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“Listen, Listen, Listen”: Hippies, the Haight, and the Soundtrack of the Sixties

RALPH J. GLEASON

I read your article for *Jazz* [Kofsky 1967]. I’ve listened to the tape and I’ve made some notes and—wow. I’ll see what we can do. To begin with, the thing about my hands. It’s not that I can’t type, it’s that I’m sort of hung up with them and I’ll try to explain it in detail sometime, but depending on the weather and nervousness, tension and exhaustion, they’re all right. It’s just that the whole thing has set me up so I don’t like to type any more than I absolutely have to at this point.

The reason I hadn’t said anything about the Mothers of Invention in that piece is that I really don’t dig them. Now, none of the points that you raised, or almost none of the points you raise, are things that I haven’t discussed in the *Chronicle*, even if I didn’t get them all into the piece that I sent you. Did I ever send you the original and uncut version of the Dylan article from *Ramparts* [Gleason 1966]? They took about 2,000 words out of it for reasons of space. I’ve got some mimeograph copies of it and I’ll send you one if you want them. I think that you have got to start on the assumption that Dylan is central to this thing and if you will get the Dylan records—don’t get the first record, but any of the others—and play them for a while, it’s like accustoming your ear to Coltrane or accustoming your

ear to Sonny Rollins: You have really got to listen to it and to have it on the phonograph a few times before it gets to you. And if you ever have the chance to see his documentary *Don't Look Back*, be sure and do that. Dylan really is the central philosopher of this whole thing.

Just casual and random comments: Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters; as far as I know, they don't sing songs they write themselves. I know the Coasters didn't. I think that the Drifters are a very good group and a lot of their songs are very interesting songs; sometimes they're songs of alienation. There certainly are songs—when they do things like the “Rat Race”—that have applicability to the condition of our time. I think that it is a mistake to dismiss them in the same way that you dismiss the Supremes. I don't think that they're the same thing. Also, the Drifters do not play instruments themselves. They're just a vocal group. The Supremes, I think, follow the same tradition that almost all rhythm and blues, Negro organ jazz music, and second-grade jazz follow, which is that you can get away with damn near anything as long as you make it swing. And the point about the Supremes and the point about all those Motown groups is that Berry Gordy, who is some sort of a production genius, has choreographed their asses off and has got them working more and more with an eye on appearing at the Copacabana and the Fairmont's Venetian Room and less and less in speaking to teenagers. But they are undoubtedly popular, and the thing that they do on the record they do very well.

I don't think that there is any possibility whatsoever of Bob Scheer ever becoming a leader of the hippies. In the first place, the hippies don't listen to speeches. This was one of the outstanding facts at the Be-In and I'd appreciate seeing your brother's letter about the LA Be-In. Did you ever see the column I did about the San Francisco Be-In [Gleason 1967a]? The speeches were a drag. Nobody wants to hear political speeches. These kids will not listen to political speeches, and Bob Scheer doesn't swing, and he doesn't move.

And he doesn't get to them—even if he may adopt positions supporting some of their positions. This is not going to happen. He will not be a leader of them. There's nothing to worry about that at all. I don't think that they can be politicized, in the sense that Scheer is a political person.

And I think that looking at what they are doing with a view toward politicizing or not politicizing them is discussing them in the wrong framework.

Now, I know that the corporations run this country and so do the hippies, but the hippies are saying, if we walk away from the convention that agrees that we have to accept the fact that the corporations run this country and begin to do our own thing—which, in a curious way, is parallel to Black Power—we may be able to make it so that the corporations do not run the country. I look to the day, and it won't be too far away, when nobody's gonna go to baseball games and *Life* magazine will not be read by anyone, if it's read by anyone at all.

The manifesto, incidentally, as far as I know, was written and distributed here by the young anarchists. I don't know which particular ones did it. I thought it was very funny because they are aware of the power of non-politics and the power of this movement, just as Scheer is aware of it and a number of people are aware of it, but they don't have the faintest fucking idea in the world of how to connect up to it. You're quite right: this is not teenage rock and roll. Teenage rock and roll is the Monkees. But this other stuff is not teenage rock and roll.

