

The Acid God & The Anti-Dad

SAINT JAMES HARRIS WOOD

With his dirty blond grown-out Beatles haircut, secondhand Hawaiian silk shirts and second-rate flip-flops, Gordon Holt appeared harmless to the untrained eye. Despite conducting drug experiments at night on himself, by day he somehow managed to maintain a 4.0 grade average. We sought and read books by Dickens, The Black Panthers, Steve Martin and considered ourselves subversives who were going to overthrow somebody, the principal maybe. Our revolutionary goals were to be achieved by listening to loud music and cutting classes. Actually, at eighteen years old I was ambivalent about the revolution and sometimes fearful that if by our activities anarchy inadvertently broke out and the government toppled, in the ensuing breakdown of public services there would be no more electricity and that would be the end of our band and loud music. This wouldn't do as the members of the Cottonmouth Strangling Blues Band were used to the feminine element that followed us.

However, my relationship with Kitten was known to every one of our friends (and the band's groupies). I struggled to be monogamous because I adored her, but it was tough. Near the end of 1972 Kitten was obsessed with school and potential colleges, while I focused on avoiding school and work, and concentrated on music. Cottonmouth Strangling Blues Band had an upcoming gig on New Year's Eve at the Diamondhead Crater Festival, playing with Journey, Little Feat, Santana and a dozen other bands. We were to play at 7 a.m.—still an

unparalleled adventure for our little pack of teenage ganja blues men. The bottom line was that though Kitten and I considered ourselves one, for those last months of the year she studied while I indulged myself with music and Gordon's drug exploits.

One tropical evening Gordon and I hitchhiked downtown, bought some weed and continued on to Waikiki's International Marketplace, the prototype for tourist traps the world over, featuring tropical plant life so abundant it gave the fanciful impression that the Marketplace had been hacked out of the jungle, then perversely embellished with tacky shops, strolling ukulele players, hookers, mimes, hula dancers, drug dealers and everything touristy. We smoked bowls of the local ganja and staggered about Waikiki, open to whatever happened. A normal Friday night.

A block from the marketplace we encountered a bearded, tie-dyed, drug casualty named Starhead, shambling down the boulevard muttering, "Acid, good acid," to anyone who got near him. He carried himself with a mad confidence that Gordon and I regarded as a challenge. We decided to befriend and swindle him. Starhead claimed to be a founding member of the Brotherhood of Love (an outfit headed by ex-Harvard professor, Timothy Leary) that distributed LSD worldwide. Leary had recently been brought to earth by FBI agents who tossed him into a federal prison in Texas. The rest of Leary's organization fled all over the globe, stoned out of their minds, carrying suitcases full of LSD. So Starhead, on the run from forces real and imagined, needed money to continue fleeing. On his person he carried probably fifty thousand hits of good acid—stashed in every pocket, as well as in his hat, his shoes, underwear, and in a tattered backpack he'd lost and miraculously found several times.

Offering us the notoriously fickle hallucinogenic Orange Sunshine, Starhead whispered loudly and moved his hands like an Italian magician. "I'm really hard up for cash, man, and there's like feds, bad feds, everywhere, looking for me. I'll make you a deal—a thousand hits for two hundred and fifty dollars. It's a time one-time offer."

"Well," Gordon said, "how much will you pay us for each hit?" "Ha!" Starhead cried happily. "At least I know you're not feds." "All right," Gordon said, "but we only have twenty-five dollars."

"Akk," Starhead said, "feds and paupers." He pulled an entire handful of tiny orange barrels—more than a hundred—from somewhere on his person. "Here," he said, thrusting the drugs at Gordon. "Twenty-five dollars if you please."

It was such a good deal that swindling him would have been redundant, so we bought the diabolical tabs. While deadset against coke or heroin or speed, I'd come to consider LSD a spiritual substance. However, one of the bewildering things underground chemists add to the already overwhelming dose of lysergic acid is strychnine, which increases hallucinations. That the mad chemists would knowingly add rat poison to a recreational drug, a drug that we gladly consumed, says something about us all.

