

Full Moon Festivals

By

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We didn't invent them. For millions of years on nights of the full moon human beings have gathered together around fires on beaches and Mountain tops to drum and dance and celebrate their lives. As industrialization overtook the western world and people spent more time indoors living in artificial environments, our contact with nature and the movements of the moon and stars faded to nearly zero, at least for most urban dwellers such as me.

Then psychedelics were released to the world in the 60s and blew a hole through the roof, so to speak. What was ancient was made new, and millions of people touched their cosmic roots and rejoiced. Like seed spores we scattered from our pods usually large urban centers and moved to the country, re-settling in small families, tribes, farms, collectives, and countless creative attempts to get back in touch with the earth. We started organic gardens, made our own yogurt and bread, broke old habits and started new ones, all in an attempt to become healthy, stop contributing to pollution, and get back to the garden. (Eden, I suppose.)

Full Moon Festivals were started in Santa Cruz by a small group of musicians and dancers in Aptos in 1968, back when there were more uninhabited mountain tops and fewer neighbors to complain about parking or noise. Always semi-private, by word of mouth special invitation only, Moon Festivals were spontaneous religious celebrations incorporating organic foods, live music and dance. We tried to find high remote meadows where folks had to hike in to reach the sites, thus reducing chance encounters of a weird kind with the law. For over three years we held them whenever the weather permitted, then ended them abruptly in 1972 for reasons I will explain further on.

In 1968 I had just moved from San Francisco to Santa Cruz where I was hired to teach English and writing full time at Cabrillo Community College. My girl friend Sally, a professional Belly Dancer in the San Francisco Bay Area, had moved down with me. Almost immediately we connected with Don MaCaslin, who lived down the road, and shortly after that an itinerant black Congo drummer named Marcellus Barnes and his pregnant white girl friend (old lady) Nancy moved into the one room cabin behind our house on

Trout Gulch Road. Nancy was pregnant and wanted to have the baby through natural birth at home. Sally and I agreed to support her through the effort. That's when I met midwife Raven Lang and started connecting up with several other budding alternate communities taking root throughout the Santa Cruz Mountains, such as Camp Joy and the Community Food Co-op. Between Marcellus, Don, and the fledgling performing art communities of Cabrillo College and UCSC, I was quickly introduced to the musicians and dancers from Boulder Creek to Big Sur.

Of course, I was also connecting with the professional literary community as well, but that group didn't attend Moon Festivals.

The full moon festivals were born one day when Sally, Marcellus & Nancy, their friends Fred & Roberta, and I went for a hike through the abandoned apple orchards behind my house on Trout Gulch Road. Many of the trees were still heavy with delicious fruit, and we decided to come back later and harvest some of the apples, which we did. We climbed to the top of the ridge where we had a great view of Nisene Marks State Park and the Bay. Fred mentioned that the moon would be full the next night and suggested that this would be a great spot to have a fire and play music. We all agreed. Fred suggested that we dig the fire pit further back down the hill in the center of a small flat meadow where it wouldn't be visible from the ridge. We also decided to haul up several jugs of water, to be safe.

Then we started thinking of all the musicians and dancers we knew who might like to come. After we hiked back down to my house, we started calling friends. Within 24 hours we had contacted at least fifty people. Most of them brought friends or families or both with them. Many also brought food and drink and various exotic ingestibles to share so we could get loose in a safe place and have a good time.

We dug the pit and gathered wood that afternoon a ritual that a core group always performed with prayers and pipe offerings. On that first night, people started arriving around five and they kept on coming, filling my driveway, parked in my garden, and squeezed along the narrow edge of Trout gulch Road for half a mile in either direction. Twenty five or thirty of us started up the trail around six PM, playing African thumb pianos (kalimbas), blowing wooden flutes, shaking bells, tapping drums, humming and talking quietly as we wound our way to the large flat space in the center of the meadow we had cleared for the fire. That walk was magical, and the line kept coming as more people arrived and parked below and followed the trail

to the top. Marcellus and I had already laid the foundation for the fire and our group circled the fire pit holding hands. Offering Indian tobacco to the Four directions in Marcellus's three foot long, feathered and beaded horn-carved peace pipe we praised the Creator, gave thanks for the moment, and as the full moon rose over the mountains we fired up the logs and started to drum.

