# A CITY ≠ A SCENE: OBSERVING THE LIMITATIONS OF SAN FRANCISCO'S SIGNIFICANCE AS MUSIC SIGNIFIER

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1993, dance music journalists gestured towards "the San Francisco sound": grouping together West Coast-based electronic acts such as Young American Primitive, Tranquility Bass, Dubtribe Sound System, Single Cell Orchestra and Freaky Chakra alongside the various producers then releasing music on San Francisco's Hardkiss label.

This geographical/musical configuration resulted in press articles that aimed to distil a collective approach: one that paradoxically was noted by, UK-based writer, Kris Needs as steering "clear of any current dance categories [and] sounding like nothing else".[1] A notable further attempt at classification in the same year was *California Dreaming*: an album released by major label affiliated FFRR imprint.[2] This compilation's artwork clustered its series of tracks as an "experience" while boasting its "acid drenched hits of California sunshine".[3] One review of the UK-released version dutifully expanded on its press release/liner notes to remark on the collection as being from "an affiliation of kaleidoscopic wild riders and psyberdelic (sic) outlaws … pooling together the digi-funk hippy vibes from the psychedelic state".[4]

While the positioning and categorisation of *California Dreaming* recounts Straw's discussion of authorship where he asserts that such processes help music companies "to plan the future, to see this future as a sequence of new releases that will build upon (and draw their intelligibility from) the activity of the past", the marketing campaign for this particular release developed a narrative that was emphasised via reviews: one that explicitly drew less generally from the state of California and more specifically from 1960s San Francisco.[5] To quote Hesmondhalgh, the opportunities to fully capitalise on an emerging culture requires "a style, a look, a sound"[6], and this collective approach to imagineering and "commodity status"[7] borrowed signifiers from (and aimed to draw parallels with) a hippie culture that was similarly located: albeit some decades earlier. As Matthew notes of the time, "to someone from the Midwest who could only read about it, San Francisco appeared to be the locus of a dreamy, idealistic, neo-psychedelic renaissance".[8]

Coincidentally, Leyshon et al. state that 1993 was also the year that a "specific disciplinary engagement between geography and music" was instigated as the result of an ad hoc meeting at an Institute of British Geographers annual conference.[9] Following Attali, an interrogation of the various ways in which music is interlinked with the social conditions of where it is both made and consumed was undertaken through the connecting of academics from a range of fields.[10] Particularly, this wide-ranging research opened-up discussion regarding the implications of place on music. For Leyshon et al., music is defined as inherently spatial: influencing and mirroring the landscapes and social environments from which it emerges. Music subsequently serves as a means of constructing, rather than just reflecting, place. Thus, establishing a basis to be built upon by other researchers, this

construction of identity through localization and sound, can be broadly interpreted.[11] It may then apply to geographically located scenes, cultural heritage and ethnicity, the creation of temporary shared spaces (for example, in the case of music festivals), the urban vs the rural or, as particularly pertinent to the 1990s San Francisco-based music producers cited as inheritors of the city's 1960s counterculture, how locations can be viewed as deeply intertwined with their musical legacies.

## COUNTERCULTURAL SAN FRANCISCO AND THE EMERGENCE OF HARDKISS

Described as "a mythical event",[12] San Francisco's Summer of Love dates back to 1967 where 100,000 people congregated around the city's Haight-Ashbury neighbourhood.[13] Typified for combining anti-war politics with psychedelic music, sexual freedom and drug experimentation, a non-conformist (and often anti-consumerist) community became an internationally identifiable group that would impact on late-'60s fashion and music.[14] However, before the year was over, many of its original participants–*hippies* a group that had first been observed in 1964[15]–had abandoned the scene.[16] Russell cites "disillusionment" as the movement shifted away from its underground status but, more generally, the realities of a scene in disarray had collided with its own myth-making.[17] In October of that year, the city's Buena Vista Park played host to a mock funeral event to mark the death of "Hippie, devoted son of Mass Media".[18] The commodification of this movement had been swift: making the Summer of Love a definitive moment where post-war youth culture is reconfigured as a marketing device rather than "rebellion or revolt".[19]

