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NEWS

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BY FRANK  
MASTROPOLO

## 50 Years Ago: The Summer of Love Brings Pot, Protests and Psychedelic Rock to the East Village

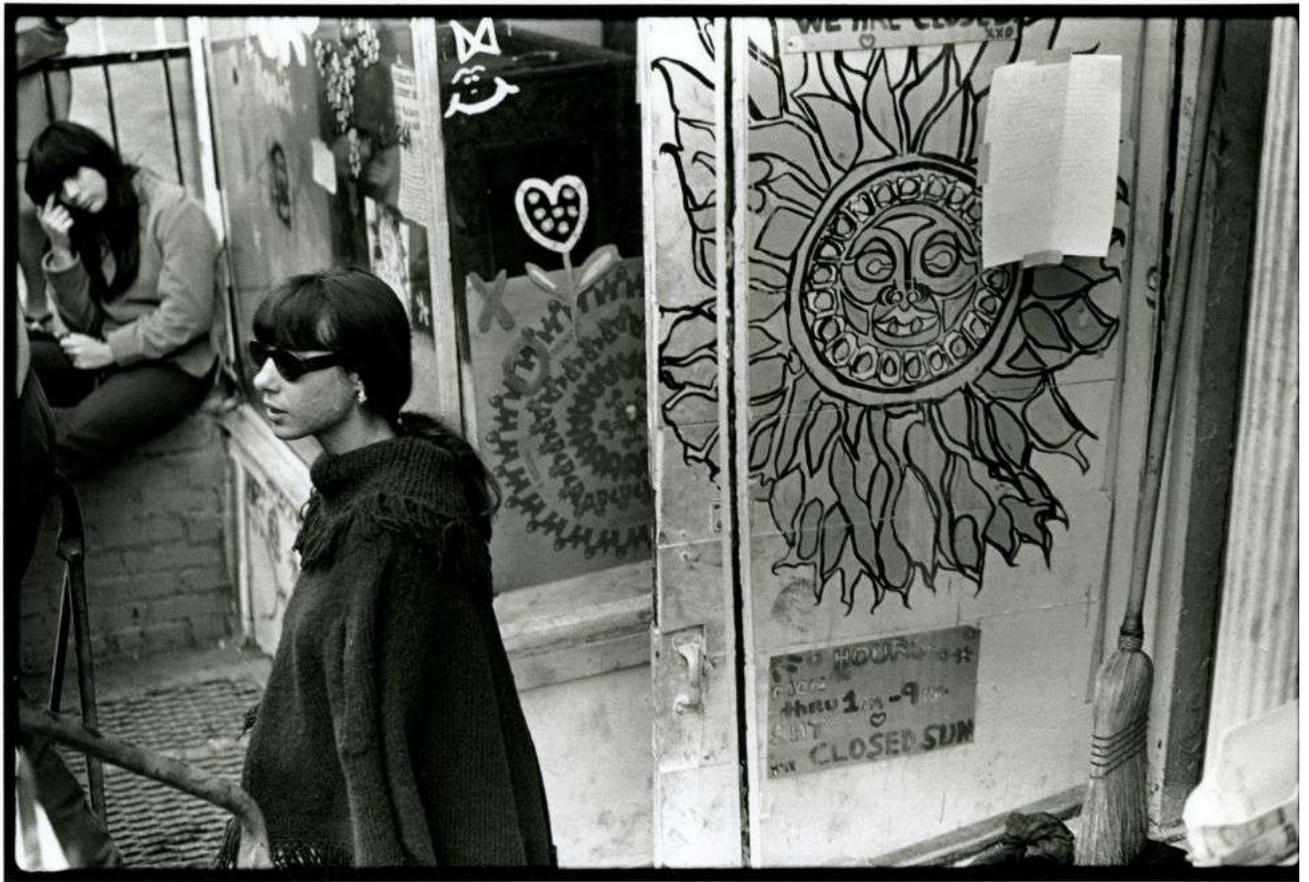


*Tompkins Square Park  
(Photo: James Jowers)*

“As the hour grew late and working people around Tompkins Square Park began turning out the lights on Memorial Day 1967, police asked several hundred music lovers to turn down the volume of a guitar-and-bongo concert in the park,” reported the *New York Daily News*. “The crowd’s reply ... was a barrage of bottles, bricks and fists that left seven officers injured.

