Ken Kesey Moves in “Magic Trip” Movie
Levi Asher · Thursday, September 15th, 2011

*Magic Trip*, a new film by Alex Gibney and Alison Ellwood, tells the story of novelist Ken Kesey’s 1964 road trip across America in a painted bus with a troupe of fanciful hippies and legendary beatnik Neal Cassady at the wheel.

This bus trip was immortalized in Tom Wolfe’s 1968 bestseller *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which is also currently in production as a Gus Van Sant film (this will presumably come out near the same time as the long-awaited film of *On The Road*, which means two major Hollywood films featuring Neal Cassady’s driving skills will hit the screens at the same time). *Magic Trip*, a modest and straightforward documentary, has at least one claim to authenticity over the eventual Van Sant work: it presents the actual film footage produced by the camera-wielding hippies as they drove across the country in 1964.
The film gets off to a good start, emphasizing in the early scenes an important point that has sometimes been forgotten amidst all the psychedelic Wolfean hype. When Ken Kesey conceived this crazy trip, he was one of the most celebrated and promising young novelists in America, and the bus trip was initiated as an audacious literary experiment above all. It’s hard to exaggerate how much potential energy the young Stanford-educated novelist held in his hands after the success of his 1962 first novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. The other hot writers of the moment were Philip Roth, John Updike, Norman Mailer and Joseph Heller, and *Cuckoo’s Nest* had placed Kesey directly in that class.

But something kept the Oregon kid from strutting around in a suit and embracing conventional literary stardom, and he would risk (and, ultimately, lose) his reputation on the set of adventures to follow. *Magic Trip* emphasizes the fact that Kesey’s second novel *Sometimes a Great Notion* was entering its pre-launch publicity phase just at the moment that Kesey decided to travel very noisily across America in a colorful bus; indeed, the bus trip was Kesey’s publicity push for his new novel.

The fact that Kesey must have envisioned his adventure as a literary gesture is often neglected, though it may be the most remarkable fact of all about his much-discussed Furthur/Acid Test scene (well, the fact that the Grateful Dead emerged from within
this scene is remarkable too). I have no idea what exactly Kesey was thinking when he
got his big idea for the bus trip (other than “let’s go have some fun”), but it’s clear
that he was aiming for a big California-based American movement, a new Chautauqua,
a mobile version of the previous century’s New England Transcendentalism.

*Magic Trip* sticks mostly to the script familiar to anyone who’s read Tom Wolfe’s book.
There are LSD freakouts, Barry Goldwater jokes, visits to the home of young *Larry
McMurtry in Texas* and an anti-climactic reunion between Neal Cassady and a morose
Jack Kerouac at a New York City party. As always when recounting the Kesey/Electric
Kool-Aid legend, the psychedelia aspect is a bit overstated in this film. I like to think
that the psychedelic drugs were less central to the actual experience as envisioned by
Kesey and his partner-in-crime Ken Babbs than they became in the Tom Wolfe legend,
and I also suspect that the main appeal of all the LSD tripping for Kesey was not to
explore the boundaries of consciousness so much as to induce chaos and fearful
vulnerability among his fellow travelers, so as to allow him to wring the maximum
emotional reaction from each player in his twisted tale.

*Magic Trip* is a satisfying retelling of the famous story, and I won’t be surprised if Gus
Van Sant’s version turns out less satisfying, once it hits the screens. I do wish that
*Magic Trip* told us more about Kesey’s later works and adventures, like *Twister*, a
controversial play based on *The Wizard of Oz* that he developed gradually during the
last phase of his life. How did *Twister* fit into the big picture of psychedelic West Coast
transcendentalism? Maybe we’ll need yet another film, a third one, to someday explain
this part of the legend.

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