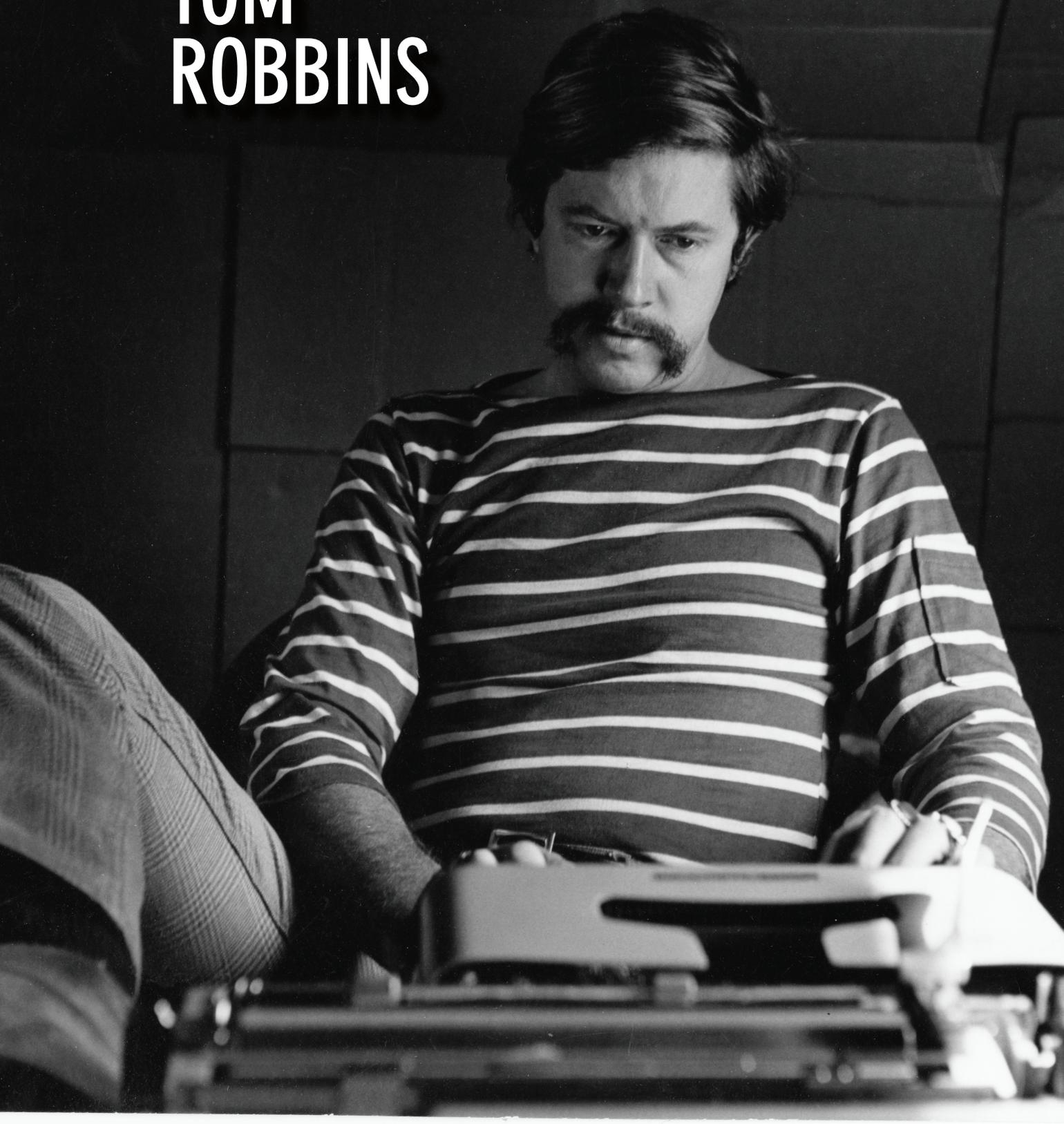


# TOM ROBBINS



# MARK TWAIN WITH AN ILLEGAL SMILE

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In what *TIME* magazine deemed “the year that changed the world,” Tom Robbins embodied the Altered States of America. Robbins, 36, was an Air Force veteran, grad school dropout and seasoned journalist. He had been an art critic for *The Seattle Times* until he famously quit one day by calling in “well.” By 1968 he was mustache-deep in counterculture. He hosted a free-form radio show called Notes from The Underground on non-commercial KRAB, “the only station in America with macrobiotic kilowatts.” He wrote for *Helix*, Seattle’s underground paper. He found his writing voice there, he declared, with a concert review the previous year. It began: “On July 23 and 24, Eagles Auditorium was raped and pillaged, anointed and sanctified by The Doors.” Reviewing Jimi Hendrix’s 1968 “homecoming” Seattle concert, Robbins called the revolutionary guitarist “Oscar Wilde in Egyptian drag” and said, “What he lacks in content, he makes up in style.”

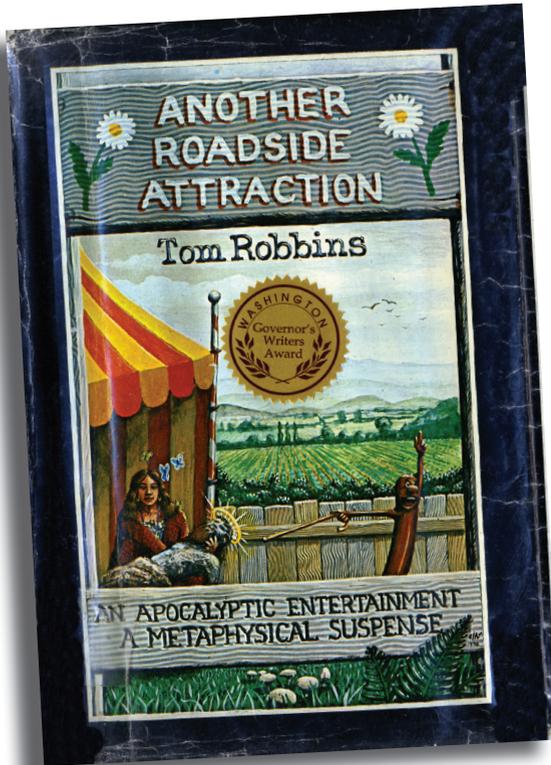
Seattle’s distractions proved too much, though, for the aspiring novelist who hailed from North Carolina hill country but fell for Washington’s firs and ferns, its sloughs and salmon. In 1968, Robbins decamped to tiny South Bend in Pacific County where he and his girlfriend Terrie Lunden rented a place for \$8 a month. They grazed on restaurant leftovers she brought home from waitressing. “I finally figured if I was going to write this book, I had to get out of town,” he said.

