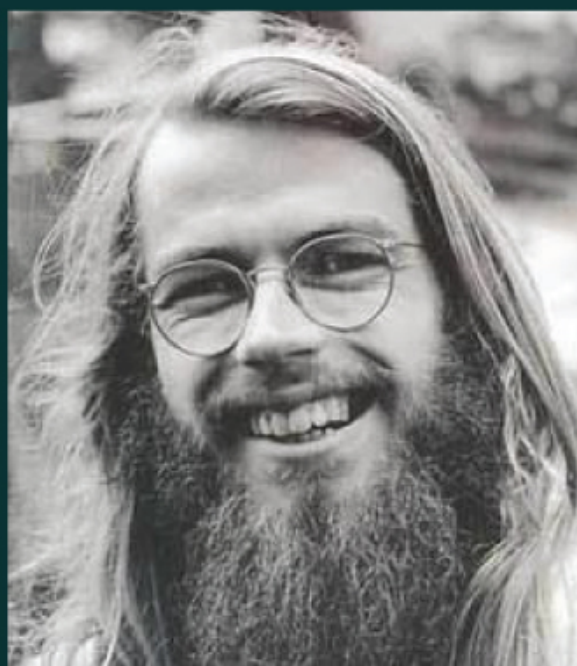


Chet Helms

At the Heart of It



with Michael Erlewine

Chet Helms

The Heart of it All

Notes

by

Michael Erlewine

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design.

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[Chet Helms not only founded the Family Dog at the Avalon, but more important Helms was an incredible force in the San Francisco movement and a kind and generous person to all.]



May of 2001 in San Francisco

Michael Erlewine: What was your given name Chet?

Chet Helms: August 2nd, 1942.

Chet Helms: Born in Santa Maria, CA.

Chet Helms: Chester Leo Helms, Jr.

Michael Erlewine: You've done so much I can't hope to... everyone says you have a wealth of stories and knowledge. Basically, what I'd like to know is: how did you get to California or to this area of California? How did you get involved in the scene? How did you get started in this whole dance-hall scene?

Chet Helms: Chester Leo Helms, Jr.

Michael Erlewine: How did you get to California or to this area of California? How did you get involved in the scene? How did you get started in these whole dance-hall scene?

Chet Helms: Well, I think that's how it seems to be getting written in history right now. I think I and a lot of other people started this whole dance-hall scene. I was certainly one of the, I don't know, inner circle of maybe ten or fifteen people who kind of generated it.

My background was that I was...well let's put it this way: my background for presenting shows had to do with having grown up, after my father passed away when I was nine, under the tutelage, if



Atelier Dore, Helm's shop

you will, of my grandfather. He was a fundamentalist Baptist minister who essentially made his living and way in the world by starting little churches all over Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and back there. And he had the Worth Bible College, and he had a correspondence school. You could take private lessons. You just sent him money and ultimately got some kind of a little doctorate of divinity or something of that order. But basically, many of the same fundamentals for creating and producing churches apply to creating and producing shows. So, a lot of the skills that I had, that I brought to that, came, really, pretty directly out of, in a sense, being back stage at a church. You know.

Michael Erlewine: Hmm, what would some of those skills be?

Chet Helms: Well, promotional skills, for one thing. How to communicate to the world that you're doing something at a particular time and place. Part of that came out the fact that my uncles were printers. I think my uncles and my grandfather got into printing initially, so they could publish Bible tracks. But to make a living at it, they also printed advertisements for newspapers and broadsides for local supermarkets and things of that order. My brothers and I had a canvassing distribution business when we were teenagers, which doesn't sound like much now, but we were makin' two bucks an hour, when there were plenty of grown men making fifty, sixty,

seventy-five cents an hour in Texas. This was primarily because we guaranteed our work.

And if we covered one of these new tract-house subdivisions with hand bills and someone found some in a gutter or

something of that order, if there was any question whatsoever about our coverage of it, we went right back immediately into that neighborhood and did it over again a second time. As you know, it's a tedious, monotonous, grueling (particularly in Texas heat) kind of work. More often than not, when people hired people to do that, the things ended up in gutters or in garbage cans and that sort of thing. I think we were, in a sense, too religious to do it that way, and also we were kind of, to some degree, supervised by my uncles and grandfather, who ran the print shops that got us the jobs.

And you know, for kids, we did pretty good at that. And later, when I was running shows here at the Avalon, I had my brother. He did all my canvassing and poster posting and things like that. He was the only person I knew that would do it in, essentially, an obsessive kind of way, and it would get done and they wouldn't be in a dumpster somewhere. He was the only person I could count on to get an ulcer doin' it, you know. I knew it would get taken care of.

From a promotional stand point, and I think it's kind of central to the whole poster thing, kind of at the core of my beliefs about promotion, that while the first order of promotion is the word of mouth; the second order, the most intimate means of communicating an event to people, is through a handbill or broadside because, again, it's a one-on-one contact. It's a person saying, "Here take this flyer, be here or be square," so to speak. My brother, in those days, really was my main conduit of information from the street. He was a very important gauge to me of how we

were coming across to the public. Because, in the course of his travels all over the Bay Area to put up the posters and to hand out hand bills and leave stacks of hand bills, people talked to him. "Oh I went to that show and that guy sucked," or, you know, "I had a hard time with the doorman and my friend said he had a hard time with the doorman," all this kind of information.

It came back to me through my brother, so it was a very important kind of gauge. I was a printer's devil in letterpress shops as a kid. I set type by hand and melted down all this, you know, slag type and stuff like that. I could run a Linotype machine, just a little bit. They were just beginning to train me a little bit on that. I was in charge of melting down all of the cuts and recasting from those little blotter paper molds with the casting machine. I'd make up the cuts, you know. They'd get mailed to you in the

form of these paper molds, essentially, and then there was a way that you'd mask up this thing on the casting machine. You would pour the hot lead and antimony into it. I always had little pits in my arms that would never heal, because the metal blowback antimony is pretty toxic stuff. And those casting machines would regularly spew metal back at you and stuff like that. And I always had belt burns on my arms, because these big ol' presses that we'd use for the advertiser newspapers and stuff were built out of cast iron; built in 1880s, but still running. The big drum presses and newspaper presses were always breakin' down 'cause they had these big leather belts, and the most common thing that happened to them is that the leather belt would go and then my uncle would have to get in there and

replace the leather belt or mend it or that sort of thing.

So that happened so frequently, he'd always leave the belt guards off, so as not to have to be taking them on and off all the time. So if you weren't careful, you'd walk into one of those belts. You'd be carrying a whole stack of posters or handbills or something like that and just brush against one of those moving belts and it'd burn your arm. I always had streaks on my arms from, you know, things like that.

Anyway, I spent a goodly time as a printer's devil. I always loved printing, loved pretty much anything to

do with books or typography. Of course, my uncle used to get all these sample books, and he'd get so many of them, he'd toss them in the garbage. There were typography or big, thick books of stock cuts that you could buy little iconographic things, you know, printed one time in a big catalog book. You could order the little paper mats to cast these things from. And I'd always haul these things out of the garbage. I was always fascinated by them, and I'd hang on to them.

Michael Erlewine: Did you pour some of them, make them?

Chet Helms: Yeah, yeah,

Michael Erlewine: Oh, these weren't the molds?

Chet Helms: These weren't the molds.

Michael Erlewine: I see.

Chet Helms: You would order it from the company and they would mail you this kind of a papier-mâché mold, some kind of wet paper that was formed over it and then became the mold for it.

I first came to California in 1962, for a couple of reasons - really three immediate reasons. One was that I was born in California and I had a lot of idyllic memories of my childhood, when my father was alive. I wasn't happy about moving to Texas at the time that we did.

Michael Erlewine: What age were you when you moved to Texas?

Chet Helms: Nine years old. I considered myself into beat poetry and I was writing poetry and doing my obligatory hitchhike from coast to coast

... duty, to earn my stripes as a beatnik. "

Michael Erlewine: And when did you come to San Francisco?

Chet Helms: I came back here in 1962, and I guess I was about 19 or 20.

Michael Erlewine: You came to this area?

Chet Helms: To San Francisco, right. Why I came to San Francisco is ... actually I think you made reference to this yourself about coming to Venice as a beatnik wannabe, but that was a major motivating factor for me. I considered myself into beat poetry and I was writing poetry and doing my obligatory hitchhike from coast to coast ... duty, to earn my stripes as a beatnik. I had read somewhere that a lot of beatniks got their mail on the bulletin board at City Lights Books, so when I got to San Francisco, that became my mail drop, and it probably was for about five years

... several years anyway.

Actually it was my primary mail drop for about three years, and as I had offices and things like that, then of course I was getting my mail there, But you know, for

a good five years there were still letters coming from friends, who were traveling different parts of the world, that would be posted on the board at City Lights.

So one reason was to kind of regain my childhood, in a sense. I had wonderful memories of California as a child and so that was part of the motivation. Part of the motivation was to come to beatnik Mecca, you know.

Michael Erlewine: I remember that.