Starhead became paranoid and didn't want to accept the money on the street, so we retired to an alley behind a donut shop. As I handed over the cash, we saw a police car cruise by about a block away. The cops took no notice of us. Nevertheless, agitated, Starhead proceeded to climb through the donut store bathroom window. The women already in the bathroom began shouting. I've seen people escape through bathroom windows often enough, though they usually climb out, not in. Gordon and I headed towards the beach.

Careful drug abusers, we split one tab, then sat in the sand grinning at each other, waiting for that warm electric numbness that precedes a good trip. The gorgeous orange sun set in the deep dark blue Pacific. Seagulls danced through the sky, and the occasional fish popped his head up to watch us go crazy. The ocean, wetter and more fluid than usual, brought forth waves crashing like an atonal orchestra practicing crescendos.

Miraculously—everything a miracle at this point—two beautiful girls appeared from nowhere and stood before us. The girls, blond and tan, from Saskatoon or Des Moines, had escaped from their families and were looking for trouble. The pretty things looked as pure and unsullied as Girl Scouts; to our practiced eyes, they were obviously just waiting to bloom into deranged party girls. They stood staring at us in all our psychedelic glory.

One girl asked a question about minors getting into rock clubs. Gordon was going out with Valerie and of course I loved Kitten, but she'd been irrationally sequestered with her schoolwork for a week—so all bets were off.

“It so happens that my friend James and I are natives aware of nightclubs that will admit you upon our recommendation. I consider it our duty to escort you. My name is Gordon. You are...?”

“I'm Claudia and this is Susan. Are you guys Hawaiians?”

I loved them. Gordon continued to lie. “We are both honorary Hawaiians placed here by the authorities. I am rich, having wisely invested in pineapples and ukuleles, while James...races helicopters for a living.” Gordon paused and struck a heroic pose as if he'd just come ashore after having invented the surfboard. “We are conducting a chemical experiment tonight. Have you ladies ever fried?”

“Fried?” Claudia asked, mystified.

“You know, tripped, turned on, freaked out ...”

“Oh my God! Are you guys stoned?” The girls studied us with new respect.

“Blown your mind, tuned in, dropped out...” I smacked Gordon gently upside the head to stop him.

He’d been known to talk girls into things and right out of them all within the same conversation.

Young and innocent, Claudia and Susan, far from their farms, felt compelled to indulge in as many life-threatening activities as possible. We prescribed mere crumbs from one of the tabs for the girls, less than a quarter of what we’d taken, knowing from past excesses that this would be enough to alter their consciousness but still leave them sane, unlike us. They gulped down the LSD, God bless their foolish, perfect hearts.

They spent the whole night with us running riot through Waikiki, laughing, dancing, crying, kissing and pretty much disrupting every nightclub heedless and foolhardy enough to let us in the door. Near the end of the evening the girls rented a ridiculously extravagant hotel room on Claudia’s parents’ Visa card. We drank wine, smoked pot, laughed until our faces ached, and fooled around—sex may or may not have happened. As the sun rose, we fell into the sleep of the annihilated.

Early the next evening a large Hawaiian hotel security dude banged on the door and unceremoniously escorted us out of the hotel. Claudia and Susan must have left earlier while we were asleep. Their angry parents probably shipped them back to whatever dreary city they’d started from. I would have married either or both girls, but they

were never heard from again and from that day on existed only as minor legends.

Gordon and I stood across from the hotel and, after no discussion, headed back to Waikiki beach to recapture the previous evening's glorious high. We split a tab of the Orange Sunshine between us and lay back in the sand to wait.

Nothing happened. Not a glimmer or a shred of a high or a hallucination. Gordon thought we should split another tab. I dug a handful out of my jeans pocket and broke one expertly in half, then grimaced as it melted on my tongue. A few synapses fired off, but very little compared to what we wanted. With finite wisdom we decided on a whole hit a piece. After having taken two hits each, we headed over to the International Marketplace.

