

THE SUMMER OF LOVE: HIPPIE CULTURE AND THE BEATLES IN 1967

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ABSTRACT

Though the hippie ideology had been brewing under the radar in San Francisco for many years, in June of 1967, the necessary catalyst appeared to advance the hippie movement to nationwide prominence, encouraging thousands of American youths to reject mainstream ideology. That catalyst, the record-topping Beatles' album *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, conveyed the simplest principles of the counterculture: LSD, love, and rejection of the unhip establishment. Entering into "the zone of maximal contact," the Beatles' music inspired thousands to make a hippie pilgrimage to Haight-Ashbury.¹ Known to its residents as "the Haight," this San Francisco district adapted to the influx of hippies with the creation of an alternative social order, including functional counterinstitutions to serve the needs of the hippie community. Again, the Beatles' enter into a dialogue with the revolutionary hippie lifestyle by developing their own counterinstitution: Apple Corps. The Beatles' interaction with the hippie counterculture allowed the utopian visions of both groups to reach peak levels of intensity during the Summer of Love.

INTRODUCTION

For a few, brief months in 1967, the United States was shocked by a counterculture influence that was able to permeate the mainstream, influencing popular music and demanding media attention. Known as the Summer of Love, this era marked the peak of hippie influence on America. The hippie movement of the nineteen-sixties evolved from the Beatnik counterculture of the previous decade. The Beatniks, also known as hipsters, retreated from the mainstream. Like that of the hippies who would follow, hipster ideology emphasized the importance of expanded consciousness through drug use. The label "hippie," originally "the beats' derogatory term for the half-hip," became nationally recognized in 1967.² In that year, hippie culture took shape in San Francisco and influenced artists and musicians who shared their vision of peace, love, and expanded consciousness.

SAN FRANCISCO AND THE HAIGHT

Based in San Francisco, one of the hippie's first major gatherings took place on January 14, 1967. A wordplay on the sit-ins being staged around the country in protest of segregation, the "Be-In" drew an estimated twenty to thirty thousand participants to Golden Gate Park. The event embodied the values of the growing hippie culture. LSD was distributed freely, rock bands performed, and leaders of the movement, including Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary, spoke to the masses.³ Later considered a defining moment of hippie culture, the Be-In rally invited participants to reject the ideologies of the mainstream and embrace an alternative vision of social order.

The American involvement in Vietnam is remembered as the major point of conflict for the hippies but, at the time, many hippies expressed a more generalized frustration with a society in which they saw no place for themselves. Uncertain of the future, hippies saw themselves on the cusp of change. In the Haight, hippies engaged in social and psychedelic experimentation in search of a utopian subculture.

They stepped through the sheen of the waterfall to behold nothing that could be named, nothing that one could carry back, but just a promise, a possibility, a mystery that helped them turn the tables on their culture.⁴

While LSD certainly helped many “turn on” to the message of the movement, a far more versatile medium spread the values of the hippie culture faster, further, and more concisely than any voice before or since: the Beatles.

The Beatles opened their first ever United States concert tour in San Francisco on August 19, 1964. They performed at the Cow Palace and met counterculture folk singer, Joan Baez. A year later, the Beatles met Carl Wilson and Mike Love of the Beach Boys in Portland, Oregon. Innovators in the psychedelic rock genre, the Beach Boys experimental album *Pet Sounds* did not enjoy the same commercial success as the Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper*; however, the thematic and technical creativity of *Pet Sounds* pushed the Beatles’ to new heights. Though the Beatles never lived in San Francisco and never immersed themselves in the hippie lifestyle, they increasingly shared many of the hippies’ core values. By 1967, the cheeky Liverpudlians, who had once talked openly about their desire for fame and fortune, found their dreams fully realized and, therefore, set their sights on a larger vision of global unity, peace, and love.

SERGEANT PEPPER AND CARNIVAL

While previous albums hinted at the Beatles’ evolving social consciousness, their 1967 masterpiece, *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, captured in its concept, style, lyric, and creativity the vision and vibrancy of the emerging counterculture. The album epitomizes Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the novel genre, in its “living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality.”⁵ *Sergeant Pepper* put forth the Beatles’ psychedelic interpretation of the reality, drawing from and responding to the swelling hippie movement.

