

Justified and ancient



From working on *Playboy* to inspiring the KLF, **Robert Anton Wilson's** psychedelic philosophies have made him the world's most infamous counter-cultural commentator.

Polymath, agnostic and the author of 35 books and counting, Robert Anton Wilson is both lightning rod and Van der Graaf generator for radical ideas. For 40 years, his takes on conspiracy theories, quantum mechanics, sex magick, psychedelic drugs, alternate universes and the possibilities of the internet as a generator of feedback and disseminator of information, have been laid down for a rapt audience, all lovingly parcelled in a tricksterish sense of humour. His spoken word outings, or "sit-down" comedy performances, are as encyclopaedic and hilarious as his interests might suggest. As an example: "How many freemasons does it take to change a lightbulb? That's a craft secret." Truly, at 73 years of age, Pope Bob is the last grand old man of American 60s counter-culture.

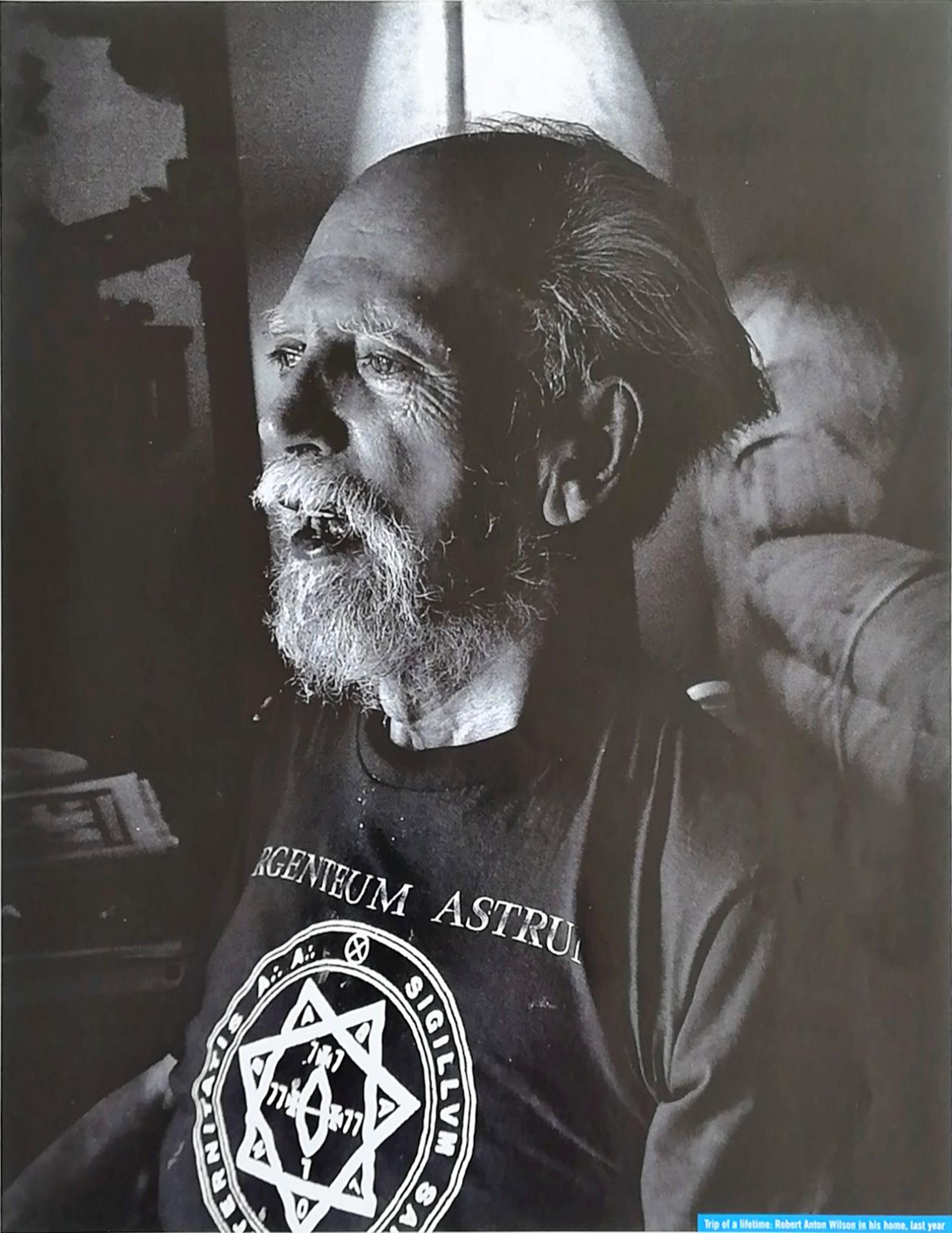
His most popular work, *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, coauthored with Robert Shea, remains the touchstone of his career and the piece that casts the longest cultural shadow. A wild romp through every far-out conspiracy theory around, along with tales of kinky sex, mind-enhancing drugs, absurdist jokes, numerology and experimental structures, it introduced the world

