

Dennis McNally, *The Last Great Dream: How Bohemians Became Hippies and Created the Sixties*.

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SL: Hello again, friends, and welcome to Madison BookBeat, your community radio home for Madison authors, topics, book events, and publishers. I'm this week's host, Stu Levitan. Our guest this week is an old friend of the show, historian, author, and music publicist Dennis McNally. His new book is *The Last Great Dream, How Bohemians Became Hippies and Created the Sixties*, from our friends at DaCapo Press. And while it's mainly about San Francisco, with a bit of New York and London thrown in, it does feature several individuals and events pertaining directly to Madison. So that's why you get to hear about it here.

Dennis's first book was *Desolate Angel, Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation in America*, an outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Then came *A Long Strange Trip, the Inside Story of the Grateful Dead*, which he wrote after serving many years as the band's publicist. And in 2015, the award-winning *On Highway 61, Music, Race, and the Evolution of Cultural Freedom*, tracking American music from Minstrel 3 to Bob Dylan. He also edited *Jerry on Jerry*, transcripts of conversation he had over the years with the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia. Here's our conversation about *The Last Great Dream, How Bohemians Became Hippies and Created the Sixties*.

As I noted in the introduction, this is your fourth book that revolves around the Beats, the hippies, and the general trends of cultural freedom. When did telling the story of the post-war counterculture become your life's work?

DMcN: It snuck up on me the telling of the story snuck up on me and I didn't realize until I was well into that last book oh that's what my so-called career has been about. I grabbed on the Kerouac literally I was sitting mumbling to myself basically about possible dissertation topics. And I I was with a friend and I said out loud, maybe I'll do the beats, that'd be interesting. And my friend said, do Kerouac. His papers are at Columbia, and you can stay with my friends in the Bronx. And having a place on the subway line that for free that I could sleep on the couch was, you know, gold to a broke graduate student. I'm going to have dinner with one of those guys Monday, as a matter of fact, what, 50 plus years later. And that's the way it worked out. I went to New York, I started working on Kerouac at Columbia and stayed with what became my friends as well in the Bronx. And they were students at Fordham. And so I did that and then the same guy also turned me on to the Dead. And so by the time I was well into the Kerouac book I was aware a lot of connections culturally between Kerouac and the Grateful Dead, most obviously being their friendship with Neal Cassidy. So that led to book two. And when I was, after that, after, the Grateful Dead book came out, which of course in the interval I had become an employee and it slowed me down for, like I basically stopped working on the book for 10 years except to

take notes. And finally when that book did come out, I only knew that I had to be doing something and started poking around at various ideas and what came out was on Highway 61, which was sort of the origins of all this, where this all came from. And then I didn't know what I was doing after that. And then finally, in 2016, I was invited to curate a photo show about the Summer of Love. It was for the 50th anniversary of the Summer of Love, which was a big deal around San Francisco. And the California Historical Society asked me to curate a show for them. And it was a fun treasure hunt and after about a month or so I suddenly went oh this is a book and that became uh *The Last Great Dream* which is the origins of the Haight-Ashbury basically and so when I was nearing the end of that I suddenly was oh this you know this all fits together uh and people say, well, you know, what are you going to do next? And it was like, well, you know, it takes a subject, uh, to grab me and say, oh yes, this is worth a lot of work. And I don't have that right now. Don't have, I'm not aware of that subject as being for me, you know, as it has to, uh, it has to get me excited. So at the moment I'm retired.

SL: Well, four, four books is a pretty good run.

DMcN: I'm perfectly happy to leave it at that, if that's, you know, that and I edited one and, you know.

SL: Was there an aha moment where you saw the pre-beat Bohemians and their link to the Haight and the counterculture that said, oh, my gosh, there it is? Or did just sort of slowly you saw connections?

DMcN: Yes. I just, I'm too slow. The slowly is going to be likely my answer because, no, I've had a couple of ahas in my life, but they were mostly about sort of the process of what I was doing. The pattern, well, it's a lot easier to see it when you're done. Let's put it that way.

SL: History always makes so much more sense looking backwards.

DMcN: That's right.

SL: So the book culminates in 1967, but it starts a quarter century before with the Bay Area poets Kenneth Ruxroth and Robert Duncan. How did their meeting in 1942 plant the seed that would flower so fully 25 years later?

DMcN: The single biggest surprise that I had in researching this subject was that A, that it hadn't been done before, that nobody, that almost without exception, people started books about the Summer of Love with the charlatans who brought together LSD and dancing and music, you know, rock and roll in a bar called the Red Dog Saloon, which was up in the, it was in a sort of a tourist town up in the mountains of Nevada above San Francisco called Virginia City., I'm a historian, I immediately said, well, you know, well, where did all this come from? Where did those people come from? And I started digging and again, it wasn't so much an aha moment per se, but I couldn't go back to, it didn't feel right somehow as a historian to go back to the 30s and the, among other things, the great