Connell and Gibson note how Haight-Ashbury has since become a "key tourist site": now known for cafes and souvenir shops that reward visitors with a visual and aural reenactment of the city circa 1967.[20] Artwork associated with bands such as The Grateful Dead is prominent, as are the tie-dye garments, crystals, jewellery and other globally identified 'hippie' ephemera. This is the version of San Francisco also experienced by Gavin Bieber, Robbie Cameron and Scott Friedel when the three college friends relocated to the city at the beginning of the 1990s. Setting up the record label Hardkiss (while collectively utilising The Hardkiss Brothers moniker), the trio first gained attention via a 1992 four-track 12-inch single titled "San Francisco: The Magick Sounds of the Underground". Over subsequent releases–and particularly through the label's own compilation album *Delusions of Grandeur*–the name would come to represent the output of its founding fraternity plus their closest associates. Yet, as with that first release's title, the Hardkiss name would also become intrinsically linked with their adopted hometown of San Francisco.

When Scott Friedel died of a cerebral aneurysm in 2013, one tribute came from KCRW Music Director Jason Bentley – who, earlier in his career, had contributed the liner notes for the *California Dreaming* compilation. His words regarding Friedel's legacy traced the narrative that followed his cohort throughout their history: stating that "the San Fran based collective was a continuation of the hippie idealism of the late '60s and '70s".[21] However, in contrast, Gavin Bieber (the only Hardkiss founder still making music) refutes this suggestion of an obvious closeness to his adopted hometown's hippy community – insisting that when the trio set up the label, Hardkiss was marginalised in San Francisco because its founders *weren't* hippies: "Our success was more outside of San Francisco," he says. "We played in different cities every weekend. If you ask people in San Francisco what the influence of Hardkiss was, they might just discount it because we were exporting our sound".[22] In accordance with this visibility elsewhere and the indifference closer to home, much of the press interest in Hardkiss largely came from outside of the city. Yet this geographical disparity appears to have strengthened the connections to the Summer of Love: creating a disconnect between the realities of a nascent US scene as experienced and how it might it was imagined elsewhere. Particularly, this oft-repeated, hippy-inflected version of events appears to have stemmed from the music press in the UK. And, as Bieber notes, this proved influential in terms of shaping the perception of their own music globally:

> In the 1990s, the biggest megaphone for music culture was pretty much coming from London […] like obviously *NME* and *Melody*

> *Maker* made their way over here–but then there was like everything from *The Face* … and then there were the electronic mags: *DJ* magazine and *Muzik* and other stuff. And everyone's got their way of stringing the past into the present. But there was this kind of thing that they picked up on, which was the hippy culture connection to what we were doing. And because they were publications that were distributed worldwide and pre-Internet, they became almost like a bible for [our] culture.[23]

In reviewing press cuttings from the 1990s, there is a stark contrast between those from non-San Franciscan outlets and the smaller number of articles from publications based in closer proximity to the label. Essentially, the latter refrains from locating any specifically hippy/psychedelic components within the music. For example, a review of *Delusions of Grandeur* in the SF Weekly instead refers to the album's "seamless techno-tinted compositions" while it addresses the compilation's more ambient soundscape-like inclusions without invoking a single reference to hallucinogens or their immediate effects.[24] By comparison, consideration of Hardkiss' music from further afield instead refers to the "tripped out, drugged out",[25] the "hallucinogenic delights" [26] and "majestic psychedelic surrealism and spirit-lifting catharsis".[27] Perhaps to commentators more familiar with the San Francisco parties that Hardkiss participated in, the label and its DJs represented the vanguard: a more future-looking prospect far removed from the nostalgic hippy tourism that was evident in the city.[28]