“And thus began the Summer of Love.”

“Suddenly all these freaky people who were hidden away from the world manifested,” remembers Bob Fass of WBAI Radio. “It was as though there can’t be two people like that and then suddenly there were 2,000 people.”



*St. Marks Place (Photo: James Jowers)*

April brought an early sign of the change to come. Fass and Emmett Grogan of the Diggers, a community-action group founded in San Francisco, helped organize a Sweep-In. An army of volunteers descended on Third Street with mops and brooms to do what the Department of Sanitation would not.

“There was very desultory picking-up of garbage on the Lower East Side,” says Fass. “It had been going on all winter practically. There was garbage and there was snow. Naturally the uptown streets, like Park Avenue, got cleaned up much sooner than the Lower East Side. There was a wrecked Porsche on the corner of the Bowery near the entrance to the Bridge and it was there for months, for some reason, full of leaves. People would use it as an enormous garbage bin. It had been going on for a long, long time.”

Next stop, a movie theater turned concert hall on Second Avenue that had hosted counterculture heroes Lenny Bruce, Timothy Leary and [Allen Ginsberg](#).



*St. Marks Place  
(Photo: James Jowers)*

“After the Sweep-In, we went to the Village Theater and had what we called the Bust Trust, which was money raised specifically to bail people out who were arrested for psychedelics. Wavy Gravy was part of it. It was a great party with free admission to the theater. Then the members of the Lower East Side began to think of it as ‘our theater.’

“That was what the Summer of Love was really about. We’re all one. Be what you are, fuck authority.”

“Summer of love, my ass. At least not in the East Village of New York City,” maintains author Larry “Ratso” Sloman. “That shit was for San Francisco. And thanks to Scott McKenzie they were all wearing flowers in their hair! The New York scene was harder and grittier.



*Larry “Ratso” Sloman*

“I was living with my parents, going to Queens College when I got turned on to Bob Dylan and the Fugs. Bye bye, MBA. Bye bye, law school. I grew my hair long, started wearing ironic vintage army jackets and stenciled THE FUGS on my favorite white sweatshirt. And I began taking the subway to the East Village to the enormous consternation of my parents.

“Since I had worked on an upstart alternative newspaper at Queens College, I gravitated to the offices of the *East Village Other* (EVO) where a ragtag bunch of anarchists were putting out a biweekly paper that *The New York Times* described as ‘a newspaper so countercultural that it made the *Village Voice* look like a church circular.’

“There was electricity humming through the offices of EVO, which were then on the second floor of the building that housed the Village Theater. It was the same electricity that coursed through the squalid streets of Alphabet City where the migrant hippies were trying to assimilate alongside the earlier Ukrainian and Puerto Rican immigrants. Walking down Second Avenue there was a feeling that everything was possible, we could beat this war, we can create a true counterculture, we can legalize drugs and, in the meantime, we could get a kickass chocolate egg cream at Gem Spa.”



*John Eskow with Bryn Meehan.*

Writer John Eskow says activists like Abbie Hoffman viewed the East Village as a base for political organization. Eskow met Hoffman at the Avenue A home of Martin Carey, a psychedelic poster artist. “When I first met and started hanging out with Abbie in that early part of the summer of ‘67, he had short hair,” says Eskow. “I’ll never forget the first time we hung out on the Lower East Side, we’re walking around and looking at all the hippies. Abbie was furious with the hippies. I remember he said the Jefferson Airplane just did a radio commercial for Levis jeans. ‘Don’t they know that their brothers and sisters in North Carolina are on strike against Levis? This is hippie capitalism. This is all a shuck and was all bullshit.’

“I came back three weeks later and it seemed like Abbie had suddenly sprung an Afro overnight. And was tripping out of his mind on acid. And had completely gone over to the other side in the sense that he saw in that hippie community of the Lower East Side a fertile field for social change.”

That summer Hoffman staged impromptu events that temporarily made St. Marks Place a pedestrian mall. As a band played from a flatbed truck, Hoffman and his followers stopped traffic and pretended to plant a tree in the middle of the block. “It was as though people were obeying a directive to have unenlightened fun,” says Fass. “To show that the government couldn’t do things as well as people can.”