“This book” turned out to be *Another Roadside Attraction*, a fantastical novel of outlaws and Buddhism, mischief and metaphysics, erotica and exotica. It hung on an earthy but mystical couple who open a hot dog stand in Skagit County that comes to host the mummified corpse of Jesus. You probably can’t imagine what happens next.

Published by Doubleday in 1971, *Another Roadside Attraction* won the Washington Governor’s Writers Award. *Rolling Stone* magazine called it the “quintessential counterculture novel.” The *Los Angeles Times* said Robbins was the new Mark Twain. But the hardcover edition sold like bad fish. Fewer than half of the initial 5,000 copies were bought.

Previous page: Robbins said he modeled his writing philosophy on Bonnie and Clyde: “I believe in one man, one woman, together, taking risks, living on the edge.”  
*Mary Randlett Photo*

Then a Ballantine Books editor took home a copy of *Another Roadside Attraction* one night, looking for orphaned hardcovers to reprint as paperbacks. Ten minutes into it, Leonore Fleischer said she was “howling with joy at the zany



Robbins' first novel won the Washington Governor's Writers Award. His characters suffered, died, stared down tyrants and still opted for "joy in spite of everything." *Washington State Library*

It wasn't until 1980's *Still Life with Woodpecker*, though, that Robbins hit *The New York Times* bestseller list. Subsequent novels also made the list, including *Jitterbug Perfume* and *Skinny Legs and All*. "He's one of those writers who clicks, and clicks hard, with some people," said *Slate* magazine.

