

## **On getting it wrong and getting it right:**

### **Ronald Stark, LSD and the CIA**

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#### **Is History a fiction?**

In his best-seller of 1991, *Giordano Bruno and the Embassy Affair*, the late John Bossy claimed that Bruno spied for Queen Elizabeth's enforcer, Sir Francis Walsingham, at the French embassy in London. This was a 'surprise'. Could the celebrated Italian humanist philosopher, who was to be burned at the stake in Rome in 1600 as a heretic, have really been engaged in such a sordid and deadly enterprise? After Bossy's findings were strongly contested by other historians, he eventually conceded, 'I made some claims about facts which have turned out to be unwarranted'. Of his claim that Bruno was the embassy spy, code-named 'Henry Fagot', Bossy wrote, 'I thought so at the time, but have turned out to be mistaken'. Bossy, however, had dragged a lot of fascinating material out of the archives and into the public domain. After all, the embarrassment of having one's errors pointed out is, or should be, outweighed by the exhilaration of making new discoveries. Bossy held to his conviction that 'the duty of a historian is to tell true stories about the past'. That's how you do history.

Or is it? In postmodernist theory, historical 'truth' and 'knowledge' are seen as merely representing rival claims to power. Whenever history becomes a story – i.e. something contrived by a story-teller – it assumes the same status as a work of fiction, which can make no claim to be the 'truth'; and the power of story-telling is determined by the audience's desire to know that what is said is the truth. But, as history has shown all too often, the desires of mass audiences can be deflected and manipulated by powerful interests.

Take, for example, the conspiracy theory which holds that the psychedelic counter-culture of the 1960s was engineered by the CIA as part of a plot by a secret, global elite bent on mass mind-control. Variations of it have found favour on both sides of the political spectrum. For the Right, the psychedelic counter-culture undermined 'traditional values' such as patriarchy, nationalism and subservience to authority; for

elements of the Left, the 1960s hedonism of 'Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll' served as a distraction from political struggle and party discipline. To flesh out the theory, extra villains have been thrown in: Satanists, MI6, shrinks of the Tavistock Institute, the Grateful Dead, and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (whose Marxist musicologist, Theodor Adorno, is said to have secretly tutored the Beatles during their 'Hamburg period'), etc., etc.

My book of 2001, *Acid: A New Secret History of LSD*, has been referenced and quoted by a number of writers who promote this stuff. Regarding this as a dubious honour, I sought in my first ebook, *Acid Outlaws: LSD, Counter-Culture and Counter-Revolution* (first edition, August 2019),<sup>1</sup> to further distance my research from the conspiracy theories. But, as I will explain, I now know that I need to do more.

## **The CIA and LSD**

**B**ecause the CIA destroyed the operational files of its MK-Ultra 'mind-control' project in 1973, the extent of the Agency's involvement in the psychedelic counter-culture of the 1960s has always been difficult to determine. Nonetheless, leading figures of the counter-culture, notably 'LSD Guru' Timothy Leary, can hardly be discussed without reference to the CIA – not least because Leary had so much to say about it himself. In contrast to Leary, who courted publicity throughout his life (1920-96), Ronald Hadley Stark (1938-84), lived by secrecy and deception; he was, after all, running some of world's most productive underground LSD factories in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

My initial primary source for researching Stark was another American, Steve Abrams (1938-2012). When he first met Stark in London in 1969, Abrams had already encountered the CIA when his research at Oxford University into extra-sensory perception turned out to have received funding from a CIA front called the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology. Abrams' later research into THC (tetrahydrocannabinol, the main psychoactive part of cannabis) attracted the attention of the globe-trotting Ronald Stark. Abrams got to know Stark quite well and began to suspect that he was connected with either the CIA, the Mafia, or both. Stark's subsequent mis-adventures appeared to confirm Abrams' suspicions about a CIA connection.

