

Hey Mr. Tambourine Man, Sell a Song to Me

Young people are writhing about, celebrating their youth and vitality with the music of the day. Hundreds of thousands of people, as far as the eye can see, have all descended upon one tiny community in New York about a hundred miles north of the big city. “Three Days of Peace and Music” are promised by the event coordinators. It’s August of 1969, and the Woodstock Music and Art Fair is set to give a generation a touchstone moment. They’re the children of the postwar period, convinced that their activism and outlook on social conventions have placed them at the cusp of a new age where corporatism and the conformity of society were going to fall by the wayside and give birth to a realization of the universe’s potential.

I’m personally not very good at describing these sorts of transcendental emotions because, well, other attempts in my lifetime to reignite this spirit of freedom and oneness with space and time have had brand logos plastered all over them. Sure, there have been not just one but *two* attempts at putting on another concert like Woodstock in my lifetime, but they were sponsored heavily by Pepsi, broadcast with commercial breaks on cable and commodified through pay-per-view. The 1999 effort at a Woodstock festival descended into fiery riots and chaos when hundreds of thousands of people decided \$4 bottles of water in the summer heat (\$6 today!) and other logistical miscues on the part of the corporate sponsors weren’t so groovy. The music was different as well: in 1969 heavy metal was in an embryonic stage and rap wouldn’t start to appear on the radar for another couple of years. In 1999, these often profane and often aggressive genres had already coalesced into rap-metal which fueled the furious crowds as they set fires and destroyed the venue. No one has taken another shot at a Woodstock since. The successors of the Counterculture dropped the ball on this one, or did they?

Those free spirits of 1969's music and culture had already been chopped and processed to sell them on mutual funds using associations with their youth. The idealistic hippie streaking through a field in 1969 now rushed to a *secure* job in an *appropriate* suit while driving a *very safe* Swedish station wagon in 1999. Had the parents of the rioters at Woodstock '99, those former Counterculturals, forgotten to teach their children the skepticism and rebellious spirit that drove them? Were the rioters truly rebelling against corporate creep into their lives? With no residual effects corporate sponsorship continued unabated, and the riots quickly vanished in the culture's rearview mirror where the object is *farther* away than it appears. Had this kind of backlash against Capitalism infringing on the Counterculture continued, I might have possessed some optimism about the future, but I fear that any organic development of Counterculture has slowed to a standstill, and so too has development of originality and novelty. Does the youth of today stand a chance at creating their own free-spirited identity, or even their own Counterculture like the Woodstock generation did? It doesn't look good for contemporary youth's chances. Differences in their treatment by society, shifting frames regarding one's participation in the consumer market, and historical precedents regarding Counterculture are simultaneously inescapable and being destroyed every day. This leaves a splintered demographic facing much more organized and well-funded opportunists in the forms of advertisers however this may merely represent an ebb of the cultural tides which have existed for decades.

So what set those young adults of the 60s apart from their counterparts of today? For one, corporatism in the 60s was undergoing its own transformation. Oftentimes, the postwar period in America is defined in rather simple terms: War veterans return home, have babies, raise those children with traditional values and discourage originality, and poof, you have the rebellious 60s as a response to societal creations of the 50s like Organization Man (an idealized middle-class

model for men who had a good job at an institutional corporation and all wore grey flannel suits so as not to attract attention to themselves). This isn't the idea of armchair sociologists but also supported by many academics. Cynthia B. Myers, a professor of communications at the College of Mount Saint Vincent, looked at some of the reasons the 60s is set apart as a time of upheaval through the lens of advertisers. Written in 2000 (in the shadow of Woodstock '99) her *Columbia Journal of American Studies* article "Psychedelics and the Advertising Man: The 1960's 'Countercultural Creative' on Madison Avenue" paints a picture of a stagnant creativity before LSD arrived and marketing men began producing copy like "The Man can't bust our music" for Columbia records.

A "creative revolution" was on, Myers argues. This was different from what came before, as just accomplishing the stated goals of advertising was no longer enough. There was now "focus on *creativity* as the industry's most important and effective product" (119). Meyers regards this as revolutionary enough, but also "newly segmented markets, consumer dissatisfaction and oversaturation, and the surging youth culture" (124) all added up to society wanting something *new* in her view. "Newly segmented markets" and "surging youth culture" were essentially one and the same as there was a new focus on something called "teenagers," a fairly new term for young adults of high school age who had increasing purchasing power as the rising tide of the American economy lifted all boats.

The advent of the term "teenager" in the 50s had massive implications for the counterculture. Before there were teenagers you were a child or an adult and that was it, but the rise of secondary schools and required completion of them by the state birthed an adult-in-waiting which inhabited the ages of 13-18. This new demographic title gave marketers something around which to rally these budding consumers. It was a risky proposition, as the

rules were being written as they went and the image of the teenager in those early years of the term was rather negative. It was one of rebellion and restless youth which rejected Organization Man and his suit. Teenagers were shiftless, uninspired parasites of society which swam in a maelstrom of hormones and self-interest for years until the Countercultural Creatives' successors of today found it would be more profitable to change gears and change the conversation.

That change was to start emphasizing the untapped potential of youth rather than presenting it as a series of risky behaviors. Mayssoun Sukarieh, an independent anthropologist from Lebanon, and Stuart Tannock, a professor of Social Sciences at the University of Cardiff, wrote in September of 2011 about this change in sentiment from the early years of "teenagers" as a real demographic. "The Positivity Imperative: a Critical Look at the 'New' Youth Development Movement" appeared in the Journal of Youth Studies and attempted to dissect this mindset. They contend the change in approach to American youth began in the late 1980s as a cartel of government interests, policy institutes, corporate analysts, and faith-based organizations attempted to give teenagers a makeover:

While dominant models of youth development in the twentieth century were criticized for pathologizing youth and for failing to consider social, cultural, political and economic contexts, the new and positive youth development theory emphasizes the strength and resilience of youth and claims to focus on the contexts and conditions of adolescent development through embracing an 'ecological' or 'developmental systems' frame.

