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HIST 4435

9 April 2019

The Death of the Haight- Ashbury Neighborhood

The Haight Ashbury neighborhood in San Francisco was the center of counterculture in the 1960's. The counterculture of San Francisco in the 1960's worked to remove itself from mainstream society by creating their own realm on the outside of "normal". The counterculture among the youth in San Francisco, contrary to popular belief, was a highly disorganized movement with little to no political motives. It was an oddly unified chaos fueled by the idea of trying to find oneself and dig deeper into the individual. While many other youth movements were focused on the ideas of coming together in society, the counterculture in Haight-Ashbury focused on the individual. The counterculture movement that evolved in the Haight during the 1960's was doomed to end from the start as the ideals of dropping out of society could never fully be achieved. Once the movement was picked up by the main stream media, the people of the neighborhood felt that they were in a zoo as people from all over flocked to San Francisco to witness and sometimes even try and take part in their culture. The music and events that evolved within the Haight neighborhood became one of the main outlets of expression for the hippies as it works hand in hand with the culture that they created there. The music scene and sound showcase ideals of individuality and the uniqueness of it all shows how the hippies were trying to create their own reality and separate from the mainstream. While many consider the counterculture of San Francisco to be an unimportant part of history perpetrated by aimless hippies, it actually had lasting effects on the United States and music culture.

The unique music scene in Haight-Ashbury encapsulated a style unlike any other. As addressed in the article “Nitty-Gritty Sound” from *Newsweek*, “it’s a raw unpolished freewheeling, vital, and compelling sound.”¹ This music was reflective of the social scene of the people in the Haight congregating at the end of Golden Gate Park fighting against societal convention with every turn and sound. The individual spirit recognized in the *Newsweek* article was also seen in a piece about the Jefferson Airplane describing their musical performance saying Jefferson Airplane “never does anything simple and obnoxious. Always it is something complex and dreamy.”² Bands from the Haight like Jefferson Airplane delivered a unique sound and performance experience that catered to the psychedelic and dreamy aspects of the culture. The style of music happening in San Francisco was highly reflective of what was happening within at times enhanced with psychedelic drugs and the introspective movement happening during the 1960’s. The *Newsweek* article goes on to explain how, “the homespun texture, the spontaneity, the freedom of the San Francisco Sound appeal forcefully to the hippie culture.”³ The music was all about being impromptu and appealing to the people of the Haight with notions of being free from what was happening in the mainstream of society. The music also embraced the ideals of individuality which can be seen in bands like the Grateful Dead whose sound, “utilizes the potential of its individual members in relationship with its group entity.”⁴ It was a sound that was different every time these bands performed as almost every show they had was a sort of jam session and varied every time they played prompting masses of fans to follow them from show to show like vagabonds to see where they took the performance next. Parallel to the music, the people of the neighborhood were not a coherent group as they all believed in different

¹ “The Nitty Gritty Sound,” *Newsweek*, Dec 19, 1966.

² “Psychedelic Music Still Keeps the Jefferson Airplane Flying,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1968

³ “The Nitty-Gritty Sound.” *Newsweek*, Dec 19, 1966.

⁴ David Mark Dashev, “In Torrance: Grateful Dead Gives Concert.” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 17, 1968.

things and most importantly, they were trying to remove themselves from society and used the unique music of the Haight-Ashbury artists to do so. The music worked to embrace a new sound and ideals of individuality that reigned supreme in the Haight in order to work hand in hand with the counterculture of San Francisco in the late 1960's.

The music was made for the people of the neighborhood and there was a lot of interaction between audience and band members. Many of the bands frequently held free local shows to give the people of San Francisco as much access to this music as they could and to really interact with the people that they were playing for. As the historian, Nadya Zimmerman explains, the Dead and other bands frequently held open jam sessions in the area and Golden Gate Park, "housed thousands of free concerts, most notably the Grateful Dead's weekly jam sessions."⁵ The music was representative of the culture of the people in the neighborhood and was also made highly accessible to them. Charles Kaiser brings up an interview from guitar player Eric Clapton in his book *1968 in America* saying, "what impressed him about the San Francisco scene, the legendary guitar player replied it was the willingness of the Grateful Dead to play for free."⁶ Not only was the sound of the music coming out of San Francisco unique, but also the ways that the bands there interacted with their audience and performed for the people without any compensation. An article from the *San Francisco Oracle*, the newspaper of the Haight in the 1960s, explains that, "rock is an intensely participation and typographic art form."⁷ As this article expresses, an essential part of rock music is participation from the audience and community. The article goes on to state that, "rock is a regenerative & revolutionary art, offering us our first real hope for the

⁵ Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspective on Late Sixties San Francisco*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.), 162

⁶ Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture and the Shaping of a Generation*. (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 192.

