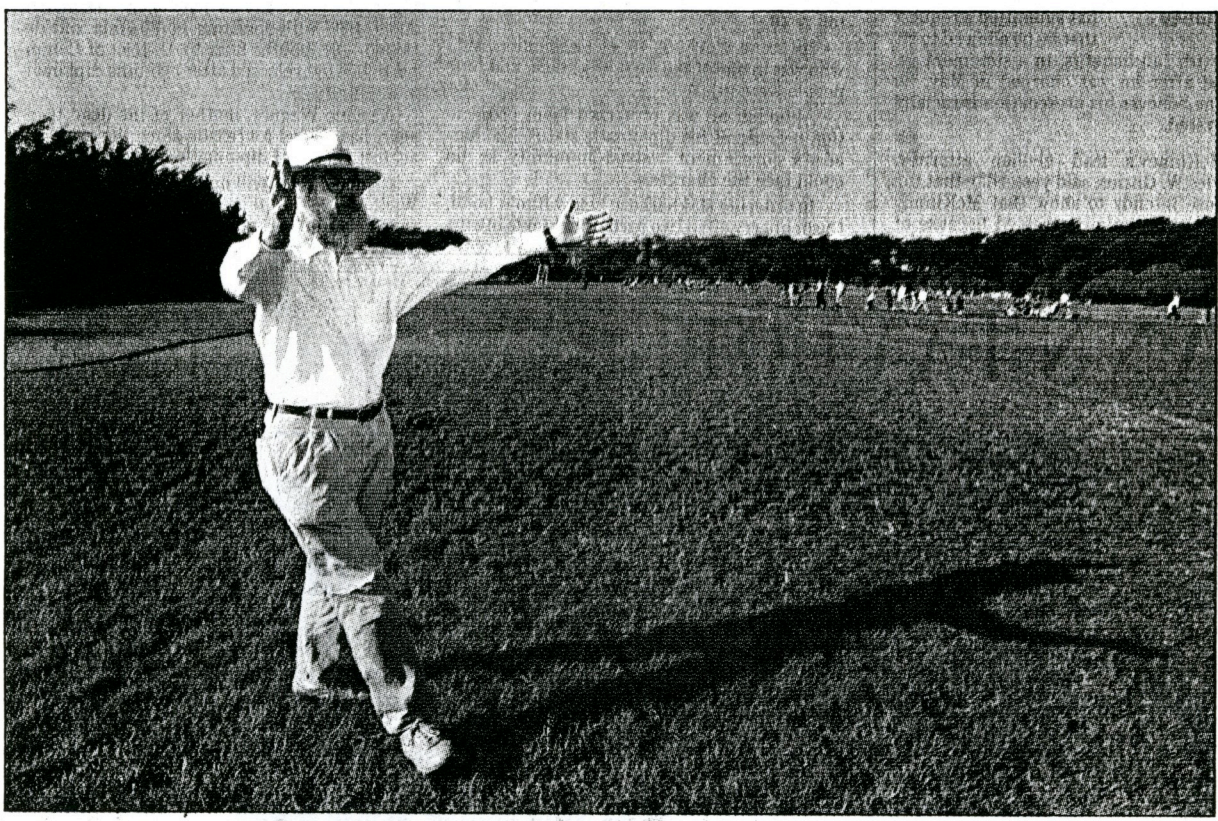


Slipping Back to the Summer of Love



BY PETER DO SILVA/THE CHRONICLE

Chet Helms showed where he wants the main stage to be for the Summer of Love 30th anniversary concert in Golden Gate Park

Chet Helms hosts nostalgic 30th anniversary concert

By Joel Selvin
Chronicle Pop Music Critic

Chet Helms couldn't let the opportunity pass.

The hippie-era concert promoter and Mayor Willie Brown were at a fund-raiser, and Helms had some things on his mind. Maybe the mayor could help nail down corporate sponsors for Helms' planned Summer of Love 30th anniversary celebration. Maybe the mayor could help with the permits. Maybe the mayor could even help with the booking.

