

SUMMER OF LOVE & LEGEND

BY MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER

You cannot have change without the young. The young have the creativity, they have the energy, they have the impatience. You need the youth to dissent.

~ABBIE HOFFMAN

All sorts of people in early middleage are reminiscing about the summer of 1967, which they call the *Summer of Love*, a drug-induced hallucination in which several thousand (mostly) pampered middle and upper class white (flower) children suspended social strictures and sang, danced and fornicated like most of us imagine our wild and unfettered ancestors to have done in the primeval veld before civilization and Christianity dampened our freewheeling tribal spirits.

Mecca that legendary summer thirty years ago was San Francisco, Baghdad by the Bay, historic incubator and refuge for many radical and eccentric mythologies. For just a brief moment in a nation torn apart by an unpopular war and racial strife a quicksilver of fun and peace rippled through the stoned young masses who had swarmed into the city from all over the country with heads swaddled in blossoms (a song that summer urged westward bound émigrés, *If you go to San Francisco / Wear a flower in your hair*). An adhoc socialist republic boomed and bust as rapidly as an old goldrush town. Everything seemed free for the asking — food, lodging, medical care, sex and wine, even the drugs that fueled the dreamlike vision of a world of harmony, peace and love.

It all went badly quickly, of course. Before the summer was over evil spirits had merged with the blithe frolicking throngs of nirvana seekers, stealing, assaulting and raping, selling bad drugs and generally creating an infection of bad vibrations. The rhapsodies of nostalgia about that long ago and faraway summer seem to ease over the ruthless struggles of the period. That same summer of 1967 American cities burned with racial hatred and insurrection (also despair). More than 200 other young Americans were dying in Vietnam every week that summer, and God/Buddha alone knows how many thousands of Vietnamese were killed between each Sunday and Saturday. The dreamworld itself soon darkened into nightmare: two summers later the counterculture that grew from the Summer of Love produced its most famous citizen, Charles Manson.

Some among the large restless tribe that worshipped the image of eternal youth never got much older, swept up in the war that everyone seemed powerless to stop. A few endured jail to avoid the war or sought exile in other countries. Others resisted the war and defiantly braved clubs and disabling chemicals of police and national guardsmen, many of whom enlisted in state militias to avoid service in the war. The drugs that opened the minds of thousands of alienated children seared them to ash in subsequent years.

Young Ben Braddock, as portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the film version of *The Graduate* (written by Charles Webb) spoke for a disillusioned generation of baby boomers in early maturity when he said, "I don't know what I am, Dad, and I don't particularly care." Later that spiritual emptiness would gorge on frenzied materialism, but for a short period a large number of primarily affluent young Americans attempted to combat cultural nihilism with experiments toward a moral republic which was to be lightly governed for the benefit of all persons by intelligent goodwill. They turned to animistic socialism and developed a political philosophy that loosely resembled gypsy law. They thought they could bind state socialism and social control with a tribal sense of individual freedom. Revolution was a serious and futile flirtation, an adolescently malevolent reaction against a paternal system that refused reform or criticism. The police and military showed the young resisters to authority that social change takes hard work and great pain, which few were inclined to exert. Reality, which means that all dreams take time for fruition and are modified by reality, disillusioned the young once more. The Now Generation found some other nows to be Now about. A frustrated few tried to push against history but were killed or hunted into jail. Accidental explosion of homemade bombs literally wasted some of the best and brightest.

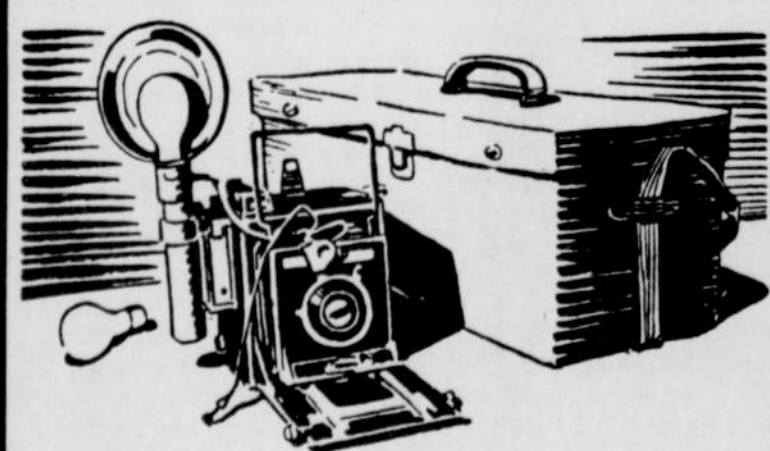
Although the babyboom generation temporarily repudiated the corrupt leadership and incessant greed of the nation, rapidly germinating (and degenerating) dizzily heady ideologies and social solutions, it grew increasingly fond of the riches it had previously loathed. Most softened their resistance to the 7-11 values of their culture as they grew older. Communal patterns and politics were abandoned; business networking among the former rebels replaced communalism. The acquisitive, workaholic, well-