⁷ Chester Anderson, "Notes for the New Geology," *The San Francisco Oracle*, February 1967, from *The San Francisco Oracle: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight Ashbury*, edited by Allen Cohen (Berkeley: Regent Press, 2005), 116.

future (indeed for the present) since August 6, 1945; and that its effects on the younger population especially those effects most deplored by typeheads, have all been essentially good & healthy so far.” The music was made for the people and worked to give the people a sense of hope and healing. The music of the Haight to many of the mainstream rock artists free concerts were a concept almost unheard of as much of what fueled the music industry outside of the Haight.

The music scene of Haight-Ashbury was also heavily involved in the drug culture that was deeply rooted in neighborhood. In a Rolling Stone interview Jerry Garcia, a member of the Grateful Dead, gets fairly candid about the bands use of drugs like acid in their personal lives and even during their shows. The bands were openly singing about and using the drugs that the people of the youth counterculture of the community were also using which gave them a direct link to one another. As historians Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman point out, “The drug's allure was enhanced by learning that many of the world's most prominent rock musicians were using and writing songs about it—the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane.”⁸ Drug use and music were highly interconnected with one another in the Haight-Ashbury scene. In a 1972 interview for *Rolling Stone*, Jerry Garcia says, “so our trip with the Acid Test was to be able to play long and loud... being high, each note, you know is like a whole universe”⁹ The drug scene was being sold as an essential muse for this musical movement had an immense effect on the bands like the Grateful Dead, as well as, countless other bands coming out of the Haight-Ashbury scene. Joan Didion describes this drug scene in great detail in her stories from her times in the Haight neighborhood, indicating that the

⁸ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960's*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 158.

⁹ Jerry Garcia, “Dawn of the Dead, Excerpted from RS 100 January 20, 1972 and RS 101 February 3, 1972,” interview by Jann S. Wenner and Charles Reich, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 10, 2015

drug use was very commonplace and a distinct piece of the unique culture there. She talks about the use not only just of acid and marijuana, but also crystal meth, STP, speed, and countless others. Didion writes about one of her friends Max who, “drops a 250- or 350-microgram tab every six or seven days.”¹⁰ Drug use was a regular affair for the people in the Haight neighborhood and they regularly got together, take drugs, listen to music, and look at art. Didion also tells a story of some of her friends getting high, “everyone dances a little and we do some liquid projections and set up a strobe and take turns getting high on that.”¹¹ The use of drugs was a major outlet for the people of the neighborhood, but also created a massive problem in the neighborhood as drug abuse was so common. An article in *The Oracle* titled “Methedrine Use and Abuse in San Francisco,” addresses the looming issues of drug abuse in the neighborhood and even addresses a place for people to seek help called the “Center for Special Problems” and explains that, “we have had in San Francisco for the past year a program designed to deal with drug abuse.”¹² This showcases that drug use in San Francisco was more and more something that people were doing abusively. Although it ties in with the culture of the Haight, eventually the problems that the use of drugs created contributed to the downfall of the neighborhood. The drug use and the other activities surrounding it became part of the music and the culture as symbols of their removal from the mainstream and were seen as a critical tool to look within the soul and internal universe to find oneself.

The Rolling Stones infamous concert at the Altamont Raceway outside of San Francisco was supposed to be like the Woodstock of the West but ended in violence rather than music and

¹⁰ Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, (New York: Picador Modern Classics, 1968), 128.

¹¹ Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, (New York: Picador Modern Classics, 1968), 140.

