The Believer

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ELECTRICAL BANANAS

AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE GREAT BANANA HOAX OF 1967

DISCUSSED: *Bananadine, Underground Newspapers, The Proposed Banana Labeling Act of 1967, Merriam-Webster's 2004 "Word of the Year," Thomas Frank, Yellow Electric Vibrators, The Acid Casualty Theory of Rock History*

In June 1967, journalist Sara Davidson visited New York City to report on a "three day cosmic love-in" taking place in Central Park. The young participants in this "hippie happening" costumed themselves in a medley of outrageous and sexually ambiguous fashions: tattered jeans and flannels, western boots, Benjamin Franklin glasses, Indian gear, and tie-dyed T-shirts. But especially noteworthy to Davidson was the sight of a young hippie in a wizard hat, selling bananas on an East Village corner. The bananas were being sold for ten cents each, with a three-cent deposit on the skins. "Anyone who heard [folksinger] Donovan sing 'Mellow Yellow' knew why," she remembered. "Smoking banana peels could get you high. Outtaaaaa-sight!"

Throughout that spring and early summer, the notion that one could get high from smoking "banana joints" circulated widely, first in the underground press but also in the mainstream media and even among some gullible federal officials. Recipes for "bananadine powder"—the boiled, dried-up insides of banana peels, which was rolled into tobacco paper and smoked like marijuana—were frequently reprinted, and some clever entrepreneurs on the West Coast founded their own mail-order company that sold banana peels. "I hope to make $100,000 in the next six months on bananas," boasted

Illustration by Tony Millionaire

a partner in the firm. At a gathering in Central Park's Sheep Meadow, hippies playfully regarded bananas as sacred totems; they gave a "banana pledge" ("one banana, under Banana, with liberty and justice for all...") signaled to each other with a banana salute ("middle finger, up and bent") and rallied around a large, wooden replica of a banana. *Time* and *Newsweek* both ran stories about the craze, and a New Jersey congressman named Frank Thompson, Jr. facetiously proposed the Banana Labeling Act of 1967, which would have required stickers on bananas that said "Caution: Banana Peel Smoking May Be Injurious to Your Health." "From bananas it is a short but shocking step to other fruits," Thompson intoned. "Today the cry is 'burn, banana, burn.' Tomorrow, we may face strawberry smoking, dried apricot inhaling, or prune puffing."

On May 26, 1967, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a press release indicating that scientific analysis of several banana concoctions failed to produce "detectable quantities of known hallucinogenics." One investigator later recalled, "We took thirty pounds of bananas into the lab, cooked, scraped, and did everything else to them that the underground papers told us to do. But it was a put-on."

Perhaps it's not surprising that historians have yet to examine the Great Banana Hoax of 1967. But a close look at the fad from an epistemological perspective—focusing on the hoax's mysterious origins, meanings, and speedy cultural infiltration—underscores some of the important accomplishments of the all-but-forgotten underground press of the 1960s. If, as the *New York Times* reports, 2004 was the year that weblogs "went from obscurity to ubiquity in a blink," the banana rumors signaled the arrival of a kind of proto-blogosphere. In fact, just about everything the blogs are credited with today—democratizing the media, rapidly circulating information, setting an agenda for the mainstream press, and creating communities among like-minded groups—was accomplished on a smaller scale nearly forty years ago by the brash and saucy, threadbare papers of the underground press.

Of course, smoking bananas could also be lots of fun. In the counterculture's calculus of values, this was no small thing.

Briefly touted as Britain's answer to Bob Dylan, the Scottish-born folk balladeer Donovan released his single "Mellow Yellow" in Europe in November 1966, and it arrived stateside in January 1967. A short, jazzy song that featured a whispered cameo from Paul McCartney, it contained the lyric: "*Electrical banana / Is gonna be a sudden craze / Electrical banana / Is bound to be the very next phase / They call it Mellow Yellow.*" According to rock critic Jim DeRogatis, "The tune was inspired by the rumor that you could get high smoking dried banana peels." But in fact Donovan's song predated the first public mention of the banana rumor by several months, and even during its heyday, the lyric's meaning was subject to speculation. When *Newsweek* magazine claimed that "Banana highs were heralded by the British pop singer Donovan," a reader wrote back with a correction. "Donovan is a fan of the Youngbloods, a new rock group out of California," she claimed. "Said group has an [electric] organist... by the name of Banana. *That* is where Donovan got 'electrical banana.'"