Slowly, but surely, as we walked, time and space stretched. I thought it was a good thing. Then my head clanked with a somber forcefulness. The sky tilted, the ground shuffled, my body disintegrated. Color and sound confused each other. I opened my mouth in a huge yawn trying to let some of it out, then bent to touch the ground, and the world sorted itself out to a small degree. I hated Starhead. We'd heard of bad trips of nearly unendurable intensity, but Gordon and I considered ourselves immune, I don't know why.

Lips full of electricity, I stood, and then reeled down the street because one leg was shorter or longer than the other. I looked around to see if Gordon still existed, saw him half a block back, a thousand miles away. He'd sunk to the curb, gasping for breath. I limped back and joined him. Hundreds of cars and thousands of people moved effortlessly around us as if choreographed. We sat on the curb and worked on trying not to cry.

I focused on Gordon's face, a gray worried color, as he stared at his hand. Disaster upon disaster: we'd both been clutching a few hits of acid in our sweaty hands, and they melted leaving a pasty orange dot on our palms, entering our bodies through the skin. An orange psychedelic energy poured up my arm and attacked the rest of my body. Running the traitorous hand through my hair, I groaned. As if being strangled, Gordon choked and shrieked and frantically tried to scrape the LSD paste off his palm with a thumbnail, but I could see the orange glow slide up his thumb like an extraterrestrial horror. Writhing and struggling with his hand, rolling into the street Gordon was nearly hit by a bus that swerved; but a bicycle carrying two Filipino paperboys ran him over. The bike toppled, spreading newspapers and Filipinos all over the street, causing cars to squeal and skid. Lights flashed recklessly, and horns blared hideously, signaling the end of the world.

The paperboys screamed in a complicated pidgin, full of clickings and English obscenities. Gordon moaned, shivered, sighed, and lay there in the road looking like an old woman possessed by senile demons. My gray body stiff, my lips brittle, about to shatter, I hobbled out into the street to help, then collapsed on top of Gordon. We got each other in a mutual bear hug and, holding on for dear life, rolled back towards the sidewalk. The paperboys chased us, smacking our heads with rolled up newspapers.

We lay on the sidewalk, Gordon openly sobbing, both of us hyperventilating. Too much of everything. A dim memory emerged: I had a home. My parents had left for the weekend, and the house would be empty. Neither Gordon nor I were familiar with reality; we discouraged it. But now, wordlessly, we reached the gloomy conclusion

that we'd gone too far. I stood and headed west. Gordon rose and followed me.

While lost and floating through the hell of Waikiki, we somehow made it to the bus stop, and sat shoulder to shoulder, shivering; out of the mist a bus pulled up. Every heartbeat brought a surge of psychedelic chemical stew to my head. Carefully climbing the steps I faced the bus driver. Gordon cautiously crept up behind me. The driver stared at us, offended. The rest of the passengers looked us over for a moment, then began chattering, commenting on our characters in a mishmash of languages and pidgin English. Gordon moaned, "Let's just, let's just" Instinct took change out of my pocket. We paid and found seats.

The bus took off with a roar like an urban rocket. We may have accidentally boarded an unadvertised adventure tour. I felt the bus hit palm trees, two dogs, it clipped a photomat, sideswiped an ice cream truck, as well as a Japanese touring group who took pictures of their fallen comrades. We topped a hill and left the ground for a full ten seconds. The driver shifted gears every few seconds or so, which made a ghastly metallic grinding sound. Loud clanging noises indicated that essential pieces of machinery were falling off the engine, causing car crashes in our wake. Gordon fell to the floor, whimpered, his heart broken. The LSD, peaking and roaring, was having its way with our hearts and minds.

