

“No one responded to the contradictory possibilities of this milieu [Hollywood in the 60s] more richly than Peter Mays. Inspired by accounts of developments on the East Coast, he formed a screening society in the art department at UCLA, to which he brought Jack Smith and other avatars of the New York underground. In his own films, he absorbed and synthesized the dominant underground styles and other countercultural current of the time. But though his early works follow Brakhage’s categorical renunciation of the commercial cinema’s concerns--his *Stream* (1964), for instance, is an 8 mm short that recalls Brakhage’s *Songs* in both its subject matter and its cluster editing of single frames to portray a mountain stream--his mature works were mostly feature length and engaged with mass media imagery. *Death of the Gorilla* (1966), his most successful film, generates a lurid surrealist melodrama of fragments of mostly horror films photographed from the television through color filters. Later, when he was working regularly with the Single Wing Turquoise Bird, Mays attempted to bring the avant-garde and the industry together in a series of dazzling attempts to extend psychedelic trance films and other underground genres to feature length, though he was not able to secure commercial distribution for any of them. *Sister Midnight* (1967-74), for example, is an underground epic set inside a film noir: radically disfigured titles from *The Big Sleep* introduce a group of promiscuous, drug-taking teen-agers whose distraught subjectivities are rendered in a distended pastiche of avant-garde styles and film genre motifs. In taking the deliberately nonprofessional reworking of industry models to an unprecedented extreme, this and Mays’s other features mobilize an overall negative aesthetic as complex and sophisticated as that of Jack Smith, but one that is informed by contemporary Hollywood rather than nostalgia for its past.”

--David James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde* (University of California Press, 2005), p. 391.