

Rock and Roll Dope

anon.

1968

A strange polarization (or maybe it's a natural one) seems to be happening with rock and roll fans right now, with white teenage audiences turning toward either total freek scenes or greasy reactionary hostility when confronted with the revolutionary guerrilla theatre tactics of the MC5. Three incidents in the last three weeks illustrate the current scene:

Friday, June 1st, the MC5 was booked into the Grosse Pointe Hideout, an eastside teen dance joint. The band produced its own handbill for the gig, a Grimshaw design featuring a picture of the group naked against a backwards American flag and the legend, "Break through American stasis with the MC5." Four hundred kids jammed the tiny hall to dig the 5—the Hideout's biggest crowd in months—and were first treated to two fine sets by a new Detroit trio, the Third Power. MC5 drummer Dennis Thompson and manager John Sinclair stepped outside during the second set for a smoke and met some fans in the parking lot next to the building. The young rock and roll addicts produced some grass, and while the sacrament was being ingested two rent-a-cops strolled on the scene, surprising one young man with a joint in his hand.

The two associate pigs called their big Brothers, the Harper Woods police, who appeared on the scene 30 minutes later to see ten freeks lounging against some cars under the watchful eye of the hired guards. Questioning followed, and the ten were told that they'd be taken into "the station" and booked on marijuana charges. Sinclair asked that the rest of the band be informed of this development, which was done, and band members Wayne Kramer, Rob Tyner, Michael Davis, and Fred Smith, along with equipment manager Ron Levine, immediately burst upon the scene woofing at the cops and demanding an explanation, causing enough confusion that those in the assembled company who were holding the sacrament could secret it from the police. Then the real shit went down.

Levine hassled the police until he was sure that subtle persuasion wouldn't work, resulting in one cop pushing Fred Smith in the chest and threatening him with a whupping) and then returned to the club, turned on the p.a., and informed the eager MC5 fans that Sinclair and Thompson were getting popped in the parking lot and that the only way they'd get to hear the band would be to surround the cops outside and make them give the two men up. While Levine was rapping, the club's manager had a cop drag him off the stage and then closed the doors, trapping the kids inside. He was sufficiently shook up, however, to persuade the pigs to release the suspects except the one who was caught with the dope and the two under-17 "juveniles," who were taken in and released later to the custody of their parents. By this time Kramer was on the phone contacting LEMAR attorney Bill Segesta, and Sinclair and Thompson were threatening the clumsy suburban police with false-arrest suits and extra-legal retaliation.

When the band, intact once again, returned inside to play their first set, the crowd went into a spontaneous scream scene to welcome them back to reality. And when Tyner kicked off the first tune with his customary "Kick out the jams, mother-fucker!" it was like a Rolling Stones concert, with wild applause and jubilation before and after every jam, including "Come Together," "Born Under a Bad Sign," "Upper and Lower Egypt" (with Sinclair's words to Pharaoh Sanders music), the MC5's current single "Looking at You" and "Borderline," and the culmination, "Believe it to 'My Soul" and "Black To Comm."

The Hideout's manager was furious by this time but was caught in a simple capitalist contradiction: he couldn't move to censure the band because the paying customers were behind them to a man. And when he shut the electricity off during "Comm" to get them off the stand, the crowd joined Fred Smith chanting "Power! Power! Power!" until it was over.

The next Friday the MC5 joined the Cream for the Grande Ballroom show. Excited by the success of the previous week's guerrilla theatre event, the band planned to burn the American flag on stage during the "Comm." Ballroom owner Russ Gibb got wind of the scheme through the underground grapevine and left word for the band that if any burning went on, he would have the police sent on stage to capture the ragged symbol and take appropriate action against the traitors. When the band went on stage for the second set of the evening, the temperature was at over 100 degrees on Detroit's first boiling weekend and there were close to 2000 sweating rock and roll fiends packed onto the floor. Again a huge cheer erupted from the crowd when Tyner announced his purpose, and the audience was with them completely all the way 'through their hour-and-fifteen-minute set in the sweltering heat.

