
By Glenn C. Altschuler  Mar 18, 2018

'ASTRAL WEEKS: A SECRET HISTORY OF 1968'

By Ryan H. Walsh

Penguin Press, $27

Appearing on public television channel WGBH’s “What’s Happening, Mr. Silver?”, “the first TV
show that spoke to the stoned generation,” Mel Lyman, a former musician in Jim Kweskin’s Jug Band who had become the guru of the Fort Hill Community in Boston, was asked if 1968 was a holy year and he was its avatar

“Sometimes, I am the avatar,” Lyman said, “and sometimes, I’m asleep.”

Although 1968 was probably not a holy year, it was certainly turbulent. In “Astral Weeks: A Secret History of 1968,” Ryan Walsh, a journalist and member of Hallelujah the Hills rock band, examines several of the year’s lost episodes. Loosely organized around Lyman’s Fort Hill Community, its underground newspaper and Van Morrison’s iconic rock album “Astral Weeks,” the book draws on dozens of interviews to recapture the sensibility, sense and nonsense of a half-century ago that may seem to some like ancient history.

“Astral Weeks” focuses on popular culture and politics in Boston. The city, Walsh claims, was ground zero for the folk music revival and the hallucinogenic revolution. And Boston became “the epicenter for Vietnam War resistance.”

These claims may be a bit exaggerated. However, “Astral Weeks” demonstrates that a whole lotta shakin’ was going on in Boston. Walsh provides the back stories of Frederick Wiseman’s controversial documentary “Titicut Follies;” the Boston Strangler murders; Michelangelo Antonioni’s flop film, “Zabriskie Point” (and lead actor, Mark Frechette, who joined Fort Hill, robbed a bank after he was evicted from the commune and died a suspicious death in prison); and Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Dass), the high priests of hallucinogenic drug use.

Especially interesting is Walsh’s account of the role played by James Brown’s concert at the Boston Garden in the aftermath of the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Broadcast live on WGBH (at the request of Mayor Kevin White), the concert apparently helped keep the city relatively quiet compared to the riots that broke out in Detroit, Baltimore, Chicago and Washington, D.C.

In a city with a reputation for racism, Walsh reminds us, White’s “sigh of relief lasted approximately a day.” On April 7, 1968, the United Front, a coalition representing nearly every black organization in Boston, was established. Among its 21 demands was a transfer of ownership of white businesses in ghettos to blacks and a payment of $100 million to the black community.

In May, several anti-war activists, including Dr. Benjamin Spock, adviser to generations of parents, were sentenced to prison. In July, two servicemen were stabbed on the Boston Common. “The Summer of the Hippie,” Walsh writes, “was coming to an end.”
It’s worth asking whether there really was a hippie summer in 1968. Walsh’s compelling narrative, after all, focuses on only one aspect of American culture. In December, Walsh notes, in a brief conclusion, the Apollo 8 astronauts glimpsed “the mysterious dark side” of the moon and viewed Earth “as a whole planet.”

The year 1968 is best viewed in this way as well, with Walsh’s cast of characters only part of a larger, more complex story.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.