

Peace and love, but only for a short while

Haight-Ashbury scene died at Altamont debacle

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OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

They came for the music, the freedom, the drugs. They came, most of all, to be part of the scene. Thousands of young people streamed into a small section of San Francisco near Golden Gate Park in the mid-1960s, seeking to live the carefree hippie life.

Known as the Summer of Love, the Haight-Ashbury scene was really a shining moment that burned brightly for nearly two years and started to fade even before the flowers-in-your-hair summer of 1967.

It was, in essence, a serendipitous convergence of music, drugs and a social climate that created an LSD-fueled image that the youth of a nation were anxious to embrace. Its legacy lives on even today, as tour buses continue to carry curious visitors to the corner of Haight and Ashbury, the ground zero of hippiedom.

While most agree the end of the Haight-Ashbury scene was the disastrous and deadly brawl between Hells Angels and fans at a free Rolling Stones concert at Altamont in 1969, it's harder to define just when the extended summer of love began.

It really started south of San Francisco, in a rustic La Honda cabin, where novelist Ken Kesey and his pals, known as the Merry Pranksters, would hole up for drug parties. They wanted to see what happened to people who took LSD away from a controlled environment. They would film the results, which came to be known as the Acid Tests.

At the same time, a band known as the Warlocks was play-

ing in suburban clubs, searching for its style. The band included Robert Hunter, Phil Lesh, Bob Weir, Bill Kreutzman, Ron McKernan and its de facto leader, Jerry Garcia.

Kesey and his pals, who needed musical accompaniment for their LSD trips, liked the Warlocks' sound. Rechristened the Grateful Dead by Garcia, the group became the house band for the Acid Tests. This was the beginning of the psychedelic sound that would evolve during concerts at the Avalon Ballroom and the Fillmore, the sound that would tell the rest of the country that San Francisco was a place where something was happening.

In San Francisco, meanwhile, a radical group of actors known as the Mime Troupe was fighting for support for their free outdoor shows. They found benefit concerts to be a lucrative and fun way to earn money. Out of these early benefits grew the first few concerts put on by promoters Chet Helms and Bill Graham.

Helms had been hosting jam sessions at a Haight-Ashbury boarding house. Graham had found a concert venue on Geary Street he called the Fillmore. While the Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service, Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company held sway on stage, Helms and Graham parted company after putting on three concerts together. Helms went off on his own and opened the Avalon Ballroom with a loose promotion organization called the Family Dog.

The Merry Pranksters continued their Acid Tests — musically accompanied trips on LSD, which was still legal at the time — and took them to other locations. One in San Jose in late 1965 was followed by a Fillmore drugfest in January 1966. That event led to the Trips Festival on Jan. 20 at the San Francisco Longshoremen's

Hall, three days of drug-infused music and partying. It could be said that the San Francisco psychedelic era began that weekend.

Peace and love, for a while

By that spring, the scene was in full swing, with its own styles of music, art, clothing and speech. Young people began pouring into The City, eager to be a part of it. Known as hippies, the men and women both wore long hair, long flowing clothes and — for a while — exuded an attitude of peace and love.

It was estimated that in 1966, some 15,000 hippies were living in the neighborhood — with 1,230 runaways reportedly hiding among them.

The concerts at the Fillmore and the Avalon continued, and the bands played nearly as many free gigs in Golden Gate Park. The Psychedelic Shop opened on Haight Street, serving as an unofficial community center, and the Oracle became the neighborhood newsletter. Stylish posters advertising the concerts were stolen off telephone poles as collectors items.

LSD was still the drug of choice among the hippies, but others were growing in popularity. Dr. David Smith opened the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic that year, providing medical care for the hippies and treating an increasing number of drug casualties.

The Grateful Dead, after a trip to Los Angeles, returned to Northern California in April, established a ranch in Novato and moved into a Victorian at 710 Haight St. that would become the headquarters for the San Francisco sound.

While the Beatles continued their U.S. tour that year, San Francisco bands honed their distinctive sound. The natural rivalry between San Francisco and Los Angeles intensified, as local bands insisted their sound was authentic



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while the L.A. sound was so much hype. The local bands saw themselves not so much as performers but as part of the concert experience they shared with the audience.

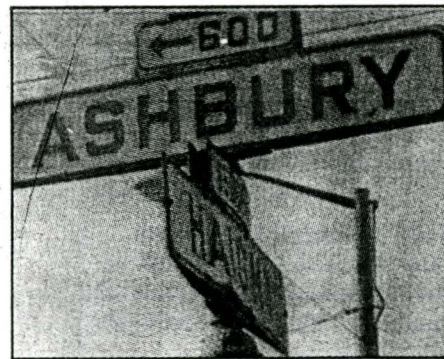
Although the official Summer of Love was not until the next year, teens continued to flood into the Haight. In October 1966, LSD was made illegal, but that didn't stop drug use in Haight-Ashbury. On Halloween, the Pranksters held their last Acid Test, which they dubbed graduation, and moved on to Oregon. The Grateful Dead and Big Brother and the Holding Company played a free concert in Golden Gate Park as part of a protest.

Gathering of the tribes

That began the Human Be-In at the park in January. More than 20,000 people came to the event billed as a gathering of the tribes for the generation. It was here that Timothy Leary encouraged the crowd to turn on, tune in and drop out.

The San Francisco scene began getting national attention. Bands were making records and being heard on the radio. Tom Donahue founded FM radio station KMPX to give local groups a showcase, and he was soon as legendary a

Hippies celebrated the first day of spring by shedding their clothes and listening to rock music in Golden Gate Park, above. During the '60s, the corner of Haight and Ashbury, right, may have been the nation's most famous intersection.



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part of the scene as the bands themselves. Gray Line added a hippie tour of the Haight for tourists who wanted to be a part of the scene, but from a safe distance. Even then, though, the scene was changing. Bad drugs hit the street, and crime was spreading among the homeless youngsters who had come to San Francisco with no means of support and were living on the streets. In October 1967, denizens of the Haight held a ceremony marking the death of the hippie.

Garcia and the Grateful Dead headed to their Marin County ranch. Other bands moved out,

too. The concerts continued, but without the same spirit. Helms closed the Avalon at the end of 1968. Graham had turned his sights on New York and opened the Fillmore East there. He returned to found the Fillmore West, and Helms opened the Family Dog on the Great Highway for a time, but neither enjoyed the success of the earlier venues.

When the Rolling Stones couldn't get permission for a free concert in The City, they staged the event at the Altamont Speedway in Livermore on Dec. 6, 1969. At the suggestion of the Grateful

[See HAIGHT, W-36]

◆ *HAIGHT from W-28*

Looking for sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll

Dead, the Stones hired Hells Angels to provide security.

It was a fatal mistake. The bikers beat the fans and stabbed one to death during the show. The music scene never quite recovered.

Nevertheless, the Dead tried to stay true to their roots. For years their concerts still held the flavor of those early gatherings in Golden Gate Park. Even though sales

of their albums languished far behind those of other bands, the Dead were consistently the top money maker for live performances.

The death of Garcia in 1995 wrote an end to the final chapter of the Haight-Ashbury era. Last year, artifacts from the era were auctioned by Butterfield & Butterfield, netting tens of thousands of dollars. In a small acknowledgment of the era, auctioneers asked those who donated items to donate a part of the proceeds to local charities, including the Free Clinic. The Dead's former home on Haight failed to attract the minimum \$990,000 bid.