strike, there's a whole complete city strike in 1934 that connected with the longshoremen. Basically what this evolved into was the complete, a fairly dense history of avant-garde art of various, of every kind, you know, painting and dance and theater and you name it, electronic composition. And as I started poking around in all that, I landed on Rexroth as the sort of the through line of the poets who, articulated the San Francisco poets articulated very explicitly his anarchist, which is not to say bomb throwing, but the idea that of maximum personal freedom. And there was a combination and then I again, studied some more and eventually connected, decided, aha, that was my aha, which was when he met with Robert Duncan, who was another one of the poets in the San Francisco scene. And what was interesting was that, well, Duncan was gay, very, you know, very overtly gay. I mean, he announced, he outed himself in 1944 in the pages of Politics Magazine, which I might add made him, basically ended his career in terms of East Coast intelligentsia, all of whom thought, well, you know, that was distasteful or something. But, Duncan was raised by a cultish family that liked Rosicrucianism and sort of the mystical approach to life. And what I read about how they met, and I might add that Rexroth was frequently homophobic and why they blended together perfectly is sort of one of life's little mysteries uh but they met in 1942 and looking at San Francisco ... I also write a lot about New York and L.A. and London all of whom were very receptive to what happened in San Francisco in the middle 60s. But the real, the initial energy started, pretty much started there. And for a lot of historical reasons. But the end result was that I saw those two artists, poets, And there were a lot of, it was a very healthy poetry scene, long before Allen Ginsberg came and wrote Howl. There was a very happening oral performance. It was a lot, it was about reading and about being in the public. And that's, you know, I said, ah, there's my beginning. I fairly quickly had my end, which was the high point of the hippie, so-called hippie scene, which was the Monterey Pop Festival, where things were kind of perfect. Everyone was happy and beautiful, young and beautiful and high and listening to great music, which was true, quite true at Monterey. And the fact is that that was in June and in part because of it and because of things like the song "If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair." The whole overload, literally population overload of the Haight made just getting through the summer of '67 frankly a miracle. I guess 100,000 people took off from the rest of the United States to come visit Valhalla, you know, the magic place. And, you know, It was a small neighborhood and it was not, no neighborhood is equipped to suddenly have an extra 100,000, most of whom were very young and without resources. And so you had to like take care of these people. And they did. And, you know, nobody, hardly anybody died in San Francisco that summer because of all this nonsense. But as I say, the high point was at Monterey when it was a matter of just sort of magic.

SL: We will get to Monterey, but to go back to the beginning of the story, after the poets you introduced us to, the painters and the sculptors and the assemblage artists, how essential were the visual arts, especially the California School of Fine Arts, later renamed the San Francisco Art Institute, in developing the new culture?

DMcN: The students, the art students at, as you say, what became San Francisco Art Institute, in the late 40s were kind of the, along with the other, with the poets, were the first

people that, that sort of listened to Rexroth and explored what you call bohemianism, that is to say, a set of different values from bourgeois day-to-day society. People whose goals were to make art, to make love, drink a lot of wine, and have fun, which is basically the bohemian code. And they were there and these people were the first sort of beat Bohemians, whatever you want to call them, in San Francisco. And the classic example, of course, is a guy named Wally Hedrick. So Wally Hedrick is this member of, as a student at what was then the California School of Fine Arts. And eventually he's a teacher there and he taught weekend programs. And it's sort of, it encapsulates what this, the story that, you know, you can sort of sums up the whole book is, so it's 1958, Wally is teaching and among his students is this kid from the mission named Jerry Garcia. And Wally plays acoustic blues music while they're painting, which infects this young man with a life what would become a lifelong desire to play the guitar. So Wally obviously had a kind of an impact on this young man. Then, he, the young man and his friend, ask Wally, "What is this Beat thing?" It's 1958. Beats are, you know, front page news. And Wally said, "You guys are Beats. Go down to City Lights and get this book." Which Jerry did. And it really became his Bible. On *The Road* was, you know, his idea that, that, uh, you, you know, you, you live for, for, for art and love and, and, uh, do not worry about, uh, about money or, you know, building a nest egg or, you know, having a house and so forth and so on. Um, he thought, basically thought of himself as a very young, the youngest beatnik. He was not, you know, a hippie in that sense. Um, but that, Cultural transfer from Wally to Jerry and then from Garcia to all the people that call themselves deadheads to this day is central to the book.

SL: So the remaining question is, when Jerry went down to City Lights to get the book, did he buy it or did he boost it?

DMcN: You know, it is a question I have kicked myself in the butt for 25 years, 30 years, for not asking because it just never occurred to me. I think the odds are good that it was Boost. Jerry, you know, was a broke street kid and a little light shoplifting was not below him. But I goofed. Sorry, boss, I forgot to ask.

SL: As you mentioned, Robert Duncan was gay. A disproportionate number of the important poets and artists and performers were sexually non-normative. This is not really a surprise. How did sexual freedom and artistic freedom reinforce and build on each other?

DMcN: Well, you know, When you're, there's a long passage in the book about when you're a poet that's not associated, and I'll get to this sexual freedom in just a second. When you're a poet and you're not affiliated with a university, you're automatically on the margins of society. I mean, you're not making any money. And yet, you know, what matters most to you is an art that, you know, you can't make any money on. And you have to find your way. So you're outside society. The same, of course, is true of people involved, particularly in the 50s, with non-normative sexuality. And so they're self-affirming that this is who I am, this is what I'm going to do, and it's going to take me outside of conventional societal rules. And if I'm to have an identity at all, then I have to find my own way. And that means basically the general, let me interrupt myself and go back to a point, which is, Freedom in America has always been defined, well, America has always sort of been obsessed with the

idea that it's the land of the free, the home of the brave, that it's about freedom. But it has basically evolved into two major forms of freedom. There's the freedom to make as much money as possible, which spirals basically out of when the United States started developing a corporate economy where wealth became, at least was the result in the hands of some, a few. And that's to this day where you have Donald Trump, whose basic only ideology is let's make more money, or at least for me. And he's doing a fine job of that. The other freedom is freedom of thought. And from that, my favorite person on the planet is a man named Henry David Thoreau, who challenged every one of the things that make up the American identity, the Protestant ethic, which means that you make a lot of money, you work hard, you make a lot of money, you die rich. The relationship to nature, which is that we control nature and nature was there to support us rather than that perhaps we are part of nature and it would be wise to pay attention to that.