The first major way that *Sergeant Pepper* drew from the rising hippie counterculture was in its concept. Brainchild of Paul McCartney, the Lonely Hearts Club Band façade was envisioned as a form of escapism for the Beatles, the opportunity for them to take on a new persona. The album’s concept epitomizes the carnivalesque, characterized by its “carnival pathos of shifts and renewals, the image of constructive death.”⁶ In the terms of the carnivalesque, the Lonely Hearts Club Band represents the constructive death of the Beatles. As Paul R. Kohl explains, the album’s concept was “a deliberate debasing of the Beatles themselves.”⁷ The *Sergeant Pepper* album looked to abandon preconceptions of what it meant to be rock’n’roll royalty in order to innovate new possibilities for the Beatles’ music. The conceptual starting point for the album aligns closely with that of the hippies, who similarly felt the need to challenge the established ideologies of the mainstream.

The carnivalesque themes that connected the Beatles to the hippie culture are most apparent in several songs that conveyed the stylistic “eccentricity” of carnival.⁸ Four days after the San Francisco Be-In, the Beatles began recording “A Day in the Life,” the song that would become the last track of *Sergeant Pepper*. Recorded in roughly thirty-six hours, the song’s eccentricity can be seen in the twenty-four measure bridge. Initially uncertain with how to transition between John Lennon’s first two moody verses, and McCartney’s peppy middle eighth, the Beatles and producer George Martin decided to record an “orchestral glissando” to fill the gap.⁹ Chaotic, yet direct, that thirty second explosion of sound epitomizes the Beatles’ willingness to experiment with previous musical conventions on *Sergeant Pepper*.

Lyrically, “A Day in the Life” also represented the values of hippie culture. The song opens with Lennon singing of a death he read about in the newspaper. Eerie and morbid, the song describes the gory scene. Then, in a single line, Lennon channels the listeners’ feelings of disgust toward the spectators: “a crowd of people stood and stared.” His tone comes through in the inflection of the hard ‘s’ sounds, where it becomes clear that the song is criticizing the observers, what Ian MacDonald calls “the society of the Spectacle.”¹⁰ The song’s tragedy was based on the death of Tara Browne, a friend of the Beatles. Lennon ends the verse with a reference to the “house of lords,” again emphasizing his contempt for those more concerned with Tara’s social status than his tragic death. Indeed, true hippies would share in Lennon’s emotional plea to regard Tara’s humanity with more reverence than his class status.

In its rejection of the society of spectacle, “A Day In the Life” also offers the alternative in its final line: “I’d love to turn you on.” Like many other tracks from *Sergeant Pepper*, “A Day in the Life” praises

the conscious expanding powers of LSD. Despite Lennon's claims otherwise, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" similarly promotes the hippie lifeblood: acid. A poetic journey through a psychedelic wonderland, "Lucy" is rich with metaphor, alliteration, and colorful imagery. Easily overlooked among the song's many eccentricities, the second-person point of view is perhaps the song's most charming feature. Though the Beatles had dabbled in second person in previous songs, instead of navigating the listener through a tumultuous puppy love as the Beatles' did in "She Loves You," "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" delves into the psychedelic pursuit of the mysterious Lucy.

Interestingly, the lyrical richness of the song's acid-inspired wonderland overlaps with the images of mainstream life. Bridges, taxis, and trains are all enhanced by the essence of Lucy left in her wake. An obvious allusion to an acid trip, the mundane, mainstream, and unhip become vibrant and magical because of Lucy. Though MacDonald criticizes the song's jarring refrain as "poorly thought out," the shift to the hard-hitting repetition of the title phrase seems true to the experience of an acid trip as any hippie might recognize it: bursts of intense, surreal detachment dispersed at intervals within the altered contact with reality.¹¹

Even the most simple tracks of *Sergeant Pepper* seem to praise the rising drug culture as not only a source of personal freedom but also a means to communal harmony. The second track, "With a Little Help from My Friends" was written for Ringo Starr to sing and, therefore, composed of a simple, childish melody, "an acid lullaby."¹² Yet, in its simplicity, the song succinctly captures a core tenet of hippie culture: a communal identity. Ringo sings, he both "gets by" and "gets high" with a little help from his friends, who are there for him when he is sad and lonely because his love is away. Ringo's friends step in, and it is revealed that it was not really his lover he missed, but the act of loving: "I need somebody to love." The idea of "free love," though commonly oversimplified as "free sex," captures the hippie ideal of universal love, shared between all people out of respect for their basic humanity.¹³ "With a Little Help from My Friends" is an early example of the Beatles' interpretation of free love, which would be featured prominently in songs that followed the *Sergeant Pepper* album, such as "All You Need is Love."