Meanwhile, Donovan stoked curiosity about the song by refusing to answer any questions about it. "People asked me all the time," he recalled. In reply, he would simply smile and sing, "They call me Mellow Yellow." But Donovan eventually confessed that the lyric was a sly reference to a yellow electric vibrator that he saw advertised in the back pages of a magazine—a plausible claim, seeing as double entendres figured in other Donovan songs from the era, most notably in "Superlungs My Supergirl" ("She's only fourteen but she knows how to draw").

In fact, the banana rumor originated in California in late 1966: the same year that Ronald Reagan was elected governor, Walt Disney died, and the Beach Boys traded in their striped shirts, Pendletons, and surfboards to record *Pet Sounds,* their vaguely psychedelic, orchestral pop masterpiece about lost innocence. This was also when

LSD began to garner a great deal of lurid media attention (although, paradoxically, the drug was mostly a phenomenon among the hip intelligentsia). While some of the era's most important, drug-inspired pop albums were released in 1965 and 1966 (among them, Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited*, and the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*), these records generally struck a prepsychedelic consciousness. As literature professor Nick Bromell put it, "Rock 'n' roll brought psychedelics into popular culture even for the millions of Americans who never knew what marijuana smelled like."

All of which is to say that a certain naïveté about drugs, along with a giddy sense of awe and wonder, probably fueled the first experiments in banana smoking. "Country" Joe McDonald, leader of the Bay Area jug band Country Joe and the Fish, and his drummer, Gary "Chicken" Hirsch, are primarily responsible for setting the hoax in motion. McDonald recalls that while driving to a show at the Kitsilano Theater in Vancouver, Canada, Hirsch "said he had just figured out that banana peels have [chemical] qualities similar to marijuana. His theory was that if you dried out a banana peel and smoked the white pulp on the underside, you would get high. At the time, the band was living on peanut-butter-and-banana sandwiches. All the ingredients were cheap. We were just throwing the peels away, so this sounded like a great idea."

No doubt, Hirsch's suggestion to smoke banana peels sounds peculiar, but it was merely an episode in his long history of experimentation with folk recipes for getting high. Previously, he'd been interested in Scotch Broom (Cytisus scoparius), a noxious, weedy shrub that's commonly found on California roadsides. In the mid-1960s Hirsch filled dozens of mason jars with Scotch Broom, carefully labeling each of them according to the location and date upon which the weed was picked. Sometimes he simply dried out various parts of the plant before he smoked it, other times he cured it in brandy first, but to no avail. "I was sure I was just preparing it wrong," he later said. Another time he had a misadventure with the pickling spice mace. After consuming a massive amount of the stuff, he found himself unable to stop burping for several days.[1] On yet another occasion, he mixed a piece of cotton tissue that he found inside a nasal decongestant inhaler with some chewing gum, and found that as a result, he couldn't fall asleep. Hirsch decided to experiment with bananas after hearing someone say they contained trace amounts of a chemical that acted as a "natural tranquilizer." When he recalled that his family had long used bananas as a bedtime relaxant, the idea seemed "almost logical."

So before their performance, Country Joe and the Fish bought some bananas, scraped out the pith inside the peels, and laid it out to dry in the back room of a nearby head shop. Later they smoked the banana scrapings like joints, according to plan... but they also drank from a bottle of water backstage, in which someone had "just dissolved a hundred tabs of LSD." When the acid-laced water took its effect, the band members may have attributed their high to the bananas. Or they may have been clowning around. In any event, Country Joe remembers everyone saying, "Man, this shit is really working! I'm getting really ripped! This stuff is incredible!" Hirsch recalls the scene as "hysterically funny." Soon afterward, they returned to the Bay Area to play at a benefit concert for the legalization of marijuana, where the band passed out hundreds of banana joints and told the crowd that banana peels could get you high. To this day, McDonald says he really believed what he was saying, whereas Hirsch admits he was "pretty stoned most of the time anyway [so] determining the effectiveness of smoking banana skins was pretty tough." Nevertheless, he remembers "just running around telling everyone that it worked.... Even if it didn't work, it was great fun."

