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Summer of Love: 40 Years Later / 1967: The stuff that myths are made of

Joel Selvin, Chronicle Senior Pop Music Critic Published 4:00 am, Sunday, May 20, 2007

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Chronicle, 1968

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A flower girl named Paula who was wearing a hat of daisies opened a cigarette case. "Anybody want a joint?" she asked. The response was slow, so she tossed a dozen cigarettes into the crowd. Kathy Brady, 18, ... [more](#)

By the time the fabled Summer of Love hit San Francisco 40 years ago, the party was already over in the Haight-Ashbury.

Yet the mythology of that summer in 1967 has never disappeared. The San Francisco hippie, dancing in Golden Gate Park with long hair flowing, has become as much of an enduring American archetype as the gunfighters and cowboys who roamed the Wild West. More importantly, the rise of '60s counterculture has had a significant impact on our culture today. The Summer of Love resonates in strip mall yoga classes, pop music, visual art, fashion, attitudes toward drugs, the personal computer revolution, and the current mad dash toward the greening of America. While some of the counterculture's dreams came true, others, particularly the movement's idealistic politics, evaporated like the sweet-smelling pot smoke that saturated the air that summer.

"If you look at all the political agendas of the 1960s, they basically failed," says actor Peter Coyote, who belonged to a Haight-Ashbury commune called the Diggers in the late '60s. "We didn't end capitalism. We didn't end imperialism. We didn't end racism. Yeah, the war ended. But if you look at the cultural agendas, they all worked."

"It was sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, and those were all fun," says social satirist Paul Krassner. "But at the core of the counterculture was a spiritual revolution."

In the weeks leading up to the end of the 1967 school year, while many of the more forward-thinking of the Haight community left town to continue their social experiments elsewhere, San Francisco braced for an anticipated onslaught of more than 100,000 young transients for a psychedelic circus in Haight-Ashbury. "The Invasion of the Flower Children" announced one Chronicle headline.

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The phrase itself, Summer of Love, echoed for months in advance throughout the national media, which took great delight in cluck-clucking over those kooky kids out in San Francisco, the ones on space-age drugs who called themselves hippies.

There couldn't have been better advertising. College students read about the Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park in January 1967. Some of them came to check things out during spring break. The rest couldn't wait for the school year to be over.

That summer was ripe for change. It was only two years after the Watts riots in Los Angeles, 3 1/2 years after the Kennedy assassination, and more and more American troops were being sent to fight in the Vietnam War. Against the backdrop of an ever-widening chasm between the nation's youth and their parents that would eventually be dubbed "the generation gap," young people all over the country headed toward San Francisco.

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"It was sort of like a farmer unloading a truckload of onions -- once the onions start to move, there's no stopping them," says Carolyn Garcia by telephone from her home in Oregon. At the time, she was known as Mountain Girl and lived at 710 Ashbury St. with her boyfriend (and eventual husband), guitarist Jerry Garcia and the rest of his band, the Grateful Dead.

"That's kind of how it felt, that the streets were just filling up with people, vegetables yearning to be free," she says with a laugh.

Ground zero for the Summer of Love was an old San Francisco neighborhood filled with large Victorian rooming houses built for Irish workers, where a student could get a room for as little as \$25 a month. San Francisco State was a bus ride away and, in those early, innocent days, just after the Beatles came to America, the beatnik underground had begun to drift away from the coffeehouses and jazz clubs of North Beach into the Haight.

In September 1965, a small commune called the Family Dog threw an unusual dance at Longshoreman's Hall, starring a rock band called the Charlatans that had played the previous summer at the Red Dog Saloon, a restored silver rush dance hall in Virginia City, Nev. The second-billed group, which had an even weirder name, Jefferson Airplane, was making its first appearance outside the Marina District nightclub it had opened the month before. The third act on the bill, the Great Society, featured a former model from Palo Alto named Grace Slick.

More than a thousand people turned up for the dance. Hair flowing over their collars, the revelers were dressed cheerfully in colorful discards plucked from thrift stores. Many were on LSD, as were many of the musicians. Virtually everyone who attended "A Tribute to Dr. Strange," as the dance was called, seemed to have the same thought about the gathering: "I didn't know there were this many of us."