The first to voice such suspicions publicly was actually Detective Inspector Richard Lee, head of the Operation Julie squad. On 26 March 1977, Lee mobilised 800 officers in England and Wales to arrest 130

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <<https://tinyurl.com/y42bobdk>> or <<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Acid-Outlaws-LSD-Counter-Culture-Counter-Revolution-ebook/dp/B07ZWP9YMN>>.

hippies suspected of LSD manufacture and distribution. Operation Julie's number one target, the brilliant chemist and psychedelic revolutionary, Richard Kemp, had been employed by Stark to make LSD at Stark's laboratories in Paris and Orleans. Stark was also chemicals procurer and money-launderer for the Leary-inspired Brotherhood of Eternal Love. After learning that Stark was in prison in Italy, Lee wanted to go and interview him but had been refused permission from 'on-high'. Lee felt his efforts to follow the international trails of the British LSD underground were being frustrated by an 'establishment'/security services 'cover-up'.

Lee's book, *Operation Julie: How the Undercover Police Team Smashed the World's Greatest Drugs Ring*, was published in 1978. Events the following year seemed to confirm Lee's suspicions. When Stark was imprisoned in Italy in 1975, he presented himself to fellow inmates of the terrorist Red Brigades as a Palestinian freedom fighter. He also told them he had contacts with armed groups in Lebanon (which was true: armed Shiite groups in Baalbek had supplied plane-loads of hash to Stark and his colleagues in the Brotherhood of Eternal Love). Stark, however, became a jail-yard snitch, passing information about the Red Brigades inmates to the Carabinieri and security services.

In March 1979, Stark used a get-out-jail-free card in an Italian appeals court. Judge Giorgio Florida described documents provided by Stark as 'an impressive series of scrupulously enumerated proofs' that Stark 'had entered the Middle East drug world in order to infiltrate armed organisations operating in that area and to gain contacts and information about European terrorist groups'. Stark couldn't, of course, say if he was CIA: to admit it would be breaking US law. Released on bail, Stark took flight and disappeared. He was next heard of in 1982, when he was busted for trafficking drugs in Amsterdam.

Post-1979 books highlight evidence and/or suspicions that Stark's involvement in LSD production was either part of a CIA operation, or tolerated by the agency as long as Stark was in a position to supply intelligence. The parapolitical 'classics' in this field are:

- Stewart Tendler and David May, *The Brotherhood of Eternal Love: From Flower Power to Hippie Mafia - The Story of the LSD Counterculture* (London: Cyan Communications, 1984; updated edition, updated edition 2007).
- Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, *Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD, the CIA, the Sixties and Beyond* (New York: Grove

- Press, 1985).<sup>2</sup>
- Philip Willan, *Puppetmasters: The Political Use of Terrorism in Italy* (London: Constable, 1991)

By the 1980s the Italian media were awash with stories of both real and imagined conspiracies at the heart of the corrupt Italian state. Following the kidnap and assassination of former Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades in 1978, a parliamentary commission set up to investigate the affair asked whether the CIA and agents of the Italian secret state sabotaged the hunt to rescue Moro from the 'People's Prison'; or worse, actually had a hand in the deed itself. Also there were suspicions, following Judge Florida's pronouncement, that Ronald Stark was in some way involved. According to the Moro Commission Report of early 1984:

'The US authorities have never admitted that Stark was an American agent, and moreover affirmed that they were seeking his arrest. However, no request for his extradition was ever made, while his cordial relations with other American officials are documented, both during his imprisonment and the period before his arrest'.

In May 1984, Stark, still a free man, died in the US of a cocaine-induced heart attack.

## **Tim Scully**

**I** sent a copy of my *Acid Outlaws* to Tim Scully, who was a most significant actor in the events unfolded in this story. Not only did he know Ronald Stark but he is also, as it turns out, a very reliable witness. In 1966, aged just 22, Scully was taken on as apprentice by the famous LSD chemist Owsley Stanley (AKA Bear Stanley) at a laboratory in Point Richmond, California. As well as making LSD, Scully and Bear Stanley worked for the Grateful Dead, providing the band with pioneering electronic gear, and participating in the 'Acid tests'. After LSD production was banned in various US states in 1966 and 1967, Bear Stanley retired; but Scully, who was a true believer in the power of LSD to revolutionise the world, carried on. Based in Windsor, California, Scully and fellow chemist Nick Sand (1941-2017) produced 3.6 million 'Orange Sunshine' trips for the Brotherhood of Eternal Love. (The Brotherhood have been labelled, somewhat unfairly, by authors Tandler and May as the 'Hippie Mafia'). In 1970 Scully withdrew from LSD production but he was still