A few months later, on March

[1] It may be the case that mace does in fact lead to a hallucinogenic experience. In his book *Magic Mushrooms and Other Highs: From Toad Slime to Ecstasy,* counterculture veteran Paul Krassner printed a testimonial from someone who ingested "two full teaspoons" of French's mace. Two hours later, he claims he saw "funny bright lights" and heard "wobbly nonsensical voices." Anyone interested in duplicating this experiment is encouraged to contact the author with his or her results at *mcmill@fas.harvard.edu.*

3, 1967, the banana rumor was passed in print for the first time in the Berkeley *Barb*—one of the earliest, best known, and most influential underground newspapers of the 1960s.[2] Ed Denson, who wrote a regular music column for the *Barb* and also served as Country Joe and the Fish's manager, said that the night before, while "feeling mellow," he lit up a banana joint. He added that he'd been "turned on to bananas" while in Vancouver, and offered a recipe for turning banana pith into a marijuana-like substance. Denson says he always knew the recipe was specious. "I was fully involved in perpetrating the hoax when I wrote the article," he recently confessed. But in the very same issue of the *Barb,* an unusual letter to the editor appeared from someone who claimed to have seen an undercover officer from the Berkeley Police Department "lurking in the fresh produce section" of a local grocery store. "I would guess that they have been assigned to observe persons buying large quantities of bananas," the writer claimed. He went on to explain that bananas have psychoactive properties, and he predicted that possession of large amounts of bananas will soon become a criminal offense. The letter was signed, "A careful shopper and Co-op member."

We'll probably never know the identity of this "careful shopper" (Denson insists it wasn't him). Possibly someone else at the *Barb* helped to perpetuate the ruse, but more likely, word about bananas had already hit the street. The following day's *San Francisco Chronicle* carried the banner headline "Kicks for Hippies: The Banana Turn-On." "Bananas—the ordinary bananas found in every grocery store—may be the new trend in the psychedelic world," the article proclaimed. The sensationalized piece recounted the "careful shopper's" anonymous letter to the *Barb* and even included a quote from a Berkeley police chief, who denied having any undercover cops assigned to local produce sections. Nevertheless, the story prompted an immediate run on bananas. The day the story broke, McDonald scoured the produce departments at local stores before finally concluding, "you couldn't get a banana in the Bay Area that day."

Those who would deflate the counterculture's subversive power typically point out that the youth rebellion was triggered "at least as much by developments in mass culture… as changes at the grassroots." Thomas Frank put the case most forcefully in his 1997 book *The Conquest of Cool*. Because the youth revolt was led by rock stars and celebrity icons, whose messages were transmitted by film, television and radio, the borders between populist rebellion ("authentic") and commodified trend ("fake") are said to be indecipherable. In this instance, it doesn't take a sleuth to point out that a certain amount of artifice was built into the banana-smoking rumor from the beginning. After all, it was a *hoax*. And although Donovan never intended "Mellow Yellow" as a massive put-on, it is hard to imagine bananas could have captured so much of the countercultural imagination if his song hadn't been soaring through the airwaves.[3] But in fact the banana rumor was primarily circulated through dozens of underground

[2] By some fluke, probably the first printed reference to connect bananas, drugs, and the avant-garde appeared a few years earlier in the quasi-pornographic journal *Fuck You: A Magazine of the Arts.* Unlike most of the so-called "underground" papers of the 1960s (which were in fact widely distributed) *Fuck You* was truly an *underground* publication. Crudely mimeographed onto colorful granatext and wire-stitched by hand, its masthead boasted that it was "EDITED, PUBLISHED & PRINTED BY ED SANDERS AT A SECRET LOCATION IN THE LOWER EAST SIDE, NEW YORK CITY, U.S.A." According to one critic, it "was available just at a small number of stores, hidden behind the counter, and only those in the know could find it." In May 1963, Sanders dedicated Vol. 3, No. 5 of *Fuck You* to, among other things, "dope thrill banana rites." The magazine was always flush with in jokes, but Sanders left no clues as to what this curious turn-of-phrase may have meant. When I recently asked Sanders several detailed questions about this via email, I got this vinegary reply: "There is absolutely nothing relating to the hippie capitalist phenomenon known as bananadine [in] the reference in the May '63 issue of the magazine."