In an early interview, Robbins said his writing philosophy was modeled on the bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde: "I believe in one man, one woman, together, taking risks, living on the edge." But there was more. A theme in his first two books was "joy in spite of everything." His characters suffered, died, stared down tyrants and still opted for joy. And Robbins seemed to relish playing the jester, or more accurately, the trickster, "a figure other cultures have used as a vehicle for mythology and mirth." The role fit comfortably on a smart aleck who called his family "a southern Baptist version of *The Simpsons*," and once led the neo-Dada Shazam Society's "happenings" with names such as, "A low-calorie

\* It is not the "Co-op" as other cooperatives are commonly called, but the "Coop." store.[thecoop.com/about-us/](http://thecoop.com/about-us/)

little novel." Ballantine bought the paperback rights for \$3,500. It printed small runs, no more than 15,000 at a time. The orders kept trickling in as dog-eared copies of the paperback were passed among friends, stashed in knapsacks and backpacks. One day the Harvard Coop, the official bookstore of the storied university, ordered 600 copies.\* "We're home," said the Ballantine sales manager.

"Doubleday had guessed wrong about who would pay the price of a cloth-bound copy; they were right about who would buy the book. The amorphous 'young,' especially on the West Coast, took it to heart," said *The New York Times*. The zany little novel was "more attractive as a \$1.95 paperback than it had been in bourgeois full dress."

Robbins' second novel was published in 1976, written in his new home, Skagit County. The protagonist of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* was a beautiful bisexual model with freakishly large thumbs. Soon the two books topped 2 million copies sold.

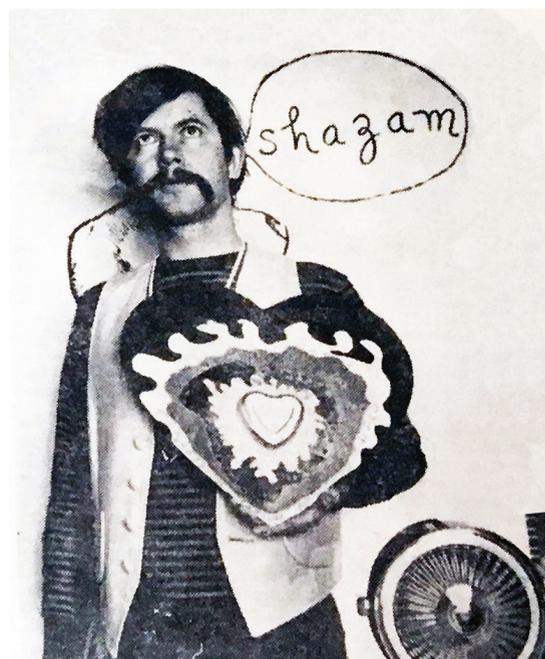
human sacrifice to the goddess Minnie Mouse.” (At that “happening” Robbins encountered a dazed docent, the wife of a Seattle surgeon, muttering, “Somebody put a fish down my blouse.”)

What distinguished Robbins’ work from other trippy, rainbow-filled novels was his writing skill and precision, according to Fleischer, the senior Ballantine editor. He was serious about frivolity. That touch was still on display in his 2014 pseudo-memoir *Tibetan Peach Pie*. Asked what it felt like when his consciousness went *inside* a daisy on a life-changing LSD trip, Robbins said, “Like a cathedral made of honey and mathematics.” Here’s his description of his adopted Oz: “Seattle, the mild green queen: wet and willing, cedar-scented, and crowned with slough grass, her toadstool scepter tilted toward Asia, her face turned ever upward in the rain.”

While major writers such as Graham Greene and Thomas Pynchon have praised Robbins, some critics tend to frown on his work. He’s been accused of “goofily overheated prose,” tortuous digressions, “all sorts of heavy, bogus wisdom” and wearing an “illegal smile.” One suspects some of the critics have a “narrowness of experience,” as Robbins might say. “Anyone who still falls for the lie that my readers are callow airheads should spend some time perusing the fan mail that fills one huge drawer of a file cabinet in my office (I’ve only saved the cream of the crop, of course),” Robbins says via email. “This very week I’ve received epistles from two mature readers recounting how my novels dramatically changed (and are still affecting) their lives. Who was it who said, ‘Let the jackals howl. The caravan rolls on.’ ”

With the possible exception of Hendrix, Robbins is the top emissary of arts and letters whose rise to prominence can be traced to the Washington of the 1960s. But unlike Hendrix, who died at 27, Robbins is still dispensing all sorts of wisdom at 86.

