

Pop Talk: The Summer of Love rocks on

by *George_Varga*

Briana Gomez of La Mesa, Calif., and David Choy of Tijuana, Mexico were born 23 years after 1967's Summer of Love rocked San Francisco and - later - much of the nation and beyond.

SUMMER OF LOVE - David Choy, of Tijuana, Mexico, and Briana Gomez, of San Diego, both 17, regard the Summer of Love as a key cultural event. People think more freely as a result,' said Gomez. CNS Photo courtesy of Don Kohlbauer. But both 17-year-olds are familiar with that fabled summer 40 years ago, when scores of budding young hippies gathered to pursue a utopian dream of free sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, if not to try to change the world. And both feel the legacy, at least indirectly, of a now-graying generation that (seemingly en masse) accepted LSD guru Timothy Leary's invitation to "turn on, tune in and drop out."

"It was a time when people were expressing their creativity," said Choy, who will be a senior this fall at Cathedral Catholic High School in San Diego. "I don't think hippies were dirty people and 'druggies.' They were individuals who liked to express themselves and were more aware of their environment. A lot of rock bands now are influenced by that era."

Gomez, who graduated last month from Christian High School in El Cajon, Calif., and has enrolled at nearby Grossmont College, agreed.

"In music, you had people like Jimi Hendrix, who came out at that time and wanted to do something completely different," she said. "We studied the Summer of Love and the whole '60s counterculture movement in our U.S. history class. Young people look back on that time and think: 'We should be active now. They started a revolution back then! Why can't we?'"

For some who experienced it firsthand, such as Tijuana, Mexico-bred guitarist Carlos Santana, 60, the Summer of Love has yet to fade away, be it in music, fashion or social and political attitudes.

"It's still here. It never passed me by," said the mustachioed band leader, who moved from Tijuana to San Francisco in 1963.

"Was it really 40 years ago?" asked folk-music icon Joan Baez, 66. "It doesn't seem that long ago."

Others, including Santana's fellow Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee Stephen Stills, 62, have a different assessment.

"The Summer of Love makes me laugh. It's preposterous," sneered Stills, who in 1967 performed at the Monterey Pop Festival as a member of the band Buffalo Springfield. "If you're on acid or smoke a lot of pot, everything seems more important. I think that's (exactly) what we saw happen."

Regardless of these contradictory opinions, the 40th anniversary of the Summer of Love is being celebrated across the nation.

The Whitney Museum in New York is hosting "Summer of Love - Art of the Psychedelic Era," a multimedia retrospective. In California, Laguna Beach's Laguna Art Museum is offering "Heart and Torch: Rick Griffin's Transcendence," which chronicles the work of one of the key concert-poster artists of the San Francisco music scene in the mid-1960s.

For those who prefer to sample that heady era without traveling, there's the expanded, 40th-anniversary DVD edition of filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker's "Monterey Pop Festival" film documentary, while Time Life has just released "Summer of Love: The Hits of 1967." A two-CD, one-DVD collection, it should not be confused with the new 11-CD Time Life boxed set "Flower Power: Music of the Love Generation" (which strangely includes such post-flower-power English acts as Manfred Mann's Earth Band and Emerson, Lake & Palmer).

For a more visceral experience, there's "HIPPIEFEST: A Concert for Peace & Love," a North American concert tour that began July 25 at Toronto's Molson Amphitheater and concludes Aug. 21 at Humphrey's in San Diego. The lineup for the tour varies from city to city but will include most of the following acts at each stop: The Turtles, featuring Flo & Eddie; Felix Cavaliere's Rascals; The Zombies, featuring Rod Argent and Colin Blunstone; Mountain, featuring Leslie West and Crocky laing; Mitch Ryder; Badfinger, featuring Joey Molland; Iron Butterfly; Melanie; former Moody Blues mainstay Denny Laine; and Country Joe McDonald, sans his long-dormant band, The Fish.