Another song from *Sergeant Pepper* that draws inspiration from hippies, "She's Leaving Home" captures the disillusionment that many youths felt toward their parents' values. McCartney sings about a girl chasing after "something inside that was always denied for so many years." Intermittently, Lennon echoes the sentiments of her forlorn parents, on the discovery of their loss: "What did we do that was wrong?" While so many beliefs contributed to the generation gap dividing hippies from their parents, "She's Leaving Home" uncovers a basic philosophical shift in the hippies' worldview: the rejection of materialism. In the voice of the girl's parents, Lennon sings, "We gave her everything money could buy." The embodiment of a runaway hippie, the girl in the song rejects the financial security of home, instead pursuing a counterculture vision of happiness. Her choice to head out on the road with "a man from the motor trade" is one that aspiring hippies would soon copy in real life.

GOING TO SAN FRANCISCO

After *Sergeant Pepper* was released on June 1, 1967, youths by the thousands followed the example of the girl in "She's Leaving Home." Heading to San Francisco, many looked to the Haight-Ashbury district as a hippie Mecca. In pursuit of peace, love, spiritual awakening, or drugs, the hippie population peaked at an estimated fifty thousand.¹⁴ For fifteen weeks, *Sergeant Pepper* topped the charts in America, opening minds and inspiring mainstream kids to "turn on" to LSD and hippie culture in a way no other agent of the counterculture was capable of. The phenomenal swell of hippies exemplifies the power of the Beatles' music to achieve "crude contact" with contemporary culture.¹⁵ The influential relationship of the Beatles' music and youth culture drove the peak of hippie culture, the Summer of Love.

Responding to the eccentricity of *Sergeant Pepper*, life in San Francisco was similarly carnivalesque. The Haight-Ashbury district embraced a communal identity defined by its lack of conformity. Hippies were drawn to the Haight's abandonment of traditional power structures.¹⁶ In the hippie culture, racism, sexism, and other forms of entitlement were immeasurably unhip. In this way, the egalitarian values of the hippies were similar to the carnival influences that also permeate *Sergeant Pepper*:

A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: overall values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced

from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations.¹⁷

The attitude of the Summer of Love connects with the idealism of the Beatles in songs from *Sergeant Pepper*, such as “With a Little Help from My Friends” and “Getting Better.” In this way, the hippie counterculture and the Beatles’ music engage in a dialogue, encouraging a more communal and harmonious society.

In both their attitudes toward each other and their attitude toward their own identities, hippies break from the mainstream norms. Distinctly recognizable by their colorful, free-flowing outfits, the hippies looked for ways to reinvent themselves, much as the Beatles did in the creation of the Lonely Hearts Club Band. In the documentary *Revolution*, a young hippie explains that many young people came to the Haight and promptly changed their names. Shedding the expectations and oppressions of her previous identity, the girl explains she has proudly taken the name “Today,” which she sees as the defining term of the era.¹⁸ Today exemplifies the live-for-the-moment lifestyle of the Summer of Love.

For many in the Haight, living for the moment went hand in hand with the gratuitous drug use that hippies enjoyed. Having only been criminalized in California for less than a year, LSD was widely circulated in the Haight-Ashbury community. An LSD trip and the accompanying conscious expansion was a rite of passage for many hippies, “the revered sacrament of the original hippies.”¹⁹ One of LSD’s most important effects was the sense of connectivity that users felt with their surroundings, both animate and inanimate. LSD users praised the acid trip experience, attempting to share the psychedelic enlightenment with the mantra “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” The feelings of cosmic oneness induced by LSD had a major influence on the Beatles’ work on *Sergeant Pepper* and the hippies’ core ideology, evidenced by their shared idealism of a utopian future.