Chet Helms: City Lights Bookstore, the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, North Beach, and the Coffee Gallery, and all these places I had heard of.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: Then the other specific instance was a dear friend of mine, a graduate student at the university, was in the process of getting married and he was marrying a woman named Sandy Breuden ****??. She and David Frieberg, who later played bass with Quicksilver Messenger Service and was with Jefferson Starship. Anyway, David Frieberg and she and a guy with a long Polish name that I could never pronounce ... the three of them had set

out as mendicant folk singers for peace. And they essentially were going on a peace journey to Moscow. They started with no money, just hitchhiking, and got as far as Mexico City. They were deported from Mexico as 'comunistas', as communists. They weren't communists, but they were deported to the nearest Mexican consulate, which happened to be in Austin, Texas. So I was at the University of Texas at the time.

Michael Erlewine: What were you studying?

Chet Helms: I went originally as a math major, but within about three weeks of being in school, they came to me and said, "Well, you did very well on the I.Q. test; you did very well on your SATs; you kind of aced the University of Texas entrance exam ... we're givin' you credit for this course and this course and this course." It was mostly English and math classes that I got advanced standing in.

And they said, "But you qualify for plan two," which is a liberal-arts tutorial program, where I'd have two years of fairly conventional classes, although they were structured for all the students in the plan-two program. Then I'd have two years where I would pick my own fields of study and I'd have a mentor, you know, on the faculty. And I could pretty much study anything in classroom or outside classroom, at my leisure. And frankly, I think I needed the structure and discipline of the conventional college education, but I elected to go into plan two and, as I

joke about it, I kind of "plan two?d" right out of college, you know? Heh, I'll get to that one of these days, I "plan to."

Michael Erlewine: Right

Chet Helms: But I think that probably the main factor in my dropping out of college was just because with this kind of fundamentalist background, I was so musically and socially and artistically deprived in a lot of ways that, when I went to college, I had a lot of things to catch up to. I'd never dated and I'd never had a girlfriend, you know. I'd had a few odd beers here and there, but I was from a teetotaling family, so it was all very secretive, when I had done it. I just stumbled upon flats of peyote buds, being sold as decorative cactus...

Michael Erlewine: No pot?

Chet Helms: Oh, not at all. Actually pot was a relative rarity, in general, then. My first psychedelic actually was in '61 or

'62 ... I guess it was actually in '61. One of my roommates was a graduate student. I was an undergraduate. I don't know why, but my pals were all graduate students. You know, the guys I hung out with, my roommates, the people that I was involved with. Anyway, one roommate was an anthropologist or in the anthropology department and he had gone

to Mexico to study the peyote ceremonies of the Tarahumara Indians.

Michael Erlewine: Right,

Chet Helms: And, as an official part of the university anthropological project, so he had gone and sat in on a lot of these sessions. He had never consumed it, but took notes, you know, went into the sweat lodges while they took these things, and kept notes, and so on. He was wandering with his girlfriend in a nursery in San Antonio, Texas and just stumbled upon flats of peyote buds, being sold as decorative cactus.

Michael Erlewine: Wow.

Chet Helms: And they realized what they were, because he had seen them in Mexico. So he bought a couple of flats and brought them home and ate five or six raw peyote buds.

Michael Erlewine: That'll do it.

Chet Helms: And we saw that he had a good time, though he was nauseous and what not, and that he didn't seem to suffer from it, certainly not on a permanent basis at all, you know. So about two weeks later, I did the same, but interesting ... that was totally unguided. Actually, everybody was

asleep. The ones that were at home were asleep, and other folks were out. And I ate six peyote buds, raw

peyote buds, washed down with Coca-Cola.
[Laughs].

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Chet Helms: Other than the chandelier trying to grab me a few times, it was a pretty good trip. I had this kinda three- pronged chandelier, and when I first started coming on to it, it seemed like it just grabbing me ... hands reaching forward ...

Michael Erlewine: I had a tiger on the wall; that was my first one too. When did you first have acid?

Chet Helms: 1964.

Michael Erlewine: At what part of the year?

Chet Helms: Probably sometime in ... I would guess it was probably March or April.

Michael Erlewine: Same for me, May of 1964 in Berkeley.

Chet Helms: Yeah it was right about that time. I had been a speed freak. I had been shootin? speed and so on and so forth, so somebody gave me a sugar cube.

Michael Erlewine: Oh yeah.

Chet Helms: And I said I?d heard about LSD, but just very peripherally, you know, and they showed me this sugar cube and I said, "What?s that?" and

they said, "It's LSD," and I said, "Well what's it like?" They said, "Oh, it's like speed," you know ...
"

Michael Erlewine: [Laughs].

Chet Helms: You know, without hesitation, I just unwrapped the thing

and popped it, you know, and so on. I had a great trip, but had this enormous apocalyptic heaven and hell vision, where I could see my one path going to destruction, if I continued to shoot speed and live this life, and then I saw this whole open horizon.

Michael Erlewine: Isn't that wonderful?

Chet Helms: Right.

Michael Erlewine: Isn't acid wonderful, what it was.

Chet Helms: It was. It was indeed, and I'll always believe that in the long haul in history, it was a very positive thing.

Michael Erlewine: Amen.

Chet Helms: And it's sad to see how it's been demonized.

Michael Erlewine: Sometimes I wonder if it's not the same anymore. I mean first of all, culturally we are not in the same spot, so that it couldn't do the

same exact thing, but we were coming out of the '50s.

Chet Helms: Sure.

Michael Erlewine: Pretty repressed kind of.

Chet Helms: Sure, Sure.

Michael Erlewine: Anyway.

Chet Helms: Well I think the LSD's the same; I don't think there's any difference. There is a big difference ... I think where the biggest difference in LSD consumption is in what they call 'disco doses' or 'hippie doses'. Our hippie dose was usually 180-250 micrograms. That's what we were taking on sugar cubes or tabs and things like that.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: The typical dose of LSD that a kid takes these days is about 80 micrograms. And I don't know if they still use those terms, but 10-15 years ago my kids and various people, they made a distinction between disco doses, which was about 80 mics, and hippie doses, which was around 200 mics.

Michael Erlewine: The hippie dose was a stronger dose.

Chet Helms: Oh yes.

Michael Erlewine: Certainly was strong when I took it.

Chet Helms: Well see, I think ... I tend to concur with Leary and Alpert, who pointed out early that they thought that 180 micrograms was a threshold dose; that to get the benefit of an LSD experience, you needed to take enough that your body went into a total catharsis. And they suggested, and it was my experience, that if you took less than what they called a threshold dose, which was capable of catapulting you into catharsis, certain things that bothered you, for instance, or perceived fears or dangers or things like that, you would end up just kind of grinding on them, and that was always kind of my experience. And I think a lot of the bad experiences that people have where they say, "Oh, that LSD was with speed." What I experience is that (I haven't taken LSD now in about 25 years), but my experience back then was that if I took a low dose like 70-80 mics, it was very much like speed. It just kind of stimulated me, made me grind on things, but somehow at about 180 mics or above, there was some kind of a full on emotional, physical catharsis that happened.

Michael Erlewine: Right. Definitely

Chet Helms: That was very much of the level of almost like an electrical discharge. And I still kind of believe that that's an accurate principle.

Michael Erlewine: Certainly the first time I took it was like a total catharsis, I mean I saw all of the heavens raining blood ... I had to die almost.

Chet Helms: Uhh huh.

Michael Erlewine: I didn't take it a ton of times.

Chet Helms: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: I treated it very religiously.

Chet Helms: I probably, over that whole period, up thru the early '70s I would say, I took LSD around 60 times, you know 50-60 times.

Michael Erlewine: That's more than I did.

Chet Helms: 50-60 times. I was never a believer in consciously going where there was going to be a lot of people and a lot of activity. So I pretty much always went to the woods or had a quiet time in an apartment.

Michael Erlewine: I pretty much found a space to myself. It was never a party atmosphere.

Chet Helms: Right, exactly. The times I had LSD in public situations, by and large, with very few exceptions, were times when I got dosed. And it was usually some cute little chickadee, who brought you a nice cold apple juice and you'd been dancin' or smokin' pot anyway, and you'd go "gulp gulp gulp."

Then, five minutes later you'd say, "Oh no, not again." [Laughs].

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: Ah, I was never a believer in dosing people.

Michael Erlewine: No, me neither.

Chet Helms: Though I must own that I kind of looked the other way when Kool- Aid was brought in and things like that. I just, you know, I never provided it to people, but on the other hand I didn't look too carefully if it was being provided.

Michael Erlewine: I interviewed Kelley, Was he on the scene before you? Or how did you ...

Chet Helms: Yeah. Well, I don't know if he was on the scene before me, but we were, Ok.

Michael Erlewine: I'm trying to understand how the scene arose ...

Chet Helms: Ok.

Chet Helms: From my viewpoint ... I realize it's my unique viewpoint.

Michael Erlewine: That's right.

Chet Helms: What happened to me was, in early '64, several things happened. One, I took LSD. Two, I met the woman who was to become my wife, and three, Luria Castell, who at a much later date was one of the founders of Family Dog with Alton Kelley, a man named Jack Towle, and a woman named Ellen Harmon. Anyway, her boyfriend at the time was a man named David Gregory, who was my best friend, and we were speed freaks together, basically. She wanted him to get off speed and she wanted me to get off speed. She had a couple of women roommates. They were all state college students, I think, at the time. Terrence Hallinan, our present district attorney, was one of the residents of this house.

But anyway, Terrence was hardly ever there and I slept in his bed when he wasn't around or on the couch when he was.

And David slept with Luria. But essentially, she and her girlfriends sometime early in '64 brought us into their house at 26 Genoa Place (SP?) in North Beach and basically fed us, fucked us, massaged us, but wouldn't let us out of the house. They wouldn't let us anywhere near speed, for which I am eternally grateful.