The driver shouted the names of streets: "Makapu, Kalonionioli, Kalakaua!". The bus route took us past Hickham Air Force base and Pearl Harbor Naval Station. As I surveyed the landscape flying by, all the buildings looked to be in ruins. Smoke hung over the wreckage of Oahu. Explosions boomed in the distance. The bus zoomed by an

old woman wearing a fur coat, doing a wild improvisational jig in the gutter. I closed my eyes and tried to wish myself home.

I couldn't see Gordon, but heard him whimpering and crawling under the seats toward the back. I leapt to my feet, pulled the cord and brought the bus to a halt. Through sheer blind luck I found Gordon, helped him up, down the aisle and through the exit, then tumbled myself out the door into the world.

The bus careened off into the darkness. We stood and watched it. No destruction or carnage in sight. It had all been hallucination. Quiet surrounded and seeped into me. I didn't feel good exactly, but didn't feel like I was going to explode or die. I stood in the delicate night and examined it. The LSD in my system simmered, each breath a miracle.

Gordon, very still, in a half crouch, head cocked, hummed softly trying to orient himself. I listened to him and studied the star-punctured sky. He was a good hummer and the world, crystal clear, more defined than it had ever been, became less threatening with each beat of my heart.

Open for the first time in my life, I saw everything, beautiful, all at once...and then...God...everywhere, watching me...me, transfixed. "God?" I hesitantly asked.

The almighty studied me for a few moments as if deciding how much to reveal. He finally touched my brow and said, "If You Want To Be Happy—Just Be Happy." That was it. Regardless of everything that happened that night, I was given that simple revelation, and took it to heart. Grateful that the instructions were simple, I leaned towards Gordon and told him, "Just be happy." He looked relieved and huffed, "Just...happy."

As we walked off towards my parents' house, I realized that if there were no more crises we would in all likelihood survive this trip of all trips. I promised God and myself that I would never do any mind-altering substances again. I expressed this vow to Gordon, and he grimly concurred, "Just...never."

It was a long two mile walk, but we made it to my house. I felt calmer than at any time since the onset of our overdose. We'd reached a quiet, familiar place. There were no strangers or angry Filipinos and no immediate danger. We had maybe twelve more hours before the lysergic acid exhausted itself, and a day or two before my family came back. Sitting on my bed considering the night's narrow escape, I wanted to go to sleep, but the strychnine and whatever else the mad chemists put in the Orange Sunshine wouldn't allow it. Gordon sat on the floor toying with my unplugged stereo, for the moment happily baffled and content. We had that one sweet moment.

Headlights lit up my bedroom window as a car pulled into the driveway. I hoped it was a neighbor using our driveway to turn around. No such luck. The prodigal parents had unexpectedly returned.

Commander Wood of the United States Navy is the last person you want to deal with during an out-of-control acid trip. He can effortlessly push every bad button in my head, and during my teenage years we didn't get along. He liked Nixon; I liked pot. He liked Broadway musicals; I liked Hendrix, etc. We didn't know each other well. Usually we met only when the authorities demanded he come pick me up from the principal's office or a military police station. Commander Wood was an atheist, didn't like sports or smart mouth kids or long hair; he called my friends, beatniks. He demanded, though

rarely received, blind obedience. The neighbors had seen him many times shouting careless threats, chasing my brothers and me down the street.

Gordon and I were trapped. The front door opened as my parents came into the house, my father talking to my mother in a loud, drunk voice. Feral instinct caused Gordon to silently slide into the dirty clothes hamper in my closet. I frantically ran to the bathroom and locked myself in, an example of how poorly a drug-addled mind reasons. I should have simply gotten in my bed and feigned sleep. I leaned against the bathroom door and hoped that the drunken Commander would go straight to bed.

Imprudently looking in the mirror I became further agitated; my face didn't look at all familiar and my skin didn't seem hardy enough to contain all the havoc. Staring in the mirror, spacing out, a series of loud thumps crashed against the door, and I stifled a scream. Since we lived next to Pearl Harbor, I always expected to get bombed. I braced myself against the sink waiting for the ceiling to cave in.

