

Review

Little light shed on UFOs

By MICHAEL ROBERTS
Daily News staff writer

Matrix Midland's "UFO Summit" was held before a near capacity house last night in the Main Auditorium of the Midland Center for the Arts.

Under the joint sponsorship of Matrix and the science magazine "Omni," UFO skeptic James E. Oberg and UFOlogist J. Allen Hynek were paired in a program billed as a dispassionate look at the phenomenon of unidentified flying objects.

Despite the two experts' impressive credentials in the field of UFO study, the net effect of their joint appearance in Midland did little to advance the discussion.

A "UFO Summit" is a strange "entertainment" vehicle to begin with. Less than a seminar or workshop, supposedly more than a song and dance, the idea was chancy, might have worked, but for lack of courage and some coordination among the principals, it did not work.

It came off a bit like one of those tent shows along a carnival midway where the huckster outside encourages you to pay a dollar and come inside to see the two-headed horse or the 600-pound woman.

This is not to say the audience is misled, just a participant in the risk. Ya pays yer money and takes yer chances.

The evening opened with a rambling, introductory monologue by WNBC radio personality E. Lee Spiegel, who felt compelled to tell us all about his trip to a New York disco dressed as an alien from outer space.

This was followed with a collage of photographs, drawings and bits of film, many not labeled or identified, of purported UFO sightings; a film prepared by Spiegel with "Omni" backing.

Spiegel next introduced Oberg, a computer specialist working on a consultant basis with NASA, and a freelance science writer.

It was Oberg's turn to ramble a bit as he laid out his thesis that UFO reports should be scrutinized in a scientific manner.

With the aid of some NASA film footage from several Gemini and Apollo flights, including a moon landing, he demonstrated how purported UFO sightings in space were little more than debris and light reflections. This portion of his presentation — dealing with real issues — was a highlight of the evening.

The films alone were worth the trip.

Almost two hours after Spiegel first took the stage, Hynek was introduced. He began reading from a prepared text, a move that on the heels of Oberg's animated style slowed the pace considerably.

With the aid of his own photographs, drawings and diagrams, Hynek followed his position statement with a quick overview of eight or ten celebrated cases of UFO encounters, passing over details with apologies that there was no time.

A couple of times, Hynek did go into an encounter (he couldn't help himself), and when he did, had the audience enthralled. But worry over time, in a overlong program of which he was to have been at least half the show, seemed to throw him off his pace.

At no point in the program did the two men talk about the same cases, except for common references to one sighting in Arizona, but in this instance, for different reasons.

It must be assumed that an audience attending a "UFO Summit" has more than a passing interest in UFOs, or more specifically, in the existence of UFOs.

Oberg's demonstration on debunking certain UFO sightings was intelligent and informative. Hynek's cursory catalogue of tales did not match up in terms of substance. The audience was left hungry for more 'solid' information. Taking one or two "good" cases and laying them out would have been much more effective.

Serving as master of ceremonies, Spiegel brought the two men out after Hynek's presentation for a question-and-answer period that failed to break any new ground.

In the end, both men agreed that a scientific approach is needed in the study of UFOs. They both agreed that we are not in a position to study UFOs, only UFO reports.

The program needed more study of actual UFO reports.

Prior to the "UFO Summit," a display of photomicrographs had its premiere in the auditorium lobby. Visitors were ushered into a darkened area and treated to a sound and slide show of color photomicrographs, with organs, moogs and symphony orchestras going for overkill on atmosphere.

At magnifications of 2000 times, many of the substances looked like opaque, abstract paintings. Very pretty, but out of synch with the 2001ish sound show.

A quiet exhibit of many of the same photomicrographs was available for viewing outside the screening room, and with added pictures of insects, pollen and other common items, was very fine.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF
JAMES OBERG