During the course of that, at Luria's, there I met the woman who was to be my wife for six years, subsequently, Loraine Helms. So, many aspects ... and around that time, somewhere, I think, I had

already moved out of Luria's again, when I took LSD, but it, that was all kind of early in '64.

But the other thing that happened was that The Beatles really hit big time. And Luria, myself, Terrence Hallinan, the present district attorney here, all of us, had been political activists. I had gotten my start in it ... Actually I was a young republican in Texas, because my stepfather was Korean and I was appalled when I got to the University of Texas and there were people... there were black people who, in their freshman western civ classes and freshman English classes, were assigned to attend certain movies and write reviews of them, but could not perform that part of the requirement because the only two theatres in Austin that were playing these movies were both owned by ABC Paramount. They were both right across the street from the campus and they didn't allow Negroes.

Michael Erlewine: Wow. I remember that time.

Chet Helms: And so we picketed those theatres for two years straight.

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Chet Helms: I pretty much began in my first year in college there. I actually worked on the John Tower and on the Goldwater campaign, as a young republican. But I was on the steering committee of

Students for Direct Action, which later became S.D.S.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: I was on the steering committee, and it was kind of like they always said, "Oh yeah, you know, we're really bipartisan and here is our republican, you know. Talk to him," you know.

So, needless to say, over that kind of two-year span, my politics shifted, fairly radically, leftward. Probably by the time I dropped out of the university, I was Young People's Socialist League, if not worse. But [laughs] kind of Norman Thomas socialist at the time. That's kind of where I was at, though I was very familiar with tract literature of the socialist workers party, C.P. stuff and all that, as well. But I was a little closer, I think, to the Norman Thomas variety of socialists, kind of social democrats at that point.

My step dad, as I said, was Korean and so I had experienced, not a huge amount, but a minimal amount of racism, kind of first hand, because of the way people treated my dad and little kids on the street going, "Ack-ack-ak- ack ... Get the dirty Jap." You know, stuff like that.

Michael Erlewine: God.

Chet Helms: So it was something I was conscious about, and I was a line captain on the steering

Committee and so on. And then I became ... Before I left Texas, I became part of the peace movement and the Vietnam movement, and the Vietnam War movement. In Texas they had just passed a treason and sedition law. We all knew that the first time it hit a federal court, it would get tossed out, but nevertheless they could arrest you in Texas for advocating against the Vietnam War. It was considered sedition or treason by law there. And there were other things: people would throw full beer bottles at you or lit cigarettes, you know, just people passing by in cars and sometimes they'd get out of cars and try to bully you and, you know, stuff like that. And that was much more incendiary, actually, even then trying to integrate the theatres. We did integrate the theatres, by the way.

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Chet Helms: But how we did it was by getting to Leonard Goldenson's rabbi. Leonard Goldenson was the head of ABC Paramount. It was after two years of picketing and all kind of political pressure. What finally turned the trick was his rabbi [laughs] got him by the short hairs and told him you know that this wasn't right and so on. Anyway, the big frustration at that time was the getting any kind of socially progressive messages into any kind of mainstream media. The only real viable route of doing that at the time was some kind of confrontational demonstration, which was always kind of presented in a sense in a negative context.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: A clash, you know. So when The Beatles came along, you know, and there was this kind of level of double and triple entendre in the songs, and suddenly, "Oh!, that's the way you do it." So a lot of people here in San Francisco, politicians primarily, were scrambling to put together message bands. I participated in two or three of those projects, but by and large they were more motivation than musicianship, you know? By and large, they fell apart because there weren't enough real musicians in the construct.

Chet Helms: So, after one of these attempts that kind of dissolved, a friend of mine came to me and said, "Look.

Over at 1090 Page Street there's a bunch of musicians that live in that building, but there's also an old ballroom in the basement there, and the building's managed by Rodney Albin, Peter Albin's brother." Peter later went on to become the bass player in Big Brother. So I went to Rodney and ended up, for I think it was 20 bucks or 25 bucks a week, we rented this ballroom, which could hold about maybe 250-300. I mean really crowded. It wasn't that huge, but we started these open jam sessions every Tuesday night, and with the idea of putting together a message band out of it, you know. And also think that I thought that, if I surrounded myself with musicians, it would rub off, you know.

And so we ran open jam sessions there for several months and it started from being about 30 musicians and about maybe ten family members and pals and hangers on. That equation radically shifted, literally over four or five weeks, to where we had about, I don't know, maybe 12 musicians and 75 people that were friends and family and hangers on or something. And it kind of

started, in our opinion, getting away from its original purpose. We weren't really trying to open a club, we were trying to, you know, find a group of people who could all play together, so we could create this band and spread the word to the world or whatever.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: Kind of on that note. I was raised to be an evangelist and I probably still am, in my own way; I have the technique and the craft of evangelism. I just don't have the same content that I was given as a child to promulgate, you know? So, out of that, out of those jam sessions, came the band Big Brother and the Holding Company and I became their manager.

Family Dog

One of the other things that happened in the meantime was that Luria Castell and Jack Towle, Ellen Harmon, and Alton Kelley ... They all lived in

a run down house, euphemistically referred to as the "Dog House" over on Pine Street.

And we had all been kind of grass dealers, basically, but not a lot of people were trying to legitimize their lives trying to do something on the straight side of things.

And so these folks ... Bill Ham who later went on to be one of the primary light show performers, and, in many ways, largely invented that whole technique.

He wasn't the only one, or necessarily even the first one, but he was the guy I think that really brought it up to being a real masterful thing. Anyway, he was into all these Japanese marital arts. He was highly trained in Kendo, in particular, and wore long black robes and had a long black beard and long black hair, at the time. He always had

those practice swords, the wooden practice swords, and so on. But through that connection, he had become the ... He worked for a Japanese property management company that owned four Victorian houses in that same block on Pine Street, and he actually still lives in one of them, all these many years later. But he maintained four houses. He had big dogs himself and didn't mind dogs and these were very run down properties that he was managing for offshore owners, and so on. And so he would allow dogs, which, in an urban environment, a hard thing to find is a place where you can rent an

apartment where dogs are welcome. So that's why there were so many dogs in the Dog House. That's because he would allow them as a landlord and so we kind of aggregated - all these people who had dogs. And there were a lot of dogs in that house, and so many dogs that that's kind of how it came to be referred to is the "Dog House." The dogs kind of [laughs] ran as a pack and kind of ran the show in a lot of ways with everybody.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: They had accumulated a certain amount of capital. They didn't want to be dealing grass anymore; they wanted to do something different, I realize you may wish to edit some of this.

Michael Erlewine: Well you'll get to see it all.

Chet Helms: Yeah.

Chet Helms: And they were thrashing around for an idea of something to do with their capital, some way to legitimize what they were doing, to be in a

legitimate business as opposed to contraband.

And one of the first ideas, according to a friend of mine, Philip Hammond, who did live in that house and who had dogs and was part of that crowd. He claims that at the kitchen table, there, the name Family Dog came from (according to him) the fact that they had come up with this idea at one point of

doing a pet cemetery to essentially get money from the idle rich, the people who could afford to indulge their deceased animals in a formal burial, you know, ceremony and all that stuff.

Chet Helms: Somewhere in that period of time, they heard about and decided to attend the jam sessions I was doing at 1090 Page Street. They came over there and there were about 300 people there and it was wall to wall, at a time when pot was extremely illegal, and they did put people in jail for one joint and that sort of thing. People were smoking pot pretty freely and underage people were drinking red wine and you know it was quite a scene. And they came there and they saw this thing and that was where ... I read an interview and I've been trying to find it since. It may be in Derek Taylor's book. I am not sure, but anyway, I saw an interview once with Luria Castell in which she said: "Yeah, we went to this jam session at 1090 Page Street and we saw what was happening there, and we said, 'Yeah, this is what we want to do.'"

So, the thing was beginning to get kind of unwieldy, with the number of non- performers attending it and so on. So at a point, I decided that I would discourage people from coming by charging money. So, we charged fifty cents, which you know doesn't sound

like a lot now, but it was a fair amount then. There were several places where you could get a meal for fifty cents. So that was kind of the context of it then.

Anyway, I started charging fifty cents and, foolishly, the initial idea was to get people to stop coming in such large numbers, but it kind of had the opposite effect. All of the sudden, it was kind of "the place to be." And frankly, it generated a lot of problems for us, because suddenly they felt they had paid, they had rights -- that sort of thing. It created kind of some liabilities for us by taking their money.

And so eventually it started attracting a wider and wider circle, and then, kind of toward the end there, it was just kind of a bunch of drunk and unrelated-to-that- scene kids, you know, that would show up. I showed up at the door one day and because I had long hair, these guys were giving me a hard time, you know, and so I just said, "Look, you know, I bet you come here for the jam sessions?" "Yeah what's it to ya?" you know? I said, "Well what it is to me is, you know, I do this for free, for love, and you're a bunch of drunken assholes, you know, and I'm not doin' it for you, so there won't be a jam session tonight, or ever again, you know. You finished it." [Laughs].

And so that was kind of the end of it, but out of that came Big Brother and the Holding Company, and I became their manager. And part of the context that somehow gets lost, mainly because, at an advanced

age, I find most of us, including myself, never used to drink.