[3] Others may have made a connection between the banana rumors and another rock production of the era: the Velvet Underground's first record, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (sometimes called "the banana album.") In the original packaging, the record sleeve featured a banana with a stick-on peel that could be pulled away to reveal the bare fruit beneath it. The album was released in January 1967, but Andy Warhol designed the image in May 1966, so there's no way it could have been connected to the banana hoax. However, the banana fad may have given the Velvet's cover an ironic tinge, since their dark, proto-punk image and sound is frequently characterized as a conscious reaction *against* the excesses of West Coast hippiedom.

newspapers, whose adversarial outlook and political mission were fairly explicit.

At the most basic level, underground papers performed this function by attuning readers to local happenings that helped to define the hip community, including trends, protests, rallies, concerts, and readings. Information about community services—such as free clinics, youth hostels, and food or clothing co-ops—mingled with practical tips and guidelines on how to hitchhike, where to hang out, or what drugs to take (or avoid). Many underground papers featured book, record, and film reviews, and a few even ran advice columns. As media activist Jerry Rubin once crowed, "the underground press's role was to… define an alternative community and give it a voice and a consciousness and an identity. It did those things pretty well."

By the time of the banana rumors, most locally based underground papers were well positioned to report on trends happening in faraway parts of the country—but this hadn't always been the case. The original undergrounds of the 1960s—the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the Berkeley *Barb*, the San Francisco *Oracle*, East Lansing's *The Paper*, and New York's *East Village Other*—began by focusing on their own communities. Michael Kindman, who spearheaded *The Paper*, recalled that his effort began "in something of a void," as a "rather limited alternative" to Michigan State University's tepid campus newspaper. Art Kunkin founded the *Free Press,* he said, because he "wanted a paper that would draw together all the diverse elements in the [Los Angeles] community," especially poets, artists, and habitués of local coffeehouses. Even the *East Village Other*—born in the media capital of the world—trumpeted its provincial mission in its first issue; it would cater "to the new citizenry of the East Village." As a result, the papers initially thrived in relative isolation from the bohemian enclaves taking shape in other regions.

However, when a cluster of underground papers banded together to form the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) in June 1966, they literally multiplied their potential audience. Somewhat similar to the Associated Press (AP) in the aboveground media, UPS facilitated the free exchange of articles, news stories and reviews among subscribing papers, and it drew a broad range of New Left, counterculture, and youth-oriented papers into its fold. It could not have emerged at a more propitious moment. As Seattle *Helix* journalist Walt Crowley recalled, in the months after UPS's founding, underground newspapers appeared in cities and campuses "like mushrooms after a spring rain." (*Time* magazine commented on exactly the same phenomenon, only it had the papers "popping up like weeds.") By early 1967, about thirty papers subscribed to UPS, with a total circulation of perhaps 250,000 and (as one record executive noted) "a tremendous pass-along readership."

Abe-Kido…

Despite its rather grandiose name, the Underground Press Syndicate wasn't without its problems; it described itself, in a classic oxymoron, as an "anarchistic organization." Its staff rotated several times, and its more ambitious goals, of linking papers with Telex machines, soliciting national advertising revenue, and assisting in underground press distribution, failed to materialize. There were also allegations of ego-tripping, financial mismanagement, and bad faith, and in March 1968, one of its organizers apologized to member papers, declaring: "In short, the whole operation has been thoroughly fucked up." Nevertheless, testimonials from several underground writers suggest that UPS coordinated the exchange of papers fairly well. By freely circulating articles, columns, graphics, and cartoons, the underground papers were suddenly able to take their readers on

a much larger cultural journey than they'd originally envisaged.

In addition to linking geographically separated communities, in late 1966 the underground press was also emerging as the youth movement's most important mechanism of internal communication. It was the main site where radicals ascribed significance to their activities, and unlike most mass media outlets, the underground press typically encouraged a "horizontal" conversation among its readers—that is, rather than always showcasing the thinking and writing of luminaries, underground rags typically opened their pages to anyone who could muster the energy to write about something. Said one scholar, "Certainly, no individual was to gain more 'status' from writing in the underground than from reading it." Editors rarely exercised the discretion that their title implied, for fear of being labeled "elitist" or "professional." Although a few notable personalities helped the Banana Hoax along, the most important purveyors of the rumor were ordinary participants in the youth revolt who simply took advantage of their easy access to grassroots papers.