*St. Marks Place (Photo: James Jowers)*

Inspired by a Dutch anarchist group, activists A.J. Weberman and **Dana Beal** founded the New York Provos. When underground newspaper *The East Village Other* moved, the Provos took over its former office on Avenue A.

“We put a big sign in the window that said ‘Psychedelic Revolution,’” says Weberman. “I remember going out, selling this magazine we had, *New York Provo* magazine, and talking to 100, 200 different people a day on the street, wherever I’d meet them, trying to get them to come to our demonstrations.



*A.J. Weberman with Martha Mitchell (Photo courtesy of A.J. Weberman)*

“And we began to organize. Every time there was a pot bust, we’d march through the streets to protest them busting people for marijuana. The people in the neighborhood were very receptive, they threw flowers at us – along with the flowerpots. We started a bail fund and went down to 100

Centre and bailed out a number of people who couldn't make bail for pot."

In June 1967, Beal staged the first of a series of Smoke-Ins in Tompkins Square Park. "We had the first Smoke-In in the entire world there," says Weberman, who left the U.S. that year. "We smoked pot openly to show people that it didn't turn you into a raving maniac. Back then the pot was so weak it hardly did anything."



*Tompkins Square Park (Photo: James Jowers)*

"There was already a tremendous amount of conflict and stress between what were seen as the invaders, this invading squadron of freaks in this largely Polish-American community," says Eskow. "There was a tremendous amount of tension between the Polish shopkeepers and restaurateurs and bar owners and these outsiders who suddenly appeared, seemingly by the thousands, in their world."

But Hoffman refused to back down to anyone. "His style was incredibly confrontational," says Eskow. "I remember very vividly walking down the street with Abbie, tripping on LSD, and two very tough-looking black guys on the corner just staring at us with contempt as we walked towards them."

"And one of the guys said to Abbie, 'Hey man, when are you going to take a bath?' And Abbie said, 'Whenever I feel like it, Whitey.' Which was a staggering thing to hear in the moment and these guys just froze with looks of abject hatred on their faces for a moment and then burst out laughing and slapped Abbie five. Ten minutes later we were all smoking a joint together. That was Abbie at his finest."



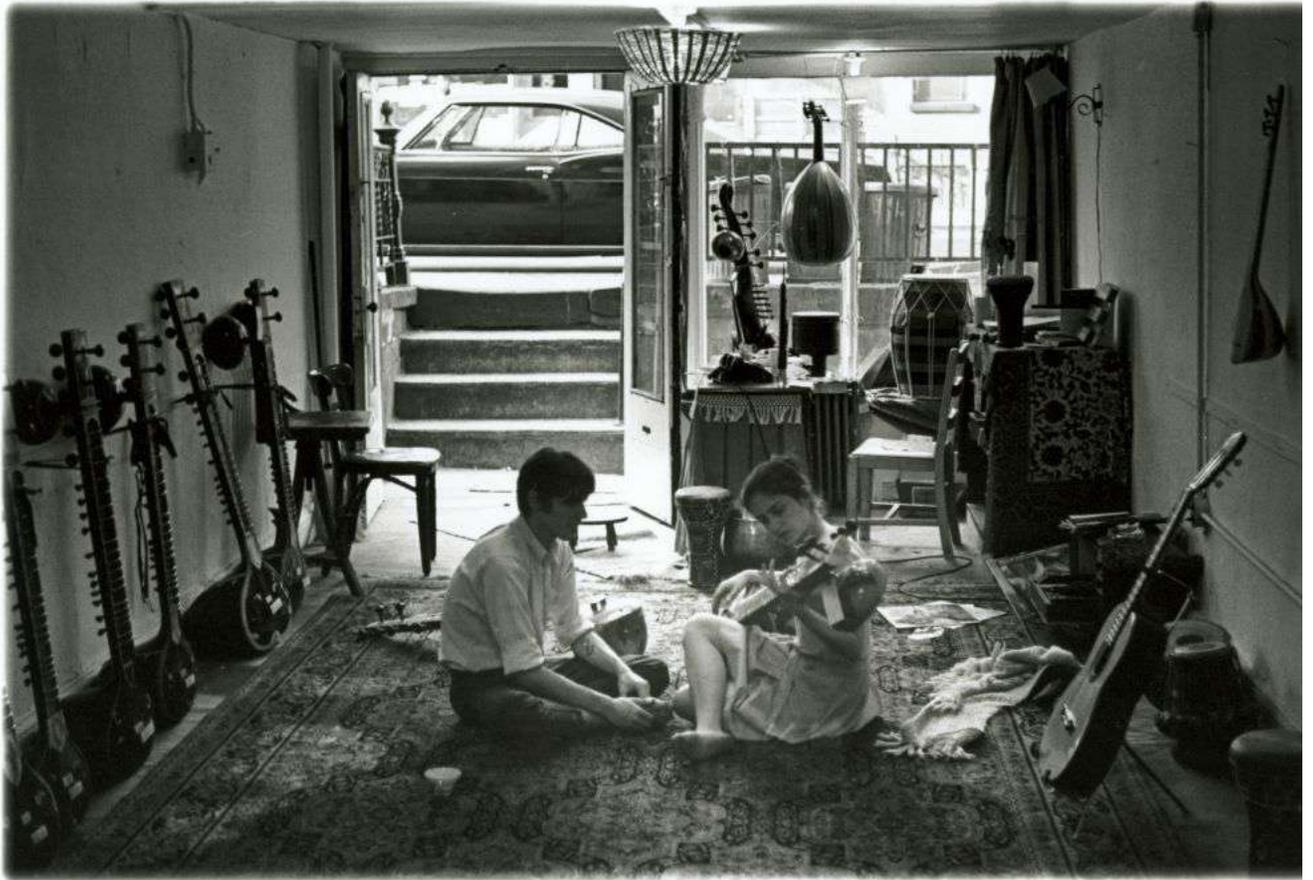
*Joey Skaggs crossing the Bowery (Photo: Joey Skaggs Archive)*

