

Summers of Love*

By Erik O'Dowd

It has since been hyped as the Summer of Love, a blink of youthful joy in Haight Ashbury thirty summers ago. But back then we gave that time no name; and as with all things sentient and transient, the act of naming it destroys its truth.

The reality—and there was much more of that than unreality—was cold, gray mornings of greasy hair, gritty eyes, thickened teeth, and a grating hunger salved by syrapping an instant coffee with a stream of sugar, then holding on until the late-afternoon handout meal at the rescue mission down on Mission Street.

True, we drifted through many days on dope and Dylan, but for every trip there were a hundred tribulations. Yes, we bedded often and without much discrimination, but for each casual coupling there were countless copings. And though the nights did indeed rage with sounds and strobes, they gave no immunity against the pangs of loneliness and, yes, simple homesickness; nor, of course, against the next cold, gray morning.

Only on one night, July 4, 1967, did we sense a temporal tremor, but it was one that forever set that time apart from the rest of our lives. A small group of us had gathered early on the Marina lawn for the fireworks display over the bay. As the sun dropped behind the coast range, **the crowd grew and** a tiny brass band began to pump out a Souza march from a gazebo near the water. Behind us strummed a Baez tune and the ubiquitous bongos were distant, somewhere. Kids, a hundred bundled-up boys and girls, squealed and skittered and tumbled on the damp, cold grass, playing tag, playing kids, in the spaces between the clumps of us, their elders.

Darkness brought the first of the skyrockets, and so the awes of all of us. Another and another, lighting the sky, quieting us between the sparks and glows, then rousing us to simple wonder with their sudden bangs and bursts—all until the fog, which had waited in a courteous bank outside the Golden Gate, slid through and in moments cloaked and coated everything. The flashes and flares of red and purple were at first softened, then made into drops of dye in cotton, then vanished altogether, leaving only mist above us. The claps and bangs of rockets became distant, lonely pops, weakened further by the groans of foghorns from the bay.

We, **now** thousands of us, sat for many minutes in that damp and weak-lit night, just sitting and being. Then a bongo, then a guitar, then a child made timid noises, which lilted gently over the grass, softened by the fog but muted more, it seemed, by our common reverence for the utter decency we felt as all of us sat quietly together on the grass.

One of us whispered into our small circle, “Man, this is how it is now. We won’t go back from here.” I knew at that instant that every soul on Earth agreed, that from now on we would all sit together quietly, in peace, just being, in the summer night.

The next day our stash and our reel-to-reel were stolen. The next year Martin and Bobby were shot. The next decade Nixon resigned and Pol Pot murdered millions. And so on to the present—all acts unimaginable to us three decades ago, but teaching us at least this: The trauma of today’s youth pales before our own. They, given what is, need live only for what is to come. We, who sat together on that summer night, have lived what was, and must live with what might have been.

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