"Now's the time to put in that call to Carlos, Mr. Mayor," Helms said, whispering in Brown's ear during a fund-raiser for the concert.

Only Chet Helms would have asked the mayor of San Francisco to call guitarist Carlos Santana. But the former operator of the famous Avalon Ballroom had been imagining his anniversary concert for more than a year and was determined to pull it off.

Little more than a month ago, Helms' plan for the celebration



BY ART FRISCH/THE CHRONICLE 1968

S.F. rock impresarios Chet Helms and Bill Graham

was full of cracks: His biggest act had bowed out, and permits were not in place. But hippie dreams die hard, and the event will happen Sunday after all.

Helms originally envisioned a two-day gathering with record-setting crowds, current big-

name acts and a revival of '60s dreams. Instead, Sunday's free concert at Beach Chalet Meadows in Golden Gate Park will be more modest.

The lineup reads like a hippie

HELMS: Page A17 Col. 2

SUMMER OF LOVE CONCERT

■ **THE EVENT:** The Vietnam Wall event begins at 7:30 a.m. and the celebration starts at 10 a.m. Sunday at Beach Chalet Meadow, Golden Gate Park. Admission: free. Information: 487-4628

■ **THE BANDS:** Jefferson Starship, Sons of Champlin, Country Joe McDonald, John Handy and Walela (with Rita and Priscilla Coolidge).

■ **THE SPEAKERS:** Jello Biafra, Wavy Gravy, Diane Di Prima and Willie Brown are among those scheduled to speak.

■ **THE ANTICS:** Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters will supply the antics.

■ **THE CLOSING:** The "Spirit of Compassion" jam, featuring members of the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Country Joe McDonald and others will close the celebration.

CONTINUED FROM

HELMS: Summer of Love

From Page 1

nostalgia show: Jefferson Starship, Sons of Champlin, Country Joe McDonald. (So far, Santana has not agreed to appear.)

Producer Linda Lowrance expects to draw between 20,000 and 50,000 people. When the crowd gets there, it will find a half-scale model of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a children's pavilion and speakers and poets to spell the bands. The Merry Prankster bus will be parked beside the stage.

It might be a few weeks past summer, but at least it's happening.

"Chet is the driving force," said Lowrance, "the visionary. He's our floating icon, the glue that holds it all together."

For the past 17 years, Helms, gray-haired at 55, has run a small art gallery on Bush Street, bought with proceeds from the auction of a valuable painting he bought back when he still had a little dough. That lucky score is about all he has to show for his years as one of the key players in the flourishing '60s San Francisco rock scene.

Early Helms

Helms began by hosting jam sessions in the basement of a Haight-Ashbury boarding house at 1090 Page St. Big Brother and the Holding Company emerged from those parties, and Helms, the band's manager, brought old friend Janis Joplin up from Texas to be their singer.

He and Bill Graham put on three shows at the Fillmore Auditorium as partners in 1966 before Graham started renting the hall and holding shows by himself.

Helms began operating under the name Family Dog and produced shows at the Avalon Ballroom, an old dance academy at Sutter and Van Ness. "It wasn't run as efficiently as Graham, but it had more soul," said Quicksilver Messenger Service manager Ron Polte.

The Avalon prospered initially, but Helms lost his permits and his lease by the end of 1968. He moved his operation to an old slot car raceway not far from the site of Sunday's concert, but Family Dog on the Great Highway ran out of money in less than a year, and Helms left the concert business in

Graham Foundation also paid \$2,500 to bring the Vietnam Veterans Memorial model to the site. But that was all.

As a result, no one involved in the production has any influence in today's music business.

"He doesn't hear what you're saying — he only hears what he wants to hear," said Bill Graham Presents executive Jerry Pompili. "Same old Chet."

So, although contemporary acts were invited, none accepted. And Steve Miller, the only real draw on the bill, decided to pull out about a month ago.

