

Detroit 1967 Rebellion

Excerpts from FE's Coverage of the Detroit 1967 Rebellion from the August 1, 1967 issue

Fifth Estate Collective

1997

The July, 1967 Detroit rebellion left 42 dead, hundreds of millions of dollars in damages and scars still unhealed today. The *Fifth Estate* office was in a hard-hit area: the August 1, 1967 issue featured first-hand accounts from staff members who went directly into the fray while half the city was still in flames.

“Get The Big Stuff”

by Peter Werbe
from the August 1, 1967 *Fifth Estate*

“The chickens are coming home to roost.”
—Malcolm X, November 22, 1963

Malcolm was right, of course, and the chickens have come home so many ways since that grim day four years ago. Vietnam, Malcolm's own death, riots across the country and now the biggest chicken of them all—the Detroit riot. Detroit always does things up in a big way.

The Warren Forest area near Wayne University was relatively untouched by the holocaust. The Fifth Estate office at Warren and John Lodge was unharmed as were the adjacent offices of the Artists' Workshop, Trans-Love Energies, and the Detroit Committee to End the War in Vietnam.

Our newspaper office sported a “Soul brother” sign and two large banners were hung from Trans Love reading, “Peace on Earth” and “Burn, Baby, Burn.”

(*FE note:* The sign we put up on our office worked for us with neighborhood people, but not with the National Guard who lobbed a tear gas grenade through our window making the premises unusable for days.)

Hippie and political residents of the Warren Forest area reacted to the situation just like their poorer neighbors—they took whatever wasn't nailed down.

They joined Negroes and southern whites in cleaning out the stores on Trumbull and Forest, which now lie in ashes, the Kroger's on Second and Prentis and other stores. Looters came back laden with goodies, swapping stories of harrowing experiences with the guardsmen and bartering goods that they had in excess. The mayor was right about the “carnival-like atmosphere.” Everything was free.

Kae Halonen, a resident of W. Hancock, described a scene of integrated looting. “There was complete cooperation between the races in their common endeavor,” she said. “There were children carrying toys they never would have been able to afford.”

Detroit's Communications Company, which distributes leaflets in the area, put out a broadside that advertised “Detroit's Summer Plunder Festival,” and advised residents to “Get the Big Stuff” and “Loot—it's the American Way. “One hippie unlocked an abandoned gas station and was pumping free gasoline to anyone who came along.

When asked if looting wasn't contrary to the hippie philosophy of love, John Sinclair, head of Trans—Love and Fifth Estate staffer replied, "We told the merchants before the riot they should give everything away, but they wouldn't listen.

"It's a little out of hand, but it's beautiful," said one hippie. "It looks like Rome burning," said another as he observed the city in flames from a roof top.

H. Rap Brown, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, who was arrested July 26 for inciting to riot, said, "We (Negroes) built this country and we're going to burn it down."

And it looks like they will if Detroit is an example.

As I write the toll is 38 dead (*FE note*: the final toll was 42 fatalities, almost all at the hands of the cops and troops); injuries in the thousands; 1,500 fires; almost 2,000 looted stores; 15,000 troops in the city; over 3,100 arrests; and about a billion dollars in property damage.

That's a hell of a chicken.

"Sing it, shout it, scream it down—the news is out, people, you own the town."

by John Sinclair

from the August 1, 1967 *Fifth Estate*

You know that it would be untrue / You know that I would be a liar / If I was to say to you / "Girl, we can't get much higher" / Come on baby light my fire / Come on baby light my fire / Gonna set the night on / FI-YUR.

"Light My Fire"—The Doors

"Light My Fire" rises through the radio ranks for weeks and, when it hits number one on the stations, the people respond and burn the city down. Or play Archie Shepp's *Fire Music* album as background music for the Detroit purification: the scope and feeling of the people's mood is there; an elegy for Malcolm X.

