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ICONIC VAN

Local artist in search of colorful Woodstock VW microbus A&E



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AMY DAVIS/BALTIMORE SUN

Artist Bob Hieronimus, 73, is seeking information about any parts to the Volkswagen bus he painted that became famous from Woodstock. He is holding a collector's model of the bus.

BUS trip

A local artist and documentary crew hunt for a Woodstock icon

BY DANIELLE OHL
The Baltimore Sun

In a now-iconic photo of '60s counterculture, one Woodstock attendee scowls at the camera while another looks into the distance at a crowd thousands strong. But it is the bus they're perched on, not the people themselves, that eventually became famous.

The old Volkswagen Kombi is covered in colors and symbols that span ages, continents and astral planes: a sphinx, an eagle, stars and moons, writhing flames and wiggling waves, the Aquarius zodiac sign and the 10 incarnations of Vishnu. Words in languages current, ancient and legendary splay across its doors, bumpers and hatches, predicting a future in which the people of the world are united.

The eye-popping van appeared in an Associated Press snapshot of the 1969 Woodstock Art and Music Fair that graced the pages of newspapers and magazines across the country, making it an instant symbol of the music festival's spirit.

But now, the "Woodstock bus" is lost — and Bob Hieronimus is determined to find it.

Hieronimus, an Owings Mills artist and expert in esoteric subjects, has teamed up with a research group out of the State University of New York Maritime College and a documentary film producer to locate what remains of his creation and bring its message of "higher consciousness" back in time to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the festival that made it famous.

The documentary, an Arcadia Content production, will feature Hieronimus and the documentary crew searching
See **VAN**, page 5



ASSOCIATED PRESS

This August 1969 photo shows concert-goers on the roof of a Volkswagen bus at the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair at Bethel, N.Y.

The game is afoot, and it's a Volkswagen van

VAN, From page 1

for clues to where the bus might have ended up. They've found a license plate number and potential mechanic records, but the search party can't make any headway until cameras start rolling later this summer, said film producer John Wesley Chisholm.

"It was what was in the air, what was going on," Hieronimus, 73, said of the mural he painted on the now-missing microbus.

Raised in Baltimore, he was a local fixture in 1960s counterculture — forming a school for religious metaphysical and occult arts, and living in a commune where members studied meditation.

Hieronimus started painting to make a living, though he said he loved art since age 4 or 5.

Today, his paintings have earned him local renown. He's done more than 30 murals, he said, including his 1969 mural "Apocalypse" that sprawls throughout the second floor of the Johns Hopkins University's Levering Hall.

He started painting cars to, quite literally, give his ideas movement.

"If you have an idea you want to get across, and you have no money to do it, you take what you've got," he said. "I had a car; it was my home, almost, so I painted it."

Hieronimus came to paint the Woodstock bus because he was a regular at New York musician Bob Grimm's shows. Grimm, after a few in-depth philosophical conversations, built a rapport with Hieronimus, whom he commissioned to paint the tour bus for his band, Light, for \$1,000. The two trekked into the Vermont wilderness and began the painting, which took a few months.

Though Hieronimus never actually made it to Woodstock (he didn't want to fight the crowds, he said), the bus came home newly famous. It showed up on the pages of The New York Times and Rolling Stone, among other publications, capturing the "generational message that embodied what the '60s were about," Grimm said.

"The bus was really an entity to itself," Grimm said. "It had a life of its own."

Grimm left to go on tour with the Four Seasons in 1971, leaving the Woodstock bus



Bob Hieronimus explains his "We The People" artcar (2008) to Baltimore Sun reporter Danielle Ohl, showing where the Woodstock Bus is seen on this car as if on its way up to Woodstock. Photo by Laura Cortner for Hieronimus & Co.

behind with Hieronimus and the Savitria commune. This is where details get foggy.

Neither Grimm nor Hieronimus can remember the exact fate of the bus since its Woodstock days. "It was being held together by the paint," and had undergone several engine and transmission replacements, Hieronimus said, so it's likely he traded it in for another van.

The hunt for the Volkswagen has attracted multiple partners — including Chisholm, a self-proclaimed Volkswagen lover. He had worked with Hieronimus on shows in the past and recruited him for a Woodstock anniversary documentary.

"It was all fine, he was very positive, and I was thrilled until we got to the part of the conversation where no one could remember where they put their bus," Chisholm said. The documentary seemed doomed, until Hieronimus and Chisholm got to talking.

"We thought, 'Well, maybe finding the bus is the story,'" Chisholm said, "because

we're talking about finding the spirit of Woodstock."

David Allen, a humanities professor at State University of New York Maritime College, has also joined the search. He teaches history and museum studies courses at SUNY Maritime and requires students to research a tangible artifact from its moment of creation to now — and that includes tracking the object down if it's missing. Allen and his students have found Apollo space capsules, Albert Einstein's sailboat and what they believe to be the only surviving Titanic lifeboat.

He's optimistic for the future of the Woodstock bus.

The AP photo of the bus includes its original license plate number, which could lead to a previous owner, Allen said. The search party has also engaged the Volkswagen community, and they hope to inspect derelicts in the Baltimore area, Chisholm said.

Through social media posts and a flyer

Hieronimus has circulated online, he's connected with someone who might be able to help — the high-school sweetheart of his old mechanic's now-deceased brother. Hieronimus and company are hoping she'll know where to find records of the bus's whereabouts.

But the SUNY Maritime group's search has not really begun in full force, Allen said.

"We need to probably actually get some boots on the ground in Baltimore and knocking on doors and scaring some hippies," he said.

Hieronimus plans to restore any part of the bus that he and his fellow searchers can dig up. In the case that they can't discover an intact vehicle, Hieronimus will re-create the Woodstock bus from a similar Kombi model. Volkswagen likes the project, said spokesman Guenther Scherelis, and is open to participating in restoration efforts.

"The Woodstock festival was a big historic event that shaped the reputation of the Microbus," he said. "We are happy to help support [the project]."

Chisholm hopes to take the new bus — whether restored or re-created — back to Bethel, N.Y., the original site of Woodstock, for the festival anniversary and then on to tour around the country or the East Coast, Chisholm said. "We'll enlist the most interesting people we can find," he said. "There's certainly lots of young people and young musicians that would jump at the chance to take this sort of road trip."

Chisholm would like to go to market with the one-hour documentary in October 2018, meaning the hunt for the bus will need to wrap up sometime next summer, he said. He has accepted a U.S. broadcast contract from CuriosityStream, a subscription-based video-on-demand service, and competing international offers.

And after that? "I personally would like to see it in a museum setting at the highest possible level," he said. "The sky's the limit, really, isn't it?"

As for Hieronimus, he's patiently waiting to see his old friend again.

"I'd be happy with a hubcap," he said.

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Additional Photos by Laura E. Cortner for Hieronimus & Co.



More information at
www.WoodstockBus.com