to the Justified Ancients of Mummu, Markoff Chaney and Hagbard Celine, and promulgated the significance of the number 23 and "Discordian" ideas such as the fnord (see overleaf). As a seminal conspiracy theory novel, it may even have sired the cultural juggernaut that is *The Da Vinci Code*, but we can't hold that against a book that also features Nazi zombies at a rock concert and psychotic dwarves, or an author who has done more than his fair share of work to challenge the consensus of reality and culture.

Wilson's incredible career as a psychedelic philosopher has been documented by director Lance Bauscher in the film *Maybe Logic*, appropriately enough a mind-bending trip of a flick. "I first encountered Wilson's work when I was in college and it generously blew my mind," explains Bauscher. "Ezra Pound said that the artist is the antenna of the race. Robert Anton Wilson seems to have an uncanny ability to siphon off our cultural maps of the future – from Bucky Fuller, James Joyce, Aleister Crowley, Alfred Korzybski, Emma Goldman, Timothy Leary – and present their import to the present."

Born in Brooklyn, New York, on January 18, 1932, Wilson contracted polio at the age of four, a disease to which he credits his lifelong optimism. "I had to be an optimist or I never would have walked," he says. "When I was a child I just kept falling down. I wouldn't believe that I couldn't walk, and eventually, I did."

As a young man in Brooklyn, he read widely, taking in William Burroughs, whom he would later meet, Ayn Rand, Joyce, H.L. Mencken and HP Lovecraft. He experienced the jazz and beat scene first-hand, and began a journey from adolescent Catholic engineering student to model agnostic and guerrilla ontologist (see overleaf). A natural-born cultural revolutionary, at the beginning of the 60s Wilson began experimenting with psychedelic drugs and undertook what he would later describe as a 14-year experiment in "induced brain-change". Later that decade, he did various writing and editing jobs, and by 1967, had rolled up as an Associate Editor at *Playboy* in Chicago, where his main job was editing the letters to *Playboy* Forum and writing the replies.



ARGENTEUM ASTRUM



Trip of a lifetime: Robert Anton Wilson in his home, last year

"It may have influenced *The Da Vinci Code*, but we can't hold that against a book that also features Nazi zombies at a rock concert"

It was in this capacity that he met Robert Shea, and the two began working on a book inspired by a host of underground ideas and the most whacked out letters they received. The pair competed to outdo one another as they passed passages back and forth, producing a multi-dimensional feast of a book whose influence can be traced to an important point of British counter-culture history. In 1976, Ken Campbell, theatrical trickster, maverick and philanthropist, and Chris Langham (*The Thick of It*) founded the Science Fiction Theatre of Liverpool in order to stage a theatrical version of the book; a young Bill Drummond helped with set design and would later go on to found, with Jimmy Cauty, a pop group named after the Justified Ancients of Mummu, a sect opposed to the illuminati within the book.

Robert Anton Wilson has continued to produce a wealth of writing on diverse counter-cultural subjects, with highlights that include collaborations with Timothy Leary on *Neuropolitics* and *The Game of Life*; his *Schrodinger's Cat* trilogy, hailed by the *New Scientist* as "the most scientific of all science fiction novels"; *Prometheus Rising*, a self-help guide to reprogramming your own dogmatic views; and an autobiographical and philosophical series, *Cosmic Trigger*.