After we reached out to Robbins via email, the phone rang early one morning at our office in the state library. “This is Tom Robbins.” There wasn’t a detectable trace of the drawl that lingered during his KRAB radio shows. (He describes his voice then as the “vocal equivalent of week-old roadkill on a Tennessee truck route in mid-July.”) A creature



Robbins once called Pablo Picasso—collect—from Seattle’s Blue Moon tavern. Picasso supposedly refused to accept the charges. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

of habit used to putting words to a blank page, Robbins asked if we could send some questions his way, so he could sketch his thoughts.

I knew that Robbins bridled at the perception he's a "60s writer." (*Another Roadside Attraction* is his only book set in that stormy decade and he swears he doesn't write under the influence of anything stronger than a full moon.) I also thought of him as fiercely smart, with little patience for the banal. If it were up to me, I told him, I'd ask about the tragedy of the tomato sandwich, a deep passion we share. Or *that* review of The Doors. ("Enter if you dare, my children, exit if you can.") But 1968 was our task at-hand, turf where Robbins seemed reluctant to trod. I sent him a bundle of questions about South Bend, societal changes 50 years later, technology, Hendrix and The Doors, "bad" drugs, and more. I was hoping to find a key that would unlock the doors to Robbins' wisdom.

He responded like someone sentenced to a life of Protestant work ethic. He got cracking, supplied updates, and when hindered by a serious eye infection and a dental problem I didn't dare drill down on, he only asked for a day or two of leniency. (I don't recall ever mentioning a deadline.) He sent more than 2,000 words that answered several of our questions, weaving together the immortality of the '60s, his pleasant time in South Bend (despite its undignified reaction to Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination), Jimi's disappointing homecoming concert, and the '60s demise at the hands of "boogie" culture and substances that didn't expand the mind, but fed the reptile brain. Ever the joy-hunter, Robbins remains optimistic about Washington state in 2018 and our ability to "expand our vision, deepen our consciousness, damp down our egos"—despite our economy's constantly tumbling dice. His advice: "bless the dice, and cheerfully get on with the game."

**Bob Young**  
**Legacy Washington**  
**Office of the Secretary of State**



The *P-I* newsroom had its share of Merry Pranksters. Robbins once wore a gorilla suit to work. Walking by, Managing Editor Lou Guzzo said, "Robbins, you never looked better." "Disney on Ice" characters visited the *P-I* and gravitated to Robbins' desk. Why? Go ask Alice. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

## “LET TOM RUN” ROBBINS ON ‘68

**T**he “Psychedelic Sixties” seems to have replaced the “Gay Nineties” and the “Roaring Twenties” as “the decade that will not die”—and for far more serious and significant reasons. In politics and sexual mores, in music and fashion, in art and advertising—and especially—in social behavior and spiritual orientations, that “decade” that in Washington State didn’t fully manifest itself until late 1965 and peaked in ‘68, not only left an indelible imprint but is referenced (nostalgically, derisively, or both) more often than any other period in our history.

Maybe it’s sentimental if not actually ridiculous to romanticize the Sixties as some embryonic golden age—obviously, this fetal age of enlightenment aborted—yet while it lasted the period was extraordinary. (And it was a hoot!) From the “be-ins” in Seattle’s



“The Doors are carnivores in a land of musical vegetarians,” Robbins wrote about the band’s first concert in Seattle. The Doors so enjoyed his 1967 review they gave Robbins one of their gold records. (Above) Robbins reads that review at a 50th anniversary celebration for The Doors at the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP).

*MoPOP photo*



Olympia photographer Mary Randlett's portraits of Washington artists and writers are known for their "effortless intimacy." She photographed Robbins while he was writing *Another Roadside Attraction* and later in his adopted hometown, La Conner. *Mary Randlett photo*

Volunteer Park to the "trips festivals" at Eagles Auditorium, from the anti-war marches down Fourth Avenue that often resembled Mardi Gras parades to the on-going arguments about Buddhist philosophy in back booths at the Blue Moon Tavern, it seemed a time when a significant little segment of Seattleites was realizing its moral potential and flirting with its neurological destiny. Eventually, of course, the old existential ferry boat—Complacency to Agitation/Agitation to Complacency—resumed its regular run, but it was nothing short of ecstatic while it lasted.