“It was just a place I could afford,” says artist Joey Skaggs. “It was difficult and dangerous. It was starting to be filled in with other artists.

“I remember being an intense, angry young man in an intense, angry environment and the love thing was kind of bullshit or just a way to get laid. It was a lot of bridge and tunnel people coming in being weekend hippies. There were real characters and if you lived there, you knew who they were, you knew who was doing what. It was a smaller intense community.

“I loved the intensity of it as a young artist. There were so many avenues to explore if you were of a different mind frame than the kids who lived outside of the city. We were a different tribe. And it was a varied tribe, of course, but it was always exciting.”

Rock music provided the soundtrack. “We had the Velvet Underground, who had a **residency at the Dom** on St. Marks Place, where they sledgehammered their audience with a wall of sound fueled by amphetamine and lurid descriptions of sado-masochistic sex and a bittersweet ode to heroin,” says Sloman. “But the house band of the East Village was **the Fugs**, a beatnik band whose lurid paeans to sex and drugs and steadfast opposition to the war in Vietnam had galvanized many impressionable young minds in the tristate area. I was one of them.”



St. Marks Place  
(Photo: James Jowers)

“My most vivid memory of the Summer of Love in New York involves *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*,” says journalist Richard Goldstein. “I was the first critic to review it in *The New York Times*, and I gave it a pan. It sounded pretentious and overly hip to me. The paper was inundated with angry mail, and, of course, being a young critic, I had to stick to my guns. But about a month later I was doing my usual maraud through the East Village when I noticed that songs from the album were emanating from every open window.

“Since each listener was broadcasting a different part of the album, there was a cacophony of Beatle sounds. And I concluded two things: First, the album sounded distinctive even in this disjointed form. And second, it was more than just a collection of songs; it was an instrument of unity among a generation of Americans, an apotheosis of the hippie sensibility in music and philosophy.

“This should have called my judgment into question, but it didn’t. It took me much longer to realize that *Sgt. Pepper* was something truly new – neither high nor low culture, but a remarkable amalgam. It was the East Village that communicated this complexity to me. If only I had listened sooner than I did.”

Guitarist Larry Packer of Cat Mother & the All Night Newsboys, who had a hit in 1969 with “Good Old Rock ‘n’ Roll,” was among musicians drawn to the neighborhood.