DMcN: Sheer individuality plus of course anti-racism he was a conductor on the underground railroad and he was certainly even though he never drank and probably never had sex a true bohemian in that he went his own way mentally so all of that tradition keeps going and that's what you're seeing at the Art Institute in the 40s and all into the 50s. And that's why, you know, there was another source of all that which was an anarchist, to be a little somewhat limiting, but actually it was anarchist, school in North Carolina called Black Mountain College. And lots of those people, for instance, who went to this unique college that did not have grades, did not have, you know, and was mostly about the arts. Some of the most important artists in America, visual and poetry, taught there.

DMcN: The students, including Ruth Asawa, who's a very famous San Francisco artist, and a guy named Jack Ryan, who was, long story short, but Wally Hedrick was part of a group of artists that together took over a gallery, which had been created by Robert Duncan, called the King Ubu Gallery. And there were six of them, each putting up \$10 a month for the rent, which was \$60, called the Sixth Gallery. And eventually they invited Allen Ginsberg to read a poem there, and American poetry history has changed. This is remarkable.

SL: My next two questions were going to be about Black Mountain College. So either I've prepared well or you have seen my notes. So you answered the question of how Black Mountain College moved the narrative along, but there's also a slight connection between Black Mountain College and one of the most important institutions of the age and since, and that's Free Speech Radio, KPFA. Which went on the air in April 1949. It's where we meet two people who had become dominant in their fields, the film critic Pauline Kael and the shaman, holy fool, Alan Watts, who would popularize Eastern thought across the country. How important was what Watts did both at KPFA and the American Academy for Asian Studies?

DMcN: Essential again, this is, as I say, what my book is about is tracing a dozen threads, a hundred threads that end up being the San Francisco scene and the Haight . And

that includes Certainly Alan, you know, and not just Alan, but also a man named Shunryo Suzuki, otherwise known as Suzuki Roshi, who founded the San Francisco Zen Center, which institutionally along with Alan brought the idea of Zen and meditation into American culture and has since spread it around all over the country. The KPFA, It was interesting, it was originally intended as being part of a pacifist movement. Unfortunately, in the late 1949 and the 50s, there was not a very strong pacifist movement in the country. It was, among other things, McCarthyism sort of... Blocked that sort of talk. So what KPFA ended up becoming is supporting cultural freedom so that you have people like Watts talking about Asian studies where the rest of the United States was like, huh? And the same with Pauline Kael who brought lowbrow culture, which is to say film culture, into KPFA and went on to what would become the most distinguished film critic career in America.

SL: And how important to San Francisco's cultural development was its history of Chinese workers and the fact that it literally looked towards Asia?

DMcN: Of course, San Francisco is guilty of gross discrimination against those people. But of course, the people who ignored the discrimination and who were curious about that, people like Lou Harrison, who lived near Chinatown and was an avant-garde composer, an important one. Who mostly got interested in gamelan, which of course is from Bali, gamelan music. But also by growing up near Chinatown, had listened to Chinese-Asian music, which is a completely different scale, and was sensitive to it. And even though San Francisco discriminated against the Chinese, eventually, as you say, as well as Robert Duncan said, you can imagine Western culture starting in Athens and moving over to Rome and rolling through Europe and coming to the United States and it crosses, you know, in one way or the other, it crosses the plains. And it gets to San Francisco, which is sort of the last stop. You know, the next, the next stop is Tokyo. And, and, uh, um, it, it's, it, it influences being in this city. You're, you are not. The influence of the Eastern establishment is just not as powerful. You have room for people like Duncan who had already left the Eastern literary establishment behind a long time ago.

SL: We're talking with Dennis McNally. His new book is *The Last Great Dream, How Bohemians Became Hippies and Created the 60s*. If geography is destiny, and I think it is, could you create a better setting for a psychedelized neighborhood devoted to social transformation than the geography of San Francisco?

DMcN: No, you couldn't. And that's really why the San Francisco scene spawned something, the hippie ideology, if you want to call it that, whatever you want to call it, which was a mixture of sexual freedom and of pacifism that went out and found responsive centers all over. But it started in San Francisco for a number of reasons. One is that San Francisco is open to nature in a way that cities just aren't. If you stand on Haight Street in San Francisco, you can look to your side and you see this immense park, Golden Gate Park, which is right there. You can look north and see Mount Tamalpais, which is this not to get too mystical, but it is the guardian of, again, place is very important. I mean, get into a little Jungian about, you know, where you are on the planet and how that affects you. San Francisco certainly has all that. And it goes back literally to 1849 when instead of being

founded the way most cities are by a bourgeois class of business people that just want to do their thing and make money and so forth. But San Francisco was founded by a bunch of lunatic losers, people who did not fit in on the East Coast and in Chile and in China and in Canton, China, and who decided to risk their lives and gamble themselves that they might find gold. Now, obviously, most of them didn't. But clearly, that establishes a personality, a group personality that's not, it's not, you know, the way other cities evolve. And so San Francisco had its own DNA of It became a regular American city and it had corrupt cops and a corrupt political system just like normal. And it had churches and it appeared normal. But there was a strand of tolerance for crazy that was part of the DNA that never left. And there was a reason why, again, you know, Ginsburg got here in 1954 and sussed things out and was going over to Kenneth Rexroth's salons and just basically saying, this is the place. And it led to him sort of freeing up. This is a guy who had been sort of stuck in New York City while all of his friends were going around the world. And suddenly he got to San Francisco. Did some traveling in Mexico and then came to San Francisco and had freed himself enough that he then had the experience of taking peyote and being at his girlfriend's apartment actually. Looking down on what was then the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, which just recently changed its name, which, not so recently, but I just found out about it, which is kind of... Bothers me that I only just found out about it. It was like, what? I didn't get the memo. But it's got a new name. And up he was, as I say, doing peyote and it was a very classic San Francisco foggy night. And he looked out at this hotel, which had these two windows up very high.