FRANZ MASEREEL

dined yuppie metamorphosed from the young angst-riven flower child hippy who thought universal love and open sex would make the world a better place. Yuppies contortedly justified their pursuit of wealth and status as compatible with their lingering sympathies for social justice.

Now the baby boomers are as old or older than their parents a generation ago. The war that traumatized their vulnerable youth is long over (though its residue continues to disturb amnesia). The psychopathic cold war they grew up with ended abruptly with the collapse and disintegration of the Russian communist empire. The Summer of Love was the generation's Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale, the watershed of its vanished youth. They were born after World War 2 and their memories don't include the daily sounds of bombers and bombs that tormented and killed children all over the world a few years earlier; yet their continuing angst is a legacy of their parents' war — they were born under the sign of the mushroom cloud. More than their rebellion against prosperity and its flaccid corruption of spirit, their dread of nuclear holocaust defined their passionate protest against the Vietnam War; more even than personal fears of young males they would be drafted into it. This first nuclear generation (also the first TV generation) felt a shared stake in the future, and apart from hype and herd instinct they tried to be kind to one another. They are so large a generation they crash through history as irresistibly as fire, remaking everything they sweep past. They are so accustomed to the attention of society (in particular its merchants) they believe they are history itself.



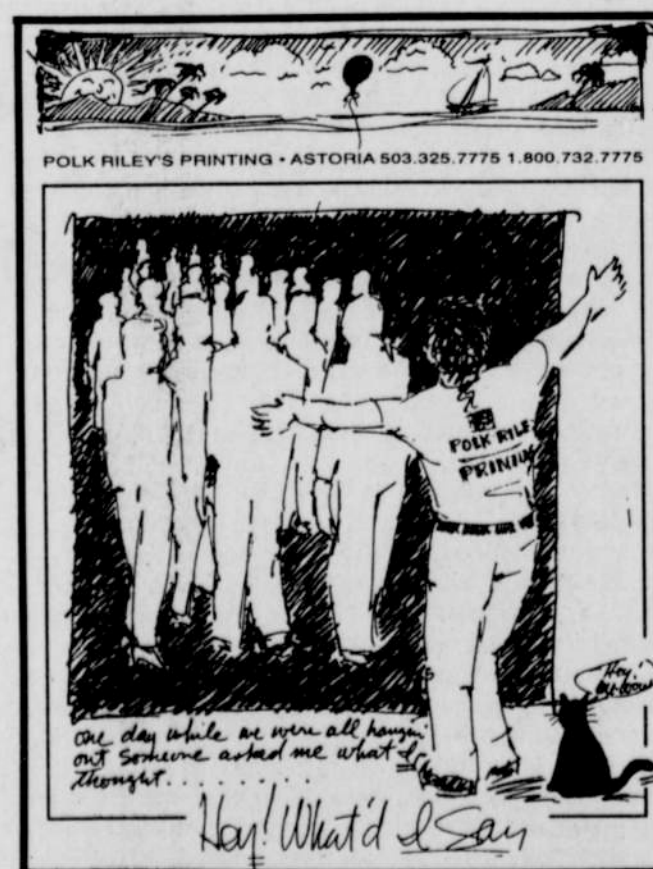
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Surprised to be invited,
he intends to explain
how Breughel has excited
his eye.
Journey through the sky
to a Hyatt House in some metropolis.
Kaleidoscope colossus
where architecture runs awry.
Reflecting glass.
Waterfalls among escalators.
Dixieland jazz.
He tries to realize
this could be what satisfies
their need. The creatures
who used to read his stories.
Looked at his pictures.
He wonders
whether speech can reach
their passions. Imagines
an astronaut
come to bear witness
in a wilderness
of alien thought.

~MIKE MCCAULEY

Mike McCauley lives in Seaside.



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