

Now the Grim Reaper wears flowers in San Francisco

By Charles Lieurance
Senior Editor

"There has been a crystals renaissance in the rediscovery of these tools in what can be called 'sacred technology.' Translated, this means that crystals facilitate alignment with your spiritual evolution, helping you on the path to healing. Come find out how to apply the use of these crystals in attaining your 'Highest Good.'"

—San Francisco "New Age" classified advertisement

"Last year we closed this street off, no problem. There were hundreds of us partying in the streets. Where is everybody?"
"They're dead."
It was a flat, lifeless, resigned re-

sponse to a naive question, a response offered by the old gay guard on Castro Street, San Francisco, New Year's Eve 1987.

The West

True, last year the gay population of the city's Castro district had created a throng of color, feather boas and screeching noisemakers, but since then thousands had died of AIDS. At a quarter till midnight, in the final moments of a lethal year, about a hundred people, maybe less, tried to create enough noise to raise the dead and close the street. They skipped frantically across the streets on green lights and were easily halted by one police officer on the red ones. They tried to hold hands and make a circle

to block the intersection, but the display of unity never happened. One gay man with long black hair turned his face to the cold northern California sky at midnight and shouted, "We made it through another year!"

Two lesbians tried to TP a police car, but lost interest.

Caught in the skipping feet was one of the city's numerous free newspapers. This particular one advertised plans to turn Alcatraz into a "New Age" Eden, a holistic, karmically sound, pyramid-energized, crystalline paradise where Paul Winter's hymns to harp seals and whales would float listlessly out to sea — where tourists stood at the rails of tour boats trying to imagine what the great, unencroachable prison once looked like. People come to the West for

decadence, for the brine smell and unscrupulous undertrimmings of the Barbary Coast, for glimpses into the often sanguinary mythology of those denizens of America packed next to the jagged cliffs that become sharper and fiercer as one travels north along the coast highway from L.A.

Since a tourist can't see the prison where Al Capone sat imprisoned but still enthroned, they head for the remarkable cavernous bars of Chinatown, with ornate Fu Manchu doorways. They rarely get as far back into the smoky recesses as they'd like, but they sit at the bar and imagine bargains whose negotiations began in some primordial dynasty that culminate with incense and ritual somewhere beyond the bar and well before the back alleys.

Acid. It has remained. It's the cleanest and best acid you can get in this country. It's not as monstrous as Greek acid, but its subtlety is its glory. The lysergic imagination still creates most of the images in Haight Ashbury, where hippie debutantes buy novelty hookahs and step into the Neighborhood Gap outlet for a pair of stonewashed jeans.

On New Year's Eve they crowd into Oakland Coliseum for the ritual called The Grateful Dead, which is an inherently lysergic ritual. And here the Dead are at their populist best, piping epic space jams into the lobby where hundreds without tickets recreate the concert via substance abuse, whirling in hypnotic wheels of tie dye, which begins to mat against them like colored crepe paper from the high school proms these misfits never attended. Inside there are rows of tape machines and pictures are taken freely. Jerry Garcia sings in a fragile voice, "I will survive..."

Just like on Castro Street, where the police are swatting the celebrants off the street with little effort, where they are turning down the throb of Bronski Beat and searching for a lullaby to rock them slowly into insensate forgetfulness.

The year-end news in San Francisco says that this year more people than live in all of Omaha crammed onto the Golden Gate Bridge to celebrate its 50th anniversary. No one at the start of 1988 could say which meant more, closing the bridge or not closing the street.

JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT IT WAS SAFE TO BE DEAD.

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