"We could never get any commitment," said Miller. "They didn't have enough bread to bring the band in. They didn't know if they had a P.A. system. They didn't have a lineup. We could never work out the details. Five or six weeks out, we just said we're not going to do it — you guys don't have it together."

Says Helms: "It's more of a nostalgia show than I originally intended. Our original intent was to make it a more cross-generational event."

Country Joe McDonald, who will appear, complains that the whole event is riddled with disorganization and incompetence.

"You want to know his secret agenda?" McDonald said. "He wants to shoot himself in both feet. Blind man with a gun. What can I say? The guy's a hippie. He's from Texas. He's doing the best he can."

Brown Steps In

Helms' luck turned around about a month ago, when Brown promised to have City Hall "open the doors."

Perhaps the mayor was inspired by his days of living in the Haight-Ashbury during the '60s. "I was cool," Brown said. "I had a blue serge Nehru jacket and love beads. Those God-damned farmers in Sacramento had never seen anything like me." Brown was then in the state Assembly.

Brown reclassified the event as a civic celebration instead of a rock concert, which reduced various fees from permits to administrative costs. This cut the budget by as much as one-third, said producer McCarthy, who has been throwing concerts in the park

1970.

The last time he ventured back was Tribal Stomp II, an ambitious festival at the Monterey County Fairgrounds in 1979. It was a financial disaster. Two years ago, Helms resurfaced a bit, lending the Family Dog name to a group producing concerts at the Maritime Hall, but that lasted only seven months.

Rebirth 30 Years Later

Nonetheless, last October he convened the long-dormant Council for the Summer of Love — a hippie-era Haight-Ashbury community group — planning to stage a 30th anniversary celebration.

"Last year, I had a number of people talking to me," said Helms, "just a general rumbling — *We should do something*. I realized we had a unique opportunity in time and space to make a statement, with all the media attention I knew would happen.

"In addition to making a fair-witness statement and to celebrate our survivorhood, I wanted to refocus on some central values of the '60s. I wanted to get people to think about compassion."

Initial financing for the event came from restaurateur Ed Petrillo of Eleven, who gave \$10,000. Other small-money donors kept the operation afloat. Producer Bill McCarthy of the Unity Foundation pursued the permit process, and Lowrance contacted potential corporate sponsors. Helms tackled booking.

In January, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department denied an application to use the Polo Field, site of the famous Human Be-In 30 years ago. In March, the department's full board upheld that decision after Helms and company appealed the staff ruling. The soccer field at the western end of the park behind the recently restored Beach Chalet was chosen as a compromise location.

The group had a site but little else. Especially clout.

Looking for Acts

Helms, who has maintained many of his contacts from the Avalon days, is largely a footnote in rock history. Some employees of Bill Graham Presents, the big local concert promoter, attended early meetings. They licensed the trademarked name, "Summer of Love," to the council for \$1 and even offered to lend the dollar. The Bill

"When the mayor came in full-blast, everything changed real quickly," McCarthy said.

Brown also ordered city charges deferred until after the event. This was a relief to concert planners, who have raised less than two-thirds of the \$150,000 budget, even after Miller Beer plunked down \$50,000 as a corporate sponsor. The group hopes to cover the remaining expenses through vendor sales.

Motive and Opportunity

Helms says he wants nothing more out of this for himself than to attract some bookings on the college lecture circuit and maybe land a book deal.

Other observers note a longing by Helms to step out of the shadows, redeem himself and assume some kind of symbolic position in the San Francisco rock scene now that Bill Graham is gone.

"Maybe Chet feels like he has unfinished business," said Hillel Resner, a recording industry trade magazine executive who 30 years ago ran the Straight Theater, a Haight Street dance hall, "and this is his opportunity to keep that flame alive. If he wants to be in the limelight, why not? He was there. He did do it. I had some great times at the Avalon."

Helms understands that he is, in many ways, a man out of time.

"I think I have a lot of respect from those years, from what I did do," he said. "It's difficult with the younger people who don't know. They don't understand who we are. It's a different world, no question."