



ANTHONY RUSSO

SUMMERS OF LOVE & WAR

BY MICHAEL 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 prime 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 briefly abandoned social strictures and sang, danced and fornicated like most of us imagine our wild and unfettered ancestors to have done in the primeval veldt before civilization and Christianity dampened our freewheeling pagan spirits.

Mecca that legendary summer thirty-five years ago was San Francisco, 'Baghdad by the Bay', historic incubator and refuge for many radical and eccentric mythologies. For an ephemeral 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 ad hoc 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 psychedelic 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 toxic 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 that 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, and God/Buddha alone knows how many thousands of Vietnamese were killed between each Sunday and Saturday. The dream-world itself soon darkened into nightmare: two summers later the counterculture that grew from the Summer of Love produced its most famous citizen, Charles Manson.

The 1960s are set apart from other decades. They are different not so much for their intensity (the World War 2 years were far more intense), or because they were flamboyant and colorful (the 'Jazz Age' of the 1920s had more splash), or for that matter because they were fueled by division and insurrection — the 1770s and 1860s make better claims. The significance of the 1960s is the example provided by the nation's indulgence in its youth. Or perhaps more aptly, with a single immensely

large generation of young people who responded by paradoxically souring on the nation at a time of unparalleled prosperity.

The 1960s were a tumultuous period. The civil rights movement of primarily southern blacks gave rise to a white civil rights movement of primarily disaffected youth who protested an unpopular and ill-conceived war that forced young males to fight and possibly be crippled or die. For the most part the children of the working classes went quietly into induction and the war, and most of the nearly 60,000 dead and several hundred thousand wounded came from their homes. Primary opposition to the Vietnam War came from the nation's middle class youth; as usual upper class whites were protected and could avoid service in the war, although many went into service (typically as officers) or were engaged in antiwar protest.

Rampant ideologies and social solutions were conceived and died in the turbulent years of that decade. Revolution was a serious and futile flirtation, a malevolent and adolescent reaction against a paternal system that refused reform or criticism. Young Americans turned to animistic socialism (a 'New Left' replaced the Old Left) 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. 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 nouns to be Now about. A frustrated few tried to push against history but were mostly killed or hunted into jail. Accidental explosion of homemade bombs literally wasted some of the best and brightest.

"This idealistic youth is the same youth already serving in the Peace Corps abroad and the poverty program at home. They are the seed corn of a better future. They embody the strain of idealism which in every generation has written the best chapters in our American history. They are the spiritual heirs of the Jeffersonians and the abolitionists."

~I. F. STONE (1968)

"The student radical is never heard talking about a rise in the price of milk, new taxes, real wages or doctor bills. The student radical creates his own society in which money is not an overriding problem and because it isn't, the student radical thinks revolution is all about love because he has time to think about love. Everybody else is talking about survival."

~JULIUS LESTER (1968)

"You are a bunch of incompetent dreamers. You promised a revolution and where the hell is it? Because you are too lazy or incapable of being real revolutionaries I am being forced to pay off my student loan."

~MICHAEL MARSH (1971)

If the 1967 Summer of Love & Flower Power was a Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale for the young babyboomers, 1968 was surely a tale by the Brothers Grimm. It was a torrid year of assassinations, vainglorious battles in the overseas war and increasingly violent antiwar demonstrations, generally set off by police and national guards armed with clubs, guns and gas. The presidential campaign failed to change anything: the new Republican administration that was elected despised the young protesters and attacked them more viciously than ever, two years later culminating in the shooting deaths of four white students at Kent State in Ohio and at least two blacks (both women) at Jackson State University in Mississippi. The government also staged a number of show trials of antiwar activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s but juries acquitted them all. In 1969 antiwar radicals responded to police murders of Black Panthers and arrests of activists by forming a violent vanguard that proclaimed the beginning of revolution: the Weathermen (later Weatherpeople) whose rhetoric was always considerably more revolutionary than their acts and whose homemade bombs blew up in their faces.

But 1968 was also a year when an international youth movement might have linked. Not since 1848 had Europe been so united behind barricades; France, West Germany, Czechoslovakia (the 'Prague Spring'), and in Mexico at the 1968 Olympic Games and Chicago USA on our side of the world. Revolutionary politics are saturated with hoped-for might-have-beens: no connection was made other than sympathetic though often inflamed oratory.

In 1968 the war in Vietnam reached its most dramatic and painful peak, the winter Tet offensive by North Vietnamese armies and Viet Cong guerrillas, which included the long and bloody siege at Khe Sanh, reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu fourteen years earlier. 1968 was the moral low-water mark of the war: the devastation of the ancient imperial city of Hue and the slaughter of civilians by American soldiers at My Lai.

President Lyndon Johnson surrendered his presidency to the war in 1968 and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sacrificed his life organizing poor blacks and whites against the economic system that impoverished them. Robert Kennedy, brother of the assassinated president John Kennedy, campaigned for the presidency on a promise to end the war and provide justice to the poor, and was murdered moments after victory in the California primary in June. In August 1968 a peak was also reached in the antiwar movement at the violent spectacle of the Democratic Party's national convention in Chicago. The whole world was watching.

Although culturalists claim the 1960s got into swing around 1968, the theme of the decade was set at its start with the black civil rights movement. Not only did the violent and passionate search for racial justice inspire the later antiwar revolutionary New Left, earliest leaders of the movement were



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