Now I'd like to make it clear that the Sixties in no way motivated me to abandon journalism for fiction. I dictated my first story to my mother at age 5 (probably better than some of the stuff I've produced

recently) and planned from that age on to write books. By 1967, at age 35, I felt that I was finally ready. I had a specific theme in mind, had a setting and characters. What I didn't have was my voice (how my written words sound to the mental ears of a reader). In July of that year, I attended the first concert in Seattle by The Doors, staying up very late that night writing a review of the concert for *Helix*, our local "underground" newspaper (the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* didn't object to me moonlighting a bit). The next morning, when I read over my inspired review (The Doors were so taken with it they later gave me one of their gold records), I realized for the very first time that I might write my novel less like a journalist and more like a **poet**.

That review, since you asked, was written in the largely unfurnished attic of an old house on Seattle's Ship Canal, a block-and-a-half north of Ewing, just out of range of a suicide jumper from the Ballard Bridge. I may have been stoned earlier in the evening, but I was totally straight when I wrote the piece. (I've never written stoned. The one time I attempted it, I found myself mostly just captivated by the ink soaking into the wood pulp. It was like watching baby spiders drink water.) The Doors review was not edited. To this day, for better or worse, would-be editors appear challenged by my writing. The really good ones seem to just throw up their hands and "let Tom run."

My first novel (*Another Roadside Attraction*) was set in the Sixties, my second (*Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*) in the period's aftermath, but that shouldn't brand me as a "Sixties writer" any more than Hemingway could be deemed a "Spanish writer" or a "revolution-

ary writer” because his early literary success was colored by his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. Yes, we did each write about public events in which we were participants, but Papa’s themes and my own were infinitely larger than either of those particular historical periods. And by the way, while the main protagonists of *Another Roadside Attraction* (Amanda and John Paul Ziller) were in a sense Sixties archetypes, they could also be said to embody Eurydice and Orpheus from Greek myth. The seven novels I’ve published since have nothing whatsoever to do with the Sixties.

In South Bend, where I holed up to write free from on-going Seattle distractions, I made a couple of friends (and mentored a small group of high-school boys), but mostly kept to myself, just writing and hanging out with my girlfriend. The town proved somewhat of a redneck reservation. For example, the local tavern erupted in applause when news arrived of Martin Luther King’s assassination. The editor of the weekly newspaper would surely have published a protest against my presence in town had he not known that I was working weekends at the *Seattle P-I*. I don’t know how the locals voted in 2016, but I suspect 90 percent of the men would trade every tree in Pacific County, every oyster in Willapa Bay, for just one month as a billionaire with a fashion-model wife. It isn’t that these guys are stupid or mean, but, rather, the unsuspecting victims of a socio-economic system that might legitimately fear its fate were its working-class citizens to start peeking through cosmic windows and climbing the winding staircase of higher wisdom. In any event, I was treated courteously in South Bend, and remain thankful for the quiet, physically charming, and affordable refuge it provided.

If psychedelic drugs gave birth to the Sixties, then music was the midwife, the nanny, the pediatrician. It was music that cemented the movement, held its varied members together, allowed it against all odds to flourish and spread. Largely underground, of course, especially in the beginning, it was the uncommon common denominator, the outward expression of a shared internal awakening.

Particularly instrumental (pardon the pun) were the new rock bands emerging in San



Just as music presided over the birth of the '60s, Robbins says it was present at the era's demise, which he lays at the hands of "boogie culture" and substances that didn't expand consciousness. "While never truly awake, boogie never sleeps," he says. *Helix/PaulDorpat.com*

Francisco: Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, Big Brother & the Holding Company, Quicksilver Messenger Service, even the short-lived group with the greatest band name ever: Stark Naked & the Car Thieves. Then along came the Beatles.