As *Newsweek* later recounted, underground papers started reprinting the *Barb*'s recipe for Mellow Yellow "almost before anyone could peel a banana." The hoax made its way to Texas via two newspapers, the Austin *Rag* and Dallas's *Notes from the Underground*. The *Rag* reprinted the "careful shopper's" letter to the *Barb*, as well as a giddy piece from the San Francisco *Oracle* that made a variety of comically pedantic, pseudoscientific claims about bananas. Two *East Village Other* editors fibbed that *they* were the ones who had discovered psychoactive properties in bananas. Abbie Hoffman (back then still going by "Abbott") passed along his own personal recipe in the Worcester *Punch*. "Bananas are the new craze," he said. "Mellow Yellow—the word's out." Detroit's *Fifth Estate* circulated a recipe for Mellow Yellow that first appeared in the *Los Angeles Free Press*. "Yes, banana-powder works," it proclaimed. "Two or three bombers will get you stoned out of your skull. A toke or a joint will give you a beautiful subtle *mellow* high—Makes the universe into a tranquil delight for an hour!"

Several papers also ran advertisements from a company called Mellow Yellow, which sold "100% LEGAL, PURE BANANA." "Made by hippies in SF's Haight-Ashbury," who mailed their product "in beautiful psychedelic envelopes," the enterprise was said to be staffed by a lawyer, an accountant, a printer, a wholesaler, and an art director. Elsewhere, merchants sold yellow pipes that were made to resemble bananas and T-shirts emblazoned with the blue logo for the United Fruit Company. Some people even sang comical banana ditties (as in "I went shopping at the A&P / But they didn't have any grass or LSD / So I peeled a banana and got so high / I thought I was actually going to fly"). The Electric Prunes, an acid-rock band from southern California, wrote a song called "The Great Banana Hoax." Before long, "mellow yellow" was being used by underground press writers as an adjective (one record reviewer referred to the "luscious mellow yellowness" of Moby Grape's debut album) and as a proper noun (to describe banana powder itself, as well as events where people gathered to smoke it. For instance, Berkeley undergrads once gathered on the steps of Sproul Hall for "a mass Mellow Yellow.")

Abe-Kido!!

Most underground papers seemed well aware of their ability to generate excitement; a common cliché was that "While the *New York Times* reported history, the alternative press created history." But in addition to self-consciously spreading the banana rumor, underground newspapers also reported on how the phenomenon spread across the country with bona fide news stories. The Austin *Rag* even devoted

its front page to the misadventures of two young Texans who may have been the only people ever arrested for possession of dried banana pith. Pulled over while speeding, they were caught trying to hide a pipe and a tin foil wrapper that contained the brown, powdery substance. ("It's bananas, sir.") Hauled off to jail, interrogated, and held overnight, they were finally released after a Dallas narcotics officer explained the new banana rumor to the arresting officer.

The hoopla around electrical bananas probably owed much to the power of suggestion; that is, to a receptive state of mind, it seems plausible that smoking bananas could cause a mild high or a relaxed disposition. But this scarcely begins to explain the comical, even absurd enthusiasm with which young people touted bananas—to the point where, as mentioned above, a "raggle-taggle mob brandishing a giant three-foot-long mock banana" once snake-danced through New York's Central Park, chanting "Ba-nan-a! Ba-nan-a! Ba-nan-a!" At another rally in Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park, someone reportedly sat atop a bronze statue of the famous engineer Alexander Lyman Holley and "sang calypso praise to the banana gods." Here, possibly, was the true source of the banana high: While lacking in hallucinogenic properties, bananas intoxicated youths with their modernist-flavored ability to bewilder and irritate defenders of the established culture.

The simple fact that bananas were legal (and unlike marijuana, could not plausibly be made illegal) produced considerable *jouissance*. It is probably not a coincidence that the counterculture took shape at a time when America's marijuana laws were most severe. Sociologists have noted that as drug use rose in the 1960s, "an increasing number of college youth experienced harassment by officials. Such repression led to a delegitimation of institutional authority, radicalizing youth along the way." As a *Fifth Estate* writer observed in December 1966, drug laws against pot had the perverse effect of criminalizing the behavior of "thousands of innocent, truth-seeking people who otherwise have no connection with the world of crime." Meanwhile, growing legions of people who actually used drugs couldn't help but grimace at the painful contortions of fact and logic that accompanied official statements about them. As one disaffected youth explained, such government-speak was all the more "painful because growing numbers of young people are suffering in prison because of such ignorance."[4]