## U.S.A. VIA LONDON

In London, there had already been an explicit visual connection between San Francisco's Summer of Love and the emergence of its dance music-propelled 'acid house' scene in the late-1980s. Paul Oakenfold advertised his pivotal club night, Spectrum using a flyer with a design adapted from a Grateful Dead poster featuring "a garish eyeball splashed with primary colours and bordered by psychedelic typefaces".[29] The designer of the flyer, Dave Little, estimates that only three out of 10,000 people would have got the reference yet many would have understood the aesthetic as "trippy". What are then described as "coded" references to the Grateful Dead would also be re-used by the designer on record sleeves for Jibaro's 'Electra' and, compilation album, *Balearic Beats Vol 1*.[30] This wasn't to be a rare example of the British acid house movement borrowing directly from San Francisco 1967 either. Melechi more widely recognised "hippy revival, consistently refracted through a subcultural mythology which it was seen to appropriate"[31] while Rietveld identifies how the formalist aspects of the club experience then appeared to be "derived from the Acid Test parties in California".[32] Club settings were almost redefined as psychedelic spaces from yesteryear–with "ultraviolet and strobe lights, projected liquid and still patterns"[33]–while Brewster and Broughton observe the multiple ways that these influences quickly played out within British club culture when writing:

> 1988 became the second 'Summer of Love' – acid house was happy to compare itself with the hippie idealism of 1967, pleased to be renewing the sixties' mission of rebellion and personal discovery. Flyers copied Grateful Dead posters or used computer-generated fractal patterns to suggest a new psychedelia; loose, colourful, unisex hippie fashions were creeping back. Timothy Leary rekindled his acid evangelism, seeing a psychedelic drug movement emerging on a scale that dwarfed his LSD generation.[34]

Yet broadening out from San Francisco and California, a mythology around other American music legacies had permeated UK club culture. Despite having been described as "post-geographical"[35], acid house's own roots were often defined as Chicago house and Detroit techno with tastemakers often still presenting a preference for American releases: a penchant that may be described as "trans-Atlantic empathy".[36] Reynolds observes that the UK's acid house scene had formed as "a subculture based

almost entirely around import records" and that, around 1988/1989, there was already "several years' backlog" of American house records for DJs to build their sets around.[37] Russell may have claimed that early UK dance music scenes had "rejected established club culture based on snobby exclusivity"[38], but the early 1990s British scene had given rise to an influential number of "purists who still swooned over their U.S. imports" that was able to promote such discernment through a growing specialist dance press.[39] Reflecting such tastes, Justin Berkman and James Palumbo's high profile opening of London's Ministry of Sound venue in 1991 was driven by the desire for a space devoted to the sounds of New York, Chicago and Detroit. Decorated with oversized logos of the most beloved of the American record labels, Ministry of Sound's first night featured Larry Levan, David Morales, Tony Humphries and Roger Sanchez – an all-American line-up that confirmed a commitment to dance music from across the Atlantic. In 1993, club night Hard Times launched in Leeds with an approach that was similarly evangelical about imported house records and, in turn, operated a booking policy built around U.S. guest DJs like Sanchez plus Todd Terry and Masters At Work. (Hard Times later launched a British-based record label that licensed or sourced new material from those same American names.) That same year, Liverpool's Cream club marked its first anniversary with sets from, U.S. DJs, Frankie Knuckles and David Morales that was revealed to have been at a cost of "£5,000 plus flights from New York and expenses". However, while this was considered to represent significant expenditure at the time, the high-profile event was observed as having "elevated the club to a new level".[40]