(There were a few good bands in the Seattle area, as well, but they developed a bit later, and at the moment I can't recall their names. Obviously, there was the great Jimi Hendrix, but he was little known to Seattle's white population before Monterey Pop in 1967. Incidentally, Hendrix's "homecoming" concert at Seattle Center was a disappointingly subdued affair. Where was the proclamation, the standing ovation? Where were the cheerleaders from Garfield High? I was working on the copy desk at the *P-I* the night news of Jimi's death came over the AP wire. The night editor, who despised anything related to "dirty hippies" and their culture, wadded up the bulletin, tossed it in the trashcan—whereupon I retrieved it, took it into the managing editor's office, and explained that the victim was a local product and an international star. The next morning it ran in all of our editions.)

Yes, music presided over the birth of the Sixties—but it was also present at the era's demise. In the summer of 1971, a huge rock festival had been organized to occur in Grand Isle, Louisiana, at the mouth of the Mississippi River. Festival organizers had brought over a noted holy man from India, and the guru was to open the three-day festival by chanting while squatting in the lotus position on the lip of the stage.

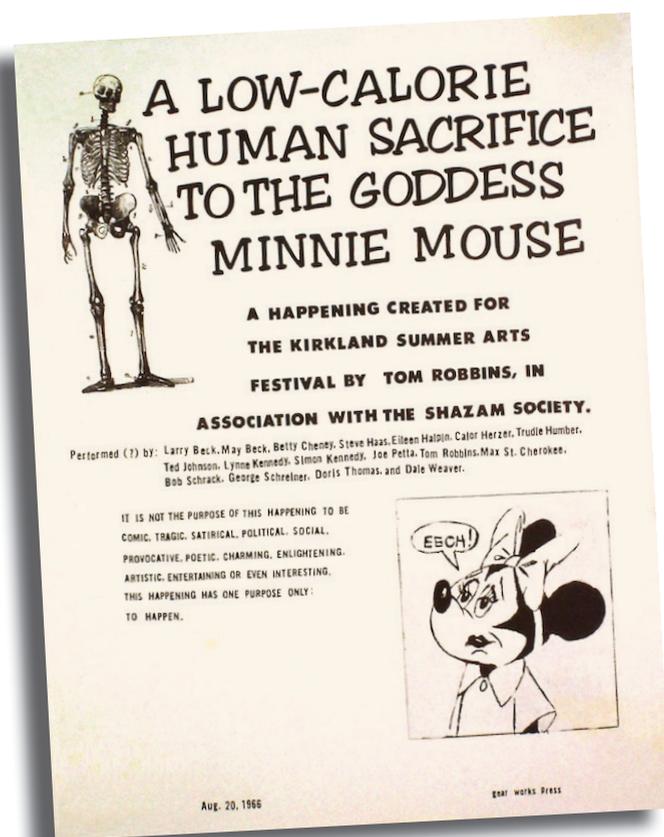
Considering that Asian mysticism had permeated the psychedelic movement almost from its inception, this wouldn't have seemed at all inappropriate. However, the robed guru had barely begun to "Ommmm" when a particularly loudmouthed attendee down front yelled, "F\*\*\* you! Let's boogie!") And there followed a festival-wide chorus of "Yeah! Yeah! Boogie! Boogie!"—and thunderous applause. The poor chanter was hooted off the stage.

When the following day I learned of this, I turned to my friends and announced. "Well, that's it. The Sixties are over." And, alas, that proved correct. Psychedelic culture was about to be replaced by boogie culture.

In contrast to mind-expanding psychedelics, the boogie culture's sacrament of choice was good old-fashioned inhibition-shrinking booze, fast being augmented with cocaine and meth amphetamines: substances that confuse, inflame, and ultimately eradicate consciousness; that agitate the old reptile brain and cause the aforementioned existential ferry to run in tight circles.

The triumph of these "bad" drugs over psychedelics may be attributed to the fact that generally we humans seem more comfortable being shut down a bit than opened up too far; prefer the confusion we expect to the revelation we do not; favor tweaked familiar over full-blown radiant strangeness; choose fantasies that inflate the ego over those that supplant it; are neither intellectually nor emotionally conditioned for ecstasy or enlightenment. As Hermann Hesse put it in *Steppenwolf*, "The magic theater is not for everyone."

