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Entertainment

Santa Cruz County Stories: UCSC's Ralph Abraham keeps alive the memories of Santa Cruz's hip golden era



Bohemian Santa Cruz comes alive through the colorful writing of historian Ralph Abraham. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

By **Wallace Baine**, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*

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33 COMMENTS

SANTA CRUZ >> Something happened in Santa Cruz 50 years ago. Ralph Abraham calls it a “miracle.” And he’s made it his mission that no one forgets it.

Of course, the cultural transformation that we now refer to as simply “The Sixties” swept the country, even the world. But, as Abraham tells it, Santa Cruz was one of the most vivid illustrations of that rapid social, cultural and political change. In effect, Santa Cruz was the Sixties in microcosm.

The longtime mathematics professor at UC Santa Cruz has been fascinated by the Sixties as both a participant and as a chronicler. He has just published a new book, “Hip Santa Cruz,” a kind of oral history of the cultural events of the 1960s that transformed the city.

Before the arrival of the University of California campus in 1965, Santa Cruz had some trace elements of the counter-culture, from a few avant-garde artists to its defining surfing scene. But the opening of UCSC signaled a sudden shift in cultural norms in Santa Cruz. In almost no time the hippies had arrived.

Abraham’s new book is a series of first-person accounts of Santa Cruz in the period between 1964 and 1970, focusing on such crucial centers of cultural change as The Catalyst, which opened as a counter-culture coffeehouse catering to the university, and the Barn in Scotts Valley, a seminal concert venue for psychedelic bands of the era.

Abraham himself didn’t come to Santa Cruz until the fall of 1968, by which time he was already a full professor of mathematics at Princeton University. It wasn’t long after moving to a Victorian mansion on California Street near Santa Cruz High School that he began hosting large groups of people discussing religious and philosophical subjects on everything from Tantric mysticism to the Tibetan Book of the Dead.

Fast forward more than three decades later. In 2002, Abraham, along with friends Judy Lomba and Tandy Beal, started up another social circle, this one made up of people who had stories to tell of Santa Cruz’s transformation in the hippie era. Thus began an ambitious online project to save recorded interviews, photos and other documentation of an era that most Santa Cruzans today are too young to remember.



Historian Ralph Abraham brings his love for a bygone Santa Cruz era to print. (Shmuel Thaler — Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Getting to Know ...

Getting to Know

Ralph Abraham

Author/editor of: ‘Hip Santa Cruz: First-person Accounts of the Culture of Santa Cruz, California in the 1960s’ (Epigraph Books).

Occupation: Retired professor of mathematics. He actually still teaches one quarter per year at UC Santa Cruz, where he has taught since 1968. He’s known for his course ‘Chaos, Fractals and the Arts,’ which combines art history, computer graphics and mathematics.

Originally from: Burlington, Vermont.

Came to Santa Cruz: 1968. Abraham was a professor at Princeton University in his early 30s when a UCSC recruiter visited him. He had developed an interest in psychedelic culture and mystical experience, but had no interest in relocating to California. ‘I accepted the free airline ticket to see friends,’ he said. His interview didn’t go well, he said. But before leaving, he went to find a friend at the Barn in Scotts Valley, where “I saw the musicians playing inside large metal sculptures, psychedelic paintings on the wall and 300 people stoned on LSD dancing to the music.’ Soon after, he changed his thinking: ‘I was interested in Santa Cruz the town, not Santa Cruz the university. But it was a job, so I accepted it.’

Author of: Several books on mathematics, chaos theory and philosophy, including ‘The Evolutionary Mind,’ and ‘Chaos, Cosmos and Creativity’ with Terence McKenna and Rupert Sheldrake. Has also written mathematics textbooks and was the founding director of the Visual Math Institute at UCSC.

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