Now, I don't dig the Mothers of Invention. I've heard them on two occasions in person and I've listened to their albums. Perhaps I ought to listen more to their albums but my intuition tells me that they aren't important. And what is more, the people whose opinions I've begun to trust in the rock world never talk to me about the Mothers of Invention at all—which is a very interesting thing.

Now, the reason for this, I believe, is that they are a product of Hollywood, and the center is not Hollywood, it's in San Francisco—because Hollywood is contrived. The Mothers of Invention are fundamentally a group of older people who have decided to make this kind of music and to sing these kind of songs because that is what they think the younger people are interested in. They're too fucking old, really, to do this thing. I believe that there is something in their relationship to the rock movement that's parallel to Brubeck's relationship to the jazz movement.

I did a column sometime toward the end of the last year about this whole business of James Brown and the Negro people and the Negro artists not providing content anymore, but merely style. And you do not look

to the Negro artists on the R&B stations or in their records except very rarely to say anything in terms of content anymore. What they do is they contribute a style and they contribute an emotion but they almost never say anything that's worth listening to.

I may tend to dismiss Marx but I don't really dismiss Marx. I merely think that the way in which American society is eroding is a way that Marx did not envision. It is eroding and it is collapsing and it's crumbling at the edges, not because of the inevitable conflict between classes, but because of the business of alienation and the business of having to be true to oneself and to get something really valuable out of life, which is an unscientific kind of erosion. There is a change in drive and a change in point of view which the hippies and the rock kids imply, which is really not accountable in Marx's structure, as far as I can see. This may or may not result in a permanent and widespread change. I suspect that it will. I think that it's got something to do with what Tawney [1926] was talking about in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* because I think that this is essentially a religious movement. In fact, I really do believe that it is the new religion. And what these kids are creating is the new American, and therefore worldwide, religion.

And it goes back to absolute beginners, it goes back to a whole lot of things. But I think that the religious aspect of it is what is going to make it really important. As soon as people begin to behave by these standards and to do these things—not completely in love and not completely to the extent that they talked about them, but to do them at all—they are going to shake the whole world up. And they're beginning to shake the whole world up. And, of course, there's a fear that they really do mean it and that they're actually making it work that's got the whole establishment traumatized.

You get treated in the Haight-Ashbury by the cops the same way you get treated in Hunter's Point by the cops. I think this may not be true in Pittsburgh and New York but it seems to me to be true in the Haight-Ashbury. It's the same thing. They beat you up because you have long hair. They beat you up because you're black. And you don't have any rights because you have long hair, just as you don't have any rights because

you're black. I don't think that the hippies understand the Negroes, but that's another matter.

That whole business about the white groups like the Young Rascals and Spencer Davis is something that I think you ought to reconsider. I don't dig Spencer Davis because he's imitating Negroes. But on the other hand, I do dig the Young Rascals because they are able to do something which is good and isn't just simply an imitation of Negroes. They sound very, very groovy. They're much better than [*indecipherable*], although that's a good point. Spencer Davis hasn't discovered that they've got to take Negro music and other kinds of music and put it together and come out with something on their own. But this is all related to the fact that this is the first generation of white people who actually can swing.

Frank, one of the things that's going to be necessary for you to do here is to listen to a lot more of this stuff. I can't listen to Love or the Doors, particularly. I don't find them important. I find the San Francisco groups incredibly important and one of the reasons is that unlike Los Angeles, where everything is aimed toward the recording studio and where there are no dances—certainly not in the sense that there are in San Francisco, or like New York, which is also aimed at concert appearance and recording studios—the San Francisco bands, which are almost all of them cooperative bands in the fullest sense of the word, with no leaders and living together in a communal sense—these bands are all playing two and three times a week for dances. They've got a tremendous personal following and tremendous personal rapport with their audience. They function together, and the bands and the audience create something. They create it together. This is a real different use to which music is being put. There has been no point in American history that I know of, except with the street bands in New Orleans, where music has had such a direct role in the culture of any area as it has in San Francisco at this point in our history. And it seems to me that far from tending to die out, it's becoming increasingly important.

Now, the Mamas and the Papas, I think, are a bridge between the LA thing and the San Francisco thing. I'm not sure that any of these people, with the possible exception of Dylan, really understand how their words

are being taken literally by their audience, by their young twenties audience, and listened to and acted upon as religious revelations.

