

Remembering Monterey Pop: How the 1967 festival changed everything

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Mercury News
San Jose Mercury News

Article Launched:

Forty years ago today, a bold experiment called the Monterey International Pop Festival kicked off the Summer of Love with good vibes and amazing music.

"There wasn't a festival before," says Lou Adler, the L.A.-based music mogul who co-produced the three-day event with musician John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas. "So not having any rules or regulations or standards, nothing was really a barrier. We just jumped in."

An estimated 200,000 people made their way to the Monterey County fairgrounds on June 16-18, 1967, for the world's first rock festival. L.A. and Bay Area hipsters, newly minted Midwestern hippies and curious Monterey High kids alike paid up to \$6.50 a show - or just sneaked in - to see 31 acts, including Jimi Hendrix making his incendiary American debut and soul man Otis Redding wowing, for the first time, what he dubbed "the love crowd."

"Everyone came together, enjoyed the music and put politics aside," says Frank Sollecito, now a Monterey city councilman but at the time a clean-cut football star from Monterey High School. "That's a great name, the Summer of Love, and I think it started right here at Monterey Pop."

It was remarkable that it happened at all.

Adler and Phillips, who died in 2001, took over the dates from the original promoter with just seven weeks to go. They opted to turn what had been envisioned as a for-profit festival into a benefit, with Phillips' band headlining.

'Crash course'

Working out of an office on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, Phillips took to the phones to persuade the biggest musicians of the day to perform for free. At the same time, a skeptical Monterey city government and police force had to be talked into letting an army of hippies invade the community.

"It was a crash course in the festival business, I'll tell you that," recalls Michelle Phillips, John Phillips' wife and bandmate in the Mamas and the Papas at the time. "But they were very, very smart."

Adler and Phillips built credibility for the festival by creating a board of directors that included such luminaries as Paul McCartney, Brian Wilson and Smokey Robinson, and quickly signed many of the leading acts from Southern California and London.

It was a tougher sell to the managers of the San Francisco bands, many of whom looked upon these L.A. interlopers with suspicion, especially after Phillips wrote and Adler produced the smash hit "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Flowers in Your Hair)" by Scott McKenzie.

"They looked at them as those folks from Plasticville coming up to get the good vibes from us underground radicals," says Peter Albin, bassist for Big Brother and the Holding Company.

"I think they were just jealous of us because we were the ones that were really selling the records," Phillips says. "But finally, I think, everyone realized that this was good for everybody."

With encouragement from concert promoter Bill Graham and San Francisco Chronicle columnist Ralph Gleason, Adler says, the major San Francisco bands came on board, including the Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe and the Fish, Moby Grape, the Steve Miller Band, the Grateful Dead, the Quicksilver Messenger Service and Big Brother.

From the time the Association hit the first note on Friday afternoon, the festival went off without a major hitch. The music was first-rate, and thousands of fans camped out in tent cities with virtually no violence or arrests.

Doubters disproved

Even the most skeptical Bay Area musicians had to give grudging props to the organizers.

"They tried to do what we did in the parks, for free generally, and they got halfway there," says Paul Kantner, a guitarist and singer with the Jefferson Airplane, "which was a good thing for L.A. people."

As it turned out, by the time the documentary film "Monterey Pop" was released the following year, such L.A. bands as the Mamas and the Papas, Buffalo Springfield and the Byrds were yesterday's news, and San Francisco musicians such as Big Brother vocalist Janis Joplin were stars.

The film originally was conceived for TV, not movie theaters.

"ABC was putting up some money for the festival with the understanding that eventually they would be able to put something on the air that would be kind of 'Young America Sings Popular Music,'" says D.A. Pennebaker, the noted documentarian who directed the film. "You know, it had a bright, red-cheeked glow to it."

Instead, ABC executives, including a young Barry Diller, saw footage of the Who smashing their instruments and Jimi Hendrix humping his amplifier before lighting his guitar on fire.

"It looked like everything you didn't want your 8-year-old to have to witness after all the things you told him about the wonderful world of music," says Pennebaker, who will speak tonight at a screening of the film at Monterey's Golden State Theatre.

"Monterey Pop" went on to become an art house classic. It's now available as a three-DVD Criterion boxed set with two hours of music that wasn't in the original film.

"Every time I see it, it is more meaningful to me," says Phillips, the only surviving member of the Mamas and the Papas. "It was almost like a blur while it was happening, and then when you got to see it on film, you thought, wow, this is an amazing piece."

The Jefferson Airplane's Kantner, on the other hand, says he has never watched the film. "It was just another gig," he says. "Any night at the Fillmore was 10 times better than the entire weekend at Monterey."

Setting a stage

Bigger festivals would follow. In the summer of 1969, 500,000 music fans wallowed in the mud at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in upstate New York, and later that year the fatal stabbing of an audience member by a Hells Angel punctuated a disastrous all-day free festival for 300,000 featuring the Rolling Stones at the Altamont Speedway.

Adler says he and Phillips declined countless offers seeking their involvement in festivals over the years, and he says history has proved they made the right choice.

"Altamont is obviously remembered for the murder, and Woodstock for the weather," Adler says. "Monterey is remembered for the music."

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