

## ***DYING TO KNOW: Ram Dass & Timothy Leary***

### **THE SETTING**

In the making for almost 18 years, the feature documentary *“Dying to Know: Ram Dass & Timothy Leary”* traces and celebrates the lifelong friendship and spiritual connection between two unlikely characters. Eminent psychologists from diverse backgrounds, the two professors, Leary and Alpert, pioneered important research at Harvard in the early 1960s where their participatory explorations and writings into personality development involved sanctioned drugs in unique supervised settings. After their dismissal from Harvard, they continued their experiments and became leading figures of social and scientific changes of the late 1960s. These controversial and iconic figures of Western culture ultimately helped shape the evolving social consciousness of an entire age.

After so much time and so many experiences together they grew apart and developed in different directions, Leary as a visionary and social revolutionary, Ram Dass as a wise spiritual advisor and Eastern philosopher. A 1983 Harvard reunion rekindled the friendship between these controversial figures. They had danced in, out and through each other’s complex lives for decades until, ultimately, Leary’s terminal cancer inspired this 1995 meeting, one arranged by the filmmakers. *“Dying to Know: Ram Dass & Timothy Leary”* captures them in an intimate and entertaining conversation about life, death and the psychedelic explorations that began it all. It would be their last time ever filmed together.

Using original interviews and collected images, Director Dillingham updates and explores their history, struggles, successes, failures. She develops a lucid conversation around their contributions to the science of the mind and the heart, showing their work to be possibly even more visionary and relevant today than in the past. Robert Redford narrates this enlightening and entertaining cosmic buddy movie.

### **THE FILM STORY**

The story centers on a 1995 meeting and filmed interview at Timothy Leary’s home in Los Angeles. Timothy has announced that he is dying of cancer and intends to approach his condition with the same curious enthusiasm and eager engagement of the unknown that marked the rest of his life. Visiting Tim is his old friend and Harvard collaborator, Ram Dass (nee: Richard Alpert), now an esteemed spiritual guide steeped in Eastern and Western religious traditions. The ensuing conversation explores their life-long friendship, divergent practices of Western science and Eastern thought, passing with dignity as the final expression of

a life and theories of what may exist beyond. Their wise exchange offers food for thought as the filmmakers revisit the history and impact of two remarkable lives.

The filmmakers explore the formative early lives and subsequent history of the two celebrated Harvard psychology professors whose sanctioned use of psychedelic drugs in the early 1960s, researched and probed the outer edges of human consciousness. Incorporating images from more than 80 years, the film integrates their history of daring explorations with their earlier important work in the field of personality assessment. Their seminal discoveries in modern psychology too clearly pointed out inherent institutional limitations of the field and society's resistance to change. Soon academic envy and the social disruption of the late 1960s overtook their efforts.

For an incident unrelated to their science, they were discredited in part by a Harvard undergraduate, then a reporter for the Harvard Crimson, and now noted Integrative Medicine proponent and author, Dr. Andrew Weil. A rising star in academics, Alpert became the first professor dismissed from Harvard since Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1838. Leary's contract was not renewed.

Once outside the academic environment, their paths took drastically different turns. At first together, later separately, those turns would make them into central figures in the evolving social consciousness of the 1960s.

Upon leaving Harvard they relocated their research project and personal explorations of altered states of consciousness to Millbrook, a communal 63-room mansion in Dutchess County N.Y. Provided by Peggy Hitchcock Mellon, the then youngest generation of the Mellon family, the vast estate which became a hotbed of communal, social and artistic activity. There, the two ex-professors collaborated on a book entitled, *The Psychedelic Experience*. Based on *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, their book explored the similarities of the psychedelic experience and the dying process of both the ego and the physical body.

After a time, the increased attention and notoriety sent things out of control at Millbrook. Seeking more, Alpert made his way to India in search of a way to stay high without drugs. There he met his guru who gave him his name Ram Dass (Servant of God). His charismatic teachings and service through compassion led Western followers through a collective spiritual transformation. A handbook of his experiences became the book, *Be Here Now*.

On the other hand, with a marked flair for drama, Leary pushed the culture's boundaries of conventional thinking, questioning authority and championing personal choice. His wild ride influenced a global counter culture movement that landed him in Folsom prison – a fugitive philosopher who Richard Nixon named the "Most Dangerous Man in America."