Thought of them as eyes and decided that what he was looking at was the face of Moloch which Moloch was the Hebrew eater of souls and a sort of demonic figure and he went that was interesting when he came down and months later he sat down at a typewriter and he wrote I saw the best minds of my generation and now it went through 18 you know you can't claim it as a as a spontaneous prose because uh he edited it many many times as you would think but the result was the poem that uh that was the statement of what was wrong in America which was basically that it had lost its spirituality um and Fortunately for Alan, the chief of the police of the juvenile squad in San Francisco was the world's greatest publicist for poetry. And went and, because there were some dirty words in the poems, he went and arrested the clerk and then the owner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the clerk was named Shigetarashi Murau, they arrested him for obscenity. Which of course made everybody want to read the book to see what was dirty about it. But beside that, the judge said this is ridiculous and firmly rejected the charges, threw them out of court. And frankly, to this day, the power of that encounter fuels City Lights.

SL: So that first reading is at the Sixth Gallery on October 6, 1955. Kerouac's there, Cassidy's there, Ferlinghetti's there. You chronicle so many events in the book, musical events like Monterey, the human being, the love pageant. You've got political events like Mario Savio on top of the police squad car in Sproul Plaza, demonstrations against the House Un-American Activities Committee. What are some of the most important events Of all those events, was Ginsburg greeting Howell that first time the event that you would have most liked to have witnessed?

DMcN: Yeah, probably. Probably. And I say that because Allen is kind of the... Zellig in that, you know, he moves to America, you know, Zellig was this Woody Allen movie where this guy sort of keeps popping up in, you know, amazing places. And Allen was that, you know, sort of that guy in the American culture for 50 years. He somehow anticipated, he either created something that anticipated or he was there. And of course Howl and then he read on the stage at the Bee-In which was the sort of the high point of hippie culture in San Francisco. And so, yes, I would have loved to have been there. I will tell you a funny story, which is simply that they did, there's a movie called Howl. It's brilliant. I mean, I think it's a wonderful movie. John Hamm as Jake Ehrlich and, you know, James Franco as the young Alan. I was invited to witness, to see it before it was released as a sort of a fact checker. And I did, and I said, I only have one comment. They didn't listen to me. I had one comment, which is the scene in which Alan reads Howl. You've got everybody listening to him in rapt silence. And as you should know, in reading about it in Jack Kerouac's book, *Desolation Angels*, where he describes the scene, he was there, but he was too shy to read, but he went out, he took up a collection and bought a couple of jugs of wine and got the audience, lubricated to the point of being extra responsive. And so that as Alan started reading and, you know, because it's a very, of course, Whitman-esque rhythm poem, people in the audience, most notably Jack Kerouac, were going, "Go, go!" And chanting, and it was a group catharsis as Michael McClure would write. So it was kind of noisy and I said that's the one, the only flaw in this movie is that you make it sound like it's reverential and it was after the fact when people sort of went, "Whoa, what did we just hear?" But at the time it was like a good football game.

SL: I think the answer is clearly yes. That's the event you would have most liked to have witnessed.

DMcN: Yes. Sorry. Yes. Yes. Yes.

SL: Briefly on the set and setting aspect of psychedelics, how much did the lack of natural splendor in New York turn freaks away from acid and towards the killer drugs?

DMcN: Well, yes. One of the reasons why, as I say, I think this all originated in San Francisco, even though Greenwich Village has been the capital of dissent since Walt Whitman spouted poetry at Pfaff's Tavern. The answer is, as you say, that people certainly did psychedelics in New York. Golden Gate Park, I mean, Central Park is wonderful. Tompkins Park is tiny. And if you were, you know, an East Village hippie, it was not, you know, that's just not a great ambiance to enjoy the psychedelic experience. So the answer is, you know, as I say, it made, certainly the village was extremely receptive to what people in San Francisco were doing, but it wasn't as good an environment. You know, here you got the ocean, walk to the end of the park and you're at the ocean. You know, now there's an appropriate place for a trip. So the answer is that for, as I said, I think somewhere, for reasons of both geography and history, it's just, it's easier here. It's generally easier here. I mean, I love New York. One of the bonuses of working for the Grateful Dead was like going to New York and being paid to stay in New York three times a year. No gripes. So New York, you know, New York is the capital, but it's not, you know, it's not the ideal.

SL: One of the things about San Francisco is that you've got, in your narrative, you've got two great neighborhoods that factor, figure very heavily. What were the economic and social forces that caused the cultural center of gravity to move from North Beach to Haight-Ashbury, and how crucial was that move to what was to follow?

