

Detroit Love-in

Sheil Salasnek

1967

Two thousand people had a love-in on Belle Isle.

Unfortunately 8,000 people were present. Whatever happened on the island that night, it shouldn't be allowed to overshadow the 6 or 7 hours of dancing, singing and sharing that preceded it.

The hippies came out in force to celebrate their love. They wore their most colorful clothing and brought things to give away to their brothers.

Describing the event becomes absurd. It is impossible to do justice to it because so many things were going on at once.

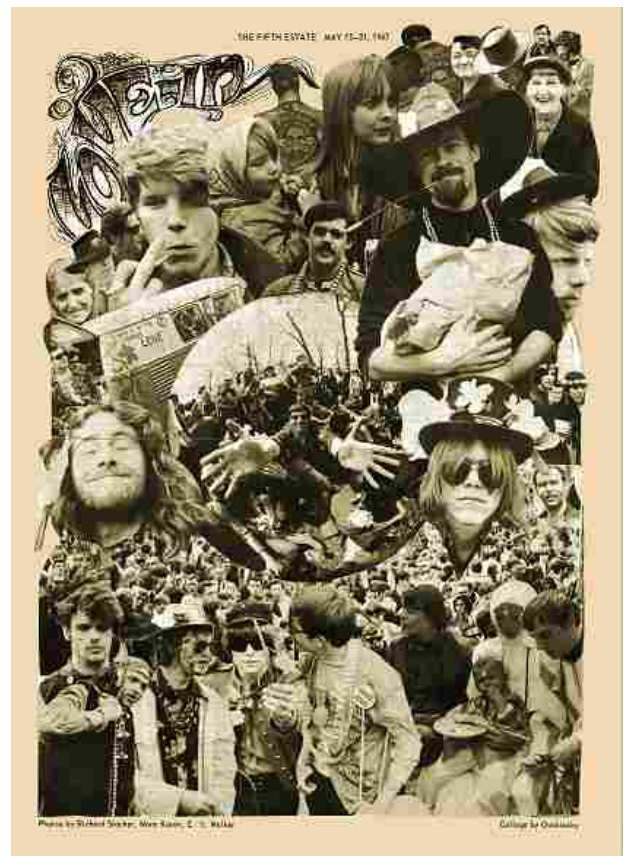
If you approached the bridge anytime after 11 o'clock you would have noticed that most of the cars were filled with bearded long-haired young people who, for this one special day had left their everyday costumes at home and came dressed as they felt. Everyone was smiling and waving at the other cars around them. After 1 o'clock traffic was backed up for miles and it took an hour to drive across the bridge.

The first impression as you got out of the car is that there is a large crowd over by the bandstand. Families on picnics are spread out all over the grounds and they look up curiously as you walk by in your long robes. Where are the hippies?

You kept walking toward the bandstand and from a distance you hear someone pounding a rhythm on a drum. Looking around you spot a few other figures dressed in colors and carrying balloons heading toward the bandstand.

Most of the people look very straight and you have to look very hard to find somebody smiling. What's going on here? Where are all the smiles and the lovers? You reach the outskirts of the few thousand people and start looking for a crowd you can feel comfortable with.

Walking through the staring crew-cuts and tribes of motorcyclists you begin to feel a little awkward. The robe hangs a little heavy now and the "LOVE" balloon looks kind of absurd.



Photos by Richard Stoker, Norm Koren, C.T. Walker.
Collage by Harvey Ovshinsky

You push your way on through the beer drinkers toward the bandstand hoping to find some smiling faces.

Then you notice some sticks with colored ribbons flowing in the breeze and you head in that direction. As you move into the center the whole atmosphere changes. Smiling strangers are now offering to share with you whatever they have.

People are hanging brightly colored beads on sticks and Psychedelic Rangers are vibrating with widely dilated pupils. Here, inside the shifting masses of curiosity seekers, sit 2,000 hippies at one huge picnic.

Outside there are thousands of people in flowing groups moving constantly from one place to another trying to find out where something is happening. Inside 2,000 people are feeding one another.

The feeling is now one of joy. It is a love-in! It worked! I never thought there were this many hippies around. Where did they all come from?

People you haven't seen in years come to break bread with you. Two young people who came all the way from Toronto for this smile in ecstatic disbelief.

A stranger hands you a painted Easter egg and waits to share it with you. Someone else sets up cases of oranges and tomatoes and offers them to everyone passing by.

A woman in a pure white nun's habit with a diffraction grid on her forehead is handing out slices of kosher salami and a grey-haired old man is passing out balloons. Their eyes meet and they stop to smile at one another.

A stranger walks by and looks in your eyes telling you you're beautiful. Something hits you from behind and you turn around annoyed only to find that someone had thrown a carnation at you.

One long-haired man sits and chants the Hare Krishna mantra with such intensity that he ends up with 200 people chanting with him. The juiceheads stare with disbelief at the maniacal zealots rocking in time to the sacred words.

Two young girls are picking dandelions and placing them under the windshield wiper of the WXYZ station wagon while the occupants of the car are out asking the hippies what their movement is all about and whether there is any social significance to love-ins.

The newsmen are out in force. Love-ins are hot copy now and their readers are anxious to find out what's going on. Most of them are smiling condescendingly and asking the same silly questions they have asked a hundred times before.

A few of the younger newsmen are smiling because they like what they see and feel. They understand when we decline to give our names and seem to appreciate that rather than a day for individuals this is a tribal celebration.

One girl taps me on the shoulder and hands me a card that reads simply "love." Another takes my hand and presses a blue capsule into it. Gumdrops and jelly beans are offered with smiles and children are running everywhere.

What a beautiful day. Bands playing and people dancing. Hippies rolling on the ground choosing to ignore the few hostile remarks coming from observers.

The motorcycle tribes are squirting their brothers with beer and even they are smiling and will enjoy themselves for most of the day. The relationship is tenuous, but for most of the day the motorcyclists and the hippies each will do their thing without bothering anyone else.

Colorful streamers are hung from the highest points and a paper dragon is placed on top of the bandstand. A line of several hundred people with hands joined weaves in and out of the crowd chanting "feed your head."

Banana heads are everywhere and the famous "Chiquita" sticker is seen all over the island. Banana joints are passed around and smoked freely as observers try to adjust themselves to a new legal high.

For anyone who wants to join in the love-in is real.

It is a day for smiling, giving and receiving. A few will come out of the crowd and change from observers to participants. Many will spend the day, staring and drinking. These are the ones who will leave without seeing or feeling.

There is magic in the center of this crowd and it is vibrating to the electrified instruments and the tambourines and drums.

It is splashing over the painted faces and bare feet. It makes itself felt in a stranger's hand reaching out to touch you or in a small dog begging for food.

The magic is real and undeniable, but it is surrounded by misunderstanding and hostility which is holding it back. Up to 4:30 this afternoon the only police visible will be those that are directing traffic, but then they will begin to make their appearance.

I stopped long enough to pick up 15 or 20 beer cans and throw them in the garbage on my way out. I left Belle Isle at 5 o' clock and it was a beautiful day.

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