But now, partially because of heart problems, I drink a couple glasses of red wine a day. I never really cared for the

sensation of being drunk, you know, I always liked things that woke me up, or, consequently, the speedy things I took like coke or speed or pot or psychedelics, something like that -- something that caused your mind to be more active, rather than less active. I never liked downers, never liked barbiturates or heroin or smack or any of those things.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: Never liked things that took you in that depressing sort of way. Something that people don't understand very often anymore about the Avalon Ballroom and the Fillmore Auditorium is that neither the Avalon nor the Fillmore served alcohol, during that whole period.

Michael Erlewine: And you didn't let people bring it in.

Chet Helms: Well, people did sneak it in, but we confiscated it, if they were too open about it. And frankly, we were pretty militantly anti-alcohol; most of us were, at the time. We kind of were against

alcohol, you know, because of what we'd seen it do to the parental generation.

Michael Erlewine: You bet.

Chet Helms: Here you've got a generation of young bands, with long hair, that are disavowing alcohol and disallowing tobacco, to some degree, but alcohol was a large part of our focus at that time. So the main venues for bands to play were places that sold alcohol, so they didn't want us there,

"cause we're telling people "Don't drink."

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: So, it kind of in the end, fell on people like myself and my

partner, John Carpenter, who managed the Great Society featuring Grace Slick, and I had Big Brother at the time. We were partners and it kind of fell on people like us, or in that kind of role, to create the venues that would showcase our bands. Because there was a limited number of prom parties and bar mitzvahs and birthday parties and stuff that you could play, you know. And we couldn't get in to the conventional club or lounge circuit because of the anti-alcohol stand. And the four people who started the Family Dog ...

Chet Helms: This was in 1965 and this also came out of all of Luria's, but of all of our political

connections, probably the strongest and most left-oriented union here was the longshoreman union. And so, the first three Family Dog dances were done in the Longshoreman's Hall, in North Beach, in the Fisherman's Wharf area. It's the only domed building up there -- a geodesic dome. The acoustics were horrible, have always been horrible, still are horrible, mainly because "cause it is a dome. And not only that, it's like a sheet-metal dome, the resonance of all the panels and stuff.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: Out of the inspiration they got out of the jam sessions, they started doing rock n' roll shows, although I don't think they thought of it as doing rock n' roll shows, I think they literally thought of it as doing a rent party, more than anything else. It was more of that nature. And so they did it in Longshoreman's Hall and they had the Jefferson Airplane, and the Great Society and the Loading Zone, and I'm trying to think whether it was ... I think the Lovin' Spoonful might have been on

that. I think it was at a time when the Lovin' Spoonful had just had a big hit. Anyway, they had one major out-of-town band as kind of the headliner.

And I brought the first strobe, I would say, ever, to rock n? roll. Actually that was the first to a formal rock n? roll thing. The strobe that I brought was built by a man named Don Buchla, who invented some of

the first music synthesizers, the Buchla Synthesizer, and he had recreated these strobes based on military strobes that had been used on planes to distract pilots in dog fights, you know. That's where the strobe came from. It was invented originally as a weapon. It would produce intense bursts of light when you were in a dogfight in the air. They would set off these blasts of light in the opposing pilot's eyes, essentially blinding him. And that was what it was invented for originally, but Buchla somewhere or another found them.

Also, sometime in that same year, I think it was the Limelighters (or one of those kind of theatrical groups) had done the play "Pantacles," by Michele De Gelderoff (SP?), and they had done a little Chaplin-esque bit with the strobe. That was the first time I ever saw a strobe used in a theatrical thing, to get that kind of movie-like stop action. But anyway, Ramone Sindair (SP?) worked at the San Francisco Tape Music Center and was a good friend of mine and he had shown me this strobe. So I had asked him if I could borrow it and take it to this first Family Dog dance, which I did. I had also borrowed it from him and taken it to the Open Theatre in Berkley previously to that, for a Big Brother and the Holding Company gig that we did at the Open Theatre and it's interesting to

me because one of the women who... Two brothers and their wives kind of opened the Open Theatre originally, the Jacquopette Family (SP?). And one of

them, I can't remember her first name, I've heard, I've seen in print ... I've been told by a couple of people that she now claims that she brought the first strobe too... but she is talking about the strobe that I had asked Ramone Sindair (SP) to bring to this event, you know, which he did, and so on. But at any event, it's not a big deal, but I think I was probably the first person who brought a strobe light to one of those events, and I brought one at that first Family Dog dance. But I think what was really significant and important about that first Family Dog dance at the Longshoreman's was pure recognition. There were about twelve hundred people there, and you walked in there and everyone, for lack of a better term, was in their hippie drag.

You know, they were in their thrift-shop clothes or their hair was long or they were dressed like a cowboy or they were dressed like a river-boat gambler or they were dressed like a gypsy, or, you know, that sort of thing. By and large, cowboys and Indians was the kind of motif that most American hippies were into. European hippies were gypsies. That was the romantic free spirit iconography or whatever. But anyway, I remember walkin' into that first Family Dog dance and seeing twelve hundred people that I recognized instantly were just like me. They were my kind.

And as opposed to feeling isolated, suddenly I felt part of a much larger community and I remember a sense of sanctuary and a sense of relief, like, "there's

twelve hundred people, there's not a facility large enough for us, for

them to arrest us all," you know. And that was a real threat at the time. There was somehow strength in numbers and in this pure recognition, you know.

They did three shows in the Longshoreman's Hall in the fall of '65. And then Luria, with other partners, did two subsequent Family Dog shows in the "California Hall"; in the spring of '66 I guess it was. No, actually it couldn't have been in the spring, because we did our... John and I did our first show in the Fillmore on February 19th, so it must have been... I guess the California Hall events must have been in the fall and winter, also. Anyway, all together they did five shows, which I would describe as critical successes and financial disasters, basically. At that juncture, three of them, besides Luria, decided to take off to Mexico; they had a lot of bills, were under a lot of financial stress, and so and so forth. John Carpenter and I, begin again dealing with this whole issue of "Where do our bands play?" We went to Luria and said, "Look if you do another Family Dog dance, our bands would, you know, like to play and will play for reasonable money," and so and so forth. "

And even if we don't do something with you, we're gonna promote shows because we've arrived at the conclusion that that's the only way our band are going to get over the... You know, we can't seem to

get, um, jobs in the clubs or in the lounges, that sort of thing." And so she said, "Well, you know, there really isn't a Family Dog right now. The other guys have gone to Mexico. It's just me and there's no money. We owe money." She said, "I have talked to the German American Association in California Hall and I have put some

tentative holds on dates with them, but I haven't been able to pay the deposits on the dates, and so they may or may not be held."

And one of the things that John and I had is that we had a committed date from the Jefferson Airplane, and they were the only local band at that point that was, in any sense, bankable. They had the image and the reputation that their gigs paid for themselves. It was something that was bankable enough that you could go to a banker or a money person, and people would have a fair assurance that they were gonna get their money and so and so forth.

Essentially, what we were bringing to the table was our two bands, our contribution to the labor, and this date that we had with the Jefferson Airplane. So, the bottom line was that we agreed to do some shows as Family Dog with Luria, utilizing our bands, utilizing the Charlatans, who were associated with the Family Dog people at that point, although they were very close friends with ours as well. At least, at the outside, utilizing our one committed date from the Jefferson Airplane to kind of launch the thing. And I

had about two hundred and fifty dollars, which was my escape money and my life savings really at that point. So I gave that to Luria to tie down these dates at the California Hall.

A couple weeks went by and I hadn't heard from Luria. Then I get a call one day from one of her roommates saying that, "Well, Luria asked me to call you and tell you that she took off for Mexico today, and that she knows she owes you money but and she doesn't have the money, but left you some antique furniture. Come get it," you know. So I

went over and it was a nice antique bed and stuff, but that wasn't what I needed or wanted. I didn't need to buy a bed for two hundred and fifty bucks, even if it was beautiful antique carved wood and all that.

So I did get the bed, so and so forth, but John and I are just sort of in a quandary. "What do we do now?" And I called the German American Association and she had not put up the deposit and so on, and so we really didn't quite know what to do. So my partner John Carpenter happened to know Bill Graham. Now Bill Graham was nominally producer of the

S.F. Mime Troop and essentially what he was a fundraiser. He was an arm twister, had good relations with William C??? (SP), the attorney that remained his attorney through most of his career. He had very close association with this other Zellerbach family, who had patronized the S.F. Mime Troup,

but kind of patronized things that Bill did, subsequently also.

In this capacity, as producer of the mime troop, he had kind of engineered them, a confrontation between them and the... They were kind of going down the tubes and Graham kind of engineered a confrontation between the mime troop and the police in the park. And a lot of the objective of it, quite frankly, had to do with stirring up a lot of controversy and therefore getting contributions, you know, support contributions, to the mime troop. He did this big benefit, and John Handy was about as big a jazz star as you can imagine at the time. And so he did this benefit in which John Handy was his headliner and he had way too much stuff on it. Frankly, I didn't think he knew a whole lot about organizing it at that point. He put way too many acts on

the bill and that sort of thing. And he did it in a big warehouse south of Market Street on Menn Street (SP?). He raised a bunch of money for them. And I give Graham credit for learning the lessons, as it were, but what was clear to him, I'm sure, at that event, was that his head liner was the Jefferson Airplane and not John Handy. That's who people came there to see.