DMcN: Well, the move was essential. The first rule of thumb is if you want to have an arts neighborhood, let's go back to the original. Bohemia is the description of Czech People now announce Chechya. And they settled in a poor neighborhood of Paris. And the artists found that neighborhood where, you know, rents were cheap and the wine was cheaper and settled there. A man named Mourget wrote a series of essays called *C'est de la vie de bohème*, *The Bohemian Life*. Which then became a genius opera, Puccini, *La Bohème*. That's the origin of Bohemia, is that it happened to be a Bohemian, that is to say, an ethnic group of Eastern Europeans, that neighborhood. So you need a cheap neighborhood. North Beach in the early 50s was indubitably that. And so that the, and it's, you know, it's just a wonderful, just as the village, it's a wonderful Italian neighborhood with, you know, lots of nice little restaurants and coffee places to hang out and bars and so forth. And it did great. And then, you know, the people got, the word got around about Howl. And then *On the Road* came out in September of 1957. Kerouac, his partner, his friend Kerouac's magnum, you know, our first famous book. And the tourists come, as they always do. And eventually, by 1960, 61, the rents are going up and there's too many tourists prowling around. And so it's a little less attractive. One of the key institutions in all of this is something called the Tape Music Center, which was a group of electronic composers who had a much, you know, electronic music is not, you know, a major, discounting current dance music. The electronic music of the '50s and '60s, which is sort of mostly bleeps and blurps, was not the kind of thing that affects so many people. But what was interesting was that the Tate Music Center Their partners, they took up a building which happened to be one block away from the Haight and they partnered with KPFA and the Anne Halpern Dance Group and it became this crucible for change in a way that if it had just been them, it wouldn't have. It attracted the community. And there was an enormous amount in the very late 50s and early, the first three years of the 60s, four years of the 60s, there was syncretism of Again, music and theater and dance and poetry and you name it. And coincidentally, and the thing that really, the Haight-Ashbury had been a very elegant neighborhood. If you drive around it now, you see these very nice, big Victorian mansions or, you know, big, you know, very solid houses. But in the 30s, those houses had been broken up into flats because nobody could afford it. By the 50s, something even more impactful in American history, which was the National Defense Highway Act, which built all of our interstates. And at the time, the plan was to chop up San Francisco with 10 different interstates, to cut it into boxes. They got away with it in New Orleans because they ran it through a black neighborhood, as the usual politics obtained. But bit by bit, people fought off a number of freeways, and it ended up being only two freeways. But the last one to be rejected was a plan to run a six lane freeway up this Fels Street, which was...

So San Francisco has this beautiful park and then sticking out of the park is called the Panhandle. And it's a sort of a thin park that's in between two streets. And in fact, it's sort of

the living room of the Haight-Ashbury. It's right just half a block or on the edge, the northern edge of the Haight-Ashbury. And it's where the bands first started playing for free in public. Up until March of 1966, the plan had been to run this six lane freeway up that street through the Golden Gate Park and allow you to get through San Francisco 10 minutes faster to get to the Golden Gate Bridge. Fortunately, The end result of that, let me say, is that Haight-Ashbury was considered, you know, dead. I mean, it was, you know, with that freeway, it was just, it was going to be cut off and horrible. Fortunately, a lady named Sue Bierman wasn't having it, and along with a whole other bunch of people in the Haight, they fought it off. And so in March '66, it was canceled. Great. In the interval, the rents in those flats in the Haight-Ashbury had dropped to where you could get a three or four bedroom flat for 50 bucks a month. Well, you know, most, you know, no matter how hard you're avoiding a conventional life, you can probably come up with 10 bucks for rent. And so they did. And that is what brought, you know, made this neighborhood, which again, was accessible to the park. You know, it made it this lost corner of the city that nobody paid much attention to. And as a result in this being completely under the radar, creative people following the lead of the Tate Music Center started settling in the Haight. It was as simple as that. And it worked beautifully. And then people who wanted it, the first person to decide that they would start a store that reflected that demographic was a lady named Peggy Caserta and she had a store called Nasitica which was, Nasitica was one of Sappho's lovers. Peggy was gay and but the store on Haight Street, the corner of Haight and Ashbury, prescient selection, was actually started out as a as a hip London sort of style store and then after a while she took acid and oh it became a hippie store but the fact is that in other store businesses that catered to the young One of the other things, by the way, about the Haight was simply that it was on a streetcar line that connected that neighborhood very conveniently to San Francisco State University. So it was a student neighborhood, perhaps first. And then you've got the artists coming in. And as I say, they study freedom. They take a lot of LSD. A lot of the musicians had settled there. Mostly at the very beginning we're talking about folk musicians. It was definitely a wing of the folk scene. And all these people from Jerry Garcia to David Freiberg of the Quicksilver Messenger Service to Paul Kantner and Marty Ballin in Jefferson Airplane to Peter Albin in Big Brother and The Holding Company. Etc. All these guys were folk musicians. Be, you know, had reacted to the commercialization of American pop music after the initial rock and roll. Elvis goes into the army, Chuck Berry gets put away in jail, Little Richard gives up the stage for the pulpit, although he keeps going back and forth. And then there's this real building pop that's frequently very beautifully constructed music, but constructed is the emphasis. Anyway, so you have these... Haight Ashbury people who are folkies uh who are hanging out uh And then they encounter two things that changed everyone's, their entire generation's life, which is the Beatles and LSD. And they decide, hmm, this rock and roll thing, as in the hand of the Beatles, is very attractive. And they start picking up electric instruments. And then, and of course, they're doing LSD, which... Whether you approve of it or not, generally speaking, most people are never quite the same. Not massively different, just life is not quite the same after you experience a psychedelic state and realize that there's more going on than you were always taught.

SL: And that we were all connected. Given the centrality of LSD to the development of San Francisco, when we learn that the first steps in the psychedelic movement were taken not in San Francisco, but in Los Angeles, when Aldous Huxley in the mid-50s, and that the first psychedelic union of dancing and rock and roll was not the airplane at the Fillmore, but it was the birds at the LA Club Ciro's, is that important or just an amusing irony?

DMcN: I think it's mostly an amusing irony because it is true, you know, and it was very clear. This is an article in 1965 for the Los Angeles Free Press. And clearly this guy has taken LSD. His language is such, the critic. And he attributes the scene at Ciro's to LSD. And I suspect that's true. Ciro's sat 100, 150 people. Pretty quickly in San Francisco, you're literally having thousands of people in the Avalon and at the Fillmore. And what happened there just grew exponentially in a way that it didn't so much in LA. It was kind of a laboratory in LA. Again, it made LA very receptive to what was going on in San Francisco. But I would say that it was to some of it, To some extent, the birds was, that scene was a bit of an outlier that eventually the San Francisco scene sort of swept over all that was before it.

SL: In terms of the psychedelic experience, would I be correct in saying that in broad terms, there are two main strains in the United States? You've got the calm and controlled, Drs. Leary and Alpert at Millbrook, and you've got the Ken Kesey, Mary Frankster's go for broke acid test approach. That be a fair summarization of the two strains?