THE DIGGERS AND COUNTERINSTITUTIONS

Motivated by their goal of creating an egalitarian society, hippies in the Haight enacted a variety of community-based programs to realize their vision. While thousands who came to the Haight during the Summer of Love were simply looking to enjoy a three-month escape from mainstream life, many genuinely aspired to the core values of the counterculture. Hippie groups looked for ways to enact meaningful change in the microcosm of the Haight that would serve as a model for global change.

“Counterinstitutions” mushroomed, offering excitement, collectivity, and employment: underground newspapers; pamphleteering publishers; rock bands and promoters; hip FM radio; all manner of cooperatives; drug distribution networks; crash pads for runaways; free medical clinics; antiauthoritarian free schools.²⁰

These counterinstitutions became increasingly in demand as young people enamored by the hippie lifestyle poured into San Francisco throughout the Summer of Love.

One of the most important groups in the Haight, the Diggers were a San Francisco theatre troupe that began publishing political literature in 1966. The hippie group was inspired by a seventeenth century English subculture of the same name. San Francisco’s Diggers shared the egalitarian vision of their English predecessors, opposing private property and seeing land ownership as a means of oppressing the masses.²¹ They generally lived in communal style housing, making an effort to consume minimal resources. They also worked tirelessly to extend support in food, supplies, and shelter to the influx of hippies during the Summer of Love.

The program the Diggers were best known for was their soup-kitchen-style service, provided twice daily in Golden Gate Park. “The Diggers salvaged food from restaurant and super-market overflow and prepared it in their communal kitchen.”²² With the help of the Diggers’ food service and the plethora of free drugs, free music, and free entertainment, many hippies found it possible to live in the Haight almost entirely without money. Another popular Digger resource was the Free Store, a storefront in the center of Haight-Ashbury where essentials like clothes and furniture came and went daily with no exchange of money. While it may be hard to envision such a facility, where inventory would stay stocked simply based on the deposits of its customers, hippie values stressed detachment from material

possessions. Many owned no more clothing than a singular outfit, believing that a break from materialism was essential to achieving a spiritual awakening.

The Diggers also operated several programs to help keep the Haight-Ashbury community safe and healthy, which became increasingly difficult as hippie pilgrims showed up by the thousands. To help acclimate new arrivals, “the Diggers offered a ‘survival school’ teaching how to get decent nutrition, how to find a clean place to stay, how to avoid sexually transmitted diseases.”²³ According to local public health officials, one of the most common healthcare needs of the hippies was treating basic infections, a common ailment in a population that often chose to walk around barefoot and neglect hygiene.²⁴ Other common maladies included venereal disease and the infamous “bad trip,” when an LSD user would suffer a psychological breakdown from the drug’s powerful effects. These health concerns in the Haight were very negatively stigmatized in the mainstream; therefore, the Diggers and a group of young doctors established the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic, which “treated dozens of kids every day.”²⁵ The hippies did more than “drop out” from the mainstream, they successfully created a functional subculture that provided for the hippie community.

APPLE CORPS AND ANTIESTABLISHMENTARIANISM

The Beatles promoted a utopian vision for the world and, like the hippies, they truly believed they had the power to execute it. Backed by their vast fortune and a massive, adoring fan base, the Beatles launched Apple Corps. The brainchild of Brian Epstein, Apple Corps was originally conceptualized in the summer of 1967 as a tax shelter for the Beatles’ earnings.²⁶ Unfortunately, the untimely passing of Epstein left the project facing a leadership void. The Beatles’ stepped in to take control of the organization and executed an antiestablishment vision that Paul McCartney described as “controlled weirdness.”²⁷ Much like the communal structure of the Haight, Apple Corps’ model was built around an idealistic vision for the future.

Apple Corps consisted of several divisions, including Apple Boutiques, Apple Films, and Apple Records. The Beatles’ themselves were very hands-off with these endeavours; the central aspect of Apple they spoke about with the press was the patronage system they planned to establish. As both Paul McCartney and John Lennon became increasingly interested in fine arts and the avant-garde, the Beatles felt it should be the primary goal of Apple to support artists. As John Lennon describes it, Apple existed “so people don’t have to go on their knees in an office, you know, begging for a break.”²⁸ Like the hippies in San Francisco, the Beatles attempted to go outside the system by creating a counterinstitution to realize their utopian vision.