And he had them in some minor billing, scrawled on the thing and also it's interesting because this was such a small scene. This whole scene was really built

out of a kind of roving party circuit, which had a lot to do with students at San Francisco State College, students at the San Francisco Art Institute, students at City College and the model's guild, which was affiliated with the art institute. At the time all this came up, there was a real dearth of any kind of live music in the Bay Area, including jazz. I guess the Matador was still kind of limping along ... the Jazz Workshop was, but the big hot menu here had been the Blackhawk, and when it closed that was kind of the death along that particular little epic of jazz, at the time.

And so, you find in San Francisco at that time, there was just no place. Other than a movie, there was really no place to go or see or do anything pretty much on a weekend. So there was kind of a party circuit and it was not unusual to go to maybe 10-12 parties over the course of one weekend. You'd go to this party and they'd say, "Oh well we just came from over there. It was pretty cool, and the food over there is like this, and they've got booze at this one." And it was pretty much all recorded music. It wasn't live music, but that was kind of the

happenings. That's what people did on the weekend.

And this whole scene kind of came out of, what I would say, kind of an extended party circuit of probably fifteen hundred, two thousand people, that kind of knew each other.

And there were people that you'd regularly see in that party circuit on the weekend. You'd go to three or four parties a night. Just go from one place to another, and sometimes all night, you know. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, that kind of thing.

So the Family Dog people understood that this whole thing was kind of a very nascent, a very beginning, a very embryonic thing and this community was very connected. Before Graham did this benefit, they learned that he was planning on doing something and they realized that his date, though he had no bookings done at that point, they realized that the date he had chosen fell on the date when they had the Mothers of Invention at the Longshoreman's Hall, which was I think the second of the first three Family Dog dances there. So Luria Castell and Alton Kelley went to Bill Graham in his capacity as the producer of the mime troop, and said, "Look, you know we love the mime troop. We would love to help in any way we can. We would even produce a benefit for them. We want no money for it, but we would put in all the labor, do all the organization of it, just for lovin' the mime troop. And the only thing we would want out of it was credit for having produced it," you know. The first thing they asked him was to differ his date by at least a week, so that in this very embryonic scene they didn't dilute the market on a

given weekend such that neither one of them made it.

Well Graham was not... In that regard, his first thought was not co-operation. It was always competition. So it was kind of like, "Oh no. I'm not movin' my date," and so on.

And probably had he moved his date, they probably would have made money on the Mother's show, and it would have been a more viable entity and he probably would have done just as well the following week, because he didn't have his acts set at that point. But he dug in his heels, "No, I'm not movin?," you know. Kind of a "Fuck you, I was here first!" kind of thing.

But in the course of them offering to do a benefit for the mime troop, he asked Kelley and Luria, "you know, well, where would you do this thing?" And they, being the gullible [laughs] innocents that they were, they said, "Oh well, over at the Fillmore Auditorium. You know. It's like \$65 bucks a night or \$500 a month to get the lease on it." So at the juncture where John and I had just learned that Luria had taken off to Mexico and that she had not firmed up the date at the California Hall, we had already begun to make some commitments to people like the Paul Buttefield Blues Band and different other people.

And suddenly, we didn't have a venue. Well, one night Bill Graham was doing his second mime troop benefit, but this time, it was, "Oh... wonder of wonders," of all places, in the Fillmore Auditorium!

[Laughs]. So, John Carpenter knew Graham. I didn't, but we went over to that mime troop benefit, paid to get in, I'm pretty sure, and I met Bill Graham for

the first time at the coke bar in the old Fillmore.

John and I, as we had an interest in exposing our bands, went to Graham and basically said, "If you do another mime troop benefit, you know, our bands would volunteer their services. We'd like to be on the bill." And just in the course of talking to him about that, we ended up kind of telling him what we had been doing with Luria, that we had intended to do a series of shows with Luria as Family Dog, and that we had this date on the Jefferson Airplane confirmed. Not us specifically, but we had them and their manager had agreed to have them play a date for us. I had a set figure.

He, having succeeded with Jefferson Airplane almost immediately before that, that was a big calling card I would say for us. Plus, we had two bands that were beginning to get a little bit of a name, at least in the underground, and could be added to the bill for no charge, as it were. And just a lot of kind of thinking out loud you know that went on, and Bill was saying, "Well, the lease on this place is only \$500 a month, but I don't know. It would take so many shows a month. I don't know if I can do more than one or two a month," you know and so and so forth.

But anyway, the long and short of it is John and I ended up making a handshake deal with him to do shows in there on alternate weekends with him and that we would do it under the Family Dog name. He said, "What name would you do it under?" "Family Dog, I guess. That's what we were just doin'." I really honestly didn't give it a lot of thought.

We had planned to do these Family Dog shows with Luria, so we just said, "Well,

Family Dog, I guess," you know. So anyway, he said, "Fine," and our initial deal with Bill was that he would put up all the money; he would put up the hall, the security, and all that, and, essentially, that we would give him 50%, after we paid the bands and paid the rude expenses. And so that show was successful.

We did that show and, after the show we realized that Bill had not lifted a finger, had not put up a dime, and so on. Essentially we had taken all the risks, done all the work, you know ... provided the Jefferson Airplane, the date we had with the Airplane for the deal and everything, and then we paid certain of his basic expenses and then he took half, you know.

Michael Erlewine: Wow!

Chet Helms: So we had an old- fashioned conference call like, "Here, you talk to him for awhile," you

know, [laughs] between John and I and Bill Graham. And so, the three subsequent shows we did in there, we paid certain flat fees and then Bill Graham got 7% of net, you know. And altogether, we did four shows. It never worked out to be exactly on alternate weekends, because he would kind of call us at the last minute and say, "Oh, well, I've got this or that or the other happening, and I'm sorry but you can't have that date. You'll have to move over to this date." So, you know, in about three months time we did four shows, or in two and a half months time, we did four shows, or something like that. We did four shows.

Michael Erlewine: Now what about the history of the advertising - was it handbills, fliers?

Chet Helms: Ok, Wes Wilson was my best friend at the time.

Michael Erlewine: Really, are you still friends with him?

Chet Helms: Yeah, after a fashion.

Chet Helms: But anyway, he was my best friend at the time. He was not an artist; he was a printer.

Michael Erlewine: That's what I understand.

Chet Helms: And that was our connection. I came out of the print trades; he was a printer. His wife and my wife were best friends.

Michael Erlewine: Really.

Chet Helms: They both went to state college. His wife was Alva Bessie's daughter, who was one of the ***** (not sure if black bulb should be capitalized and/or how the screenwriter fits in IE) ***** black bulb, and Hollywood screenwriters.

And he was a C.P. member, and so and so forth. She had grown up here locally; Alva Bessie lived and died here. And the first poster that Wes had done, and this was done... Have you seen the 'Be Aware' poster that Wes did?

Michael Erlewine: Yes

Chet Helms: Ok, that was the first poster, to my knowledge, that he ever did.

Michael Erlewine: I think it was his first poster.

Chet Helms: And that was totally graphic arts; there was no drawing in it.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: It's all graphic technique.

Michael Erlewine: Posters, right.

Chet Helms: Right. Coming from someone out of the printing trade, you know, essentially. And I always liked that poster a great deal.

Michael Erlewine: It was beautiful.

Chet Helms: And it's interesting, because he's gone pretty right wing, in terms of politics, very homophobic. Very anti feminism, although that may be because he had three very strong daughters, but I don't know, [Laughs] from a previous marriage he had. He's got children by his present wife. Three very strong adult daughters. Let's see... The first rock n' roll thing he did was my wedding announcement. I've been trying forever to remember who took the photograph that he used. Someone took this beautiful ... I actually ... now that I think about it, I think I do know who took that photograph. I think a photographer named Tony Rosenwall took that photograph.

But anyway, there's just a funny photograph of myself and my, soon-to- be wife in an apartment I had on Pierce Street. I mean we had no money, so there was like essentially a double mattress there with some covering on it and a crate with a lamp, you know.

Michael Erlewine: We all did that, right?

Chet Helms: And a bare bulb with one of those Japanese paper lanterns around it, but it's an interesting kind of surreal photograph on there.

Michael Erlewine: I'd love to see it.

Chet Helms: In fact, I think there may even be two photographs on there, now that I think about it. It's hard to remember.

Michael Erlewine: So Wes did that.

Chet Helms: So Wes did that. And again it was pretty much straight, graphic technique...

Michael Erlewine: No drawing in it.

Chet Helms: Set type and he had a... There was kind of a little starburst cut that he had put in and so on. And when we got married, which was December of '65 ... actually Peter Albin got married in some other part of the city on the same day. Peter Albin from Big Brother. But anyway, the Charlatans played and J.C. Boroughs, who was this black harmonica player that used to hang out in North Beach, who wrote 'Ballin' the Jack', which was the biggest hit of 1946. And he had been kind of reduced to...

Well, he was an alcoholic, and he was on the street a lot in North Beach, and he still played the harp real fine and played the bones.

And essentially, he was a guy that for a bottle of Ripple or something of that order, you could get him goin', you know, and rev his engine up, so to speak, and he'd play. And so, on my wedding, I actually paid him to come do this thing and play. And I don't think I paid the Charlatans. I think they just came and played.

Michael Erlewine: And Wes did the paper for that.

Chet Helms: And Wes did the announcement for it. But it was of all of that era. I would say other than the Family Dog shows, it was probably the biggest rock n? roll event to that point. We had about 800 people.

