

Flowers Crowns with Thorns:
The Downfall of the Hippie Movement

Zoe Hecht

AP US History

A Block

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Abbie Hoffman, a political and social activist in the 1960s and '70s, once said, "The '60s are gone, dope will never be as cheap, sex never as free, and the rock and roll never as great." Those years were a memorable time in America, and marked the time in which the psychedelic hippie culture rose and fell. Members of a new youth movement that emerged in the U.S., hippies did their best to drop out of society entirely and attract others to their ideals of love, beauty, peace and fun. The media shined a spotlight on them and popularized hippie culture, and thousands of young people were inspired to travel from all over to San Francisco to participate in the goings-on. The Summer of Love that took place in San Francisco in 1967 was supposed to be a fun and enjoyable event for all who were involved, the capstone of the hippie movement. However, internal problems around such things as rules, power imbalances, and drugs, along with external problems like incessant, biased media coverage and pressure from the people of the surrounding community, turned the summer into more of an unraveling of hippie culture than a celebration of it, and by the end of the summer, the hippie scene in San Francisco had deteriorated.

The middle of the twentieth century was a time of extensive cultural change, and the combination of this with the baby boom of the 1940s resulted a lot of 1960s teenagers who experienced a different world altogether than the one their parents had grown up in. The women's rights movement was getting underway, along with a sexual revolution that occurred after the first birth control was approved by the FDA in the year 1960. The civil rights movement, too, was still in full swing, and it was becoming more and more militant every day, despite the fact that segregation had been declared unconstitutional in 1955. In all the ways that World War II had united the country, the Korea and Vietnam Wars did the opposite. Only 35

percent of the U.S. population supported the latter war by 1967, as people were dying every week in Vietnam and more and more boys were being drafted to fill those spots (“Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). The countercultural movements that appeared during this time period, involving diverse groups of people who embraced a lifestyle that rejected conformity, came to detest U.S. militarism (“Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). Fear of Communism in the heart of the Cold War led to patriotism, but John F. Kennedy, the president that had inspired so many, was assassinated in 1963, and this combination had made life scary for many people. On top of all that, there was an unusually large number of children living through these new experiences. The number of couples marrying and having children in the euphoria that followed the Second World War led to the baby boom of the 1940s, which resulted in more than half of the population of the United States being under 30 years old by the 1960s (“Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). These children were growing up with a different standard of living than those in the decades before them, but also with a deep-set anxiety as a result of the Cold War. Uniform suburban communities sprang up in the 1940s and ’50s that many people thought were “soulless and culturally empty,” and everybody was living very predictable, boring lives (Hill 6). As teenagers, many were “chafing under the pressure to conform that had dominated the ’50s,” and they were growing up in a new and ever-changing world (“Hippies”).

Many groups that were known collectively as the counterculture emerged during this time period and tended to rebel against the normal structure of everyday life. Their slogan was to *Never trust anyone over 30!* (Hill 69). An example of one of these counterculture groups was the underground Beat movement that began in Greenwich Village, New York and then also appeared in the North Beach area of San Francisco starting around 1944. The Beatniks were very

left-wing, they were into new styles of music and art, and they rebelled against materialism. Many great authors and poets emerged out of the Beat movement. Beatniks tended to wear black, frequent coffee shops, and experiment with drugs, meditation, and sexual freedom. However, their somber colors gave way to bright, psychedelic clothing and long hair by the end of the 1960s as public terminology shifted from “beatnik” to “hippie”. There were other counterculture groups around at that time as well, including the campus radicals who rebelled heavily against the war in Vietnam, but only a small minority of teenagers in the ‘60s were actually a part of any of these movements, not as many were involved as one might think (Hill ix). Most of these extreme radicals were young adults from white, middle class backgrounds who were liberal arts majors and good students who were used to being listened to and having their opinions matter to others. The term “counterculture” tended to be used by critics trying to “characterize the widespread rebellion of many western youths against the values and behaviors espoused by their parents,” although it was difficult to define, as many members of the counterculture had different practices and ideals (Gustainis). However, many radicals believed that drugs would change the world, and this was a common theme of the counterculture movements of the time.