Every Moon Festival was similar to that first one in that the drumming was continuous over the next several hours, intermixed and overlaid with dozens of other instruments, while fire dancers of all ages leaped and swooped around the edges of flame. Saxophones, clarinets, trumpets and violins played solo and ensemble, sometimes riffing recognizable tunes, but more often than not expressing a spontaneous approach that echoed the free spinning and contact-improvisational moves of the dancers; overall we created a wild, rhythmic cacophony which both terrified and delighted us. It was like Coltrane's *Love Supreme* and Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* fused into fire music shooting sparks at the moon. Don MacAslim wailed away on his vibraphone while two or three percussionists at once whacked their mallets on Don's marimba; Don's string bass player, Dean, always hauled his bass up through the bushes to give Don back-up, and the two of them laid down solid lines behind the drummers all night long.

As the moon rose to its peak and descended, we paused from time to time to eat, to drink, to howl at the moon. Children fell asleep on blankets or tucked in sleeping bags; lovers slipped off to become humping shadows under the trees. Moon Festivals were heavy imprint nights when everyone fell in love with everyone else and curious couplings occurred.

In the morning at least a dozen families were still on the hill, drumming up the dawn. The survivors would gather in a circle for a morning prayer of thanksgiving and a debriefing, discussing the night's events. Then we filled in the fire pit and packed our trash back down the hill to my house where we had breakfast and started planning for the next full moon.

Over time we moved the site to at least a dozen locations around the county, including one or two beaches, but we liked mountain tops best, especially when there was no access road and everyone had to walk at least a ½ mile to reach the site. As long as we stayed with that plan we were fine.

However, over time the Moon Festivals became popular. Even though we only notified people by word of mouth 24 hours before each event, the gatherings had grown quite large, sometimes numbering in

the hundreds. One night I saw what seemed to be the entire Cabrillo modern dance department doing cartwheels all around the fire, and another night it was the UCSC dance group. Members of many local bands would show up to play always acoustic. Warmth and Oganookie, were at least two of the local groups frequently jamming, and members of the Cabrillo jazz band were always present

The Moon festivals ended just as spontaneously, by general consensus, after Easter Sunday morning in 1972. Sometime around midnight our location at a site near Bonny Doon was announced over the microphone at the Catalyst Bar and thirty or forty Hells Angels invaded our party, forcing us to play the hottest and hardest we ever attempted, just to keep those crazies dancing until they dropped! We couldn't even stop for a juice break until 3 AM that morning, and then only for a few minutes before the Dark Angels started shouting again. Since we had lots of small children, nursing mothers, family dogs, and generally non-violent musicians, we had to out-stone them with the sheer boogie-power of our drums and instruments. We did, too, and got through the night with only one incident and that was down at the neighbor's gate, through which they crashed. The Angels terrorized the elderly owner of the peacock farm next door, who went back inside and called the cops. Who can blame him? By then it was nearly dawn and the rude crowd roared away, leaving the rest of us exhausted and shell-shocked, sprawled on the hillside. We had survived and when the sun came up many of us were reborn, which is to say we rose up with an altered attitude, a new perspective on Moon Festivals. We had faced our worst fears and tamed them, but the cost was huge. We agreed to disband the moon festivals for at least a year. Then our lives took off in a hundred different directions and we've never been the same since. Except for a few smaller spontaneous events over the years, our Santa Cruz Moon Festivals have retreated back into our primal roots, misty memories of mystic moments that tend to blend and blur together into one long throbbing song of joy.