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**PRODUCTION NOTES**

**The Moment on Film:**

The original idea to reunite Leary and Ram Dass in conversation was one that resulted in their last filmed meeting together. Over the years, the film project grew in scope as the filmmakers unraveled an expanding universe of important social and philosophical issues, ideas, buddy stories and revelations that arose from the lively 1995 chat. It became clearer through the editorial process how much their joint and individual scientific and philosophical works contributed to world culture and had resulted in a radical rethinking of contemporary life from the 1960s forward.

Director Gay Dillingham, who was born in 1965, brings a fresh perspective and honest curiosity to her discovery of who these real life figures were – figures her culture had only handed her as caricatures. She and her generation rode a wave of impact, good and bad, that the 60s generation had set in motion. Her perspective is reflective of the generations that followed and their desire to learn more about 60s era and to develop a conversation on how to forge a saner path relative to how we live and how we die.

Completed Spring of 2014, *“Dying to Know: Ram Dass & Timothy Leary”* brings a new perspective to reexamine and contextualize the historic legacies of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, Ram Dass and their influence beyond their own generations.

What makes *Dying to Know* different from other coverage of the period stems from the trust and unprecedented access afforded the filmmakers. The conversational point of departure presented a rare opportunity to reassess two larger than life iconic figures whose work and friendship changed our times. The unique context of Leary’s pending death, Ram Dass’ role as counselor to the dying set the stage for a sensitive and direct style of filming that opened the two men up like never before for their last good bye. Their engaging candor, humor and deep respect for each other encouraged an original moment to both emotionally and analytically revisit history while offering a refreshing perspective on the eternal present.

As we grapple with contemporary social issues, the viewer can reflect on what went right and what went wrong in the tumultuous 1960-70s, and how these two well-lived lives archetypically reflect those times. *Dying to Know* explores and reassesses their work and contributions to an age and to the future.

## **STYLE OF THE FILM**

As with many independent documentaries, *“Dying to Know: Ram Dass & Timothy Leary”* was made opportunistically without any preconceived budget and over many years from personal funds gathered along the way. That organic process and freedom are reflected in the production process over time. Multiple video and film formats (some long gone) have been artfully and proficiently combined with both an original composed score and original graphic design. These original components both reflect the protagonists’ period and contemporize the supporting visual experience.

Still, the charismatic participants speak for themselves and present their personal and intimate perspectives for a documentary experience that builds awareness in a manner easy to digest, yet enormously poignant in its theme and social message.

The main visual approach to the narrative was to incorporate original interviews shot by the filmmakers with acquired period archival footage and photography spanning more than 80 years. Timothy died in 1996, but these original, never-before-seen filmed interviews conducted before then, form a basis for the timeline. Ram Dass suffered a debilitating stroke in 1997 making travel almost impossible for him. While his speech is now somewhat more laborious than before, his wisdom is more profound than ever.

### **Narration**

Mr. Redford offered to narrate because he fell in love with the film. He was not only honored to narrate but also provided guidance on the content. A full-feature narration by Robert Redford brings authority and familiarity to the message and the film.

### **Music**

The same sensibility applies to the Western and Eastern musical audio foundations, an original score, period and contemporary songs by musicians such as Jackson Browne, Moody Blues, John Lennon, Krishna Das, Jai Uttal and others. In addition to the period pre-recorded music, the film features an original composed score and is performed by some of the most versatile accomplished session musicians working today.

### **Testimonial Interviews**

This documentary takes advantage of notable figures who both intersected the story and who intelligently explore the issues of life, death, drugs and history. Interviews from 2012 include family members, collaborators, media figures, supporters and detractors of both Leary and Alpert. Personal perspectives are provided by: Dr. Andrew Weil, Huston Smith, Roshi Joan Halifax, Ralph Metzner, Lama Tsultrim Allione, John Perry Barlow, Peggy Hitchcock, Johanna Harcourt-Smith and Zach Leary.

The filmmakers are eternally grateful to the participants whose generosity of time and spirit, as well as their total commitment made the information so special and personal.

