

HIPPIES 'SUPER CHILDREN'

What Happens When Psychedelic Ball Ends?

BY DAVE FELTON

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San Francisco electric rock is not so much soul music as it is stomach.

There's something about 300 watts of amplified guitars, drums, harmonicas and organ that grabs your lower intestinal region and turns it into a private, pulsating baffle. How much you enjoy the concert may depend on how much you enjoyed your last meal.

Actually, it doesn't really matter whether you enjoy the music or not; it will have accomplished its purpose—to suck you in, to make you totally involved with what's happening.

This basically is what the hippie creative renaissance is all about, a sort of sensual extremism that runs through their music, their light shows, their costumes and psychedelical posters.

Renaissance headquarters is San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, the West Coast's music center for the bombarding arts. But the Haight-Ashbury influence—and this is important—can be observed at every teen-age gathering and on every teen-age radio station around the country.

"What we're trying to create is a total environment kind of thing. We're getting the kids aged 16 to 25," explained Bob Cohen, 29-year-old co-manager of the Family Dog, a hippie production agency at 630 Gough St.

He said the Family Dog's main job is sponsoring the wild, weekly weekend teen-age dances in San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom, fluorescent balls that regularly draw thousands of costumed youngsters from the bay area per night.

Looks Like Franklin

With his long, receding hair, Cohen is one of the few hippies in Ben Franklin glasses who actually looks something like Ben Franklin. He quit his electronic engineering job and joined show business after discovering the electricity of rock and roll.

"The groups we book all have the 'San Francisco sound,'" he said. "It has to be experienced in person. I've taped every single group that has appeared at the Avalon; they're strange tapes, they can only be played at full volume."

After joining the Family Dog, Cohen's first job was to build the entire Avalon sound system. "It's one of the best systems in the country. It cost \$4,000. It'll put out 126 decibels at 100 feet, and that's only for the voice."

Most groups use their own sound systems for the instruments, he explained, and if it weren't for the Avalon system, beautiful rock lyrics would be drowned out.

High Energy Groups

"We match the groups by energy levels," said Cohen. "We try to book two high energy groups and one low energy per show. Certain blues groups, say, are low energy groups. Then you get groups like the Grateful Dead or the Quicksilver Messenger Service—they're high energy. When they're on, you can't talk anywhere in the building."

Not that the youths do much talking anyway at the Avalon. Mostly it's a lot of dancing, a lot of staring, some rolling on the floor, some flaking out and occasionally a freak-out or two.

"We only have a few rules," Cohen said. "You can't wander in and out of the building. You can't take your clothes off—it would be nice if you could, but the police are against it. There is no physical violence and no narcotics."

"It doesn't matter," Cohen added.

"Everybody's high when they come in, some have trouble getting up the stairs.

"We've had a few acid freak-outs. See, there's these pillows and rugs in front of the bandstand where the kids can lie down if they don't want to dance. Well, when the dance is over at 2 a.m., some of the kids won't leave. We have to go around and wake 'em up.

Need Tranquillizers

"A few are so turned on we have to bring them down with tranquillizers. We have a doctor on hand at all times, and we always see that the kids get home or to a hospital."

One's first visit to the Avalon Ballroom can be an exhilarating or shattering experience, depending on how long one stays and his threshold of pain. The following description of what happened there two Saturdays ago may or may not be fully accurate; it was written without the benefit of drugs.

They start lining up an hour before the doors open. They are two kinds: the hippies, the freaks and flower children of the entire Bay Area, dressed in every fabric of their expanded imagination and decorated by all the beaded symbols of the world; and the frat boys, the conservatively coat-and-tied and clean faced youngsters who have come mainly to dance and see what's happening.

The dance floor itself is bathed in ultraviolet light which makes even the frat boys, in their bright white shirts and teeth, glow like zombie visions.

A giant projection screen hides three of the four walls. It is covered with blood; no wait, honey; no wait, oil and ink and alcohol, all the vibrating ingredients of a liquid light show, operated from an upstairs booth by six men with rotating glass dishes.

Everything Is Loose

Everything keeps time to the music, the lights, the slides, the abstract films, the dancers, even a mad black-light puppet show near the snack bar upstairs.

In one corner of the dance floor a stroboscopic flood light turns giggling hippies into spastic silent actors. They toss a balloon into the air and watch it jerk and act funny. The strobe attacks their peripheral vision, and soon the whole room darts from left to right to left. Nothing is fastened anymore.

In another area, kids play with fluorescent toys, a fluorescent ball and boat and rubber elephant. An electric orange go-cart whizzes by. Surrounded by dancers playing ring-around-a-rosy, someone in a sailor suit is drawing with fluorescent chalk. He applies chalk to the floor, then his hands, then his face and hair and finally over all his clothes and shoes.

Super Children at Play

This is not the Avalon; it is a fantastic, turned-on nursery of super children. In its own small way it is the Haight-Ashbury and the entire hippie world.

Which raises two questions: When is the dance going to end? And when and if it ends, who is going to wake up the kids and send them to their homes and to their hospitals?

Perhaps that is the wrong attitude. At the Avalon a dancer is dancing by himself. He is jumping and laughing and waving a fluorescent tambourine. When asked why he is dancing alone, the tambourine man shouts:

"I'm not. I'm dancing with everybody, I'm dancing with everybody. Think positive, man."

End of a series.