

# Straight Theater



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Reginald Williams, an early psychedelic pioneer (in tune with the message of Leary and Alpert) and civil rights activist was knocked out by the Trips Festival in early 1966, in particular the potential of the light show. He soon found himself as a light-show apprentice at the Fillmore Auditorium, working under Tony Martin and Luther Green.

By the Spring of 1966, William's vision was to establish some kind of "Trip Center," a place where he could present multi-media events that would "allow a unified field of consciousness to happen with the participating audience and performers." On a Sandoz-inspired acid trip, he wandered past an abandoned movie house at Haight Street & Cole. It was the old Haight Theater and could hold 1500 people.

From later in the Spring of 1966 until the Summer of 1969, Reginald Williams and crew put on hundreds of events, not only musical performances, but also dance, poetry, drama, and, of course, film and light-shows.

The Straight Ashbury Viewing Society, Straight Theater Dance Workshop, and the Straight Theater School of the Performing Arts were an integral part of the venue. Much more loose in content and free than either the Fillmore or Avalon shows, the Straight Theater was a true home for the ephemera and interests of the 1960s. Some of its themes included

tarot, astrology, mystery religions, free love, anti-war, and marijuana initiatives.

Most of the major local bands, like the Quicksilver Messenger Service, the Charlatans, Santana, Mother Earth. The Grateful Dead, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Steve Miller, and Blue Cheer played there.

The old theater was completely renovated, and this included tearing out the first 26 rows of seating and installing a 5000 square foot parquet dance floor, with 40-foot light show screens surrounding the dance area. The only problem was that city refused to issue them a dance permit. This was headline news as the struggle to gain the permit marched on. In the end, it was denied, even after appeal.

In response, the shows at the Straight Theater were deemed "dance classes," and the authorities let it ride. The Straight Theater was up against both the Bill Graham (Fillmore Auditorium) and the Chet Helms (Avalon Ballroom) venues, and the increasing competition forced Reginald Williams to cut back on the printed art (about \$950 to design and print the art) and go forward with radio advertising (\$200-\$500). The art suffered as a result.

A major event the Straight Theater was one of the first showings of the Beatles "Magical Mystery Tour," which was wrestled through customs, motorcycled to the theater, and shown on a round- the-clock schedule to thousands of fans.

But ultimately, the Straight Theater could not get enough action, partly due to semi-frequent muggings of customers on the way to and from the shows, and this was not helped by Bill Graham's practice of precluding any of his acts from playing anywhere else, while they were in town. The struggling venue fell back on just about every kind of event imaginable. Their poetry night even gave way to Steven Gaskin (of Hog Farm fame), who lectured once a week to a group of some 500 people. The Straight Theater supported virtually every kind of culture and event. The last true Straight Theater poster was done by Gary Grimshaw, for a gig by the MC5.

There were about one hundred posters and handbills for the Straight Theater, but most of them are very rare. Unlike the Family Dog and Bill Graham series, these posters were not numbered until later and the whole series is very eclectic, even unorganized might be a fair term. Like the venue itself, the printed items are in all shapes and sizes, colored and uncolored, professional looking and amateurish - everything and the kitchen sink. There is great poster art here (the incredible "Grove for Peace" by Rick Griffin) and also simple memorabilia. It makes for quite a piece of poster detective work, just piecing various handbills and posters for this venue together - very interesting.

All of the San Francisco venues had some sort of financial and organizational struggle to make their vision into reality. I get the sense that the Straight Theater had a lot of vision, but had real trouble getting practical and down to business. They wanted to be all

things to all people. It is clear that more counterculture experiments were made in this venue than in any of the others.

The venue morphed and segued, trying to reflect the emerging San Francisco scene. It never sold out its inspiration; never had the chance. Although I actually played at the Straight Theater, my memory of it is pretty foggy at this distance. It would be nice if someone who really knew this venue would write a short and clear factual history of it.