What's more, in the early 1960s, marijuana was still linked in the public imagination with Mexican immigrants, poor blacks, jazz musicians, and beatniks—minorities and subcultures that were threatening to mainstream America. Bananas, on the other hand, were ubiquitous; here youths found a potentially corrupting influence on American life right out in the open. Thus the undisguised glee with which many youths greeted the banana rumors. "Do you realize what this means?? Do you???" the *Los Angeles Free Press* asked. "Everybody can get high, anytime they want to from now on!—You can light up a banana joint in the street, at the freakout, in public, anywhere, anywhere, wheee!" Abbie Hoffman was likewise enamored. Banana highs were "legal, cheap, and you can blow your mind on the process alone," he said. "Just think of it, United Fruit Company peddles dope!" Marvin Garson, a *Village Voice* columnist, observed that bananas could henceforth be used to taunt the police. Whenever an officer stopped a youth to ask what he or she was smoking, the teen could reply, "It's all right, offi-

[4] So profound was the youth culture's skepticism over official pronouncements against drugs that one underground press writer sketched a one-act play in response to the FDA's attempts to sink the banana rumors. It opens with "Lyndon Straight" encountering his friend, "Timothy Hippie," who is lying down in the apartment, smiling pleasantly. Thinking he knows what's up, Straight says, "I thought you didn't have any pot."

"I don't, I'm flying on bananas."

"Oh come on!" Straight replies. "You know what the FDA said about bananas."

"I know, but I'm still stoned out of my skull," Hippie says. At this, Straight turns indignant. "Now do you think a responsible government agency would mislead the American public?... Now look, they had this real scientific test with all kinds of equipment...." But Straight's remarks fall literally upon deaf ears. Timothy Hippie is too zonked to follow the conversation or offer a coherent reply; instead he drifts in and out of consciousness, loses track of time, announces that he has "the munchies" and mistakes a nearby pile of bananas for "weird looking snakes." Clearly the bananas worked for him!

cer, I'm just smoking bananas. *I smoke 'em to get high, you know*."

Also attractive to youths was the degree to which the banana rumors seemed to bypass rational thought. That bananas already held a somewhat indelicate position in American humor and wordplay was one thing; the possibility that they could get you stoned was something else altogether, and hippies delighted in the thought that something so healthy and commonplace—something that was aggressively marketed to children, no less—could be a source of such worry and bemusement. In fusing avant-gardism and social agitation, Mellow Yellow's champions acted in what Peter Braunstein calls a "countercultural mode" that "reveled in tangents, metaphors, unresolved contradictions [and] conscious ruptures of logic and reason." Whenever youths decorated themselves in Chiquita stickers, held smoke-ins on university steps or in public parks, or crowded around oversized banana totems, they were functioning as "life actors" in their own theater of the absurd.

That bananas were deployed to flout conventional authority is clear. But the fad also contributed to an informal process of socialization, as Mellow Yellow smoke-ins brought people into proximity with one another and provided an arena where they could become politicized. Ideals deeply felt in the New Left and the counterculture—the existential call to action, participatory democracy, a loathing of hypocrisy and a rejection of all things puritanical—may have been communicated to people at first drawn simply to the playful camaraderie that fueled the banana hoax. To put it another way, the Great Banana Hoax created what sociologists call a *liminal* space, a literal border area between the counterculture and straight society. By smoking banana joints, youths could participate in a hippie ritual without undertaking a significant amount of risk. Meanwhile they entered a process where the mundane spaces of everyday life were suddenly transformed into arenas of cultural experimentation.

The banana rumors fizzled out about as quickly as they came to the fore. In fact it's remarkable that while the Great Banana Hoax unfolded as a major story in the underground press in the spring of 1967, not a single underground journalist seems to have examined the hoax in retrospect. One imagines purveyors of the rumor may have been chagrined after it was disproved, but the lack of commentary on electrical bananas after mid-1967 probably owed much to the new left and counterculture's changing priorities. As the federal government stepped up its crackdown on protestors, the Vietnam War intensified, and Black Power radicals introduced the topic of armed struggle to the movement, the underground papers steadily became more militant and less playful. For many young journalists, exposing American society as rotten at its core seemed a higher calling than freaking out the squares.