My father's voice, magnified thousands of times by the LSD, shouted angrily from outside the locked bathroom door. "WHERE'S THE TWEEZERS!!?"

Tweezers . . .? I didn't know what they were and I didn't like the harsh sound of the word. I barely knew what I was.

"Who are you?" I shouted back at my father, hoping to buy some time.

"Who the hell do you think it is? What are you doing? Why is the door locked? WHERE ARE THE GOD DAMN TWEEZERS!?"

The word tweezer ricocheted madly in my mind. All those abstract questions—What was I doing? "Dad, I don't know what I'm doing."

It confused him for about five seconds before he got back on point. “Don’t make me do something we’ll both regret.”

“What do you want?”

“Jesus Christ on a crutch. I want the God damn tweezers!”

I couldn’t think. Tweezers, tweezers...nothing came to mind. I didn’t think it was a real word. Tweezer sounded like it had something to do with Dr. Seuss. I felt responsible for pushing my dad toward the brink with my constant mutiny.

“Dad? Are you all right?” “No! Open the door! NOW!”

My concern was misplaced. He wanted a face-to-face confrontation. If the door opened and our eyes locked, most likely my head would literally explode. I’d seen it happen in movies to heads under less stress than this. A survival instinct impelled me to turn out the light, drop to the floor and shout, “I can’t, the lights are out.” It made not a drop of sense.

“Turn the light ON!”

He had all the answers. I could hear him breathing angrily. Then my dad launched his patented whisper-to-a-scream demand, calculated to express the range of his emotions and the seriousness of his request.

“Give...me...my...Tweezers...NOW!!!*#!*#*#! TURN ON THE LIGHT! Open the door! NOW! God Damn It!”

The light, the door, tweezers, God, damnation—I couldn’t handle it. With no conscious thought, I threw out one last desperate non sequitur, “I can’t, dad. I’m naked.”

Off in the distance I heard Gordon make a long high-pitched moan, the constant references to tweezers getting to him also. He told me later that he was trying to make a sound like an ambulance to

distract Commander Wood so I could escape. It did confuse him for a second.

“What in the name of Christ was that?”

I wished my dad would stop with the religious outcries. It was inappropriate and unsettling because (1) he is an atheist and (2) I, being a lapsed atheist and newly agnostic, was uncertain what deities could be summoned and (3) it would piss my Catholic mom off. Sure enough, I heard her warning voice from the bedroom, offended by her husband’s blasphemies.

My beleaguered father muttered, “This is ridiculous.”

He has that right. I am laying in the dark, half naked, close to losing my mind. He is leaning against a locked bathroom door drunkenly raving about damnation and an obscure Dr. Seuss character; while Gordon, hidden in a clothes hamper, is doing an oddly good imitation of an ambulance. And still the LSD isn’t through with me.

My woefully over adequate imagination began to hear little creatures scuttling in the darkness. Sporadic flashes, probably supernatural beings brought forth by my father’s blasphemous incantations, sparked all around me. Another surge of hallucination and disorientation pulsed through my bloodstream. It grew quiet.

A curious hissing jerked me back to reality. My dad whispered so as to not disturb my mother, “This is your final warning.”

I’d had many final warnings. Next would come the inevitable last chance. Usually those eligible for the last chance had left the area upon receipt of the final warning. “I’m giving you one...last...chance,” he said in his best whispery doomsday voice.

There it was, reassuringly familiar. I felt secure for a moment because I had another chance. Knowing the ritual, I enjoyed being in

the bosom of my father's anger. I believed he would run out of death threats and last chances, eventually give up and leave me alone. Youth is so foolish.

With stunning force he smashed the door, jarring me out of my complacency forever. All the rage of a Commander, who daily orders hundreds of men to do his bidding but can't get his son to open a bathroom door, manifested in a soul-wrenching shout of despair, "TWEEEEEEZEEERRRRRS!!!" a new note of insanity in his voice.