CONCLUSION

Neither Apple Corps nor the Haight community possessed the staying power to accomplish the ambitions of its founders. As the Beatles’ struggled to work together as musicians, any hope they had of becoming a competent business force crumbled. Apple hemorrhaged money, and the Beatles’ unsustainable dream ended with the grand gesture of closing the London Apple Boutique by giving away its entire inventory. The Haight similarly faltered, and though the Summer of Love was thought by participants to be the beginning of a new world order, the overcrowding and introduction of hard drugs dragged the once dynamic hippie community down into squalor. By the time George Harrison visited the Haight in August, the hippie’s utopian vision was already plagued by addiction, hunger, and poverty.²⁹ Devastated by the turn their community had taken, the hippies stages a mock funeral, called “the Death of Hippie” in the fall, to symbolize the corruption that had infiltrated the once spectacular microcosm of the Haight.³⁰

Despite these failures, the idealism of both the Beatles and the hippies during the Summer of Love is remembered with reverence and nostalgia to this day. Nineteen sixty-seven was the year for dreamers, willing to question the inequality of the social systems in place and brave enough to enact an alternative. Kicking off the Summer of Love with their counterculture inspired *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles as artists entered the zone of maximal contact, both drawing from the surrounding culture and influencing thousands to embark on their own psychedelic journeys. The epicenter of hippie activity, Haight-Ashbury acted as a model community, for a short time functioning as a utopian subculture. Again, the Beatles’ would draw inspiration from a hippie worldview, using the

newly formed Apple Corps as a means to redefine the art, music, and film industries by giving away money to support artists. The combination of the Beatles' artistic vision and the social rebellion of the Haight-Ashbury hippies became a powerful force for change in American culture.

NOTES

- ¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Epic and Novel." (University of Texas Press 1988) 11.
- ² Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. (New York: Bantam 1993) 211.
- ³ Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. (New York: Bantam 1993) 208.
- ⁴ Bromell, Nicholas Knowles. *Tomorrow Never Knows*. (U of Chicago Press 2000) 119.
- ⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Epic and Novel." (University of Texas Press 1988) 7.
- ⁶ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Carnival and the Carnavalesque." (U of Georgia Press 1998) 253.
- ⁷ Kohl, Paul R. "A Splendid Time Is Guaranteed For All." (Academic Search Premier 1996). 85.
- ⁸ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Carnival and the Carnavalesque." (U of Georgia Press 1998) 251.
- ⁹ MacDonald, Ian. *Revolution in the Head*. (Chicago Review 2007) 231.
- ¹⁰ MacDonald, Ian. *Revolution in the Head*. (Chicago Review 2007) 230.
- ¹¹ MacDonald, Ian. *Revolution in the Head*. (Chicago Review 2007) 241.
- ¹² MacDonald, Ian. *Revolution in the Head*. (Chicago Review 2007) 247.
- ¹³ *Revolution*. Dir. Jack O'Connell. (Omicron 1968) 1:09.
- ¹⁴ "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).
- ¹⁵ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Epic and Novel." (University of Texas Press 1988) 23.
- ¹⁶ *Revolution*. Dir. Jack O'Connell. (Omicron 1968).
- ¹⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Carnival and the Carnavalesque." (U of Georgia Press 1998) 251.
- ¹⁸ *Revolution*. Dir. Jack O'Connell. (Omicron 1968) 0:46.
- ¹⁹ "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).
- ²⁰ Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. (New York: Bantam 1993) 214.
- ²¹ "English Diggers." *The Digger Archives*. 2011.
- ²² "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).
- ²³ "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).
- ²⁴ *Revolution*. Dir. Jack O'Connell. (Omicron 1968) 0:42.
- ²⁵ "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).
- ²⁶ Gould, Jonathan. *Can't Buy Me Love*. (New York: Three Rivers 2007) 470.
- ²⁷ Gould, Jonathan. *Can't Buy Me Love*. (New York: Three Rivers 2007) 472.
- ²⁸ Gould, Jonathan. *Can't Buy Me Love*. (New York: Three Rivers 2007) 472.
- ²⁹ Gould, Jonathan. *Can't Buy Me Love*. (New York: Three Rivers 2007) 432.
- ³⁰ "Summer of Love." *American Experience*. (PBS 2007).

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