Magnum P.I. Wrestling the Nemean Lion

Nevertheless, the underground press continued to grow at an astonishing rate. By 1969 there were several hundred youth-identified campus and community newspapers in the United States, with a combined circulation of perhaps three million, and a readership many times that number. Never before in American history had a social movement been bolstered by such an elaborate mechanism for disseminating alternative news and opinion, and the only thing to surpass it has been the internet (albeit by a considerable margin). Decades before weblogs began directing attention to issues that otherwise would have remained *sub rosa*, the underground press transformed local phenomena into national trends; and before electronically based PAC's proved that they could mobilize great masses of disaffected Americans, the raggle-taggle

community newspapers of the 1960s brought a sense of cohesion and community to a sprawling rebellion. The underground press also served as an agent of mass recruitment. In self-consciously hyping the banana fad—by eagerly passing along the latest bananadine concoctions, by celebrating Mellow Yellow smoke-ins, and even by providing hip merchants with space to advertise their banana wares—they spread the antics of West Coast hippies to scattered pockets of bohemia throughout the country, and crafted an entry point into the counterculture for untold multitudes.

But most importantly, the underground newspapers of the 1960s gave sanction to thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that were elsewhere greatly frowned upon. They exemplified a radical culture and articulated a coherent set of values that were alternative to those in the mainstream. Additionally, these radical values set in motion ideas, trends, fads, and mythologies for youths to emulate, modify, spread, or squash (as they saw fit)… and they did so in a grassroots fashion. Like the blogosphere, the underground press's most distinctive feature was its egalitarianism. Virtually anyone who wanted to make a claim on the attention of the youth movement could do so by penning an article for his local community paper. Throughout the late 1960s and even into the early 1970s, underground newspapers functioned as a vital institutional base for radical political and aesthetic communities. In their pages, they replicated the creativity, zaniness, humor, and impertinence of the youth movement at large.

ADDENDUM

Country Joe McDonald and Donovan met for the first and only time on May 10, 1997, in Cleveland, Ohio. The occasion? The opening of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's first major temporary exhibition, "I Want to Take You Higher: The Psychedelic Era, 1965–1969." John Lennon's *Sgt. Pepper's* jacket, Tom Wolfe's handwritten notes for *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, a Jimi Hendrix set list—these were just some of the 500 artifacts on display, all safely (and rather depressingly) confined in colorfully painted display cabinets. Earlier in the day, both artists had performed some of their old hits before a large audience; now they were seated beside one another at a table, signing autographs. According to Donovan, this is when Country Joe leaned into him and said, cryptically, "It was me, man."

"What was you?"

"The banana thing."

Donovan says that Country Joe then proceeded to tell him how he and a few Haight-Ashbury pals had actively plotted "to dupe the gullible media." According to Donovan, Country Joe even bragged about having salvaged a giant banana replica from a carnival float, which they later hoisted onto a truck that they drove about town while spreading the banana rumor. "We thought it was just a bit of fun, man," said Joe. "Then you released 'Mellow Yellow' the same week and that was it."

But Country Joe remembers the scene altogether differently. He says that when he met Donovan in Cleveland, he seized the opportunity to ask him a question that had percolated in the back of his mind for many years: Was "Mellow Yellow" about smoking banana peels?

According to Joe, Donovan proved every bit as elliptical in 1997 as in 1967. "He looked at me for a moment, then said, 'What do you think?' He wouldn't say anything else."

My instinct is to trust Country Joe's recollection; as rock journalist Andrew Darlington reported after interviewing Country Joe several years ago, "He's a poor example of the acid-casualty theory of Rock History. He's too sharp to fit it." I'm not so sure about Donovan. Nevertheless, there are certain built-in hazards to relying on oral history interviews with counterculture veterans famous for ingesting vast amounts of psychotropic drugs in their youth. As I neared the end of my research, I wrote Country Joe one last time to inform him of Donovan's conflicting account of their meeting.

"YIKES!!" Joe wrote back. "As Richard Nixon well knew, a good lie has a life of its own. I don't know what Donovan has been smoking… banana?… hehehe… but my memory is totally different.… the thing about the truck with the banana on it is not true. We never did that… that I know of anyway." ✯