I think that you've got to get with Dylan and that the way to do this is to expose yourself to it for some period of time and that investment will pay off. I think that you've also got to get with the Beatles, past *Rubber Soul* and past *Revolver*. All the Beatle albums are delightful and enjoyable to listen to. Now, the Beatles started out with Chuck Berry and Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters, and they began like the Rolling Stones began, as straight-out imitators. But the point about them is that they became in the process of this something very individual. They certainly do not sound like a Negro group now. All the music that they made and all the original songs they wrote, going back to the beginning, have got a very, very positive, yea-saying stance in favor of life and of love, and I think that this is the quality that has made them instantly acceptable by almost everybody. I also think that their electronic music is the most important electronic music being made in the world today.

Now, the Rolling Stones—who, as opposed to the Beatles, were a bunch of reasonably well-educated and literate kids—started out actually to prove that jazz was old-fashioned. I mean, that's what Mick Jagger said. I've talked with Jagger. I've talked with Charlie Watts, the drummer in the band. I've talked with Lennon. I've talked with McCartney and with Harrison and Ringo. Now, I think that the Rolling Stones represent a slightly different thing than the Beatles. I tried to bring it out in that piece—though no, I haven't really gotten all those points out there clearly—but I think that they're equally important.

I think you've got to listen to the Lovin' Spoonful. The Lovin' Spoonful's songs bring into all of this business folk music and rock and roll and R&B; they have legitimate ties. The sound of the electric guitar was an anathema to me all my life because it meant red-necked hillbillies. Electric guitar was hillbilly music and the hillbillies were nowhere. This is no longer involved. They are not ashamed of being white and they are not ashamed to use white-originated material because the electric guitar doesn't mean a bad thing to them since they themselves have no prejudice. Their attitude toward all of these things is to regard them not as symbols,

but to regard them as what they are themselves, such as their attitude toward the Service Cross, which does not mean concentration camps and ghettos, but simply is a decoration.

Anyway, I think you've got to go all the way back with the Beatles and go all the way back with the Stones and listen to all this stuff, just as you would if you were going to take on the business of listening to a new jazz artist. The bands in San Francisco are wild. You should get the Grateful Dead album on Warner Brothers and listen to that guitar player and listen to that bass player.

The Jefferson Airplane is the best group in this country today, ranking with the Spoonful. And the Beach Boys are really, I think, more important to all this than Frank Zappa. They're certainly important as sort of John Birch, Orange County, beer-drinking, hot rod folk music. And some of the things they've done with their most recent album *Pet Sounds* are very interesting electronically, but I don't have much hope for them because I think they're all idiots.

There's really nothing going on anywhere in the country like what's going on here in San Francisco. And it's going to get much more important. This whole business of what Freidenberg had to say about Los Angeles and the Sunset Strip is magnified and much deeper and much more significant up here than it is in Los Angeles.¹ There is actually a community functioning in San Francisco. That's what the Haight-Ashbury is all about. These people have got a job co-op, they've got street cleaning organizations, they're working on free things in the park every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, they've got all these bands playing free in Golden Gate Park, for chrissakes. There's gonna be a big thing here on June 21 in the Park, another sort of a Be-In. I don't know what'll come out of that.

The Diggers are an incredible group and are having a fundamental effect on this whole thing. Much of this is causing everybody to revise the ways in which they consider the future of American society, and, as I said before, I don't want to go back and rank Marx for not having envisioned something that was unpredictable, but this has all got to do with a change in the basic drive and redefinitions of old values. It's not without significance that the word dope is used all the time by these kids. They smoke

dope, they say. Now, dope had a pejorative meaning in adult society. It is being used with tongue in cheek by the kids, but it is also being used because it's been given a new meaning by them. Now, they're giving new meanings to love, they're giving new meanings to cooperation, to free, to the whole thing.