Michael Erlewine: Wow, really.

Chet Helms: And it was in a studio that had been an old meeting hall of some kind, some kind of Order of the Eastern

Star or something like that. But it was a place called File Building out on Fulsom and 24th Street, I think it is, and Bob Levine was a painter here, a beatnik painter. Bob Levine's lover and live-in boyfriend was the poet Peter Orlovsky.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really.

Chet Helms: And at, right about the same time as my wedding, right in that little window of time there, Allen Ginsburg came to Bob Levine's studio. Bob was gay also. Bob had been my friend and had provided the studio space for me to do my wedding in. But anyway, I had met Peter Orlovsky there a couple of times. Very striking looking. I guess what you would say, a 'beautiful guy', just really strikingly handsome.

I mean, I had extremely long hair, but Peter Orlovsky literally had hair, blonde hair, down to his knees. I mean, he had let it grow and it was beautiful. But anyway, he met Ginsburg right in that period of time. Ginsburg, I think, stayed there for three weeks and then left with Peter Orlovsky, breaking Bob Levine's heart, so and so forth. But then that's how Peter Orlovsky and Ginsburg got together, right around that time.

And then, the next kind of big event, I would say, was the Trips Festival, which started... One of the local events that had affected everything, including posters, for that matter, really, was the American Needs Indians Sensorium. It was created by an architect named Zack Stewart and then Stuart Brand, who went on to create the Whole Earth Magazine, and so forth. There's a wonderful article by Brand published in 1995 in Time Magazine called "How the Hippies Invented the Internet." And it's a

brilliant article and it makes a very good case, you know.

[Spring 1995 Special Issue, "We Owe It All to the Hippies," by Stewart Brand]

Michael Erlewine: Did someone do a poster for the 'America Needs Indians' thing?

Chet Helms: Yes they did.

Michael Erlewine: Who did it?

Chet Helms: Quite honestly, I don't know, but it was a big... on brown, almost a brown construction paper and it was almost full human size.

Michael Erlewine: Oh really.

Chet Helms: And it was flour-pasted up, you know. It was posted in that way.

Michael Erlewine: Hmm, I don't think I've seen it.

Chet Helms: I always kind of confuse it and the one percent free thing, cause they were similar, the big ones anyway, were similar in size and applied with wheat paste, you know, in the traditional kind of thing.

'American Needs Indians' -- We talked at that time about happenings and we talked about an environmental theatre, a term that would be misunderstood these days, but the idea of environmental theatre was that by tailoring or customizing an environment, that you could have a desired emotional output.

Michael Erlewine: Like the 'Living Theatre'? That kind of thing?

Chet Helms: No, not precisely. It was having more to do... I guess the paradigm of it, the local paradigm of it was this 'American Needs Indians Sensorium.' The attempt, there, was they'd have two or three big teepees in a

space. They'd have a 360 degree slide projection of Indian life on the reservation in the Southwest. They'd sometimes have an actual, depending on where they did it, an actual campfire, but there were certainly always odors of mesquite burning. There was always a constant drum track and you go in.

Michael Erlewine: Sage...

Chet Helms: Sage, and you could go in these teepees and it was essentially, precisely what it described itself - it was a sensory. We talked in terms of synesthesia. All theatrical experiences, the ultimate objective was synesthesia, was the wedding of the senses, so that you had this total experience. And the idea of environmental theatre was that you... and I still use a lot of the things I learned while I was thinking in that framework... the difference between high stages and low stages. They all have an impact on what people's experience is.

Michael Erlewine: Do you remember, in the Midwest, I mean this was happening all across the country, the whole idea of 'events' and 'happenings' and remember 'Once Music' John

Cage and crew.

Chet Helms: Yeah, John Cage was a big deal here. And we went to all of his things. And we read all of his books, and he was...

Michael Erlewine: Right, Bob Ashley. Do you know Bob Ashley or George Cacioppo?

These were modern avant-garde electronic composers. Yeah, they'd have a piano piece where you played one note for hours. Things like that. And I lived in a house with some of them,

except that I was more into regular music -- blues and jazz. I really liked a little bit of it, but that was about it.

Chet Helms: Yeah, right, right, exactly.

Chet Helms: John Cage was kind of the best of that genre, I think. And I went to several of his events, and so on. But a very important institution here in San Francisco, with respect to all of this movement, was the Tape Music Center at 321 Divisadero. It was really out of that place that your strobes came, the Buchla synthesizer came, the liquid-light projections in the form of Bill Ham, Tony Martin, and Elias Romero. Those were the three first guys doing them and that kind of all came out of that.

Michael Erlewine: Oh, that sounds like a whole thing needs to be done on the light shows. Has anything been written much about that?

Chet Helms: Not to any great extent. There probably has... I can't remember what her last name was, Pauline... there's an electronic composer, Pauline something or other, and then Mort Subotnick and

Ramone Sindare (SP?). These were all electronic composers and they were the core of... and Bucla was kind of their tech guy. He was the guy who created all of the machines and the strobes and so on. The Bucla synthesizer was before Moog. And the Moog device, I think, was considerably more sophisticated, but Bucla, I think, really invented the first synthesizer.

Michael Erlewine: I know that there are, before the regular Family Dog posters there, what there's five or so handbills for events.

Chet Helms: Well, there are five handbills, and then there were I think

three or four... actually I guess just three big silk screens that Amy Magill did.

That were to advertise the Longshoreman's Hall dances.

Chet Helms: I would say the Trips Festival handbill was fairly significant, but again, strictly graphic technique that Wes did.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: And then there were two... Let's see, there was a Loading Zone one that he did for the Open Theatre and then there was one for Big Brother that he did for the Open Theatre, which was a photograph that I chose of a guy sitting on a bed of

nails. Wes did this, but again, strictly graphic technique.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: And it was at that show I brought them, in my opinion, I brought the first strobe to a rock n' roll event. [Laughs].

Michael Erlewine: Right. So how did Wes take off into his... He really did pioneer the psychedelic style at some point. How did that really happen?

Chet Helms: So, essentially, Wes Wilson came to... He was my poster artist and Bill saw and liked what he did, so Bill started using him.

Michael Erlewine: Was that a problem for you?

Chet Helms: Actually, I didn't really give it a lot of thought, initially, that Bill Graham was using him. I mean, he was my best friend and it was more work for Wes, you know. What did upset me though, was when, though actually in my opinion it was a very germinal event and very good thing in the long haul of things, was when Bill basically said,

"You can't do posters for Chet anymore. I'm booking your time exclusively." And gave him an advance and a commitment to, you know, do posters exclusively for him into the extended future.

Michael Erlewine: Well sounds like him.

Chet Helms: And that was kind of the way Bill handled things.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: And it kind of happened to me with the light shows too. What really... Bill's tendency was to get the same person and work them to death, you know. And when I lost the exclusivity of, or not even exclusivity, but just the availability of Wes, that threw me to opening it up to other people.

Michael Erlewine: Who came in to fill that spot?

Chet Helms: Yeah, the first were Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley.

Michael Erlewine: Kelley had been part of this, all this...

Chet Helms: And Kelley had been part of it, from before.

Michael Erlewine: Before you guys even.

Chet Helms: Well, before I got involved directly with Family Dog. I was a friend and volunteer on those shows. I just wasn't a principle in it; I wasn't one of the four who had actual cash money out of pocket into it.

Michael Erlewine: I see.

Chet Helms: There was essentially a large community of people who put

those things on, but they were the four guys who put up the money.

Michael Erlewine: Just an interjection again. Have you been working with people to create a book of this kind of stuff? I mean, your knowledge is so encyclopedic about this scene. How has it been reported? What have you done to document this?

Chet Helms: I haven't, aside from just kind of thousands of interviews. Well, I'm hoping to do that. I mean, I had, actually. What's been on my mind really is... I *** (visited a friend?) ***** have a friend visited for my 40th high school reunion in Texas last year. He's got a little in-law apartment above a garage there and he's a fairly well off guy. He's a musician, and more than most musicians who've ever asked me about this period, this guy has great questions, really insightful questions. And he's hammered me...

Michael Erlewine: Have you recorded it?

Chet Helms: No, we didn't, but while I was there we spent three or four nights. I was killing him because he works during the day, but we were stayin' up 'till four or five o'clock in the morning and he's asking me all this stuff, he wanted to know, you know. My problem in terms of book things, though I have done

what I'm doing right now, kind of pretty freely allowed myself to be interviewed over years.

Michael Erlewine: But I don't see this kind of detail written, maybe it exists, but I haven't seen it.

Chet Helms: The people record everything I say and then they kind of pick and choose and they use this little

element of it or that little element of it, but you're right it would be ... I think, I in a sense, tell the most complete story of it from a fairly central point of view. Well, in my own sort of way I like to put all the little pieces together.

Michael Erlewine: You do. It's amazing.

Chet. And I never had any training in it, but my dad was a sociologist and I think that what's interesting is ... did you ever see the movie 'Feed Your Head?'

Michael Erlewine: No.

Chet Helms: It was a twenty-minute piece made by a local guy here, Bob Sarles. He made it for the "Let Me Take You Higher" show that was at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And what happened in that is, by default, I became the narrator of it because I was the only person there that did not talk exclusively about myself.

Michael Erlewine: This is a good sign, right?

Chet Helms: Actually, I think essentially what we were saying was that it was a boon to me in a way when Graham did indeed book Wes' future output...

