Curtis and Paul Krassner,
Hoohaw circa 1976, Pleasant Hill

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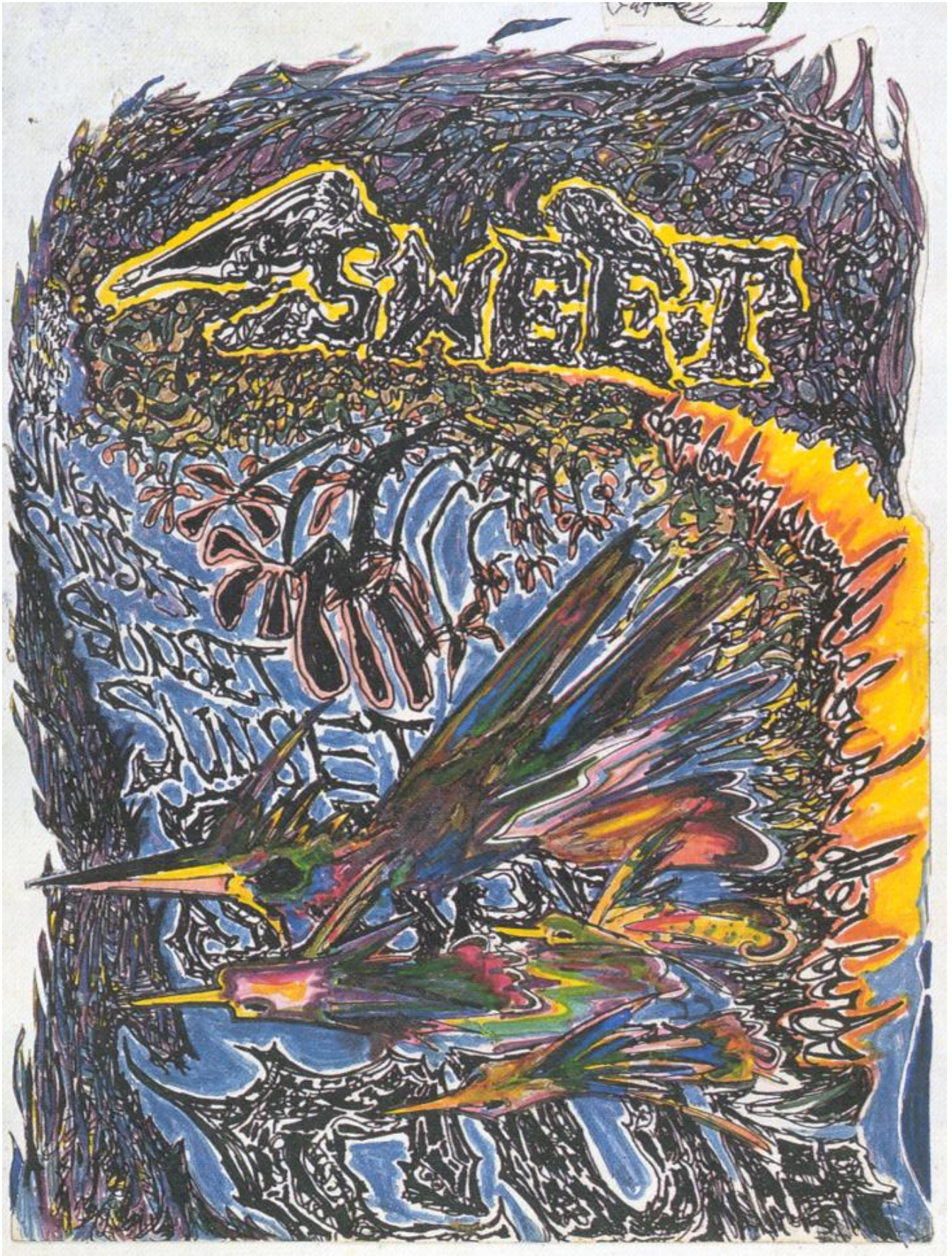
Faye and Ken Kesey, circa 1985

Photo: Kit Andrews



The Kens—Babbs & Kesey

Photo: John Baugness



Detail from "In the Bush with Bushie," page 41
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