*Cat Mother & the All Night Newsboys. L to R: Roy Michaels, Michael Equine, Larry Packer, Bob Smith, Charlie Chin crossing First Avenue at 10th Street. (Photo: Polydor Records)*

“When I joined the band the drummer, Michael Equine, was living at 7 Bleecker Street, next to the Pablo Light Show people, and that’s where we rehearsed. It was just in from CBGBs and almost across from the men’s shelter with the statue of Jesus on the roof. People would occasionally call the police ‘cause they didn’t know it was a statue of Jesus and say, ‘Somebody’s gonna jump off the roof!’



“I moved to Fifth Street, between Avenues C and D. I used to walk from there to 7 Bleecker Street with a J-200 Jumbo Gibson guitar case and a fiddle case under my arm. I only got ripped off once, and they didn’t take my instruments. It was right across the street from where I lived. I had so little money that the guy started laughing at me, started making fun of me. When I walked by him after that he’d just go, ‘Get out of here man, you’re of no use’ [laughs].”

The Village Theater, which became the **Fillmore East** a year later, was the largest music venue in the neighborhood. That summer the theater presented the psychedelic rock of the Byrds, Cream, the Yardbirds and Vanilla Fudge.

“It was the biggest thing to play in New York,” recalls Vanilla Fudge guitarist Vinny Martell. “It was tremendous, both times that we played there. In fact, when we did the July gig with the Byrds and the Seeds, we were Vanilla Fudge but right before that we had changed our name from the Pigeons. So if we hadn’t changed our name it would have been the Pigeons, the Byrds and the Seeds [laughs].



Vanilla Fudge. L to R: Carmine Appice, Vinny Martell, Mark Stein, Tim Bogert  
(Photo: Atco Records)

“We were like gaga over playing it,” says Vanilla Fudge drummer Carmine Appice. “Because it was a theater. Up until then we were playing the Action House on Long Island. We started getting our following in Newport, R.I., so we would play a 500-seat place there. But this was a *theater*, 2,500 people. Much bigger than any place we’d ever played.”

“We used to buy clothes down there,” says Martell. “We were smokin’ some pot at the time and there was a truck that was parked at St. Marks Place and Second Avenue that was dealin’ a lot of stuff out of there. Later I got to know the people. One of them, Brother Frank Minucci, became a minister some time after that but in those days that’s what was going on.”

Appice had performed in the neighborhood years before at a bar frequented by mobsters and gamblers. “I played a place there before Vanilla Fudge called Fox’s Corner. It was a little dump on the corner of Second Avenue and Seventh Street. I played there with one of my bands, just played there on the weekends, Friday, Saturday, maybe Sunday. Met some crazy chicks down there at that time. It was pretty nuts.”

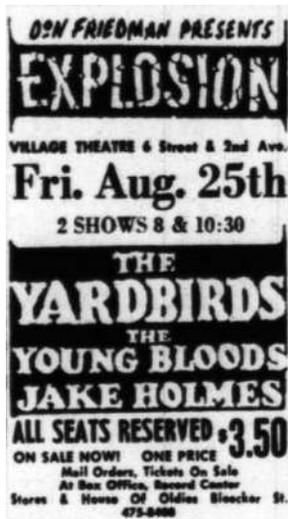


*The Yardbirds. L to R: Jim McCarty, Chris Dreja, Jimmy Page, Keith Relf. (Photo: The Yardbirds)*

On Aug. 25, the Yardbirds shared the bill at the Village Theater with singer-songwriter Jake Holmes, who performed his bluesy “Dazed and Confused.” Holmes had released the song in June on his debut LP, *“The Above Ground Sound”* of Jake Holmes.

“I remember this show – with Jake – and went backstage to see his show,” recalls Yardbirds drummer Jim McCarty. “It was basically very folksy, but out of the blue he played this song with a descending haunting riff. I liked it, and thought it would suit our group. Next day I went to a record shop, Bleecker Bob’s, and bought the album. We worked out our version of the song I’d heard!”

“Dazed and Confused” became part of the Yardbirds’ live performances. When Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page left the band in 1968 to form Led Zeppelin, he took “Dazed and Confused” with him. The song was featured on Zeppelin’s debut album with Page claiming the sole writer’s credit. A lawsuit ensued; a 2012 live version now attributes the song to “Page; inspired by Jake Holmes.”