DMcN: Well, sort of, and then there's the third, really, which is what you were talking about, which is Dr. Sidney Gottschalk. Gottschalk? Gottlieb? I may have that name wrong. I probably do. Sidney, for sure, who was a psychologist at UCLA. So, as you already remarked, you get this first public knowledge about psychedelics that are not...

Peyote has been around forever and is certainly something that most of the Beats experimented with in the 50s. It tastes vile, it's very difficult, you know, it causes you to vomit a lot. It's not a fun experience, at least until you, you know, settle down. What Huxley wrote about in *The Doors of Perception* is psilocybin, which is a, you know, it's a pill. It does not make you want to throw up. And so you have this, you know, sort of psychic, potential psychedelic culture. The irony is, of course, is that the CIA in the early 50s had heard about, had learned about LSD in particular and psilocybin. And introduced it to the United States through a front of psychologists and some very strange people that were just sort of floating around, turning people on, individuals, that, that, because they thought it could be a truth drug and that they could administer it to foreign agents and get all their secrets. Which turned out to not be so. It certainly cut down your inhibitions, but it didn't necessarily, you know, you couldn't tell whether the person was just following some random thought or, you know, actually speaking straight. But at any rate, as you say, there was, In terms of the popular culture, you have Leary. And the problem with Leary, for me, yes, is that he tried to control LSD with what he called set and setting, which is certainly true. You want...

Doing LSD in the middle of Times Square, I would say is not recommended because it's like this assault of sensory information on you and you might get run over. But Leary tried

to codify things and the LSD experiences can't be codified. It's simply, when it was first being discussed, which was by Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond, who was working with LSD and alcoholism up in Canada, and who's the guy who turned on Huxley, they connected and eventually, At the time, what they were just talking about was it was referred to as a psychotomimetic drug, which is to say that scientists thought that what you were experiencing when you were high on LSD was an imitation of schizophrenia, which I don't see at all. I don't think I'm schizophrenic. And what... Osmond came up with instead of that was psychedelic, which is to say mind manifesting. And it's true, you know, you got what was on your mind, good, bad, fun, happy, and, and, you know that's that's the psychedelic experience um and if you were if you were very very unhappy with yourself and your state uh it's probably maybe not a good idea to take it because it can be very powerful um not that you have to be totally at you know peaceful but you know it can be it can be very challenging but as you say uh it's it You can't codify it. And the only thing that I ever heard from other people, including my own experience, was simply that When you come down, you decide that the whole world is one. It's just like Buddhism says. In my spiritual life, I took that and then was studying Buddhism as a result of working on a book about Kerouac and then eventually started practicing. To me, that's the obvious consequence of the psychedelic experience.

SL: I'm turning into a stoic, I think, in my later years.

DMcN: Be an Epicurean.

SL: Man, Epictetus and Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, they had it going on. You cannot control events. You can only control how you react to events.

DMcN: Yes, Buddhism.

SL: In terms of Leary, how much damage did turn-on, tune-in, drop-out do to the serious study of consciousness?

DMcN: Oh, I think it did. I think Leary did uncountable damage to the process. You know, he announced that phrase literally at a press conference at the New York Advertisers Club, you know, which it's just he trivialized it. A, he became megalomaniacal, you know, with the white robes and the, you know, that I'm Timothy Leary and you're not kind of thing. Kesey was just a Pacific Northwestern farmer, son of farmer, who had no desire to put straitjackets on anybody and, you know, trusted the experience enough to have the acid tests, which were these amazing experiments, which went from 50 people to 5,000 people in three months, in which you simply bring people together and everybody takes acid and you have trust and faith that it'll all work out fine, which it did almost all the time. Certainly I would trust that more than the Leary Book of the Dead and kind of thing where it's just, I never thought that my ego had gone away. So supposedly it's about ending the ego. And if you're going to stay alive, your ego is still going to be there, as far as I'm concerned. And I've gotten quite high, but I could see what was going on, and I don't feel there's any need for a completely mystical overlay, which is what Leary tried to put on it.

SL: They released some of the footage of the bus trip of Kesey, and they had the scenes where they had both the evening when Kerouac was sitting there drinking bud, looking very unhappy. And when they went to Millbrook, and Leary wouldn't even meet with him, but Richard Albert came down and was quite pleasant. Those two scenes are remarkable for what they tell us about the transfer of the center of energy from the Bohemians and the Beats to the hippies.

DMcN: Yes, I did see that, and it's true. Kerouac had simply was among the world's least qualified people for fame. Fame is when people think they know who you are and you don't know them. And he was frightened by it. And very quickly went from drinking a little wine to drinking a fifth of whiskey a day and hitting the bottle. And he was always socially conservative. I mean, he was an immigrant from a very conservative community in French Canadian culture in Lowell, Massachusetts. And this As Kesey and Neal agreed after, rather than invited him to a mad party on the Upper East Side, they should have gone quietly, the two of them, to his house out on Long Island. And, you know, it was good to connect, but dragging Kerouac into that kind of scene was not indicated.

SL: As much as you don't approve of Leary, you are a very big fan of the Diggers, with their free store and free frame of reference and street theater and so on. For all the music and fashion and drugs, you say, quote, the primary reason for asserting San Francisco as the most influential source of countercultural ideas was the presence of the Diggers. Why were Emmett Grogan and Peter Coyote and the others so important?

