

## [Shaw on Zimmerman, 'Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco'](#)

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**Nadya Zimmerman.** *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008. 230 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11558-7.

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### Peace, Love, and Hell's Angels

In January 1967, LSD guru Timothy Leary, along with poets Allen Ginsburg, Gary Snyder, and a host of other bohemian personalities, took the stage at an event billed the "Human Be-In," held at San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Alternating sets with musical acts, like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and Country Joe and the Fish, these spokespersons of San Francisco's emerging counterculture read poetry and spoke about the spirit of "here and now," urging their audience to forgo the culture of the capitalist mainstream and instead "live in the moment." It was here that Leary delivered his infamous "tune in, turn on, drop out" mantra (p. 7).

One month later, Ginsburg, Snyder, and Leary convened with philosopher Alan Watts on Watts's own ferryboat for the "Houseboat Summit." The event was organized and sponsored--and the dialogue recorded and transcribed--by the subversive newspaper San Francisco *Oracle*. The four appointed spokespersons of the new and rapidly forming youth counterculture were called on to address a number of questions and issues including, "Once someone decides to 'drop out' of the mainstream and join the movement, where should they go?" Leary's dead-serious answer was "Meditation rooms." Leary then suggested that there would be many mediation rooms from which to choose: "One can be Zen, one can be macrobiotic, one can be bhahte [sic] chanting, one can be rock and roll psychedelic, one can be lights.... [And] in these places ... tribal groups would develop and new matings would occur ... and then they can head out and find the Indian totem wherever they go" (p. 126). These are among the vignettes that Nadya Zimmerman uses to characterize the contentious and sometimes absurd 1960s youth movement in *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*--a musicological and cultural history of the late sixties' Haight-Ashbury scene in San Francisco.

The latter half of the 1960s is generally understood as a watershed moment in American social and cultural history. The spirit of opposition and the social upheavals of the civil rights and antiwar movements sought to shake up the oppressive and regimented social order of prior decades. Among the many contenders of this history was the so-called youth counterculture, the bohemian "hippies" that coalesced around the Haight-Ashbury area, those who would have attended the Human Be-In, the readers of the *Oracle*, and the poster children of that generation.

Zimmerman argues, however, that contrary to popular imagination and many mythologizing historical and media accounts, these peace-loving flower children were not "counter" to anything. Rather, the

"counterculture"--she introduces the term in quotations--took up a decidedly detached posture. Rather than seeking to institute social change, as did the civil rights and antiwar movements, the counterculture only sought distance and autonomy from the mainstream; they rejected consumer society by attempting to live outside its influence, by "dropping out" as it were. The Haight-Ashbury scene was characterized by the music of Janis Joplin and the Grateful Dead, not Pete Seeger or "We Shall Overcome." Its leaders included the likes of Ginsburg and Leary, not Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, or Tom Hayden. Its message was personal salvation and spiritual escape, not social justice or change. This is a critical distinction, the reader is reminded, lest we continue to understand "the 60s" as a uniform moment of resistance, or we continue to conflate political action with drug-induced passivity. *Counterculture Kaleidoscope* thus provides a critical intervention in the conventional late 60s narrative. Moreover, Zimmerman suggests, "dropping out" was not possible to begin with because expressing detachment must necessarily include mainstream attachment, as we will see. The counterculture was forever riddled with that irony, and its very demise was precipitated by its own paradoxes.

Zimmerman develops her detachment-not-activism thesis with reference to four thematic personas that typify the countercultural mood, and that make up the subjects of her analytic chapters: the rebellious outlaw, the exotic-mystic, the free natural, and the New-Age/spiritual persona. In each of the chapters, Zimmerman weaves a narrative that examines these qualities through the music of bands like Jefferson Airplane and Jimi Hendrix, and through the styles and philosophies of anti-mainstream personalities like Leary and a dude with a portable microphone named Ashleigh Brilliant.

The outlaw persona, for example, found its musical expression--among other things--in the raspy blues of Joplin. Zimmerman describes Joplin as the "quintessential outsider" (p. 42). Joplin sang the blues, which, being understood as an African American folk art, was already coded as a rebellious form of expression. While singing the blues, she also appropriated a stereotypical black female sexuality. Zimmerman shows how this was done, not in the personality or the stage behavior of Joplin, but by the very music itself.