The Loading Zone is refusing to join the American Federation of Musicians. This is giving everybody traumas. I don't think that any of these groups, including the Diggers, function at all times in a predictable way, and sometimes, from where I stand, they seem to function in their own disinterest rather than in their own interest. But nevertheless, what is going on here in all this bubbling, seething, frothing, incredible turmoil—and I might say that there's so much going on that you can't keep up with it—what's going on here is going to eventually end up in some very, very fundamental changes. I think that there is more hope for peace in the world and for stopping the Vietnam War and for getting the situation with Standard Oil worked out in what the hippies represent than there is in what Bob Scheer represents.

And the square left is Jerry Rubin, who ran for mayor. Now, Jerry Rubin was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee and before he went to it, he asked me in the street one day what I thought of his idea of appearing in a Revolutionary War uniform. And I laughed and he said, "Why are you laughing?" And I said, "Because you're gonna be on TV with that, Jerry, and everybody's gonna think that you're a member of Paul Revere and the Raiders." And he said, "What are the Paul Revere and the Raiders?" So I told him and he disagreed with me and when he came back from Washington he said, "How could you be so wrong? Everybody took me seriously." I said, "Sure they did, inside the committee, but when you were on TV man, the kids all thought you were funny." And that's true. They did. Jerry Rubin spoke at the Be-In and nobody wanted to hear him.

You can't communicate with these people in the old forms any longer. We have got to face the fact that they are demanding—and they are getting—new forms. Now, McLuhan is hip to this thing, though I can't go all the way along with him and I really haven't been able to make myself get in there and read all of McLuhan and seriously think about it,

but some of the superficial things are obviously true and I think he has good concepts.

You ought to read Norman Mailer's analysis of Lyndon Johnson—it's in his latest collection of essays, whatever it's called.² It came out sometime in the last six or eight months. And it was reprinted in that little booklet about the Vietnam Day thing in San Francisco, or in Berkeley, which was called *We Accuse* [1965]. Mailer analyzed Johnson and the American society as being more interested and believing more reality expressed in the news, that was on the front pages, than in the events which actually made those news stories on the front pages. And there's something involved in this which is true because people are working by symbols.

The adult society is certainly working by symbols and these kids, even while they may work by symbols, they're at least smart enough to realize they shouldn't work by the symbols of the adult society. Now, in the process of all this they may make up their own symbols, and God knows they all aren't full of love and they aren't all functioning like they want everybody else to function, and that, of course, is one of the tragedies of the thing. But we can't expect them to be that much better than us, particularly since they've turned off into this thing and everybody is against them.

I'll get around to sending you more things that I've written and I'll get around to sending more tapes and I'll try to communicate here. I really dug your letter and thank you very much. The hysterical and frustrating and frightening part of it is that I've been writing all these things in the *Chronicle* and not in places where they will be referred to by people who are studying and where the forum that I occupy is one that gives dignity to what I say. That's why I'm so knocked out by the *American Scholar*. They asked me [Gleason 1967b]. I can't get into any place else, as far as I can see, with this stuff, and I think that my insights into it are more useful even than Friedenbergs, who comes to it really as a square and really as a sociologist, although he's the only one of them that makes any sense at all.

But Friedenbergs is full of irrelevant facts about the stuff that goes on, like he thinks that it's significant that two of the members of the Buffalo Springfield are Canadians, whereas the only thing important at

all about the Buffalo Springfield was that Steve Stills happened to write that song, just as the only thing important about Barry McGuire was that he happened to write "Eve of Destruction." The Buffalo Springfield is something of a drag to hear in person and they're not at all important in this scene except for the fact of that one song. And that goes on with a lot of people, but then you get other groups that continually bring up songs like the Lovin' Spoonful, like the Beatles, like the Rolling Stones, like the Grateful Dead and like the Jefferson Airplane, and like Donovan, who is very important. You must listen to all of Donovan's records and particularly to the *Sunshine Superman* album and the *Mellow Yellow* stuff.

These people bring up songs continually, the lyrics of which are saying the things that these kids fundamentally have felt and are now beginning to articulate and which represent their real-life beliefs. Marty Balin said they wanted Grace Slick to be the first girl singer to say "fuck" in a song on a stage and blow everybody's mind. That's a great thing because there again, it's a freeing of the society and a freeing of the culture and a freeing of ideas to do things. And this is what these people are doing.