Also in San Diego, from Sept. 6-9 the Birch North Park Theatre will stage the world premiere of "Love In: A Musical Celebration of 1967." To be narrated by Tony award-winning actor Ben Vereen, it will feature performances by Jesse Colin Young, Peter & Gordon, Buddy Miles, Strawberry Alarm Clock, Vanilla Fudge guitarist Vince Martell, Rockola, Earl Thomas, Eric Johnson and - in a tribute to original Monterey Pop artist Ravi Shankar - sitar player (and University of California San Diego music professor) Kartik Seshardi.

"San Diego did have love-ins at Balboa Park in the late '60s," said veteran music critic John D'Agostino. "But there was no hub here to foster a scene, so musicians like Moby Grape's Bob Mosley, The Byrds' Chris Hillman and the band Iron Butterfly all left for Los Angeles or San Francisco."

Based in Los Angeles, The Turtles straddled the worlds of pop music and flower-power better than most, but never quite fit in with either.

"Was I a hippie back then during the Summer of Love? Probably," said Turtles singer Mark "Flo" Volman, 60, from his home in Nashville, Tenn.

"I think anybody who wore tie-dye shirts, had long hair and smoked a big spliff of Maui Wowie would probably fit into that categorization. But when we made music, we didn't say: 'Wow, we're making music to be part of the "Summer of Love!"'

It was a time for record companies and the media to capitalize on a generation looking for new music and alternative lifestyles. New words came into play - like 'organic' and 'holistic' - which allowed people to charge more money for things.

"Mainly, the '60s was the generation of drugs. And with the war in Vietnam and the political situation, the music became more harsh. The Summer of Love became the 'Summer of Discontent' for a lot of people."

Not so, countered ex-Fish leader McDonald and former Youngbloods leader Young. McDonald became a counterculture rock star with "The Fish Cheer & I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-To-Die Rag," a satirical anti-war song that became a hippie anthem after he and his band performed it at the 1969 Woodstock festival in upstate New York.

"I valued everything the media portrayed the Summer of Love as being," said McDonald, 65, a U.S. Navy veteran, speaking from his San Francisco Bay area home.

"Everything the media portrayed about it is probably true and is hated by the fundamentalist conservatives now, including Bush and his administration. So not much has changed. The 'peace-and-love' generation will continue to be popular for decades, because there is no other alternative."

Young, 62, also recalls the Summer of Love fondly.

"Everything changed. San Francisco was vibrating with life in a way I'd never seen before. We all thought the world had changed forever."

And now?

"I've been going through feeling a great sense of disillusionment with the loss of intensity of the dream many of us had back then," replied Young, who in 1969 sang "Get Together," his band's biggest hit.

"The Youngbloods played a lot of gigs for the college generation of the late '60s. When those people came out of school and had to deal with the reality of making a living in the early '70s, that's when the intensity dissipated. Now it's more like: 'We are the performers, you are the audience; we perform and you clap.' But it was different back then."

Echoing The Turtles' Volman, Young contends that "the hippie movement was destroyed by drugs." However, Anthony Adams, the San Diego-based director of "Love In: A Musical Celebration of 1967," believes that drugs initially provided an essential conduit in the Summer of Love and beyond.

"We address drugs in 'Love In' as one of the methods for mind-expansion that youth looked into," said Adams, 55. "The spiritual search back then entailed everything from meditation and Zen Buddhism to psychedelic drugs, which people used 5,000 years ago in India for enlightenment and has also been used by shamans in South America. The hippies really tapped into these methods."

Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin, who both performed at Monterey Pop in 1967, are among the rock greats from that era who died drug-related deaths. Others, such as the still-active David Crosby, came close to death more than once.

"The drug use was lamentable and it killed a lot of people. But if you're honest, it also opened up a lot of minds that were closed," said Robert Cancel, 56, an associate professor of African and comparative literature at University of California San Diego, where he teaches a pop culture course that focuses on the 1960s.

"What happens when you mature is the simple answers become more complicated. The best part of the Summer of Love, which I think has carried over in various ways to today, was the challenge to the status quo and the notion there were other ways to live your life.

"I love the music, still, but watching old folks jumping around trying to be young is not a lot of fun. With something like 'HIPPIEFEST,' it's basically the '60s without the edge. And the '60s were the edge."

Pop Talk: The Summer of Love rocks on by George_Varga