LSD was the secret ingredient. The psychedelic drug had become increasingly popular in Haight-Ashbury underground circles by the time *Life* magazine trumpeted the mind-altering chemical in an April 1966 issue. Again, the advertising couldn't have been better. By October, LSD was illegal, but the cork was out of the bottle.

In January 1966, former San Francisco Mime Troupe business manager Bill Graham began throwing weekly dances at the Fillmore Auditorium and, within weeks, his onetime partner Chet Helms, who took over the name Family Dog from its original owners, was producing weekly shows at the Avalon Ballroom at the intersection of Sutter Street and Van Ness Avenue. Rock bands with funny names were springing up everywhere -- Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Country Joe and the Fish -- and the golden age of San Francisco rock was under way.

In January 1967, 15 months after the "Dr. Strange" dance at Longshoreman's Hall, a crowd estimated at 35,000 filled the Polo Fields in Golden Gate Park for the Human Be-In. Subtitled "a gathering of tribes," the Haight-Ashbury community event featured several rock bands, beatnik poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Michael McClure, and the LSD evangelist Tim Leary, who urged everyone there to "turn on, tune in and drop out."

As spring turned to summer, a human tidal wave swept from the East toward San Francisco. Gray Line began driving tourist buses down Haight Street and hippies ran alongside, holding up mirrors to the visitors. Graham predicted 3 million young people would descend on the city that summer and said he would operate the Fillmore six nights a week.

"Law, order and health regulations must prevail," proclaimed Police Chief Thomas Cahill.

Even the hometown paper got into the act. The Chronicle dressed reporter George Gilbert in a turtleneck sweater and sent him to spend a month skulking around Haight-Ashbury crash pads for a front-page series, "I Was a Hippie."

By July, the Haight was swarming.

"People were walking down the street six deep," says Peter Berg of the Diggers. "Kids were coming in from all over the United States wearing rainbow-colored clothes and psychedelic scarves around their neck."

When a bunch of street people experimented with stopping traffic and jumping on car bumpers, the police came down hard and the resulting hourlong melee left four people badly injured and nine arrested.

Almost as soon as the party began, the nature of drugs on the street changed. Speed became an epidemic. The colorful, carefree characters who populated Haight Street only a year before had been replaced by long-haired urchins holding out their hands and asking, "Spare change, man?" Health and hygiene issues festered.

"When the Haight was healthiest was when it wasn't known as the Haight," says political activist Michael Rossman, one of the organizers of the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement that started the era of student protests.

"There's a funny thing. I've known a number of people who've become famous and, by and large, the experience is really destructive," he continues. "Why do I mention this? Because something certainly as destructive happened from media attention to the Haight."

The neighborhood made it through the summer, but it has been a long, slow recovery process for a strange little nook of San Francisco. In October 1967, some local characters staged "The Death of Hippie," complete with a funeral procession down Haight Street. The Grateful Dead made it official when the band moved to Marin County the following March. The chapter was closed and Haight-Ashbury has become as much a commercialized tourist destination as Fisherman's Wharf.

No matter how quickly things turned bad, and no matter how far the actual Summer of Love fell short of its cultural legend, many of those who were there believe good things came out of it.

"If these young people hadn't declared the possibility of a new culture, a new family," says beat poet Michael McClure, "a new tribe, believing in peace, nature, sexuality, the positive use of psychedelic drugs -- if they hadn't been there to broaden and deepen the hundreds of thousands and then millions of people who were broadened and deepened by this -- we would be in an even bigger stew."

The Chronicle looks back at the Summer of Love with a four-part series.

-- Today: The Summer of Love, 40 years ago.

-- Monday in Datebook: Participants recall the time before that summer.

-- Tuesday in Datebook: Thousands jam the city and the party goes bad.

-- Wednesday in Datebook: How it changed our lives.

The Summer of Love online:

Go to sfgate.com for:

-- Transcripts of the complete Summer of Love interviews

-- Video of key Summer of Love locations with Country Joe McDonald and others.

-- Gallery of photos of the Summer of Love

-- What do you remember about the summer of '67? Did it make a difference in your life? Did it have a major impact on American culture? You can share your thoughts two ways: by commenting on the Culture Blog at sfgate.com, or by calling (415)777-6268 and sharing your story in an Open Mic podcast.

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