

S.F. Examiner
June 14, 1987

HAIGHT ASHBURY
HISTORY

SU

SUMMER OF LOVE

HERB CAEN



Days of Our Years

"THE HIPPIES, even if they're dying, have made a tremendous impact on this city — and, for that matter, the world. They constitute a frontal assault on everything that our frayed society holds dear, and, to make it more unnerving, they do it only by indirection. ... What really bugs the critics is that the hippies are saying without saying a word: 'What are YOU doing, brother, that's so damn important?' And this is the question — with its ghostly overtones of Vietnam, taxes, bigotry, hypocrisy, corruption, cancer and all the other ills of established society — this is the question that has no answer except fury."

★ ★ ★

EDWARD LARRY Beggs, one of the founders of Huckleberry House for runaways and a man with a better filing system than I, reminds me that those words appeared in my column for Oct. 17, 1967. The Summer of Love, now being analyzed and dissected on this 20th anniversary, was already fading away. Ecstasy had turned to ashes, overnight, and the funeral marchers along Haight St. announced, "Hippie Is Dead." A touching way to put it. Not "The Hippie" but "Hippie," a nickname, one person out of many. And for a time there, Hippie did seem like one person, and an appealing one, at that — one with a conscience, a crazy sort of courage (the kind that gets skulls cracked by police batons) and an innocence trailing off into naivete, confusion and ultimately despair.

★ ★ ★

THE SUMMER of Love sneaked up on an unsuspecting San Francisco, as did the hippie movement itself. Having grown up with Norton-esque oddballs, rich eccentrics, bohemians both genuine and phony, and a beatnik era that had some literary substance, the city looked upon the hippies as simply the next step, the equivalent of the move from swing to bebop to rock. But the hippies turned out to be something definitely new, radical — and dangerous. They held up a distorting mirror to society. By taking no prisoners and offering no compromises, they taunted and titillated the Establishment. As is usually the case, the Establishment would win, but it was shaken to the point of losing its poise. Society matrons wearing miniskirts and peace symbols! Old Dad letting his sideburns grow and trying to "understand" what the hippies themselves didn't.

★ ★ ★

SAN FRANCISCO was so accustomed to — and tolerant of — "deviant behavior" that the beginning of a genuine movement wasn't even noticed. No historical perspective, except that traditional (and stupidly lovable) one of looking the other way when a nut case walked past. "You go your way, I'll go mine — just don't disturb my pleasant life" has been a San Francisco credo since the days of the Bonanza Kings. The local media missed the story completely. It took a covey of Eastern reporters — I believe Nicholas von Hoffman, then of the Washington Post, was the first — to recognize and write at length about the phenomenon. After that, no story was too wild to be disbelieved, as reporters

HAIGHT ASHBURY VF

hippie and such like were peeling one, at that — one with a conscience, a crazy sort of courage (the kind that gets skulls cracked by police batons) and an innocence trailing off into naivete, confusion and ultimately despair.

★ ★ ★

THE SUMMER of Love sneaked up on an unsuspecting San Francisco, as did the hippie movement itself. Having grown up with Norton-esque oddballs, rich eccentrics, bohemians both genuine and phony, and a beatnik era that had some literary substance, the city looked upon the hippies as simply the next step, the equivalent of the move from swing to bebop to rock. But the hippies turned out to be something definitely new, radical — and dangerous. They held up a distorting mirror to society. By taking no prisoners and offering no compromises, they taunted and titillated the Establishment. As is usually the case, the Establishment would win, but it was shaken to the point of losing its poise. Society matrons wearing miniskirts and peace symbols! Old Dad letting his sideburns grow and trying to “understand” what the hippies themselves didn't.

★ ★ ★

SAN FRANCISCO was so accustomed to — and tolerant of — “deviant behavior” that the beginning of a genuine movement wasn't even noticed. No historical perspective, except that traditional (and stupidly lovable) one of looking the other way when a nut case walked past. “You go your way, I'll go mine — just don't disturb my pleasant life” has been a San Francisco credo since the days of the Bonanza Kings. The local media missed the story completely. It took a covey of Eastern reporters — I believe Nicholas von Hoffman, then of the Washington Post, was the first — to recognize and write at length about the phenomenon. After that, no story was too wild to be disbelieved, as reporters scrambled to catch up and then top each other. Drugs, orgies, lost souls, distraught parents walking around with photos of their missing kids — graduation photos of short-haired boys, no longer even faintly recognizable and probably lost forever.

★ ★ ★

“DEATH OF HIPPIE,” end of innocence, but while the going was good it was wonderful. For young people everywhere, San Francisco was mecca, the city that cared and understood (it didn't at all and was damnably slow to catch on and then try to help). The Haight-Ashbury was world-famous, the capital of a children's revolution that happened by spontaneous combustion. Fortunately for the system, there was no direction, no plan, no place to go. Patchouli, marijuana and anarchy were in the air. The streets were crowded with beautiful young people deteriorating with the speed of — well, speed. The music was loud, exciting and not all that great, but when you're stoned, who cares? A heavy after-beat is enough. In the mansions of Pacific Heights, the leaders of the community were having “hippie parties,” smoking pot and hiring teachers to show them “The Swim” and “The Monkey.”

★ ★ ★

THE OLD Cole Porter line — “too hot not to cool down” — keeps coming to mind. The poppies withered in the unwashed hair of hollow-eyed girls. The dream with the simple vocabulary — “peace” and “love” — died of malnutrition. And yet — and here is the triumph — things would never be the same. The movement lasted long enough to speed the ending of a senseless war. Those who emerged from the Summer of Love with their brains reasonably unscrambled discovered they had a certain power to effect change. The old crowd, its values challenged and its children almost lost forever, adjusted nervously. It wasn't Camelot, but there was a time in San Francisco when almost everybody became just a bit of a hippie, and hypocrisy never again would have such an easy time of it. The Summer of Love turned wintry and sour, but that is its lasting legacy.