DMcN: The Diggers were sort of street activists who emerged from the mime troupe, that is to say they'd all been in theater. And they saw what was happening in the Haight and they saw it clearly. And they saw that among other things it was vulnerable to commercialization. But if things were free, big business couldn't do much because of course there was no money in it for them. And they had the insight to try to make the San Francisco Haight-Ashbury experience very pure. And the guy who theorized all this, it was very perceptive, was a guy named Peter Berg, who introduced an environmental, very profound environmental vision that realized that what had gone on in terms of all the prosperity that everyone was awash in in the middle 60s was a, among other things, the 19th century industrial takeover of nature and that there's high consequences to this. And other than Rachel Carson, Peter Berg is one of the really first important environmental theorists. Well, they both wrote books that were more successful than Peter's. Peter Coyote, each, you know, are more in people's awareness because, again, they've told their story. Peter mostly theorized, and it's brilliant stuff. It's important stuff. And to me, that's, again, the, the, that's the, the heritage of the San Francisco scene, um, It did not have political influence, but it had an amazing cultural influence, so that anybody now, 50 years later, who does yoga or eats organic food or is part of the peace movement in some fashion or who practices non-normative sex, that's all coming out of the 60s and in part out of the Diggers.

SL: The Mime troop was actually, had a very direct connection to a pivotal event in Madison. They were here on campus the night before the Dow protest as an obstructive sit-in to block job interviews by the Dow Chemical Company over napalm in 1967. And were

actually at the demonstration the next day, except for Coyote, who was still in bed with a big blonde co-ed.

DMcN: That was, Coyote describes that after their performances, they would go out in the audience, all performances, they would go out in the audience to solicit funds and also places to spend the night, generally with members of the opposite sex. And, you know, Coyote's a handsome devil. So, yes, he usually did well.

SL: And as Ken Burns learned, he has a very seductive and soothing voice.

DMcN: He certainly does. And it works for Ken.

SL: There's a glossary in the back of about 250 names, people who are fundamental to the narrative. Several are known to even casual observers. Many will be completely new. Some were to me. Who are some of the lesser known figures whose contributions you think should be more widely known?

DMcN: Oh Lord, Ramon Sender of the Tate Music Center, who's a composer, but and was very involved with the Chips Festival and then took off to Morning Star Ranch, which was the anarchist playground out in Sonoma County. Who else? Oh, well, my favorite character in the whole book, and one of my favorite moments in researching the book, was a man named Mel Weitzman. Mel was one of those Art Institute students back in the 40s. In the 50s, he drove a cab and painted, also played the trumpet, played jazz trumpet. And I went and interviewed him because in 1964, as was not uncommon in the beat scene, he was basically a beat. He met Suzuki Roshi and started meditating at the Zen Center and eventually became the abbot of the Zen, to cut the story short, became the abbot of the Zen Center and then eventually the Berkeley Zen Center. Very important fellow in Asian thought in San Francisco, although again not a name that most people know of. I went and interviewed him and it turned out not terribly long before he died and we're talking about stuff and I'm getting good stuff and then he happens to mention and I had not I don't know why I didn't know this but that he had been married to Ruth Weiss. Ruth Weiss was this very you know sort of paradigm bohemian poet. She kind of then invented jazz poetry. She had been in Chicago and was reading her poetry to a bunch of friends who were players and they started backing her. She never recorded, which is why people know about Ferlinghetti and Rexroth, but less her. But she was quite a character and quite a person and And when he told me that they'd been married and here's this Zen Abbott and this wild lady with purple hair that refused to capitalize her name, my jaw truly dropped. And I, oh, tell me more about being married to Ruth Weiss. And we, he took, you know, we did that. But the connection, you know. Again, it was more about the, just the connection that, uh, I knew that he was central to this story and, and he was, he just, uh, became, you know, at one end and the meditational end, rather than the, again, the, the Bohemian, the so-called Bohemian end. Were there other things that you didn't fully understand or maybe even misunderstood until you started doing the research and writing? I can't answer that question because you know, those are the things you, you realize you, you, you rise your, your opinion. Eventually you look back and you say, ah, my opinion

expanded at that point. I was less that I was wrong, but this, that things, things were richer and freakier than I first imagined. And you fix that by study. So I studied. Yeah.

SL: Well, let's try this one then. Table for four at the restaurant of your choice. Who are the three others from the book joining you for dinner? I assume Jerry would be one.

DMcN: Jerry would be fun. Gary Snyder. Who there's a great scene just after the Bee-In, the Oracle brought together the poets and Leary, it's called "The Houseboat." It was on Alan Watts's home to talk about, you know, where's the counterculture going? And Leary is like, recites these platitudes about, you know, getting more publicity and was it plant, you know, plant a flower on the, in the highway and, you know, it'll get, it'll get TV support and, you know. You know, it was all about PR. And Gary's going, no, no, no, you know, this is a chance for us, but it needs to be practical. We need to like actually know you can't just go out and farm. You have to learn how to do that. And Gary was just... he was acknowledged by many people and still is as the poet laureate of Northern California but of course the hard work of living a subsistence lifestyle which he's done since for his entire life is people you know it's usually they don't want to work that hard.

SL: You've got one more sea.

DMcN: Maybe Lenore Candell, who was another one of the poets.

SL: You mentioned the Oracle. Late 60s San Francisco had the Oracle and the Berkeley Barb. In simple terms, the Oracle's about rainbows, the Barb's about lightning. If you're living in San Francisco at the time, which would you have preferred?

DMcN: Well, I would have been reading them both. You know, I'd be shaking my head over some of the sillier, you know, canonizing Leary. The Barb was clearly interesting and rabble-rousing and I would support that. It was also about the most miserably edited rag in history. I mean, literally the, sorry, I'm a writer and I like the words to at least be spelled correctly. And the Barb was fairly grim in terms of just, it was sloppy. And, you know, from the very beginning, it got by on ads for things that were not necessarily legal.