His awesomely diverse work is best summed up by the term "Maybe Logic", coined by Lance Bauscher and subsequently adopted by Wilson himself. "This was the theme that I used to tie together all of Bob's ideas and lives," Bauscher explains. "When we were cutting the movie, if the scene on the chopping block didn't relate to Maybe Logic it was usually discarded. Maybe Logic is a multi-valued logic, as opposed, for instance, to Aristotelian 'either/or' logic. This 'model agnosticism' emphasises the fallibility and relativity of perception and tends to approach information and observations with questions, probabilities and multiple perspectives rather than absolute truths."

Under this umbrella, Wilson gathers numerous examples of non-Aristotelian systems: von Neumann's three-valued logic (true, false or maybe); Rappoport's four-valued logic (true, false, indeterminate or meaningless); Korzybski's multi-valued logic; and Mahayana Buddhist paradoxical logic, and condenses them all into a single, accessible notion. "Maybe we'd

all think and act more sanely if we had to use 'maybe' a lot more often."

And what about the elephant in the room – or perhaps more appropriately, given Wilson's rich world of hallucinatory experience, the six-foot white rabbit – *The Da Vinci Code*? Bauscher is not surprised at the book's success: "It's not a coincidence that Dan Brown has used so many themes found in Wilson's work and at the same time has created as fervent a fan base as his. They explore similar ideas that our culture seems to desperately need at the present time." Then again, neither is Bob himself surprised. "I wrote a non-Aristotelian conspiracy series," he explains. "Dan Brown turned it into an Aristotelian series. If you want to get rich, don't tax your reader's intelligence. Follow Dan Brown's method and become rich."

It's no surprise that a man so adept at marshalling and communicating ideas is also great at condensing them. He is a rich source of sage advice, providing this gem for those approaching his work for the first time: "Don't believe anything you read in my books, in the Bible, or in Darwin." And what one idea would he like people to take away with them? "Doubt. Doubt even that you have doubted enough. Doubt your doubts."

He "activated" for the legalisation of marijuana for medicinal use long before he began using the drug to help his post-polio syndrome, a recurrence of symptoms of his childhood polio. To this end, his latest endeavour is the Guns and Dope Party, whose mantra, "Everybody for President", echoes the Discordian notion of making everyone a pope, and that would doubtless have proved popular with another recently departed counter-cultural legend, Hunter S. Thompson.

With only four policies – "guns for those who want them, no guns forced on those who don't want them (pacifists, Quakers etc); drugs for those who want them, no drugs forced on those who don't (Christian Scientists etc); an end to Tsarism and a return to constitutional democracy; and equal rights for ostriches" – the party is classic Wilson, libertarianism cloaked in absurdity; political activism with a philosophical shrug; a lit spliff; a smoking gun and a large bipedal bird.

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Mind-bending movie: Lance Bauscher's *Maybe Logic*

Magick moments: RAW glossary

GUERRILLA ONTOLOGIST

According to RU Sirius, a Wilson enthusiast who stole his pseudonym from the man's hallucinations, "the guerrilla ontologist is a kind of memetic warrior who lives to dynamite people's static reality tunnels." Ontology is the branch of metaphysics concerned with what exists. The guerrilla ontologist, therefore, challenges others' conceptions of what does or does not constitute reality.

SNAFU

The SNAFU law states that the greater your power to punish, the less factual feedback you will actually receive. So, if you can fire people for telling you what you don't want to hear, you will only hear what you want.

COSMIC SCHMUCK or IDIOT OF THE CENTURY

1. The more often you suspect that you may be thinking like a schmuck, the less of a schmuck you will become, year by year.
2. Conversely, the less you think you are a schmuck, the more likely every idiot idea you have will remain in your head and you will become the most awesome Cosmic Schmuck.

DISCORDIANISM

Discordianism has been described as an elaborate joke disguised as a religion, and as a religion disguised as an elaborate joke. It is a chaos-based religious system founded by Greg Hill (Malaclypse The Younger) and Kerry Thornley (Omar Khayyam Ravenhurst) in either 1958 or 1959, and formalised, if such a concept can be applied, with the publication of five copies ("mostly lost") of the *Principia Discordia* in 1965, a text heavily referenced in *Illuminatus!*

FNORD

Originating from the *Principia Discordia* and popularised in *Illuminatus!*, fnords are subliminal signifiers hidden in newspapers to promote a sense of unease and panic when reading news stories. Fnords are not placed in adverts. We are brainwashed at school not to see fnords, so instead we just feel scared by the news and relieved when we see ads.