

The Ray Charles Riots

Mike Davis

2003

FE Note: Mike Davis's captivating new collection of essays, *Dead Cities, and Other Tales* (New Press) chronicles many facets of the long-running anti-authoritarian struggles to reclaim public spaces. The book includes a 2001 article for on teenage riots in California before 1965, "As Bad as the H-Bomb." Police, professional Red baiters, and Hearst's newspapers warned that California's teenage riots, illegal drag races, beatniks, and heavy petting at drive-ins was a dangerous pattern of subversion orchestrated by ingeniously sinister Communists.

Davis, however, suggests that these were attempts by working-class kids to "wrest as much freedom, exhilaration, and sheer mileage from the Night as possible" while looking down the double-barrels of a future dominated by Fordist misery and the constant fear of nuclear annihilation. The following is an excerpt from Davis's article.

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The second weekend in September, as usual for the summer's finale, was a scorcher in Los Angeles, and the largest crowds of the season packed the beaches to escape the 100-degree-plus temperatures in the valleys. Six thousand fans were lucky enough to have tickets to hear Ray Charles perform at the Hollywood Bowl Sunday evening. The blind rhythm-and-blues genius was at the height of an extraordinary "crossover" popularity that brought huge racially mixed audiences together outside of the South.

His latest tour, however, had been plagued by logistical snafus and disputes with local authorities. A week earlier, police had turned fire hoses on a thousand angry fans in Portland after Charles's plane had been grounded in Seattle. The crowd, in turn, wrecked the Palais Royale Ballroom and smashed car and office windows in the downtown area, the first riot in the city's history.

The Hollywood Bowl concert began without a hitch under the vigilant eye of LAPD music critics. As the tempo increased, hundreds of teenagers—Black, white, Latino—found the beat irresistible. "Some of the screaming youngsters," the Examiner reported the next day, "organized a dance group and put on an impromptu performance of what police said were objectionable dances, including the popular 'Jungle Bunny.'" Whether the dancing was too "dirty," too interracial, or both, the police decided to stop the concert. The lights were turned on, and when the "screaming, gyrating fans" protested, reserves were summoned from the LAPD's Hollywood Division. The ensuing "teen riot," spilling out into the parking lot and adjacent Griffith Park, involved an estimated 500 to 600 members of the audience; ten were arrested.



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