

# Actor to 'Medicine Head'

You're known as one of the great Cannabis heroes what do you think of that?

Well I don't know if im a hero or a villain, famous or infamous! I came late to Cannabis, I was twenty six when I had my first puff although I didn't even get high coz I didn't know how to inhale! I was a researcher so I had come to it purely academically. So when I heard a group of people were going to smoke cannabis at a party, I lugged my heavy duty tape recorder to the place and when I played it back when I got home all I'd got was a couple of girls giggling in a corner and I never got high but soon after I eventually did!



Lee at the legalise pot rally in 1967

It was 1963 in the time of swinging London and in February 1967 I was busted in the West End for a tiny bit of cannabis and I got a £30 fine! This helped spark my realisation that this was a bad law and I had learned in my experiences in South Africa that bad laws do exist, sometimes you can change them and sometimes you can't.

I remember being at the Legalise Pot Rally in 1967 during the Summer of Love where Allen Ginsberg chanted and I had a Zapata moustache, a caftan and floral decorations in my hair, I was one of the beautiful people being photographed and appeared on television and the papers, it was a memorable occasion.

Tell us about the Arts Lab, what was your involvement?

It was the time of Flower Power, the height of the hippy movement and I was very much part of it, I wrote for the underground press and I was a social activist, I'd won an Arts Council bursary as a playwright and helped Jim Haynes and Jack Moore form the Arts Lab which was a multimedia centre in Drury Lane which brought together alternative plays, films, music and food. It was the seedbed for a lot of the things I was to do later on.

How did you find writing and producing "Love Play"?

It was the time of sexual freedom and revolution and I'd written this play about all night characters, dreamers, no-hopers set in a dive in the West End. It lasted twelve underground performances, it was my brilliant successful failure and it left me feeling letdown, depressed and led me into an alchemical crisis.



Promo shot for Love Play

So how did you find yourself on the Portobello Road and what made you decide to use the name Alchemy?

Here I was an out of work actor, playwright, underground writer and dropout. The acid dream was over and in 1969 I helped along with Jim Haynes and the Arts Lab to organise the Alchemical Wedding at the Royal Albert Hall where Ken Kesey sat with the Hells Angels and John and Yoko did their Fluxus Art where they hid under a large white sheet on the stage where I sat nearby. That was such a wonderful and defining event that when I came to the Portobello Road I didn't know how to make a living and someone offered me a stall in an indoor market, I called it Alchemy.



As you were one of the pioneers of the Headshop, what were your experiences of having to battle the courts?

People used to come from all over to see the collection of over a hundred different types of cigarette papers as I was the first person in the UK to have such a collection.

So from starting off with oriental and eastern products we had a wide range of American smoking paraphernalia. During Margaret Thatcher's period there was a change in the law and by 1989 I was busted for selling papers, pipes, scales and other things.

It was dealt with at the magistrate's court and I received a three month jail sentence and a fine. I spent one night in a cell and was bailed, I had an Alchemy defence fund for which we had a benefit before the appeal at the London School of Economics where among others Benjamin Zephaniah, Mark Thomas and Arthur Smith appeared to show support and later that week the verdict was quashed because of ineluctable doubt. In the wake of this all the head shops started selling paraphernalia so I opened this up for a new generation



How did you find yourself as consultant of this now legendary club Megatripolis?

It was in the mid-nineties, the post-psychedelic rave culture, I first went to the club to hear a webcast with Timothy Leary who wasn't allowed in the country. I ended up bringing speakers to the club in the techno silence room. The first person I brought over was the legendary beat poet Allen Ginsberg; I introduced him on stage to an audience of over two thousand which was his last performance in London. I also brought Howard Marks over which was his first public speaking performance, Ed Rosenthal from the growers guides, John Beresford who spoke about the prisoners of war on drugs.

Whenever I introduced anyone on stage I always quoted Baba Ram Das "When you know how to listen, everyone is a guru" It was a very wonderful time for me.



Lee and Allen Ginsberg