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**THE INTERVIEWEES**

**Timothy Leary, PhD**

*Philosopher, Psychologist, Author, Convict, Lifestyle Icon*

**Ram Dass (nee Richard Alpert), PhD**

*Psychologist, Author, Spiritual Teacher*

**Andrew Weil, MD**

*International Best-selling Author, Founder/Director: Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine*

**Ralph Metzner, PhD**

*Harvard Contemporary Psychologist with Leary and Alpert, Author*

**Huston Smith**

*Professor of Religion, Author: "The World's Religions"*

**Peggy Mellon Hitchcock**

*Millbrook House Resident/Owner, Benefactor*

**John Perry Barlow**

*Rancher, Author, Grateful Dead Lyricist, Co-Founder Electronic Frontier Foundation*

**Roshi Joan Halifax**

*Author, Founder and Abbot: Upaya Zen Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico*

**Tsultrim Allione**

*Tibetan Buddhist Lama*

**Joanna Harcourt-Smith**

*Former Wife of Timothy Leary*

**Zach Leary**

*Timothy Leary's Son*

**Dean Chamberlain**

*Photographer, Light Painter*

## **KEY FILMMAKING PERSONNEL**

Producer/Director, Gay Dillingham  
Narrative Writer/Editor, David Leach  
Robert Redford, narrator  
Associate Producer, Michael Donnelly  
Alan Kozlowski, production and camera  
David Aubrey, camera  
Steven Postell, composer  
Ken S. Polk, Audio re-mixing  
Colin Gill, motion graphics  
Dustin Linblad, illustrations

Running Time: 95 minutes. Format: Mixed Digital Media  
Producer: CNS Communications, LLC  
Completed: October 2014

## **REACTIONS TO THE FILM**

*“The idea of anything that expands our thinking beyond conventional borders has always been of interest to me. When I see the living, breathing portraits of these characters, especially the early archival footage... To see them intelligent and smart – they were a kind of blessing considering how they have been caricatured in later times. I like what this film explores and I’m glad to be a part of it.*

**Robert Redford**

*“This film is stunning and literally left me speechless. It is so powerful on so many levels, whether personal, political, spiritual or ultimately facing death. It is an amazing piece of work. Thank you so much for doing it. You will make history with it.”*

**Ambassador Joe Wilson**

*“A great piece of work and an extraordinary story well told.”*

**Sting**

*“The film left me open. It’s a historic document chronicling two majestic lives.”*

**Jeff Bridges, “The Dude”**

*“It is highly entertaining and enlightening on all levels. I was never bored!”*

**Kathryn Altman**

*“gay- i just finished watching your documentary “dying to know” again. It is a tremendous and beautiful piece of filmmaking. it was so deeply engaging and touching. thank you for putting this into the world. all my best,”*

**Darren Aronofsky**

## PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

### Log Line:

*In 1995 two old friends and collaborators reunite after many years. Timothy Leary has discovered he is dying of cancer and asks his friend of a lifetime, Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), to come to visit him in Los Angeles. Together their lively and entertaining conversation explores their past, modern society, their beliefs and what lies beyond.*

### Blurb 1:

*The film is a compelling and entertaining road trip through the shared consciousness of two controversial Harvard professors, iconic figures of the 1960's, whose lives and work deeply affected an entire generation.*

### Blurb 2:

*In the early 1960s, two conventional Harvard professors began probing the edges of consciousness. Over the next five decades, the two greatly impact modern thought, Timothy Leary, as a counter-cultural legend and Richard Alpert as Ram Dass, a spiritual teacher. Gay Dillingham's film, narrated by Robert Redford, offers an intimate portrait of an epic friendship, through life and into the next realm. (U.S. 2014, 95 minutes)*

### Tag Line 1:

*The original cosmic adventurers who started it all in the 60's get back together and are about to go on the biggest trip of their lives.*

### Tag Line 2:

*Who are these guys REALLY?*

*And why did this once young filmmaker take 18 years to find out why they matter today! Are you dying to know? Do you have 18 years or 90 minutes?*

### Tag Line 3:

*The ultimate cosmic buddy movie, come along.*

## THUMBNAIL SUMMARY:

*In the early 1960s Harvard psychology professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert began probing the edges of consciousness through their experiments with psychedelics. Leary became a missionary for mind altering drugs, asking us to think for ourselves, igniting a global counter-culture movement, landing in prison after Nixon called him "the most dangerous man in America". Alpert journeyed to the East becoming Ram Dass, a spiritual teacher continuing to*

*teach a new generation and the author of the book “Be Here Now”. The cinematic vision quest encourages us to ponder questions about life, drugs & the biggest mystery in the human landscape.*

*Now, nearly 50 years later, a new documentary re-assesses the lives of two iconic figures, their work, their successes and failures, the times they lived in and their remarkable shared journey through life. Together as friends, collaborators and individuals they were both celebrated and vilified, but like two sides of a coin, or as the mind and the heart, their work together and apart has become more significant today than when they were lightning rods in a time of great social change. Too long viewed as caricatures in a larger game of power and social upheaval, the new film takes a fresh and entertaining look at these men and their times. Whether you've heard of them or not they've changed your life and those of a generation.*

*Robert Redford narrates this intimate portrait spanning 80 years of rare footage and never before seen interviews.*

## **ISSUES ADDRESSED BY THE FILM**

Although not truly an “issues film” per se, the personal lens, unique relationship, history and conversation between these two controversial characters inevitably brings up several of society’s most perennial issues. The considered discussion between Leary and Ram Dass is enhanced by interviews with a host of eminent experts in the fields of education, medicine, psychology, art, world religion and the hospice movement.