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<sup>2</sup> Available as a free PDF at  
<[https://erowid.org/library/books\\_online/acid\\_dreams.pdf](https://erowid.org/library/books_online/acid_dreams.pdf)>.

arrested in the roundup of Brotherhood members by the FBI and DEA that took place in 1973. He was subsequently sentenced to twenty years imprisonment – later reduced to ten.

Nick Sand jumped bail, fled to Canada and carried on producing LSD for another 20 years. Scully was paroled in late 1979 and began a new successful career in computers, designing among other things biofeedback and interface systems for people with disabilities. Now retired, he is developing a project on the history of underground LSD manufacturing, and working on his memoirs.

In correspondence with me, Scully, pointed to a number of errors in my book regarding Stark and events in the USA. Scully's observations and the information he provided threw me into a new bout of research and fact-checking. Generously, he has given me permission to quote some of his material. For the second edition of *Acid Outlaws* I have reworked and extended those sections which deal with Stark and with LSD production in the US from the mid-1960s to the early '70s. Crucially, Scully has provided enough of a glimpse of Stark to pose some questions anew, and draw some new conclusions.

## **Who was Ronald Stark?**

**J**udge Florida's statement about an 'impressive series of scrupulously enumerated proofs' supporting Stark's claim to have been a spook all along can only be doubted if we allow for the possibility that the judge was corrupt (for which there is no evidence), or that he was fooled. *If* the evidence on which Florida made his decision is discounted, then what remains is the following:

1) statements by Stark's associates about his own claims to have had 'CIA connections';

2) suspicions held by the British Operation Julie police, Italian investigative journalists and others about Stark's US Embassy contacts in London and elsewhere;

3) conjectures concerning Stark's activities and the people he was associated with: Californian psychedelic revolutionaries, Italian terrorists, English anarchists, Arab revolutionaries, Afghan hash-smugglers, Timothy Leary's milieu, etc., etc. – precisely the sort of people the CIA would be interested in.

But none of this intriguing stuff amounts to solid, corroborated evidence. Tim Scully thinks the judge was fooled; and for that there *is* evidence. Stark could act the part – he could charm – and, most importantly, was very good at faking documentation.

So why did Stark, after he was deported from Holland back to the US in 1982, never have to answer outstanding charges relating to LSD, money-laundering and the Brotherhood of Eternal Love? The answer, according to Scully, is that Stark had it planned all along: feed the Italians enough bullshit to get out of prison, and stay incognito and free until the statute of limitations ran out for the charges in the US.

Though it is possible – even likely – that Stark had dealings with people connected with the CIA, I suspect that if CIA agents had ever tried to do business with him or recruit him, he would have endeavoured to fool them just like he fooled so many others. As Scully says, ‘Ron Stark was a very charming, playful, very intelligent pathological liar and con artist. He fooled me for many years.’ And, beyond the grave, Stark’s legend has continued to fool people, including me.

A more complete picture of the trickster has to be left to Tim Scully, who hopes – after he has completed his memoirs – to eventually write a biography of Stark.

Most of the factual content of the first edition of *Acid Outlaws* generally still stands, but now there are more facts to consider. The new light they shed dissolves the previous ‘bigger picture’ of Stark’s activities as tolerated or driven by CIA. What emerges from the fog of information wars is a new perspective on Stark, no less fascinating or disturbing: Stark as trickster who could fool almost anyone. I say ‘almost’ because Steve Abrams told me about an LSD tripping contest between Stark and the psychiatrist R. D. Laing in 1970, which Stark lost. At the peak of the trip Stark tried to ‘recruit’ the Glaswegian doctor to front his criminal enterprise. Laing told him ‘Get the fuck out of my house’ and threw him out into the street.