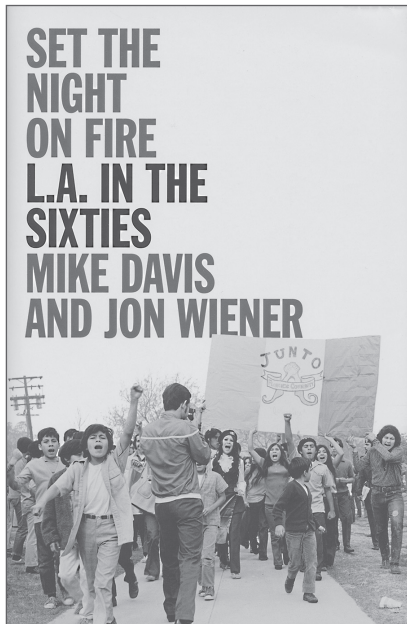


SET THE NIGHT ON FIRE

L.A. in the Sixties

Mike Davis and Jon Wiener

Verso (\$34.95)



A few years ago, a splendid book of Los Angeles murals described young neighborhood residents as they looked wonderingly at the faded images of Chicano self-identification and struggle: what are these, where did they come from? A glorious as well as painful chapter in the past of one of the world's great cities is now on view again in *Set the Night On Fire*, a work rich with history important to all of us today.

Two veteran authors allow themselves vast detail to tell about us about the cradle of “counterculture,” in all the far-flung rebellious meanings of the term. It is also the story of L.A.’s contested racial space, with contradictions ranging from radicalized white

youngsters in the suburban sprawl to Chicano Teamsters breaking strikes.

When the saga begins, in 1960, Los Angeles is in many ways a Southern or South-inflected city. Racial barriers ruled, something understood well by those African-Americans arriving from the South during and after World War II. But it was also a zone of heavy hypocrisy. Liberalism could be awfully good for growth.

The Left had previously been powerful and influential in Southern California, from the movie industry to the labor movement to ethnically divided communities. The red scare deci-

mated these strengths but the civil rights movement compelled community leaders to engage in a masquerade about fair housing, employment, and so on, insisting things were somehow getting better.

Johnny Otis—band leader, multiracial local TV and radio star, and columnist for local black newspapers—might be as good a personal symbol as any for the struggle soon to unfold. Future Black Power and Brown Power leaders were already attending local colleges. School integration had supposedly begun, although in practice it mostly had not.

L.A. Police Chief William H. Parker personified everything they were up against. Like a figure out of a noir novel, Parker was at once an extortionist with secret files on political opponents and rivals, intimate relations with the mob, and a taste for publicity. The Left, including Los Angeles CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) and the Black Muslims, as well as a succession of moderate reform groups, offered him welcome targets. Los Angeles Democrats rightly feared that white backlash could drive them from elected office and it was never clear whether they wished to offend the real estate lobby with a tough anti-discrimination law on housing—the most precious of all resources in the booming region.

Add the Vietnam War and the explosion seems, in retrospect, to have been inevitable. But it would always have a certain L.A. vibe—as the 1966 Buffalo Springfield hit “For What It’s Worth” captured—of restlessness and undefined alienation, shadowed by a paranoid and heavily armed police force. The mostly Jewish, middle-aged women who had survived the virtual demise of the once-powerful Communist

Party (and kept their acquired political skills) were as much a part of this picture as the racial tension, the hitch-hiking teens, and the nightlife that—thanks in part to lefty nightclub owners—helped turn rebelliousness into a veritable music of rebellion.

Radio station KPFK brought a wide-open Pacifica radio. The tabloid *Los Angeles Free Press* brought the underground press, or actually *made* the underground press, because founder Art Kunkin (a protégé of Pan Africanist thinker CLR James) showed how an avowedly freaky, left-wing community tabloid could garner a mass audience of a quarter million readers. Though not everyone was freaky! The congealing of a left-wing Catholic community, empowered by the farm workers’ struggles among Latino neighbors nearby and the Second Vatican Council far away, likewise added to the sense of massive potential changes.

1965 was the year of the Watts Riots. L.A. changed or might have changed, but the sense of “Black violence” held strong. And the next year saw major blunders on the Left, not for the last time. At a major peace rally in La Brea Park, preceding the big anti-war march, H. Rap Brown spent his rhetoric on Israel instead of Vietnam. Happily, Muhammad Ali came on next, freshly convicted of draft evasion, a simply tremendous figure of the time. Soon, the L.A. Red Squad attacked the crowd of 10-15,000 (mostly peaceful, middle-class white people) in what the authors call “one of the country’s biggest Democratic strongholds.”