UK record label owner Dave Piccioni explains how this reverence for American talent affected the releases that he had poised for his house-oriented Azuli imprint in the 1990s when observing "a real snobbiness at the time about that kind of music if it was made in the UK".[41] In a move not dissimilar to how "producer Joey Negro pretended to be a black guy from New York, when he was actually Dave Lee from Essex" and labels like Z Records and studio acts including Hustlers Convention similarly "disguised themselves as American"[42], Piccioni shrink-wrapped his vinyl releases as was common practice with import releases in an attempt to be comprehended and sold as American. Each record notably featured New York contact details even though Azuli's actual base was, London record shop, Black Market Records. Piccioni explains the lengths that he went to in order to suppress this information:

> We had a US telephone mailbox with a Manhattan dial code. So we simply had people call our answer machine there. We sat in London collecting the messages and my ex-wife–who was American–simply returned the calls from our flat in Battersea [...] It was a cheap and effective way of getting noticed. We had no money for marketing and it seemed that American records sold without any PR companies or press, whereas the U.K. releases at the time needed a fair amount of promotion.[43]

The quest for location-based authenticity–a pursuit of provenance–had also existed in scenes that pre-dated acid house. The U.K. northern soul scene, for example, was built on American releases while additionally sharing a preoccupation for rarities. The (perhaps self-explanatory) 'rare groove' scene–still an active area of clubbing as house music infiltrated the U.K.–was similarly based around the highly competitive search for vinyl obscurities. In both cases, the hunger for the most in-demand records would also result in high-priced transactions: where a premium would not just be charged due to being observed as an imported product, but due to a perceived status as a rarity. In the case of rare groove, this collector culture and its ties to obscure American releases had been exploited by, band, the Brand New Heavies who attracted the attention of scene participants in 1988 with a fake import single that offered a pastiche of vintage U.S. label design.[44] Then appearing to fit in neatly with tracks from the likes of Maceo & the Macks and Bobby Byrd, this accomplished approach mirrored that of an even more successful record from one year earlier when, mainstream pop producers, Stock, Aitken & Waterman duped many critics who may have written-off the trio's work had it not been circulated as an un-credited white label–an initially assumed American bootleg–titled 'Roadblock'. This latter

example perhaps exemplifies the ability to subvert origins in order to contextualise a music release: where value judgements based on what might be categorised as 'scene snobbery' (or, more simply, 'elitism') due to geographical origin have been pre-empted and capitalised on by producers and label owners. Yet this also reveals the wider preoccupation within U.K. dance music scenes to use location as a primary method of categorisation.

## CONCLUSION

Leyshon et al. state that considering the role of "place" to music is to "allow a purchase on the rich aesthetic, cultural, economic and political geographies of musical language".[45] This is certainly tempting and may offer some vital insights. Hardkiss' Gavin Bieber, for example, cites his upbringing in South Africa as a specific influence on his approach to music making. However, considering a label like Hardkiss, we might also want to consider the limitations involved when place has been used to help ground understandings: especially given how San Francisco's particularly potent local history (plus any associated aesthetics, culture, economics and politics) may preclude consideration of other, more significant factors. As noted with the compilation album *California Dreaming*, a curated–if not entirely fabricated–context may have proved useful for marketing purposes. Yet it is perhaps indicative of the sheer weight of such legacies that these comparisons to late 1960s San Francisco persist long after the press releases have been distributed. With much of Hardkiss' output released just ahead of the mass adoption of the internet, it appears to have been a relatively small number of print articles, largely representing the wishful thinking of a dominant foreign music press, that have been copied and gone on to describe the label's music on the world wide web.

Gavin Bieber adds further context to San Francisco and its music that may have contributed to its hippy past proving so enduring within Hardkiss' own story. He says it is "*not* a music city": then highlighting how the Bay Area, while still boasting music talent, hasn't been a base (or even the main focal point) for music executives in recent times.[46] Those cities that have been 'music cities'–such as Los Angeles or London where the "majors anchor the music business in these nodes, surrounded by a dense institutional matrix of smaller record companies and related businesses"–are routinely reinvented through their vast ranging output. As networks or creative clusters, they repeatedly develop a wide selection of new music through record companies, publishers and other internationally recognised channels.[47]

Other cities, perhaps relegated to more provincial status, continue to be generally understood in relationship to landmark musical eras and/or specific musical genres. Be they Seattle, Liverpool or San Francisco.[48] While stereotyped using cultural signifiers that so easily lend themselves to commercial exploitation, their framing may be at the expense of more complex, active scenes that will challenge the press officer or tourism manager's manufactured version of events.