### **The Taboo of Death and Dying**

The more forward-thinking issue of the moment is the taboo surrounding death, dying and passing from this life with awareness and dignity. From their philosophical and religious Eastern and Western perspectives Leary and Ram Dass explore deep-rooted personal, social and economic impacts brought on by our collective failure to grapple with death and dying as an extension of life and living.

Society requires new perspectives to build a healthier relationship to how we live and how we die. As they age, this generation has the opportunity to shift this paradigm profoundly and we hope this film can help that movement.

### **The War on Drugs**

Leary actually advocated for the reasoned control and regulation of drugs with potential scientific and medicinal value to research. Yet Timothy became one of the first, if not the first, major casualty of the grand failure of the War on Drugs.

Leary’s story reflects a misguided government policy that has failed in many ways: scientific research, social disorder, lives lost, millions incarcerated, treasure expended, increased and unmanaged drug use and expanded criminal enterprise. The current national consensus



demonstrates that criminalization policies have not resulted in increased public safety and may have in fact undermined serious scientific research and the medical potential of certain drugs.

### **Repression of Personal Choice**

The government and institutional repression of thinkers and scientists like Leary and Alpert was tragic in many ways. These scientists and philosophers thought for themselves, questioned authority and paid dearly for those liberties. By extension, society, too, has paid dearly for the shortsighted actions of an establishment adverse to change and by those seeking to preserve power and the status quo.

### **Convergence of Eastern and Western Thought**

Recognized religious scholars, doctors, writers and scientists review converging concepts of Eastern and Western philosophies. These interviews contextualize spiritual practices as those impact our daily lives and broad social wellness and economics of health.

Notably, Ram Dass' seminal book, *"Be Here Now"* (in its 43<sup>rd</sup> printing) was and continues to be highly influential in opening up this convergence for many Westerners. In this age of ever increasing distractions the message to "be here now" is more pertinent than ever.

## **CURRENT TIMELINE STATUS**

### **Status Summary and Timeline for completion**

The filming and post-production process took place over 19 years. From the beginning the film has been a personal labor of love and exploration without any deadline or real consideration of broadcast or commercial exhibition. The response at a few private screenings engaging multiple age groups, Millennial to Baby Boomer, has been overwhelmingly positive. Follow-up comments have been deep and thoughtful. The Director's dream of a creating a film that will inspire audiences to engage in deep conversation has finally come true.

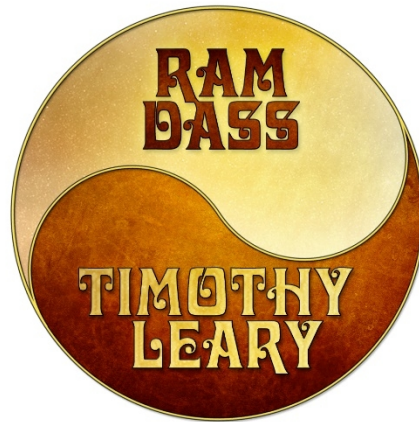
To help bring new life to the substantial archival elements from the Leary Archives and the Alpert Family, the film was finished by talented artists at leading commercial visual effects houses in Los Angeles, New Mexico and even Mexico City. The final sound mix was completed by award-winning sound mixer/designer Ken Polk. Composer Steven Postell wrote an original music score and brought in noted musicians to contribute to the compelling audio textures.

The film is currently seeking commercial distribution in addition to a grassroots outreach.

The World Premiere of the film was celebrated at the Mill Valley Film Festival in California in early October 2014.



## DYING TO KNOW



For more information please contact:

Gay Dillingham, Producer/Director (505) 603-7592 [gayd@cncs.com](mailto:gayd@cncs.com)

Michael Donnelly, Associate Producer (310) 486-2559 [sfxfilms@pacbell.net](mailto:sfxfilms@pacbell.net)  
[www.dyingtoknowmovie.com](http://www.dyingtoknowmovie.com)