Michael Erlewine: Cause it made you spread out.

Chet Helms: Yeah. It opened me up to other possibilities. Stanley Mouse and then Alton Kelley were collaborating, and, frankly, I have to say Kelley couldn't draw for shit, at that time. And frankly, Wes Wilson couldn't draw for shit at the beginning. I watched both of these guys become artists. Just as I watched a lot of musicians who couldn't really play become musicians.

Michael Erlewine: Huh! Mouse had a long history of...

Chet Helms: Yeah, Mouse was fairly accomplished at air brush and that sort of thing, although compositionally I always thought that, you know, Kelley had a lot going.

Michael Erlewine: Still does.

Chet Helms: And that also Kelley was a master collagist. In fact, that's all of the early stuff that he did was all collages.

Michael Erlewine: Like David Singer is now.

Chet Helms: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: Have you seen any of Singer's recent collages?

Chet Helms: Quite honestly, I'm not as keen on his collages right now. To me, that's him going back to an older time. That's what he did, and, actually, my first familiarity with his stuff was all different colleges

Michael Erlewine: What have you seen? Have you been to his house? I mean recently? It would be hard to move the things I'm talking about.

Chet Helms: Oh, it's probably been 6 to 8 months since I've been over there.

Michael Erlewine: Oh, that's pretty recent, then he's shown you what he's doing.

Chet Helms: I actually probably haven't seen too much. The last time I was up there he was working, kind of reworking a lot of older collages ... scanning them.

Michael Erlewine: Like the Gaugain collage?

Chet Helms: I don't remember that one specifically.

Michael Erlewine: Well, he's got many of them right? Probably dozens of them.

Chet Helms: Yeah, yeah I'm sure he does.

Michael Erlewine: Some of them are really something.

Chet Helms: Yeah, but I love his poster output. I mean, with typography he's the best.

Michael Erlewine: I'm having him do something for our poster site.

Chet Helms: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: He's one of the best. The 'Summer of Love' was exquisite.

Chet Helms: Yeah. That's a process too. I mean, that started with an idea that I had that I gave to Jim Philips. Jim Philips started working on it and then he fell off a ladder and broke his hip. So then the project went to David Singer.

Michael Erlewine: So is that how that happened.

Chet Helms: That's how that went.

Michael Erlewine: Singer did a good job.

Chet Helms: He did a wonderful job. Yeah, I think that's a spectacular logo for what it is.

Michael Erlewine: I can't believe how good it is.

Chet Helms: And he did one for a friend of mine. You know the flying monkey one?

Chet Helms: About the only negative feedback I have from that period is like the Mystery Trend; they never miss the opportunity to say I wouldn't hire them and this and that and the other. He told us this and he told us that. I have a lot of respect for Ron Nagle and, particularly, for things he did after Mystery Trend. In

Mystery Trend, they initially didn't do a lot of their own material and that was a kind of criteria for me. I wasn't interested in booking cover bands and they did a lot of cover material initially. But I liked a lot of the stuff that Ron did after that, like the "Do Wops.". Did you ever see that video, the 'Doo-Wop Diner'? That is ... I mean it is almost a prescient, visionary kind of thing of the way VH1 and all those things were handled.

Michael Erlewine: No. Cool, I'd like to see that. Now it's clear to me that I'm not going to be able to cover all the stuff I want to, you know more than I imagined. And I've been interviewing all these other guys and believe me it's quite different. So I'm going to ask you just some things off the wall.

Chet Helms: Sure.

Michael Erlewine: What do you know, if anything ... can you remember about Bob Fried? I'm trying to build a biography and he did some beautiful posters. Some of my very favorite posters.

Chet Helms: He did. You know, I loved Bob and Penelope a lot. Bob was a highly trained, both as a fine and a commercial artist, who had a fairly extensive and recognized career on the East Coast before he came west. He had done some shows of his paintings in fairly major galleries back there. He had a portfolio of stuff that he brought to show me.

Michael Erlewine: That's how you hooked up?

Chet Helms: Yeah, he came to me. I think he may have ... he knew, I think, Victor Moscoso, I believe.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, Victor kind of chaperoned him a little bit.

Chet Helms: Yeah, I think so.

Michael Erlewine: Did he have some paintings by that time?

Chet Helms: Yeah, he did.

Michael Erlewine: What did you think of that?

Chet Helms: I liked his paintings. I used one of them, you know, as a Billboard.

The Family Dog is coming down to earth. It was a big one. It started as a painting,

Michael Erlewine: You mean the one that's called Billboard? I mean the abstract one with the circle? Are we talking about the same piece?

Chet Helms: There's one that I literally used.

Michael Erlewine: I thought a smaller print was made of it. Right?

Chet Helms: At the start it was a painting, I believe. And then he made a smaller silk screen print of it and then I was at his studio one day.

Michael Erlewine: OK. That's the same one I'm talking about. Isn't that a beautiful painting?

Chet Helms: Early '69 or so. It's like you were entering the earth's atmosphere from outer space and there was all these kind of, kind of clouds and...

Michael Erlewine: Isn't it beautiful, I mean, I think that's a wonderful piece.

Chet Helms: It is. It is and at the time I had just lost my permit at the Avalon Ballroom and I was kind of in transition, trying to get this new venue out at the beach, but I needed and I was doin'... I

did four shows that year in '69 in Winterland. Cause I didn't have a venue, but I did four one-off shows in there.

And I wanted to keep the name Family Dog alive, because I knew I was going to open another venue somewhere, you know, as soon as I found the place.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: So that was one of the ways of keeping that name alive, particularly as we were in negotiations on this place at the beach. The political set up ... I knew I was going to get the permits. They screwed over me so righteously on the Avalon permits, that the city fathers here knew that I was owed one, and I'd been pretty well assured by the L.A. outa (SP?) administration that I would get a permit. Period. That they would see to it. And they were good to their word in that way, although I had to go out to the boonies [laughs] in a sense. But, anyway, I wanted to keep the name alive, so I did twenty-four billboards.

Michael Erlewine: Wow!

Chet Helms: One image.

Michael Erlewine: Oh! It was that same image?

Chet Helms: That same image. We posted for three months in eight rotating locations.

Michael Erlewine: And, I'm just curious, did Bob get paid especially for that?

Chet Helms: Yeah.

Michael Erlewine: That's an outstanding image.

Chet Helms: Yeah, yeah. He was paid for that.

Chet Helms: Ok. We produced these beautiful, marvelous, partially transparent, partially translucent, partially opaque, marbled, and intense saturated color, and we had a whole scheme in mind for designing a turntable that would put a beam of light through it so as you played the record, you'd get a light show on the walls or ceiling, you know?

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: But, also, they were just beautiful things. You could hang one on a thread of catgut or something on your window and just the light coming through made this beautiful marble thing.

Michael Erlewine: I never saw one.

Chet Helms: At the time, my patent attorney was a man named Robert Slick, who was Grace Slick's father-in-law, father of Darby Slick and Jerry Slick. He's now deceased. May he rest in peace. He was a good man and a good friend, and he had taken it to a certain point and I just ran out of money and couldn't pursue it any further, because at that point I was battling the city over my permits. I just needed all my resources to fight that and sort of had to pull back on a lot a R&D things -- research and development things -- that I was doing. But he could have gotten me a patent on that stylization of records

based on an earlier button patent that used the term variegated zoning. Anyway, the first time I saw an I-Mac, that minute, I wanted to do the limited hippie addition of the I-Mac. Well, I've been talking about this for two years. I don't know anybody at Apple, but I know a lot of people who know people at Apple, and I've been putting

this idea out and I said all I want is the, you know, a G-4 tower... Well, actually at the time it was a G-3 tower and a video-cinema display play, you know. That's all I want. I'm not askin' for a lot, but here's a great idea. And what would really make it very marketable, is if they could affiliate it some way with the Grateful Dead and make it a 'The Grateful Dead Limited Edition I-Mac', you know.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: So, I was very disappointed to see this new rip-mix- burn, flower-power I-Mac, because it's kind of like one of the most offensive, and I'm not generally down on Walter Landor, but one of the most offensive things to me in terms of '60s iconography was that stupid daisy that Walter Landor designed. And to me when they put out this I-Mac, that was the return to this flower power design by some big commercial design firm rather than something wild and cutting edge.

Michael Erlewine: Right.

Chet Helms: I mean, to me, when I see that ad, it's such a pussy rendition of that compared to their rip-mix-burn slogan, you know. Somehow the two are not consonant.

Michael Erlewine: The white guy doin' rap.

Chet Helms: Right. [Laughs]. Exactly. So, anyway. It's just been a kind of... Right now, I don't want anything out of it other than to see them do it right. I would like to see them... I mean I'd if I had the money ... if I were multimillionaire, I'd just produce some skins, is what they call them now, just some modular things where you could

pop that sucker out of there and pop one in.

If they'd just simply used saturated colors, you know, and marbled it, truly marbled it, which would have been pretty easy to do.

Chet Helms: Tom Donahue). Do you remember who he was? He's generally given credit, I think to some degree, I think undue credit, for starting underground radio. I think underground radio really was FM radio that was started by a guy named Larry Miller, who's on a station in Boston. It was after he had kind of made somewhat of a success of it, then Tom Donahue saw the potential in it and really organized it in a more traditional, marketable kind of thing. And in fairness to Tom, Tom was a brilliant man in marketing and merchandising and so on, and he

really made it the grand phenomenon that it became. But, Larry Miller was on this little contract station KMTX.