## NOTES

[1] Kris Needs, “The Ultraviolet Catastrophe – The Trip (Remixes) review,” *Echoes,* April 10, 1993, 15.

[2] The *California Dreaming* name is clearly borrowed from the iconic hit song by The Mamas & The Papas that, alongside the collection’s “groovy” typography, openly invites the retro-hippy comparisons.

[3] Various, *California Dreaming*, 1993, FFRR (CD): 697 124 002-2. Further compilations similarly drew from this cyber-hippy theme - often featuring some of the same artists as *California Dreaming*. Some of these would licence additional tracks from beyond California to present a more global approach yet still suggesting a synthesis of hippy and tech ideas. Examples include *United States of Ambience* (1994) and *Synthetic Pleasures Volume One* (1996).

[4] Des Hill, “California Dreaming | Various (review),” *Generator Magazine*. Issue 9, March, 1994, 55.

[5] Will Straw, “Authorship,” in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture,* ed. Bruce Horner and Thom Swiss (Blackwell, 1999), 109-208.

[6] David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries (Fourth Edition)* (Sage, 2019), 180.

[7] Will Straw, “Authorship,” in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture,* ed. Bruce Horner and Thom Swiss (Blackwell, 1999), 203.

[8] Terry Matthew, “Hardkiss: The Story So Far,” *5Mag*, May 16, 2014. https://5mag.net/features/hardkiss-the-story-so-far/.

[9] Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill, *The Place of Music* (The Guildford Press, 1998), IX.

[10] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester University Press, 1985).

[11] See Sheila Whitely, Andy Bennett and Stan Hawkins (2004); John Connell and Chris Gibson (2003).

[12] Hillegonda Rietveld, “Living the Dream”, in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture,* ed. Steve Redhead (Ashgate, 1993), 54.

[13] Russell states that there were 15,000 hippies living in the Haight-Ashbury area in 1966 with numbers ranging between 100,000 and 200,000 the following year. Irvine notes that by the mid-‘60s, the area already had a mix of “long-term residents, nearby university students, and an amalgam of outsiders such as artists and bohemians from North Beach, sexual minorities and the surge of young drop-outs”.

[14] The intense cultural focus on 1967’s ‘Summer of Love’ perhaps betrays other significant events that year including more than 150 race riots that flared up as part of the fight for social justice.

[15] Janice M Irvine, *Marginal People in Deviant Places: Ethnography, Difference and the Challenge to Scientific Racism* (University of Michigan Press, 2022), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11519906.

[16] Irvine sees the term ‘hippy’ as having “loosely conflated a number of disparate groups, such as student activists, weekend hippies, dropouts, drug addicts and individuals seeking unconventional ways of living”, 209.

[17] Kristian Russell, “Lysergia Suburbia,” in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture,* ed. Steve Redhead (Ashgate, 1993), 113.

[18] Peter Berg, “Funeral Notice,” in *Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library*. (New York Public Library Digital Collections, 1967), https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/03088b80-6a7a-0135-173b-0ed1cba3c19b.

[19] Steve Redhead (ed.), *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture* (Ashgate: 1993), 1.

[20] John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Soundtracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place* (Routledge, 2003), 228-229

[21] Jason Bentley, “Scott Hardkiss: Remembering His Music,” *NBC Bay Area*, April 3, 2013, https://www.nbcbayarea.com/local/scott-hardkiss-remember-his-music/2050473/.