A San Francisco neighborhood called the Haight-Ashbury came to lend itself well to the needs of the counterculture. By the 1960s, the San Francisco Bay Area had become a center for the counterculture and anti-Vietnam War movements, with the nearby campus of UC Berkeley, which was very anti-war at the time, and the existence of the Beats movement in the North Beach district. The Beat movement ended, for the most part, in the early 1960s, but remnants remained, and when North Beach rents rose drastically around that time, whatever beatniks were

left there could no longer afford the price raises and had to relocate (Ashbolt 36). There were many large, Victorian-style houses in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood near Golden Gate Park, only four and a half miles from North Beach, that turned out to be a very nice location for the counterculture groups, being a perfect spot for hosting concerts and other gatherings, and the houses had low rents. Suburbanization after World War II and plans for the construction of a freeway near the neighborhood had led many of the middle- and upper-class inhabitants of the early Haight-Ashbury district to move out and rent their property to the various black renters, beatnik renters, and gay renters who then moved in, leading the Haight to become a very tolerant kind of “quiet Bohemia” (Howard 45, Ashbolt 36).

Many young people called hippies soon began to migrate into the city of San Francisco and they found a place to live in the large houses of the Haight-Ashbury. These hippies were anti-work, pro-drug, and had no interest in changing politics, instead hoping to change culture and the social system (Howard 45, Hill 67). Many of them thought that the Vietnam War was a “bad trip,” but they did not have much of a desire to devote themselves to protesting it like their antiwar neighbors over at nearby UC Berkeley (Hill 68). They condemned the worship of material goods, focused on such things as mind-body contrast and the estrangement of people from each other, and wanted to invert traditional values by living intentionally in poverty instead of forever reaching for something to temporarily improve life (Howard 45). Many hippies tended to be very suspicious and paranoid people who were big on astrology and fatalism, and believed that they were listening to and doing exactly what the universe told them they should be doing. Their motto was, “Don’t do it if it doesn’t groove ya,” and the movement revolved around spiritual enlightenment, free love, and a heavy drug culture, especially marijuana and LSD

(Hedgepeth from Swartz 154). LSD, or lysergic acid diethylamide, is a psychedelic, hallucination-causing drug that was especially popular in the hippie quest for the expansion of happiness, so when the state of California declared LSD a controlled substance, making the drug illegal, on October 6, 1966 in an effort to curb the ever-growing drug use of the countercultural movements, the hippies quickly responded with their own Declaration of Independence, which outlined their basic rights as “freedom of body, pursuit of joy, and expansion of consciousness” (“Summer of Love”). A large rally attended by several thousand people called the Love Pageant also took place to protest the ban the day after it was passed, and at the event many people put tabs of LSD on their tongues and swallowed simultaneously.

Allen Ginsberg and Michael Bowen, one a celebrated Beat writer and poet, the other an artist, were both leaders of the counterculture, and they were inspired by the Love Pageant rally to create a similar but even bigger and more spectacular event. They organized a Human Be-In, a large-scale event a bit like an enormous version of the sit-ins that had been eroding the entrenched practices of segregation all over the country at that time, that brought together Berkeley’s anti-war protesters with the Haight-Ashbury psychedelic subculture to celebrate communal living, ecological awareness, and psychological growth through psychedelic drugs, ideas that would become central to hippie subculture. Also known as the Gathering of Tribes, this Be-In took place in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park on January 4, 1967. It featured speakers and musical groups, and twenty to thirty thousand people from many diverse groups all around the Bay Area were in attendance (“Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). The event featured a speech by Harvard professor Timothy Leary, in which he said the famous words, “Turn on, tune in, drop out,” instructing people to reject the traditional, conservative path to

success by dropping out of their high school, college, or graduate school (“Summer of Love”, “Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). It was the first time hippies were able to gain national recognition, and their message appealed to the teenagers of the enormous baby boom generation, leading more and more young people to start migrating towards San Francisco.

As the number of hippies grew in the Haight-Ashbury in the spring of 1967, the city began to prepare for a huge summer influx during what they began to call the “Summer of Love”. Somewhere between fifty and one hundred thousand people came from all around the country by early summer, swelling the population of San Francisco, particularly the area around Golden Gate Park. Concerns about shortages began to creep into the minds of many (“Hippies Organize the Human Be-In”). The *Oracle*, the hippie newspaper of the Haight-Ashbury, began to warn people not to continue coming to the city, as there was not enough food, shelter, or drugs to supply the number of hippies expected (“Summer of Love”). As it turns out, they were right—the reality of the Summer of Love was much worse than the original vision, and it ended on October 6, 1967 with a “Death of Hippie” parade down Haight Street. The hippies realized that their dream had gone sour, and they wanted to instead spread what they believed to be the real, pure hippie movement around the country (“Hippies”).