“Hanging outside the Village Theater one night,” remembers Sloman, “I saw the then little-known Tiny Tim take his ukulele out of his tattered shopping bag and serenade an old Jewish couple who had just eaten at Ratner’s next door. This was a song that was written by the late, great Russ Columbo in 1935’ and he began crooning ‘Prisoner of Love.’

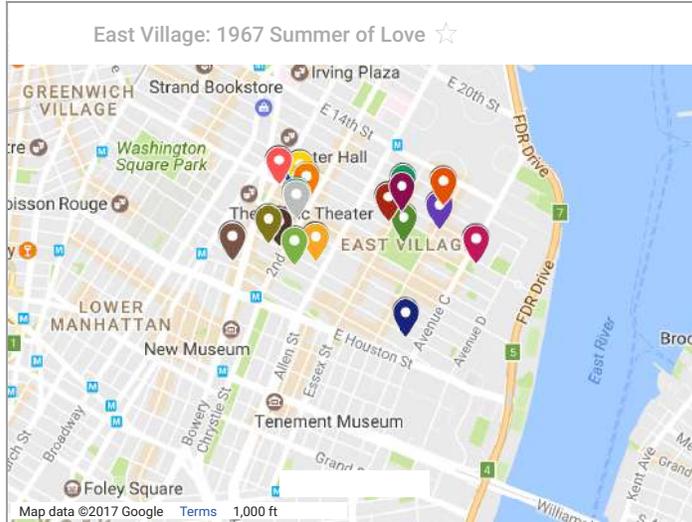
“And a few weeks later, in September of 1967, I was kibbitzing with the ticket taker at the entrance to the theater when a thin wiry-haired dude

wearing sunglasses, an op-art shirt and Carnaby Street boots walked up. He looked nervous. He said something to the ticket taker, who motioned me over. 'Hey Larry, escort this gentlemen to the dressing room. He's playing tonight.' I was a good soldier, navigating him past the early concertgoers and down the aisle that led to the backstage area. We chatted along the way and he told me he was from the U.K. And the name of his band was Cream. We got to the stage door. 'Hey, what's your name?' I asked. 'Eric,' he said, and we shook hands. 'Don't be nervous,' I smiled. 'You're gonna do fine.' He did."

By summer's end, Smoke-Ins had given way to hard drugs and soured the neighborhood's good vibe. "It was really the introduction of speed more than anything else that doomed that whole community," says Eskow. "Speed and heroin to a lesser extent. Once the powders came into it the bloom was off the rose."

"The Summer of Love officially ended on October 8th when a janitor stumbled upon the bodies of James 'Groovy' Hutchinson, 21, a hippie leader and Linda Fitzpatrick, 18, an upper class escapee from Greenwich, Connecticut, whose dream was to be a psychedelic painter," says Sloman. "Looking to score LSD in Tompkins Square Park, they had been lured to an Avenue B apartment where they had been dosed with acid and Linda had been sexually assaulted before she and Groovy were bludgeoned to death with a brick."

"Already at this time your heart was being broken because even though the hippie thing was in its glorious first flowering, it didn't take the killing of Groovy and Linda Fitzpatrick to make you aware of the vast number of lost children that were filtering into the East Village," says Eskow. "For every enlightened, turned-on, hyperaware, politically active hippie there was a fucked-up, sad, hope-to-die speed freak."



TAGS: [1967](#), [ABBIE HOFFMAN](#), [ALLEN GINSBERG](#), [BEATS](#), [BOB DYLAN](#), [CREAM](#), [DANA BEAL](#), [EAST VILLAGE](#), [EAST VILLAGE OTHER](#), [ERIC CLAPTON](#), [FILLMORE EAST](#), [HIPPIES](#), [LARRY RATSLO SLAMAN](#), [LENNY BRUCE](#), [LOWER EAST SIDE](#), [NEW YORK CITY](#), [NYC](#), [SAN FRANCISCO](#), [ST. MARKS PLACE](#), [SUMMER OF LOVE](#), [THE BEATLES](#), [THE FUGS](#), [THE PROVOS](#), [THE YARDBIRDS](#), [TIMOTHY LEARY](#), [WAVY GRAVY](#)

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