LBJ was shaken. Public sympathy for the LAPD’s continual attacks on Black people was shaken. Politics radicalized, if incrementally. A newly organized, deeply

sincere, but repeatedly stumbling Peace and Freedom Party could not stand up to the Eugene McCarthy campaign, especially against the background of the Tet Offensive. The Democratic Party would continue to dictate the terms of progressive politics; self-avowed revolutionaries were not going to get very far, except in repeated, vivid moments of martyrdom.

In a way, the rest of the saga is already set by 1968. Chief Parker, intimate to Robert Kennedy, would fall from power because he threatened J. Edgar Hoover's princely authority, based on a bigger haul of secrets. A first Black mayor would be elected, but would come to represent an adjusted system of urban/suburban commercial and real estate expansion even more lucrative than before.

Probably for some readers, the story unraveled in the last third of this monumental volume will seem more grim than otherwise. But that is reading too much backward, when the reality of the political and cultural unfolding is tremendous and unforgettable. Take the rebellious music scene. Popular arenas were burned down repeatedly by right-wing Cuban terrorists, no longer in the pay of the CIA and uncontrolled by the FBI—but the music surged and resurged, with some of our finest artists emerging from it and sometimes (like Janis Joplin) destroyed by it.

The Chicano movement is described with a passion for detail in one of the most moving chapters of *Set the Night On Fire*. Public education, deeply racist at its core, now saw walkouts known as Blowouts. Soon the Chicano Moratorium offered a new dimension in the anti-war movement, in the very neighborhoods where military

recruitment, especially into the Marines, had been a tradition for generations. Vast marches with signs in Spanish marked a huge transition for the community and so did, in a way, the LAPD response: normally a matter of billy clubs and threats, this time began the use of gas meant for military conflicts.

In part because of this scene of horror, a multi-racial, multi-generational peacenik public was awakened. Not (to repeat a key point) that the Democratic Party was going to be overturned. But new leaders emerged, suspiciously familiar to long-term observers of American Left politics; it was the experienced left-winger Burt Corona, training young Chicanos to lead their own movement, who perhaps best exemplified doing what can be done, working within coalitions and not blaring revolutionary tones so loudly as to scare off allies.

There are so many more rich and moving stories here, one of the best stretching beyond the framework of the book: the feminist movement. In 1972, the LAPD busted two staffers of the Women's Self-Help Clinic on charges of practicing medicine sans license. A resulting trial quickly became a cause célèbre. Meanwhile, a Chicana struggle against sterilization emerged alongside welfare rights organizing, as did a Women's Union led by a former free speech leader in Berkeley. An alliance of women artists added to the movement, and a trans-racial, gay-and-straight sisterhood was triumphant—for a while, anyway.

Another well-covered topic, Asian-American self-consciousness, sparkles here with the magazine-and-movement *Gidra*, named (of course) after the Japanese filmic monster. It


symptomized and symbolized a comprehensive radical perspective clarified in 1969, as its demise in 1973 marked the end of the free-wheeling underground newspaper era for a moment of self-inflicted defeat: Maoist splintering of the Left.

The final chapter, "Sowing the Future," looks back upon a mixed picture with an authority owed to the authors' vast personal experiences as well as research. The mayoral reelection victory of Tom Bradley in 1973 revealed that the ground had shifted. He ushered in a new era of business success without being able to tame the police force. The famed neighborhood of Watts, heart of the 1965 uprising but also of hopes for change, faded back into unprecedented despair. In the era just ahead,

factories would close and gang violence would rage anew, with drugs the commercial commodity of choice. Further ahead, from Reagan to Trump, the very victories of the 1960s would be treated as the work of senseless "dopey hippies, traitorous peace protesters, bra-burning feminisms, dangerous Black radicals, and commissars of political correctness."

An era so far away, and yet so near, so glorious, and so tragic. The authors have chosen, I think, to let final judgment fall to the reader. They have given us a remarkable opportunity to think about the promise of the Left, even in failure, to create mighty moments of hope and of pride amongst those previously given anything but pride in themselves.

— Paul Buhle



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