The Summer of Love was meant to be a celebration of culture taking place, but within a year and a half of the event’s conception, the Haight-Ashbury was lined with vacant storefronts because the hippies could not figure out how to interact with each other in a peaceful manner and still be productive. The Be-In was the high point of the hippie movement, and the Summer of Love more the “beginning of the end” for them than anything else (“Summer of Love”). Many were afraid to tell others what to do because they did not want to “power trip,” but power

distinctions appeared anyway that caused tensions (Howard 47). This was especially evident in a subset of the hippies also living in the Haight-Ashbury, called the Diggers, who focused on trying to make the hippies stand up against the society they had dropped out of (“Hippies”). Members initially went about their days spending their free time scrounging around for clothes and other things to give away to those in need because they firmly believed that money was the root of all evil and that people should not need to possess any in order to be able to live (Hedgepeth from Swartz 150, “Summer of Love”). The Diggers offered free food in Golden Gate Park every day, and they started a Free Store, where people would donate anything they no longer wanted and the Diggers would give away those items to anyone who needed them. They wanted to be authentic, they did not want to get jobs, and they thought that anyone can make the world however they like simply by acting out the world they want to live in (“Summer of Love”). However, the anxiety that kept people from telling each other what to do led to the end of the free food and clothes, because the Diggers could not effectively assign each other jobs, and they eventually could not operate successfully anymore. Internal contradictions like these were a big problem for the Summer of Love.

The hippies, as it turned out, did not fully understand what they were getting themselves into in the summer of 1967, and the reality of life in Haight-Ashbury that year was not exactly in line with many of the dreams that they had once possessed. The existence of big, cheap houses led to communal living, which had led to a vision of a kind of Utopian society, but it was an LSD-enhanced dream, and reality had no chance of competing with this idealistic scheme for what it could have been (“Summer of Love”). They had hoped also to lead by example, assuming that what they were doing was so “groovy” that everyone else would follow in the

hippies' footsteps (Howard 45). It was a bit like that for a while, because it was easy for them to sell peace, love and rock'n'roll, so for a time they had many interested followers, but not everyone wanted to be a hippie, and so that dream, too, eventually faded away (Vulliamy).

From the beginning, there was a big emphasis on marijuana and LSD in the Haight-Ashbury community, but the focus was originally on spiritual enlightenment and love. However, as the 1967 summer progressed, drug use in the neighborhood got worse and worse. This was one of the big reasons why the hippie movement as it had originally existed began to die out. Bob Weir, songwriter and guitarist for the Grateful Dead, said:

Haight Ashbury was a ghetto of bohemians who wanted to do anything - and we did, but I don't think it has happened since. Yes, there was LSD. But Haight Ashbury was not about drugs. It was about exploration, finding new way of expression, being aware of one's existence...we wanted everyone to be their own leader. Ideology never meets reality with any grace (qtd. in Vulliamy).

In the early summer, what he said was accurate- the Haight-Ashbury was not about drugs- but that began to change. People started coming to the area just for the drugs, not for any spiritual reasons at all, and many of the original peace and love seekers left for the nearby countryside by late June ("Summer of Love"). The Love Pageant and the Be-In had set dangerous precedents of people actively turning their backs on anti-drug laws, but now "thousands of kids were moving into San Francisco for a life based on LSD and the psychedelic thing" (Wolfe 11). The effects of psychedelics vary widely from person to person, and from one experience to another, and there are times when users of such drugs would start to feel as though they would never be able to snap out of their hallucinations, which led to varying states of panic and terror. These experiences were commonly referred to as "bad trips," and tended to be brought on either by taking the wrong dosage of a psychedelic drug or by the thinking of troubling thoughts while

under their influence (Harvey). LSD use soon led to more and more of these bad trips as people would take it and “feel that any moment there may be a knock on the door,” sometimes with anxiety lasting up to a few days after the immediate effects of the had worn off, and so the psychedelic movement started to die out (Wolfe 29, “Summer of Love”). Around the same time, drug dealers started to take advantage of the large numbers of susceptible younger kids who had migrated to the area and began pushing nasty street drugs like speed, heroin, and cocaine. Speed, formally called methamphetamine, eventually replaced LSD as the “major drug” of the Haight-Ashbury during the Summer of Love (Howard 49). It can cause extreme weight loss, mouth problems and skin sores, it alters judgment and inhibition, and it raises the user’s risk of contracting hepatitis B and C (“DrugFacts: Methamphetamine”). Heroin is very addictive and can lead to fatal overdose, diseases like hepatitis, collapsed veins, and more, and on top of that, street heroin is frequently also full of toxic additives that can clog blood vessels to vital organs and cause permanent damage (“DrugFacts: Heroin”). Cocaine, a stimulant to the central nervous system, is also highly addictive. It causes heart rate, blood pressure, and demand for oxygen to go up, and can lead to anorexia, apathy, insomnia, depression, and death, among many other things (House 43, Mittleman 1092). As the American Journal of Nursing says, “Addiction to [cocaine] is like riding a bike downhill without brakes; you pick up speed, careen out of control, and crash” (House, 45). Use of these street drugs led to immense paranoia throughout the neighborhood, making it a less than great place to be and contributing to the eventual downfall of the Summer of Love.