On the weekends, he had the midnight to 6 or 7 in the morning thing. And, literally, we would plan a party and refreshments and our weekends sitting up all night and listening to Larry Miller's radio show. Because he was the first guy who played album cuts. He was the first guy who would play an entire album in one sitting. He was the first guy who would play Bob Dylan, followed up with Ravi Shankar and then you know, Flatt and Scruggs or something, you know.

He had an eclectic play list and things like that. Literally, a lot of social life at that point really, very often on the weekends, was organized around Larry Miller's show. Anyway I digress about Donahue,,,

But one of the things that I always remember about Tom Donahue was John Carpenter and I were the young turks. We were the ... and he was probably at least 15 years, maybe 20 years, our senior... And so we'd come barreling into Autumn Records, his office you know and everything, and we'd just be full of some vigor and vitality and piss and vinegar, you know. Just, you know, full of ideas and rarin' to go and he'd say, "Stop right there." He said, "Don't tell me any of your ideas. I have plenty of my own, if you tell me your ideas, you'll be back here tomorrow telling me I stole your ideas."

Michael Erlewine: [Laughs].

Chet Helms: That's the way he would preface every time we'd come barreling' in there like, "Ahhhh! Let's do this! Lets do that!" You know [laughs], and I never forgot that.

Chet Helms: What happened later was there was... Lee Crosby is a guy who owned that station KMTX, at a point. It was a contract station, where mostly minority programming would hire blocks of time and that sort of thing, although I don't think that Larry Miller had hired that time. But anyway, Larry Miller then... I guess Donahue initially... all these guys climbed on board at KMTX. Then there came a point where Crosby was either selling the station or in some way he was going through a real radical programming change there. I think he was broke and having to sell the station. But, anyway, it ended up in a big strike where everybody but Larry Miller walked off. And so Lee Crosby became the 'evil one', you know. I don't think he was that evil a character.

He became the evil one, and then Larry Miller just became that scab, you know, which is kind of sad, because he started it all -- he really and truthfully did. And I think I probably offend some people, but every time I'm sitting in a situation where I'm being interviewed with a group of people and somebody says, "Oh yeah and then Tom Donahue started underground radio," I just have to interject and say,

"Sorry, but, you know, Tom's a great man and he really did make it a very commercially buyable thing, but he was not the guy who started underground radio." And I try to set the record straight that it was Larry Miller who did.

Michael Erlewine: Well that's cool, I was going to ask you what was your relationship with Victor Moscoso?

Chet Helms: Pretty good over the years, until the artists sued me. He was kind of the ringleader of that.

Michael Erlewine: He's very brilliant.

Chet Helms: He's very brilliant I know and...

Michael Erlewine: I spoke to many of them about that suit and they all seem to have accepted, from what I can understand, whatever that outcome was.

Michael Erlewine: We get a bum rap I mean the "60s to me is so important.

Chet Helms: Yeah, it's been so heavily demonized that...

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, it's been demonized and, you know, I was out here in 1960. And then I lived here in '64 for a year, dropped acid, etc., so I was around for all this Sproul Hall student free-speech

thing. In fact, I even saw myself in a movie they made. I had the

CPO jacket, Ray-Bans, the works. [Laughs].

Chet Helms: (Laughs)

Michael Erlewine: So anyway, I don't want to see this whole era just tokenized in some way that doesn't have an edge to it, that doesn't have some beauty to it. It was really something.

Chet Helms: Yeah, oh it was.

Michael Erlewine: You didn't just have to be here. I was in Michigan, and it was still very...

Chet Helms: It was all over. And to me, it still like dropping a pebble in a pond, you know. There was a ripple that went out that hasn't stopped yet, and, in my personal opinion, I know that it's not entirely shared by the world; it's what brought down the iron curtain and what brought down the Berlin wall.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, maybe so.

Chet Helms: I believe it was precisely that huge culture that started here and in London, primarily in the '60s that has so affected. Part of it's been technological -- the cassette recorder, the fax machine... now the Internet.

Michael Erlewine: The Internet is the biggest thing of all.

Chet Helms: Right, but I don't think you can ... in a way right now it's overshadowed, but I don't think you can really discount the Walkman. The Walkman and the transistor radio. I mean, those things, like when I was in Mexico as a kid, 19 or so, hitchhiking around down there, the thing that was transforming the little village I lived in, where no one spoke English... What was transforming it more rapidly than any single other thing was the little \$10 nine-transistor radios.

Michael Erlewine: But when you talk about the ripple effect, the ripple from... The thing about the Internet that is the great equalizer, really, hasn't had a chance to work yet and that is the ability to find information -- search. That is an equalizer. I have some experience in library science, a little bit. Very few people can use a library properly. When I would get an enthusiasm, I would spend weeks documenting, tracing through books, gathering books buying books, in order to answer a few simple questions. I can do that in a minute now, I mean that, when that gets to third world countries, that is going to have an even greater effect than the Walkman.

Just my opinion.

Chet Helms: Sure.

Michael Erlewine: And the '60s to me is like a threshold of change. It's not going to be reproduced.

Chet Helms: Well, I just think that those social values, those aspirations, went out in the form of this music and they were transmitted onto cassette recordings, which were fundamentally smuggled into Russia and Eastern Europe.

Michael Erlewine: And something that's in your favor that needs to be brought out in more articles is the whole idea that bands like the Grateful Dead would not have existed the way they did without the posters. The posters were being sold across the country, way before the band traveled at all.

Chet Helms: There's another area that I think has been egregiously overlooked and reduced to the quote "electric

wallpaper" or whatever and that's the light shows.

Michael Erlewine: I think it's starting to be a trend to look into those.

Chet Helms: I think you're right. I really resent what the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame did with light shows, which was essentially: they created an installation there that seems to suggest and imply that this was just a stage effect that the Grateful Dead invented for their touring shows.

Michael Erlewine: Hmm, perhaps they don't know any better.

Chet Helms: Well they knew better,

"cause I told them and a lot of other people did, but that's how it got presented. Partially, it was because of who they hired to present it. The person they hired had never done a light show, but they hired little elements of other light shows to provide them. I tried to get them to get someone like Bill Ham or Ben Van Meter or Robert Elliott or one of these guys that was a master practitioner of it to... I mean for one thing, the thing about light shows that's totally misunderstood at this point is that light shows at that point were a performance art.

Michael Erlewine: Well, that's right. I mean we had them in Michigan.

Chet Helms: Right now, it's presented like it's something that could be canned and automated and just sort of plugged in, with little ancillary units there, that provide some little flashing lights while the band plays.

Michael Erlewine: I know. It took a staff to do it, right?

Chet Helms: Right.

Michael Erlewine: Even we had strobe lights. We had big opaque projectors, with gels, concave lenses, and so forth. And that was in Michigan.

Chet Helms: Right. I'm so hungry for a light show that would be a large element...

When, I talk to a lot of the younger people, and I've been to a few raves, they all talk about, "Oh, we're doing the same thing." But you go there and it's not the same thing. It's highly mechanized rhythms, by and large, or computer generated. It's kind of like trying... Sure, you can get a synthesizer to produce the sound track, but there's something essentially lifeless about it, because, you know, humans are inherently human and fallible, and it's precisely those little dissonant, off-beat things that put the 'funk' in funk music, you know? If you over digitalized everything and clean everything up and make rhythms that are based on an atomic clock...

Michael Erlewine: You're missing the point. You're not accomplishing anything.

Chet Helms: Right. And a computer doesn't know intuitively when counterpoint is called for. It's like there are many effects in human music that come out of human intuition that says... Well, somebody was tellin' me the other night about trying to jam with someone and they were constantly having to tell them, "Look, don't play what I play. Play against what I play."

Michael Erlewine: That's why Bach was so great.

Chet Helms: Right. I forgot who it was. I was talking to some musician the other

night and they were talking about jam ... we were talking about them jamming with some particular person and they said the problem was that this person would play what they played. They'd play this and then, you know, they'd come back with the same thing or they would play over them, playing the same thing. He'd say, "No don't play with me. Play against me, so that it shows what you're playing and it shows what I'm playing, but they work together.

Chet Helms: When I do a biography, it needs to be something separate from the poster book. And the reason for that....

Chet Helms: I'm talking about "The Chet Helms Book," the Family Dog book.

Michael Erlewine: Of course.

Chet Helms: Needs to be a separate book,

Michael Erlewine: I agree.

Chet Helms: Than the ... I don't even know why I'm telling you this, except that you're a person out there, you know, confronted with all kinds of opportunities

and maybe a second on some of these dove tails at a future point.

Michael Erlewine: Yeah, what are you looking for?

Chet Helms: But all I'm saying is that people say, "Oh, do your biography and, and do all the posters with it." Well, if I do all the posters with it then I have to share that 50-50 with the artists. So the poster book needs to be a book about posters, and I don't have a problem sharing that with the artists. But if I do

the grand complete Family Dog and or Chet Helms book, then that needs, or memoir or whatever, then that needs to...

Michael Erlewine: Well, you know, some books, I mean the book that appears in my mind to this conversation is something like a, you know, place holder. You know, the "60s scene according to Chet, basically, and most of the time you wouldn't want anything according to someone. I mean, that wouldn't be the title but you really have it is like an encyclopedia knowledge that