The television people are scared and stand frowning in doorways, sit clenching their teeth in front of their sets, as the news makes its way through the burning city—the police can't hold them, the state police can't hold them, the Michigan National Guard can't hold them; "Bring in the Federal Troops, we gotta stop them crazy niggers before they tear the whole city apart and carry it back to their living rooms piece by piece."

Soldiers in battle green and tommyguns hold down the banks and furniture stores where there's still furniture, gun shops, troops massed at the Woodward Hudson's entrances to keep the plastic castle safe from lawless, pillaging, looting criminals the governor and the President of the United States call them on TV, and still the fires burn, the stores fall, the people set the night on fire.

No, baby, it's not a "race riot," or anything as simple as that. People just got tired of being hassled by police and cheated by businessmen and got out their equalizers and went to town. The mode of the music changed and the walls of the city shook and fell. Yes, they did. Oh, it was Robin Hood Day in merry olde Detroit, the first annual city-wide all-free fire sale, and the people without got their hands on the goodies.

Whole families climbed through A&P windows and picked the stores clean, carting home the groceries they'd been paying their lives for all these years. Free furniture and color TVs, guitars and leather coats, shoes and clothes and liquor. And when their energies turned from smashing the stores they would go for the police, and not, you'll notice, their neighbors. The dirty, rotten hated police who came to bring a "law and order" made for the owners and bosses and bigshots to protect their precious property. Just now someone tells me, "If there was-any hatred, it came from the cops—the people weren't hostile at all."

The people just wanted what was theirs all along. They'd been waiting long enough, and it was time now to do it. On a lovely hot Sunday morning they saw the hated police dragging off 80 people from a blind pig, and they'd had enough. This country is built on a powderkeg of plunder and greed, and the fuse burned down, that's all. The people watched the Man's TV and knew it was a lie—THEY didn't live like-that, and there was no way in hell the

Man could make them believe his lies any more. Their frustration and desperation mounted until they couldn't get no higher, they were invisible now, got no secrets to conceal.

When you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose. A white boy said that. And the stores came down.

The jails are full—the City, the County, the House of Correction, those arraigned were taken to Jackson Prison to be held for trial, those who just came in were held in empty DSR buses until the jails had room for them. The system was breaking down. The President got up on TV with R. Strange MacNamara weeping over his shoulder and whined for “law and order.” Riots broke out in other cities all over the country. The television programs began to look stupider and less human than usual next to the reality news reports every hour. The reality news had stars and extras the folks back home had never been allowed to see. And these new stars were all “criminals,” thousands of them sat rotting in jail until they were allowed their “day in court.”

The people ruled the city for a minute, and may still be ruling when this is printed. The hypocrisy of “democratic capitalism” stood exposed, naked and ugly. The troops protected the owners' possessions and shot the people down in the streets for money. Sing it, shout it, scream it down—the news is out, people, you own the town.

Riot Eyewitness

by Bob Serling

from the August 1, 1967 *Fifth Estate*

There was a small integrated group sitting in front of our apartment building, talking like they do every night, and the police came by and saw them and said, “Get in the house, white boy, and you too, nigger.”

The police and National Guard came by in trucks and told us to get in the house or they'd kill us. Someone shouted it was too bad that there weren't any Indians around and the police started firing shots into the building. They didn't hit anyone, but there are marks all over the apartment. They then went up and down Prentis shooting at the buildings. When the National Guard left, people started throwing bottles from the roofs so that if they came back, they'd get flat tires. A couple of carloads of Detroit police came by with shot guns, pistols, machine guns and riot helmets. They were walking up and down the street and right below our window we hear them say “We're going to kill some of those fucking hippies.” They came into the apartment building, and since our apartment is first, they came in there first.

Six policemen came in and held guns at everyone's head. None of the policemen wore their badges. One guy came walking out of the bathroom and the police started hitting him with a gun butt. Most of the girls in the apartment were crying by this time. The police searched the apartment, broke our radio, searched the refrigerator, and kept repeating they were going to kill us if we moved. They couldn't find anything that they thought was wrong so they told us that the whole place smelled and went up stairs and beat up some more people.

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Fifth Estate #350, Fall, 1997

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