Allen Ginsberg is infinitely more a leader of this than Scheer could ever become. And yet one of the great facts about all of this is that they don't follow leaders. As Dylan said to them, "Don't follow leaders, watch your parking meters." They do not follow leaders. They don't follow Dylan, they don't follow Tim Leary, they don't follow Ken Kesey. They don't follow any of these people.

So anyway, listen, listen, listen. Play, play, play and get to see these bands where they function, in front of people and not in those goddamn nightclubs, which are the worse place to see them. You know, "Never take your band into a whiskey club," said Banana Ed Denson, the manager of Country Joe and the Fish. That's a good album, too. Get that. It's on Vanguard. There's some very interesting songs on that. They're much more important than the Fugs, who are really kind of corny and old-fashioned now. And particularly so because they're such terrible musicians. The only thing they've got is Ed Sanders.

Okay, I gotta go. You know, the thing about Jon Hendricks is fascinating, but then we know all about that. You know, LeRoi Jones' play *The Dutchman* was not a frightening play to anybody who's spent any time in

jazz clubs 'cause that what goes on, man, all the time, and we know that. It only frightens people who've never been around the jazz clubs.

I might also point out another observation, which is that the jazz club milieu, which was described so well by Colin McGuinness, moved to the campus coffee shops and out to the plaza at Cal—the racial milieu—and it's now beginning to spread around in other ways. But the hippies are doing something else. The hippies are saying, "We are not accepting guilt because of the color of our skin and we ourselves are not going to practice guilt." Now, certainly it's a racist society and that's true, and this cat, who's now writing for *Down Beat*, is in a weird position—Don DeMichael will never understand how Don DeMichael is a racist.

But these kids are trying, really trying, to function in an open and straight-ahead way. And if you are black, you are welcome, but you've got to come to where they are and to where they're going. It's wrong to think that they ought to go up to Harlem to sweep the streets. That's not what they ought to do at all. The streets in Harlem should be swept by the people who are living in Harlem—even though that statement brings up a whole other thing, and I mean it as step fifteen in a series of things, the first fourteen of which have not yet been done. But they shouldn't be doing that. They shouldn't be going into the Negro community and doing anything at all, any more than the SDS should be. What they should be doing is getting the white community straight, which is what Stokely [Carmichael] told them to do, and which is correct. And which the hippies, in their own way, without even planning it, are beginning to do.

It is all hung up with Eastern philosophy, Eastern religion, and Eastern music, and in terms of emotions rather than intellect, and in terms of feelings. That was a great line of—was it Albert Ayler?—"This is more about feelings than it is about notes," or "Less about notes than it is about feelings."³ That was a great line. And the thing that [Emmet] Grogan, the Digger, says, the futility of either entering the system or fighting the system seems to have all sorts of possibilities that nobody thought of before, because when you go up against them at the polls, and when you try to buy stock in Standard Oil and change the way it functions, you are accepting the conditions that Standard Oil has defined by existence. And this is one of the things that Marx did. Marx defined all this stuff in terms of

capitalist functioning. And these kids are involved in defining it in some other terms. We don't know what the hell they are yet.

Over to you. God bless and for chrissakes, get out here and stay in the Haight-Ashbury for three or four weeks. It's a pretty wild scene, sweetie, and there is more than this than is in your philosophy, Polonius, or whatever his name was.⁴ Later.

NOTES

1. Gleason is referring to a recent article in the *New York Review of Books* that noted: "The Sunset Strip, of Los Angeles but not in it, is a grimly prophetic area. Social, political, and demographic factors explosively combined, have established there a persistent pattern of conflict and hostility which conveys the sinister atmosphere of life in California today with remarkable economy. The atmosphere of the Strip is spreading fast, and is toxic" (Friedenberg and Bernhard 1967, 8).
2. "My Hope for America: A Review of a Book by Lyndon B. Johnson," first published in *We Accuse* (1965) and collected in *Cannibals and Christians* (1966).
3. Ayler's comment was, "It's not about notes anymore. It's about feelings!" (Jones and Young 1966).
4. From *Hamlet* (I, 5:167–8): "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

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RALPH J. GLEASON (1917–1975) was an early supporter of San Francisco rock music and used his *San Francisco Chronicle* column to defend it. He dictated this oral letter in response to a letter from Frank Kofsky. Transcription and notes provided by the editor.