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40th anniversary of Human Be-in

Event launched Summer of Love and 'the '60s'

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Associated Press

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SAN FRANCISCO - Their hair, once a symbol of youthful rebellion, is mostly gray. Bodies that writhed with wild abandon when a guru invited them to "Turn on ... tune in ... drop out" now sport stiff knees and age spots.

"How many of you are on acid right now?" rock critic Joel Selvin asked an audience of former hippies who turned out this past week to mark the 40th anniversary of the Human Be-in, the counterculture event that unofficially launched the Summer of Love. "How many of you are on antacid right now?"

In many ways, "the '60s," as we now know the era, was born Jan. 14, 1967, when musicians, poets, visionaries, student radicals and wayward youth gathered in Golden Gate Park. It was the unofficial birth of the counterculture movement that defined San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, a prelude to the social and political upheaval that followed.

Those who were in the park that day agree neither they nor San Francisco have been the same since.

Part rock concert and literary event, part protest and mass consciousness raising, the Human Be-in was billed at the time as a "Gathering of the Tribes" meant to unite and stir up the various wings of the counterculture movement. Estimates of the number of people who cavorted on the park's Polo Fields that day range from 10,000 to 50,000.

The speakers and bands who appeared reads like a Who's Who of 1960s icons: LSD advocate Timothy Leary, poets Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, comedian Dick Gregory, the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane.

By all accounts, psychedelic drugs were in plentiful supply, courtesy of a parachuter who tossed free doses to the crowd.

"Over the years, probably a dozen people have come up to me and said, 'You guys were fantastic!' I say 'We weren't there,' " laughed David Getz, drummer for Big Brother and the Holding Company, the Janis Joplin-fronted band that was not on the lineup the day of the Be-In. "And they say 'No, I saw you!' Maybe they did."

By that summer, publicity about "the happening," as it was called, and the Monterey Pop Festival in June, had encouraged thousands more young idealists to head to

San Francisco. Haight-Ashbury, just outside the park, was the flower child's Mecca.

At Tuesday's commemorative forum, sponsored by the San Francisco Museum and Historical Society, panelist Jim O'Donnell recalled the transformative days leading up to the Be-In, when he went from being an engineering student at the University of California, Berkeley, to a freewheeling Haight-Ashbury resident.

"My life turned from academia to sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll - unfortunately, not necessarily in that order," he said.

Like other panelists, O'Donnell and Getz remembered the Human Be-In as both the beginning and the end, an event that would be much duplicated but never equaled.

"The Human Be-in was a creation from within the San Francisco counterculture," Getz said. "The Summer of Love really was a creation of the national news media that befell San Francisco."

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