Documenting the [Im]Possible

*The Bad Trip,* James Riley(Icon Books)

James Riley's book is subtitled 'Dark Omens, New Worlds and the End of the Sixties', which just about sums it up. On one level it's a book full of what is to be expected – Charles Manson, Altamont, acid trips, protests and love-ins – but it is also much wider-ranging and more interesting than that suggests.

Riley is excellent at making links between unexpected strands of the counterculture. So, we get Michal Moorcock's novels, Illuminati conspiracies, Kenneth Anger's films, Jeff Nuttall's *Bomb Culture*, J.G. Ballard's novels of 'inner space', along with *Easy Rider* and *Performance*. We get The Church of Satan, *Vanishing Point*, John Mitchell's Atlantis and long straight tracks; and we also get Joan Didion, Hunter S. Thompson and Peter Whitehead, each in their own way documenting the hippies and voicing their suspicions about how it was all going to fall apart before very long.

And it did. Drug-addled brains, sunburnt ignorance and paranoia combined to find secret messages in the music of the Beatles, summon up musical demons, and produce artefacts such as *Performance* (a 'shamanic gangster film'), not to mention lose interest in protest and peace and love, turning instead to introspection, unease and eventually embrace violence and murder or a return to the 'normality' of Western Society.

But even as the alternative worlds fell apart, there remained a world where fiction and reality blurred. A world where the unattainable could be achieved by addiction and desire, a world that liberated others by running 'acid trips' to dose music fans, a world where poetry sold out London's Albert Hall, and Michael Moorcock's polysexual assassin Jerry Cornelius could not only time travel but be regarded as the epitome of a groovy hero, despite any violent or sexist traits.

Meanwhile the two bikers in *Easy Rider* had a good trip on the back of a dodgy drug deal until a couple of locals shot them dead, the Hells Angels publicly bludgeoned a Rolling Stones fan to death whilst the band looked on and continued to play, and whoever was running the world – whether Illuminati, Masons, closet Nazis or not – simply carried on running the world as they wanted, happy to ignore any idealistic challenges to power.

Gradually, the hippies disappeared, film and rock stars put gates on their big houses in the Hollywood Hills, and the cultural dissection commenced. Occult interests informed the likes of *Witchfinder General*, Polanski's *Macbeth* and *Blood on Satan's Claw*, not to mention the propagation of the ongoing cult of Manson in numerous cut-and-paste books, songs and visual art.

Riley charts the end of the Sixties as a descent in to Hell, and then a resurrection of sorts in a chapter called 'The New Jerusalem', where he sees the counterculture take a reality check and come to its senses, whilst still trying to change the world and enter the Age of Aquarius, build a man-made Heaven. For him, many of the resulting 'rituals, sacred spaces and magical objects offer[ed] points of psychic refuge', and the way the Sixties and early Seventies have become a kind of 'time capsule' is a good thing, which 'make the sixties accessible for those who weren't there and for those who can't remember the decade'.

It's important, he says, to remember because of what didn't happen as much as what did. Although the era and this book are full of positive achievements and hopeful possibilities, in the end:

 Whether offering a celebratory of sinister representation of the
 period, the sixties emerge [...] as either an idyll lost to the past due
 to the compromises of the present or a grand project that collapsed
 under the weight of its own excesses.

*The Bad Trip* is a kind of cultural astronomy, charting the movements and orbits of both light and dark stars, meteors appearing in the sky, and the effect of black holes imploding. Riley notes achievements and failures in this readable, somewhat maverick but clearheaded history, underpinned by a realistic optimism. As Riley declares:' Somewhere among all the wreckage, we might find a map to a better world.'

Rupert Loydell