Joplin and her band Big Brother and Holding Company's hit "Summertime" was originally written by George Gershwin for the "folk opera" *Porgy and Bess* (1935). The song was written as a lullaby, meant to be sung by a black woman to her own black baby, to signal a moment of calm in a period of upheaval. But Joplin and Big Brother transformed it. Writes Zimmerman, "while overall Gershwin's 'Summertime' is simple, starkly modern in the minor mode, and even impressionistic with colorful chords, Big Brother's version is a clichéd minor blues with cool jazz and classical music signifiers woven in at every turn" (p. 47). Joplin's vocals were also different; the author continues, "for Joplin's part, she revises Gershwin's lyrics, stretching what, in spoken language, would be unaccented syllables, and producing slippery pitches that are often indecipherable as she bends and twists away from a tonal center" (p. 47). The differences between Joplin and Big Brother, and the differences between both and the original Gershwin score are elaborated further by the author, who creates her own analytical tension, which is finally resolved as follows: "Gershwin assembles a static black utopia, while Joplin simulates a burlesque, even stereotyped, African American blues queen, and her bandmates languish in a cool jazz style associated with whiteness. The fact that Joplin and Big Brother offer no stability or meeting ground in their versions of 'Summertime'--and no consensus on their relationship to Gershwin--parallels the counterculture's implicit engagement with race without

explicit engagement in racial politics” (p. 48). Through the appropriation of racialized images, Joplin took the position of an outlaw. It is but one persona that typified the countercultural mood and their detachment-not-activism posture, but it also demonstrates how that “detachment” was actually grounded in mainstream cultural patterns, in this case white racial domination.

The counterculture also signaled its detachment by appropriating non-Western spiritual beliefs, by reverting to nature to oppose capitalist consumerism, and by delving into drugs and sex to oppose mainstream values and practices. Leary urged people to drop acid and do their own thing. Bands like Jefferson Airplane, Grateful Dead, and Country Joe and the Fish experimented with non-Western music and antimodern nature themes, which suggested “participation in the Otherworldly or mystical spaces that ... modern civilization lacked” (p. 89).

In each case, however, the counterculture was fraught with ironies. The outlaw persona embodied by Joplin was built on racial stereotypes, thus forging that “outsider” identity only in terms of the dominant (and contested) racial order. Likewise, the exotic persona was constructed by Eastern religious practices and musical styles, thus basing their detachment in the colonial history that made that identity possible. Similarly, the natural persona ironically relied on modern technology, and the New-Age persona was founded on a system of sexism. Thus, argues Zimmerman, the “detachment” that was characteristic of the counterculture was itself never far outside social convention to begin with.

However forceful the counterculture’s message and its rise to notoriety was in the late 1960s, its tenure was short lived. Just two-and-a-half years after the Human Be-In, Zimmerman notes its death knell with Charles Manson and his murderous rampage in August 1969 and the violent chaos of the Altamont Festival in December of the same year. Manson was a Haight-Ashbury local who went to Los Angeles in 1968 to make a name for himself in the music business. Fueled by drugs, orgies, and “secret” messages from the Beatles’ song “Helter Skelter,” Manson “orchestrated a maniacal and racist killing spree that lasted two nights and left five dead” (p. 158). At the Altamont fest, the Hell’s Angels were hired as security guards. Arming themselves with pool cues and knives, this group beat several people and murdered a black man named Meredith Hunter. In both cases, the counterculture ethos obscured the underlying racist, sexist, and colonial paradoxes of their supposed detachment, and manifested itself in violence. In Zimmerman’s words, “as the counterculture sensibility became amplified and exaggerated, excesses such as racism and violence filtered in” (p. 165). Thus ends *Kaleidoscope’s* narrative about the rise and fall of a detached-not-oppositional sixties counterculture.

Being that I am neither a musicologist nor sixties historian, I cannot speak to the accuracy of this book. As an urban and cultural sociologist, however, I can jealously appreciate what this book accomplishes. The book shines in its musical analyses. The author is a musicologist by trade, and it must be acknowledged that musicology adds a depth to cultural analyses that conventional histories rarely accomplish. Zimmerman shows us that music has its own living elements that neither the record industry nor the people creating and consuming it can possess, but that nevertheless tell a profound human and cultural story. By thoroughly exploring the music of the counterculture--and its relationship to their styles and ideologies--Zimmerman recreates a cultural tapestry in which the chords, melodies, lyrics, and inflections are interwoven in their very detached sensibility. When examining the music and lyrics of Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit,” for example, Zimmerman builds her analysis in the spirit of the music itself, so that the reader hears Grace Slick’s own voice,

and the spirit of the era, imploring you to “feed your head, feed your head.”

*Counterculture Kaleidoscope* turns out to be incredibly entertaining. Zimmerman takes us from Golden Gate Park in 1967 to Ho Chi Minh City in 1945 and back. She weaves a narrative between Hendrix's “throbbing quarter notes” in “Purple Haze,” racial segregation of San Francisco’s Fillmore district, and Manson’s killing spree (p. 141). There are Black Panthers and Hell’s Angels, orgies, LSD, and psychedelic rock and roll. If you like kaleidoscopes, then the book is aptly titled.

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