

NONFICTION
REVIEWFlashback
to '60s
acid test

By Don Lattin

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

It's hard to imagine the psychedelic '60s without Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey — the bicoastal ringmasters of a drug-fueled social movement that changed the way millions of us define the

Acid Christ

Ken Kesey, LSD, and the Politics of Ecstasy
By Mark Christensen
(Schaffner Press;
449 pages; \$29)

White Hand Society

The Psychedelic Partnership of Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg
By Peter Conners
(City Lights Books; 308 pages; \$16.95 paperback)

very nature of reality.

For Leary, the trip began during a Mexican vacation in 1960, when an anthropologist friend turned him onto some psilocybin mushrooms.

At the time, Leary was one year into a three-year appointment to teach clinical psychology at Harvard. He returned to the classroom convinced that psychedelic drugs would change the world.

On the other side of America, a promising young Oregonian named Ken Kesey won a scholarship to a prestigious

creative writing program at Stanford. To earn a little spending money, Kesey signed up as a research subject for a series of CIA-funded drug tests at the Menlo Park Veterans Hospital — drugs that included LSD and synthesized psilocybin.

Kesey sneaked some *Sixties continues on E6* acid out of the hospital and began a series of his own experiments with a band of bohemian party animals known as the Merry Pranksters.

It has now been 50 years since Leary and Kesey began the long, strange trip, but there still seems to be some interest in this story. Three books about the era have already been published this year, including one by this reviewer. Now two more titles are coming out: "Acid Christ" by Mark Christensen, and "White Hand Society," by Peter Conners.

At the end of "Acid Christ," Christensen informs readers that they have just completed a "participatory biography," meaning his book is also about how Kesey "affected the life of the author personally and subjectively." He then congratulates himself for having come up with "the best new format idea ever."

Not really. Not even close.

This technique *might* have worked if Christensen had been part of the Kesey saga. But the only connection to his subject's life is the fact that he grew up in Oregon (in a later era) and had a cousin who hung out with Kesey in the mid-1970s, when "the Commander" had already begun his long slide into

irrelevance.

"Acid Christ" is most compelling when Christensen gets out of his own way and tells the story of Kesey's rapid rise and fall as one of most promising young writers of the '60s. But to get there we are forced to struggle through chapters of Christiansen's own misadventures with sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll — the unholy trinity of that decade and its messy aftermath.

Christensen employs an overheated, speedy prose style, one that has come to be known in some circles as "hysterical realism." This irreverent in-the-moment tone may have once worked for Wolfe or Hunter S. Thompson, but it quickly becomes tiresome when chronicling something that happened half a century ago. What we need now is reflection and analysis, not more stoned pseudo-profundity.

Conners, on the other hand, offers solid reporting and straightforward writing in his intimate account of Leary and Ginsberg's long and sometimes troubled relationship. History remembers Harvard Professor Richard Alpert (who would later travel to India and return as the spiritual teacher Ram Dass) as Leary's partner in a drug research project that would spin out both kicked off campus.

"White Hand Society" reminds us of the behind-the-scenes role Ginsberg played making Leary the "high priest" of the '60s drug culture.

In November 1960, when the unknown Leary invited Ginsberg to join the Harvard Psilocybin Proj-



ect, Ginsberg was already the most famous poet of the Beat generation. His breakthrough poem, "Howl," had already been published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of City Lights Bookstore; praised by the New York Times; and featured in a much-publicized obscenity trial, which Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti won.

Conners writes like a poet and researches like a scholar. He pored over hundreds of letters, FBI files and other primary sources to shed new light on these two avatars of altered consciousness.

He argues convincingly that Leary "would have just been some square Harvard professor" without the introductions and connections that Ginsberg provided. For better or worse, Leary took "the blessings of the King Bohemian" and scorched his way into the mind of America.

Don Lattin, who covered the religion beat at The Chronicle for many years, is the author of "The Harvard Psychedelic Club." E-mail him at books@sfgchronicle.com.