As "Black to Comm" built to a screaming frenzy, equipment manager Steve Harnadek introduced a tattered plastic-nylon 3' X 5' American flag onto the stage, and he and Tyner ripped it to shreds while the audience freaked and cheered. The symbol of imperialism and oppression demolished, Tyner then struggled back to his feet and raised his freek flag high: a 4' X 5' red banner inscribed with a rampant marijuana plant, green in yellow circle in the upper left-hand corner, and the word "FREEK" lettered in black and yellow across the body of the flag. Again the freeks in the crowd-most everybody screamed and cheered. Simultaneously, the spectre of madman Jerry Younkins (of the Magic Veil Light Company) appeared on stage with the band, fully naked. Cheers turned to gasps of disbelief as Younkins settled cross-legged on the lip of the stage and began chanting "Om" into a microphone. Trans-Love Lights flashed slides of a naked Fran Mannino draped with the same American flag on the walls. The music climbed and climbed to a natural climax and faded into a distant humming "OM" and the band and entourage danced off-stage triumphantly.

Repercussions followed immediately: Ballroom manager Larry Feldmann (also manager of the Rationals, another local (power) was called on the carpet by building owner Gabe Glantz and was summarily discharged from his duties. Glantz also started ranting at Tyner and Sinclair about "committing crimes" and "obscenity" and "is that what you think of your country?" and threatened them with eternal expulsion from the Grande, which was pretty comical. The next day Feldman reported scores of phone calls from protesting parents, Younkins was allegedly banned from the Ballroom forever, the MC5 was lectured by their booking agents, and everyone involved was met with a frosty silence from "Uncle Russ" Gibb who carried on about freedom, dope, police brutality, and rock and roll on his weekly 6-hour WKNR-FM music show. Only the Cream, it seemed, were unaffected by the whole scene, as they didn't bother to show up at the Grande until the beginning of their set, which began half an hour after the MC5 had left the stage and continued until they were exhausted by the heat an hour later.

The following Wednesday, June 12, the MC5 traveled to Lansing, Michigan, for a gig at the (yes!) Lansing Hulla-baloo. Their audience seemed at first to be 90% grease and frat and maybe 10% freeks, and there was a lot of hostility throughout their three shows engendered by young short-haired anti-freek forces in front of the stage. Warned by booking agent Mike Quatro against any un-American and/or obscene acts, the MC5 merely kicked out the jams throughout the evening and into the last set, holding their rap down to their usual blasphemous cant and raunchy songs. Guitarist Wayne Kramer periodically swept the front row of the audience with his axe held like a Gatling gun to cool them out a little, and the band worked its magic on the kids to warm them up, and by "Comm" time the polarization was down to maybe 50-50. As "Comm" built to its howling climax, the freeks in the crowd began howling with the music and waving their arms in the air, flashing a two-handed "V" and jumping up and down with glee.

The converted short-hairs joined them, while the more hostile elements raised their middle fingers in the traditional symbol of rejection and disgust. The Tommy James fans made menacing gestures toward the stage and one of their number responded to direct musical attacks from Kramer and Sinclair (playing tenor saxophone) by climbing on-stage and shaking his fist. He was pulled off by his friends and their friends in the audience, and it seemed that a lot more V's went up, starting with those on the bandstand, as the music crescendoed into the everlasting "OM" of the assembled Sunns. Rumors of toughs waiting outside filled the dressing room as the fans rushed to join

the band backstage, but the purity and accuracy of the music as usual equalized the bad vibes and the band rolled home unscathed.

As everyone wonders what will happen next, the MC5 is girding their loins and readying some new tactics. Their itinerary for the rest of June includes dates at the Sarnia (Ontario) Arena (June 13) the Birmingham-Bloomfield Teen Center (June 15), Michigan State Fairgrounds (June 16), Russ Gibb's new dancehall, Walled Lake Amusement Park (June 21), a Benton Harbor Scene (June 22), the Grande with Blue Cheer and the Psychedelic Stooges (June 22), a return to the Grosse Pointe Hideout (June 26), the Jackson Hullabaloo (June 29), and Romulus' Greenlawn Grove (June 29). The MC5 will also headline the First Saugatuck Pop Festival (with the Amboy Dukes and the Rationals) at the western Michigan resort town the 4th of July.

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