Now here in Washington, where our rainy climate has a natural tendency to



A food fight broke out at a 1966 “happening” in Kirkland organized by Robbins. He encountered a dazed docent muttering “somebody put a fish down my blouse.”

“Boogie.” This periodic exchange continued over and over until eventually I had to flee, but for all I know it might have gone on until closing time. Or even thereafter. While never truly awake, boogie never sleeps.

Americans were introduced to psychedelics and cybernetics at approximately the same time. A coincidence? To what degree the one might have influenced the other is difficult to determine, although Steve Jobs made it quite clear that LSD played a significant role in his development of the personal computer. In Zen it is said that “a big front has a big back,” but while I’ve neither experienced nor witnessed a “bad trip,” one needn’t be a technophobe to note the “big back” of our electronic renaissance.

In truth, of course, it was technology that helped make us human. When our early ancestors commenced to employ stone tools, a permanent gulf widened between them and our simian cousins. We were empowered, evolving as hunters and eventually farm-

turn a person inward, and perhaps, too, because of the area’s longstanding connections to Asian traditions, exemplified by the school of “mystic” painters (Tobey, Graves, Anderson, et al) that flourished here, boogie culture was slower to triumph than elsewhere. But even in 1971 it was hardly absent. One night that same summer, I was taking the air out on the deck of the 1890’s Tavern in La Conner, as inside couples danced to a raucous rock band; when my attention was drawn to a young man and woman who sat opposite one another at a picnic table. The pair was silent, without expression, almost comatose—except that every now and then the man would stare at the woman and mutter, “Boogie.” Then, after two or three minutes, the female would raise her head and say to him (without expression),

ers and merchants. We also got good at killing and exploiting one another, at taking what wasn't ours. Big front, big back.

The spread of electronics has stimulated advances in commerce, aviation, and medicine. It also has turned significant numbers of the population into virtual humans, into a race of zombies staring endlessly into lighted screens, both large and tiny, ignoring nature, ignoring life all around them—except to the extent that the screen has now usurped life. If the biggest pollutant muddying the waters of human consciousness has always been the narcissistic ego, well, the advent of social media has been to narcissism what red meat is to a hungry wolf.

Problems ranging from over-population and social divisiveness to road rage and intrusive audiences (at concerts, quiz programs, and reality TV shows) may be laid at the stamping feet of the neo-narcissists: these days, every noisy onlooker, whether or not he or she has paid any dues—seems to think he or she ought to have a share of the spotlight. It may be a case of democracy swallowing its own tail.

What effect the latest technologies will have on imagination is yet to be determined, but I suspect it will be minimal. Wasn't television supposed to have killed off imagination back in the Fifties? The fact is, truly creative imagination has always been a rare commodity. Humanity has entertained group enthusiasms; experienced group deceptions, even group hallucinations, but creative imagination has ever been the province, the gift of singular individuals, usually working on the fringes of a society with which it frequently is at odds.

Washington State was founded by fortune hunters, men hoping to strike it rich in timber and furs. In 1968, the timber business, though having given ground (if that's not a contradiction) to aircraft production, was still flourishing, and no economist was predicting that our powerful log train might soon be overtaken by a sleek little high-tech trolley. Today, logs seem less essential to our economy than logarithms. In the game of life, for a state as for a person, the dice are always rolling.

Just because 2018 isn't strobe-flashing with promise like 1968 doesn't mean we can't expand our vision, deepen our consciousness, damp down our egos, bless the dice, and cheerfully get on with the game.

**Tom Robbins**  
**April 2018**

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*1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* looks back at 1968 and its impact on Washington state through the stories of some remarkable people who lived through it. On college campuses, the campaign trail and evergreen peaks, Washingtonians were spurred to action. It was the year when Vietnam, civil rights, women’s liberation and conservation coalesced—the year when tragedy led the 6 o’clock news with numbing regularity. 1968 changed us in ways still rippling through our society a half century later. *1968: The Year That Rocked Washington* features a collection of online stories and an exhibit at the Washington State Capitol in the fall of 2018. Legacy Washington documents the activism and aftershocks of a landmark year in world history. [www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/](http://www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/sixty-eight/)