All the fear in me had been used up. I entered a calm, aware state. I remembered to be happy. All I had to do was accept the world around me. Although I never did well in science, Gordón filled my mind with his unified field theory, in which it was a given that time and space did not exist. I could hear my father's litany of grievances and garbled complaints flow, an endless river of undiluted emotion. It didn't matter. I had the wildest free-form imagination in the world and whatever I thought, would be realized.

As a little test, I sped time up: the sun rose and set thousands of times before I got a grip on it. I gazed upon the bathroom and saw those scuttling little hallucinations weren't hallucinations at all, but tiny people no more than a tenth of an inch high. I'd given the creatures substance, life, a civilization. The hallucinites were industrious beyond reason, rushing about madly doing the things societies tend to do. I resolved not to be arbitrary and capricious like some gods I could name; although, occasionally the little people's piousness bothered me, and I would sweep a few of them under the door and then listen with divine thoughtfulness as the Anti-Dad crushed their tiny bodies. Curious as to what the passage of time had

done to the outside world, I stood and went to the window. Everything was gone. Hundreds of years must have passed. Our house stood on a vast beach with no other structures in sight. There were herds of cats and a forest of giant palm trees. I'd inadvertently ruined the whole world. God! My dad was right. I heard a monster so I lay back on the floor and tried to go blank like you're supposed to do in meditation. I have never been able to do this. I sat frozen, trying to control my thoughts. Then, one of the only good ideas I ever had came to me. Since I made time flow fast-forward, maybe I could also make time flow backward until things became normal again.

No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than events began to slip away faster than I could think. Hallucinite society frantically devolved as industriously as ever, undoing all they'd accomplished. The sun swooped and spun in a circle. I heard backward satanic yelling and as I pondered the sequence of possibility, I went too far back.

The door burst open; I stumbled in and tripped over myself, literally and figuratively. If the new me was a hallucination, he was vivid and realistic. He stood, eyes and mouth wide open, agog. It didn't surprise me much, having created the time loop or whatever, but the second me looked badly shaken. I knew the other me was trying to hide from my dad who'd just arrived home. I watched myself open and close his eyes, willing me to disappear. "I'm real," I said, for the benefit of us both.

"How?" he asked sadly.

"The acid."

"Oh God, oh man," he said, neatly summing things up.

I should have been prepared for the cataclysm of my father

pounding on the door, but the Commander's unpredictable nature transcended time itself. Both mes jumped and fell to the bathroom floor in a tangle. "WHERE'S THE TWEEZERS?!" my father yelled, ready to set off another round.

During the years I'd tampered with the universe, I'd turned into someone able to deal with this crisis. I gave myself a calm look and quietly replied to my father, "I don't know dad, they're not in here. I love you."

Dead silence. I had deftly short-circuited the aggression he'd been nurturing. I sensed him mulling over what it all meant.

"All right," he replied slowly, "turn out the light when you're through in there. Good night sweetheart." He lumbered off to bed. I and I sat whispering to each other, asking questions about our lives, trying to find a discrepancy. But we were the same guy.

Around dawn I heard my dad snoring and judged it safe to creep into my bedroom to investigate Gordon's welfare. I opened the lid of the hamper and whispered, "Gordon, it's safe." He gingerly peered out, a pair of underwear perched jauntily on his head, and looked back and forth at the two mes.

"Just...stop it," Gordon complained. He didn't think it was that safe, so he slid back inside the hamper and pulled the lid shut. With no discussion we grabbed the hamper's handles and stealthily as possible stole through the house, out the back door, into the pearl gray dawn. We sat on the lawn in the backyard until almost five in the evening when the LSD wore off and things finally sorted themselves out. I fell asleep and when I woke up the other one was gone. Maybe he moved to San Francisco where they're used to that sort of thing. □