

Toronto: Pops

Fifth Estate Collective

1969

You jump into Toronto all of a sudden after driving four hours through the Ontario countryside.

Our first thought as we drove the station wagon downtown on Yonge St. was, "The youth revolt is international!" It was partly the pop festival that weekend, but all of downtown Toronto looked like Beverly St. when the Grande is playing.

The streets were crowded with young people. All of them it seemed were wearing long hair and bell bottoms. We were excited. "They're like us!"

The freedom and openness of these kids on the streets was bold and exciting. It seemed like a free Utopia. Freaks' paradise.

That's why it was a swift down the next day when we discovered that the 25,000 people coming to dig on the Toronto Pop Festival were being crowded into a football stadium. True, the playing field grass was open but there was little room and only eight exits. Apparently, the promoters conceived of this as a grand concert rather than a festival.

There'd been some hassle with the city fathers before the festival could even be held. Apparently they felt that bringing the young people together would unite them with a new consciousness that would result in a disturbance.

So they took an attitude of containment, which is their general attitude to Toronto's community of young people. The festival went on, but in a stadium. And the authorities stayed ready, calm and polite on the surface, but ready.

The Band produced the first excitement of the weekend that same Saturday afternoon. They played mostly "Big Pink" material and were plagued by amp troubles. But their style was so smooth and collective that it knocked us all out.

People were on their feet, moving and listening. The Band grew up in Ontario, and all but one member are originally Canadian. In that setting their songs exploded with new meaning. "Pickup your heads and walk" they sang. "We can talk about it now." And everyone dug it.

But while they were singing the police drew the line. Protection of property. The lighting scaffolds were threatened by people climbing to see. Quietly and quickly police guards were moved into the crowd. No one stirred.

See, it's a developing community in Toronto. And the stadium bowl was an incubator for the people's spirit as we were all pressed close and grew in openness and strength.

People were all glad to be there and free of the stinking corpse that Amerika tried to shove on us all as culture. And there was innocence and spontaneity beyond daring here.

It was scattered and sporadic, but there was a continual sideshow in the audience that attacked the promoter's idea of an orderly concert. Groups of people would suddenly stand up and dance together. There were firecrackers and fireworks.

One group of freaks started snake dancing, tripping and falling through the people jammed together on the playing field grass while Carla Thomas was belting up front.

Frequently, during breaks, groups would toss a chick high above the crowd with a blanket or rug. At one point all action on the stage stopped as a full-scale garbage war broke out in the crowd. It was cool, and everyone got into it and dug it instead of getting uptight. Part of the show that grew from the crowd itself.

But the community is developing and still has a very schizoid nature. In the evening in particular the old concert format took over—enforced by the crowd itself.

Before Blood Sweat and Tears appeared, people in one section who tried to dance like they had earlier were pulled down and passed overhead from hand to hand to the rear.

Blood Sweat and Tears has been pushed a lot in the area and the people have bought it. “The best band on the stage today,” said the broadcaster MC. They came on and drew applause for their loud, but very, very traditional big band sounds.

In contrast, though, when Sly and the outtasite Family Stone had played the previous night, they had catalyzed all the energy running through the crowd.

Everyone was up and shouting. Sly, striding all over the stage, urged everyone to take the little V-sign. It went up everywhere (with revolutionary fists thrown in) on command. “Higher, Higher!”

Sly’s message is reconciliation, but it was the Family Stone’s hyped-up music that unified us all. They were called back once, and called back again as the overhead playing lights were switched on.

“They threatened us that the lights would go on if we didn’t quit by a certain time,” said Sly. “But anything we do in the dark we can do in the light. Right? So we’re going to keep going.”

“And the next time the chick says, ‘Turn out the lights, I feel funny...’” Other crowd favorites were Chuck Berry who drew a ten-minute ovation from the 38,000 who came for the Sunday show, and Johnny Winter, who laid down a bad, bad set with his bottleneck blues guitar sounding like young Robert Johnson returned from the grave.

The missing link in Canada is a direction and unity of purpose. The Canadian young people are not pressed by a draft, the pigs, or a war in Vietnam, But they share a common enemy with fighting students, black people and young workers in the U.S. That is: Amerikan wealth is interested only in its own self-preservation.

For Amerikan capitalism there is no way to go but down. In Canada there is room to grow—so a temporary peace exists. But this peace is always in jeopardy because Amerikan wealth has a strangle-hold on the Canadian economy.

When Canada wants to direct its own future conflict is inevitable.

Because of these differences, the Canadian youth revolt doesn’t have the rough edge of the American movement. Often they couldn’t understand the toughness in the American music.

SRC, for instance, came on hard. They started right in: “Don’t forget the Motor City!” Scattered all over the bowl Detroiters were on their feet yelling and remaining standing while SRC ran an inspired set. They played familiar numbers, but they played them hard and blew back many there not used to Detroit power and energy.

Another group, Crow, from Minneapolis, played some incredible hyped-up music behind a lightning beat. They were brought on as, “This group hasn’t slept for fifty hours.” And their speed-freak pace left many in the audience behind. The songs were about love, and listeners wondered why love songs were timed to such a savage beat.

Latent feelings surfaced only once. Closing out a mediocre set, Dr. John the Nighttripper rushed back out to do his blockbuster, “The Patriotic Flag-Waver.”

The crowd was restless with the political labeling that passed for satire, but when the doctor swung into “Oh Beautiful for Spacious Skies,” the crowd ran him off the stage with cries of “Out! Out! Out!”

They know what the score is with U.S. imperialism. All they need is the mind to act. See what more events and a growing consciousness will hatch.

Coming Home

“Where were you born? Do you have a draft card? Anything to declare? You’d better drive it over there to the right.”

From the git-go, Amerika = police attack. Any freaks or radicals crossing back over the border from Toronto the following Monday were subjected to the same harassment.

Cars were lined up in front of the customs house for inspection. It certainly wasn't contraband Canadian Club they were looking for. They even knew most people were too smart to carry dope back over the border or had used it all anyway.

They were searching for weak spots. Pressure points. "You don't have a draft card? I'm afraid we'll have to put in a report on this to the Justice Department,"

It took three-quarters of an hour in all we watched one guy detained because he didn't have enough ID cards. One chick was held up because she had several types of pills in the same bottle. All we could do was offer the name of a lawyer in case they ran into trouble.

Survival is still an issue in Amerika.

fifth Estate

Fifth Estate Collective
Toronto: Pops
1969

<https://www.fiftheastate.org/archive/83-july-10-23-1969/toronto-pops>
Fifth Estate #83, July 10-23, 1969

fiftheastate.anarchistlibraries.net