SL: You're definitely not a fan of Walter Hickel's editorship of Ramparts and Social History of the Hippies, which I have a copy of right here because I scored a collection of Ramparts magazines. What about the so-called straight press? How important was Ralph Gleason in legitimizing the music scene from jazz to acid rock?

DMcN: In terms of the musicians of the Haight, Ralph was God. I mean, he was open and warm and was covering all that stuff at a time when, you know, he was the first, you know, in the 50s, he was the first jazz, full-time jazz critic at an American daily newspaper. And he had a gravitas and respect that, for instance, when the police messed with Bill Graham, the power of the Chronicle was behind Bill Graham and kept him in business because they literally made fun of these of these cops who were. Enforcing, you know, 100-year-old dance ordinances and, you know, stupidity. Ralph, you know, Ralph was very much, you know, important in business terms, and then, of course, helped co-

found Rolling Stone, which became the, you know, the voice of rock and roll. So between Ralph Gleason and Herb Cain, San Francisco had it pretty good. We had a guy that you don't know named Thomas Albright, who was an art critic, who again, paid respectful attention to all the beats in the 50s and 60s. The Chronicle, I talk about in the book, it was very, it was a beacon for freedom. It was not a great newspaper like the Times. It was a, it had great features, including for my money, the best columnist in America ever, Herb King. And Herb's attitude, he might make fun of you, but his attitude was if you brought honor and credit to San Francisco, I'm for you. And so he he said nice things about the Grateful Dead, even though obviously he was not he was not going to be going down to the Grateful Dead show.

SL: How dismaying was it to read the Hunter Thompson coverage in May 67, which you say oozes contempt to an astonishing degree?

DMcN: And it did, and I've never understood it because there's a famous quote that came just a couple of months earlier about that we would win and it wouldn't be a matter of confrontation. The hippie scene was good. And I forget what the context was. I think it was after the BN. Yeah, no, it was after the BM, but I forget what he, what that wrote. But then he did a longer piece for the New York Times in like June. And yes, it's, I don't, whatever it was in the interval, he had soured on what was going on in the Haight. And again, by the, by, by spring, you've got, you know, tens of thousands of kids. Sort of flowing into the Haight and it's to some extent coming unglued and his piece certainly reflected that.

SL: So as the Haight becomes, the Haight became dysfunctional essentially after the being, is that right?

DMcN: Exactly. All the stuff in '66 happened under the radar. And in that peaceful quiet, it worked. The Be-In attracted at least 30, probably 40,000 people. The media just descended. And they had no clue what they were seeing. All they knew is that they saw people wearing, to them, strange clothes, saying strange things. And they just, they said, "These people are strange." And that's sort of, that was the coverage. The Haight becomes overcrowded, chaos. We got runaways. We got a very bad scene.

SL: And yet as one dream apparently died, the dreaming continued and some positive things happened. How did the untenable conditions of overcrowding lead to the Haight-Ashbury Free Clinic and Freeform Radio?

DMcN: Music had changed and Tom Donahue, was a radio guy, he had fled Boston because of a potential scandal, a payola scandal, and he realized that with all this marvelous music on FM, you could turn it into like being in a friend's living room where you just play tracks or the whole album. And that was a safer substitute for the Haight, which had just become as you say, untenable. The same thing was the creation of free medical care, which is still going on. David Smith is still practicing free medical care in San Francisco. And he regards it as a right, not a privilege, healthcare. And I think that's a healthy attitude.

SL: The book's big finish, June '67, the Monterey Pop Festival, as glorious as memory paints it?

DMcN: Oh, yeah. Oh, it was, it was, here's, here's, you know, here's the punchline. You have 7,000 seats. There were probably 30,000, 7,000 seats in the arena, which is in the middle of a large county fairgrounds. There were at least 30,000 people. There and yeah and on Friday you know the every cop in for miles around had been because they were you know worried about this invasion of Monterey by Saturday afternoon so we're not talking about the whole weekend which is one night the chief is sending his troops you know a lot of his cops home because it was clear there just wasn't going to be a problem And there wasn't. And the picture for that, which is one of my favorite objects in the whole book, it's the next to the last picture, the last pictures of Jimmy on stage, duh. But the one before that is a picture of a cop, every chair, had an orchid placed on it. And there was this cop who had collected some orchids and was stringing them on the antenna of his motorcycle because he didn't have anything to do and he had this big smile on his face. And we like happy cops. This is a good thing. And that picture expresses the best side of Monterey.

SL: So when all the cards are down and there's nothing left to see was creating the counterculture 60s the most important thing the bohemians did for American culture and consciousness?

DMcN: Well yeah it was they were they as Jerry Garcia used to say to me all the time they were part of a tradition that goes back to Thoreau and that those ideas are not going away. Right now, with such a conservative political scene going on, that's not only political and conservative, but it's hateful about things like victimizing trans people and so forth. It's just, you know, really? I mean, do you really need to do that? I don't think so. But the point is that all of this stuff is the same issues in different form, and it's not going to go away.

SL: And that is where we're going to have to leave it with Dennis McNally. Again, the book is *The Last Great Dream, How Bohemians Became Hippies and Created the Sixties*. It's from our friends at DeCapo Press. I'm not exactly sure how we're going to mark the big birthday next Monday. I'll be back on July 27th with another old friend, Ben Sidran, whom Dennis quotes in *The Last Great Dream*. Ben will be talking about his new book, *Cool Cat Blues, The Life and Times of Georgie Fame*. Until then, on behalf of News and Public Affairs Director Nate Carlin, Engineer Jeffrey Calhoun, and the entire Madison Book Beat team, I'm Stu Levitan. Thank you for joining us. Now, as the aforementioned Ben Sidran plays us out with a little bit of Little Sherry, please stay tuned for Alex Wilding White and All Around Jazz. You're listening to WORT 89.9 FM Madison, listener-sponsored community radio since 1975.