[22] Gavin Bieber, interview with the author, *Microsoft Teams*, February 10, 2022.

[23] Gavin Bieber, interview with the author, *Microsoft Teams*, February 10, 2022.

[24] Aidin Vazari, “Recordings,” *SF Weekly,* July 19, 1995, https://archives.sfweekly.com/sanfrancisco/recordings/Content?oid=2132256.

[25] Lily Moayeri, *Hardkiss.org,* 1995, https://www.hardkiss.org/quotes.

[26] Reiss Bruin, “Hardkiss – 1991,” *Data Transmission*, March 25, 2014, https://datatransmission.co/blog/hardkiss-1991/.

[27] Kris Need, “Hardkiss: Delusions of Grandeur | Various Artists,” *Record Collector*, September 9, 2015, https://recordcollectormag.com/reviews/album/hardkiss-delusions-grandeur.

[28] Janice M Irvine, *Marginal People in Deviant Places: Ethnography, Difference and the Challenge to Scientific Racism* (University of Michigan Press, 2022), 251, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.11519906.

[29] Matthew Collin, *Altered State: The Story of Ecstasy Culture and Acid House (Updated Second Edition)* (Serpents Tail, 1998), 67.

[30] Alex Marshall, “In 1988, Acid House Swept Britain. These Fliers Tell the Story,” *NYTimes.com*, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/10/arts/music/1988-acid-house-summer-of-love-oakenfold.html.

[31] Antonio Melechi, “The Ecstasy of Disappearance,” in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. Steve Redhead (Ashgate, 1993), 29-30.

[32] Hillegonda Rietveld, “Living the Dream”, in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture,* ed. Steve Redhead (Ashgate, 1993), 42.

[33] Thomas Lyttle and Michael Montagne, “Drugs, Music and Ideology: A Social Pharmacological Interpretation of the Acid House Movement,” *The International Journal of the Addictions*, 27(10), 1992, 1173.

[34] Ben Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life,* (Headline, 2000), 500. Notably, the drug dimension can’t be ignored if addressing the assumed kinship between these two supposed ‘Summer of Love’ movements. Russell (1993) writes extensively on this connection, although Bieber

seemingly finds this focus less compelling. As he says: “most music culture, if not all, has a drug component … whether it’s alcohol, weed, ecstasy, ketamine”.

[35] Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture* (Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 30.

[36] Nicola Smith, *Performing Fandom on the British Northern Soul Scene: Competition, Identity and the Post-Subcultural Self*, PhD thesis, (University of Salford, 2009), 141.

[37] Simon Reynolds, “The 20 Best Bleep Records Ever Made,” *FACT Magazine*, 2008, 65-68.

[38] Kristian Russell, “Lysergia Suburbia,” in *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance on Contemporary Youth Culture,* ed. Steve Redhead (Ashgate, 1993), 35.

[39] Ben Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (Headline, 2000), 469.

[40] Ben Turner, *Cream x 10* (Carlton, 2002), 32.

[41] Daniel Cookney, *Masked: Depictions of Anonymity in Electronic Dance Music*, PhD Thesis. (University of Salford, 2015), 146.

[42] Dom Phillips, *Superstar DJs Here We Go!* (Ebury, 2009),123.

[43] Daniel Cookney, *Masked: Depictions of Anonymity in Electronic Dance Music*, PhD Thesis. (University of Salford, 2015), 147.

[44] Cynthia Rose, *Design After Dark: The Story of Dancefloor Style* (Thames & Hudson, 1991), 37.

[45] Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill, “The Place of Music: [Introduction],” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1995, 435.

[46] Gavin Bieber, interview with the author, *Microsoft Teams*, February 10, 2022.

[47] Andrew Leyshon, David Matless and George Revill, “The Place of Music: [Introduction],” in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1995, 428.

[48] 1995’s Annual Billboard Dance Music Summit was a rare occasion where national and international industry figures converged in San Francisco.

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