Another source of disaster for the hippie movement was the attention focused on the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood by the media of the time. There was a parade held at the end of

the summer called the Death of Hippie parade, and the side of the cardboard coffin that was carried down Haight Street read, “Hippie, Son of Media” (Flamm). Jerry Rubin, an important leader of the anti-war movement who was an active part of the counterculture in 1967, once said, “Television creates myths bigger than reality.... [It] packs all the action into two minutes--a commercial for the revolution,” and that is what mass media did (qtd. in Flamm). The message and deeper meanings of the social and cultural movements of the time, including but not limited to the hippies and their Summer of Love, were repeatedly distorted by the media, which began to portray the hippies like they were something to look at, like zoo animals on display (Flamm, “Summer of Love”). The hippies did not appreciate this at all, and friction began to build up in their community.

Pressures from outside the hippie community caused uneasy feelings in the Haight-Ashbury, making it a worse place to be and therefore contributing to the deterioration of the Summer of Love. John Shelley, mayor of San Francisco from 1964 until 1967, warned the hippies not to interfere with normal community life, and police started cracking down on the neighborhood (“Summer of Love”). However, the hippies were at this point pretty fully established in Haight-Ashbury and it is unclear both what the mayor meant when he requested that they stay out of the way and how exactly he expected them to be able to do that, and this led to quite a bit of confusion and anxiety amongst the hippies. Along with this, tourists started flooding into the already crowded streets to gawk at the hippies after seeing them in the media, and, as previously mentioned, the hippies did not like to be watched, and held up signs saying things like “we are not freaks to be gawked at. Go to the zoo and look at the animals” (“Summer

of Love”). This irritation and frustration continued to grow among the hippies, and the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood became an increasingly unpleasant place.

There were many smaller individual problems that led to the downfall of hippie culture in the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood in the summer of 1967 that are not easily categorized but were significant nonetheless. There were lots of kids, vagrants under the age of seventeen, who came in and did not know how to care for themselves. Many of them quickly ran out of resources but stayed anyway, wandering around aimlessly, going barefoot on the street, getting infections, and not feeding themselves right. This created problems for the community and led to the sometimes randomized roundup of children for interrogation, after which their parents would be called to come out to San Francisco as soon as possible to retrieve them, no matter where they were from (“Summer of Love”). Free love as it was essentially disappeared, and “women were raped - it became a perversion of what it had been before” (Vulliamy). People who were not really hippies, who had no intention of dropping out of school, for example, took on hippie personas just for the summer, and runaways began to wander aimlessly around the area, not sure what to do now that they had reached their destination (“Summer of Love”). All of these problems contributed to the deterioration of hippie culture in the Haight-Ashbury and to the deterioration of the Summer of Love.

Because of the existence of other counterculture communes in the U. S. and because there was another, smaller celebration of hippie culture two years after the summer of 1967, some might make the argument that not all hippie culture had died out. There was 14th Street of Atlanta, Lower East Side in New York City, Colfax Avenue in Denver, and many more places where the counterculture continued to thrive even after the celebrations of the Summer of Love

came to a close. Also, from August 15-19, 1969, a huge concert called Woodstock took place in Bethel, New York, advertised as “three days of peace and music” (Hill 74). It was very peaceful despite lots of logistical problems and convinced many people that there was in fact potential for creating peaceful alternative communities. The festival marked the “culmination of an era and the end of a decade,” but if there were hippies still thriving in other places two years after the end of the Summer of Love, some would say that the idea that hippie culture died in time for the “Death of Hippie” parade is not entirely realistic (Lauro). Hippie culture did not simply die out when the Summer of Love ended, it was just dispersed around the country. The Summer of Love turned out differently than it had been expected to, but those who left Haight-Ashbury with love and peace still in their hearts went to spread true hippie culture around the country.

A disastrous mix of internal and external problems pushed the hippie movement close to destruction in the summer of 1967, and the event that was supposed to be a celebration of all things hippie ended in a “Death of Hippie” parade. The Summer of love, arguably the climax of the hippie movement, was really not very loving at all. However, the positive aspects of the time period served to reinforce the importance of community and to prove that it is possible to make the world a better place to live, if only for a short time.

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