¹² Joel Fort M.D. , “Methedrine Use and Abuse in San Francisco,” *The San Francisco Oracle*, February 1967, from *The San Francisco Oracle: The Psychedelic Newspaper of the Haight Ashbury*, edited by Allen Cohen (Berkeley: Regent Press, 2005), 68.

peace. Initially the concert was supposed to feature some quintessential Haight-Ashbury bands like the Grateful Dead alongside the Rolling Stones, a band from outside of the realm of San Francisco. Author Nadya Zimmerman points out, “the festival in Livermore showed, in one sense, how the vibe of the San Francisco counterculture would play out in the rest of America.”¹³ It was meant to take ideals and aspects of culture from Haight-Ashbury beyond the borders of the neighborhood and originally intended to feature some of the neighborhoods most famous bands like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane. The Hell’s Angels were a distinct feature of the Haight-Ashbury counterculture and as Todd Gitlin describes they, “were the counterculture’s resident bad guys.”¹⁴ It was not an unusual choice to hire them as security for an event as ~~they~~ bands had done it for countless counterculture events in the past like the Human Be-In. Zimmerman also describes the Angels as, “the counterculture’s unofficial guardians.”¹⁵ The problem was that they were no longer within their safe haven in San Francisco and there were people from both the hippie culture of the Haight and the mainstream of society, as one news article describes, “the young rock fans ranging from costumed hippies to clean-cut teenagers.”¹⁶ This mixing of two cultures did not go over entirely well as it resulted in violent behavior and the death of one young man. The Grateful Dead were also set to perform but left early because they were, “horrified at what a peaceful, loving counterculture had become outside of the Haight-Ashbury district.”¹⁷ The counterculture specific to the Haight in the late 1960’s could not be replicated in an environment outside of the neighborhood as it was taken and twisted into something entirely different.

¹³ Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.), 162

¹⁴ Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope Days of Rage*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 210.

¹⁵ Zimmerman, *Counterculture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.), 163.

¹⁶ “Youth Slain as Throng Attends Calif. Rock Festival,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald*. December 7, 1969.

¹⁷ Zimmerman, *Counterculture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.), 163.

The messiness of the counterculture movement in San Francisco centered in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood ended up being a short-lived episode in musical and cultural history that none the less left an indelible mark. Ironically as the media began to take a larger interest in the hippie culture and what was happening in Haight-Ashbury the movement was losing the one thing it desired, to be separated from the mainstream of society. People were no longer able to have their freedom and drop out of ~~society~~ the normal world, as they were now a large focus of the American musical and cultural scene. This point is expressed in the article “Haight-Ashbury Hippies Going Home,” from *The Hartford Courant*, explaining that, “the hippies have grown tired of conforming to the image created by news media.”¹⁸ The people of the Haight were tired of being watched and having their image twisted and manipulated by the media and attracting people to gawk at their movement as a tourist attraction. Jerry Garcia makes a similar comment in a 1972 interview and explains, “*Time* magazine guys came out and interviewed everybody and took photographs and made it news, the feedback from that killed the whole scene.”¹⁹ Once the media had latched on to the ideals of the counterculture in San Francisco all of what the Haight-Ashbury counter culture population desired was no longer valid or even possible. The hippies in the Haight desired to remove themselves from mainstream society, not to be a news story for people in the mainstream to read about and take trips to go look at.

The mid to late 1960’s was a unique period in the history of the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. The music scene was one of the key features of the counterculture movement there and was highly reflective of the unique cultural sensibility there surrounding ideals of individuality, freedom from the mainstream, drug use, and spirituality. This cultural phenomenon

¹⁸ “Haight-Ashbury Hippies Going Home,” *The Hartford Courant*, October 6, 1967.

¹⁹ Jerry Garcia, “Dawn of the Dead, Excerpted from RS 100 January 20, 1972 and RS 101 February 3, 1972,” interview by Jann S. Wenner and Charles Reich, *Rolling Stone Magazine*, September 10, 2015, 26.

had effects that were felt around the United States and in the music scene as a whole. It is fitting to think that *Rolling Stone* magazine, one of the most relevant magazines in the pop culture scene sprung out of the San Francisco scene amongst the counterculture movement and featured a story of the drug raid on the Grateful Dead's Haight-Ashbury home in 1967 in its first issue. The musical and cultural stylings of the Haight area eventually spread into mainstream America and this in turn created the demise of the counterculture there. It was a movement based on the ideals of freedom and separating from the mainstream of society that could never last on its own, but eventually spread out across and had influences on other movements and parts of society. The culture was all about dropping out of main of society, as Timothy Leary famously promoted "Turn on, tune in, Drop Out." The Haight could never last as it was fueled by excessive drug use and working to remove oneself from society, a task impossible to complete. It was a movement that was born to be short-lived.

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