Both of these frames required an analysis which changed the terminology, and this is where Sukarieh and Tannock get to the core of the issue. Teenagers are seen as *assets* and language of *capital* matters pervades. I would be doing poorly by you to not mention that many of the forces involved in this "Positivity Movement" stood to profit greatly from teenagers realizing their potential. In their language, Sukarieh and Tannock use terms like "deficit thinking" to describe imagining teens as a drain on society rather than the also oft-used "youth-

as-asset” idea where teens are only one rung lower on the purity scale than small children and can just do so darn much for the world if we believe in them!

By the 1980s teenagers are already being pumped up by positive language to go out and *make* something of themselves or improve the world, but it’s not like people are born already thirteen years old. Demographic specialists are carving up our ideas of age groups by creating new ones themselves. “Teen” appeared as an organic result of changing labor and educational standards like secondary education becoming standard in the postwar period, but “tween” has become big in the last twenty years as a descriptor of children aged 8-12. These aren’t really children that are fingerpainting, but they’re also prepubescent and becoming exponentially more aware about the world around them as their brains and bodies begin to fully mature. They’re too young for labor and lack education to contribute to society, so why were they separated? Well, tweens become teens and potentially have product preferences before their first paying job, plus they can pester Mom and Dad for the money if they really want.

In March 2014, a pair of marketing professors from the University of Delaware named Dan Freeman and Stuart Shapiro conducted a study on awareness of different advertising methods on tweens for the *Journal of Advertising Research*. They tested ten different avenues for advertising such as mobile devices, television, stadium naming rights, and social proof (seeing others using product in daily life), using messages that were implicitly promotional and explicitly promotional. Though much of the Positive Youth Movement has centered on the belief that children are smarter than adults credit them, the study made a chilling conclusion (emphasis mine):

The observation that tweens possess greater awareness of explicit versus implicit tactics is consistent with the notion that processing explicit (implicit) promotional messages requires a lower (higher) level of cognitive ability. And that finding has important implications for child advocates. *Specifically, the low levels of awareness of implicit marketing tactics the authors*

observed suggest that, more often than not, children ages 12 and younger targeted with implicit promotional messages will not succeed in recognizing the influence attempt. Consequently, even if a child were extremely skeptical about the truthfulness of promotional messages and possessed the requisite mental abilities and resources, there would be little chance that he or she would be able to successfully cope with an implicit influence attempt (53)

Yikes! Fortunately, the study also concludes that when *adults* notice implicit tactics being used on tweens it leads to enough of a consumer backlash (which Freeman and Shapiro quantify throughout using a “fairness index” to evaluate the implicit or explicit nature of advertisements) so as to force advertisers to keep it above the belt when marketing to tweens for the most part. None of this suggests advertising is a *bad* thing to expose to children (and a fair argument could be made that any person with working eyes and ears can’t help but encounter it thousands of times before the age of five), but that Woodstock generation and its Counterculture had its basis in rebelling against all of those attempts to make them what someone else wanted. Implicit tactics and creativity certainly worked on that vaunted 60s youth but their spirit of skepticism of monolithic business interests was generally present at an early age whereas now it never even gets out of the blocks.

The landscape of youth in 2015 would be unrecognizable to that of youth in 1965. A man much braver than myself, Douglas Rushkoff, dove headfirst into current teenage-focused marketing and sought to find if any kind of youth Counterculture exists anymore in a 2014 documentary for PBS entitled *Generation Like*. Rushkoff, a professor of Media Theory and Digital Economics at CUNY/Queens, looked to update a 2001 documentary he had crafted called *The Merchants of Cool* which detailed the relationship between youth and marketing in 20th century terms. *Generation Like* thrust the conversation into the 21st century by looking at promotional encroachment on social media only to find that social media was more than happy to have promotions where young consumers were satisfied with advertising themselves.

“I’ve done a lot of work with Pepsi, Audible, Warby Parker, MTV, tons of brands (41:25),” says Tyler Oakley, a young YouTube personality who has leveraged his online notoriety into economic opportunity. Rushkoff’s cameras also peer into a meeting Oakley has with marketers from multiple firms who hang on to each word of insight he provides to building a brand out of yourself. “They know it’s my job, and they know I have to pay bills... they get that so it’s all good (43:00),” says Oakley about the idea of social marketing, showing no reservations at all about what the youth of fifty years ago would look upon as conspiring with the enemy. The founder of Inside.com, Jason Calacanis, explains that “selling out isn’t really selling out anymore, it’s getting the brass ring (43:15).” Corporate sponsorship is a way of saying *you’ve arrived* now, and “selling out” no longer exists in the vernacular of teenagers. Doesn’t this erode those principles of self-determination and freedom set forth by the Counterculture of the 60s and the rest of the 1900s?

Let’s go back to those swinging 60s and take some stock. Myers offered the narrative of originality and creativity being valued over all else after the stultifying 50s, but at the expense of an important consideration: those acid-dropping ad men were doing their job, which was to make their clients money. Creativity is nice and all, but it means nothing to a discussion of Countercultural commodification. Thomas Frank, an accomplished cultural historian and former contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* and *Harper’s Magazine* who is often cited in such talk, released a landmark book in 1997 called *The Conquest of Cool*. He argues that “the essence of the counterculture remained unco-optable” and any kind of “creative revolution” being espoused by Myers’ psychedelic marketers and society at large ignores that the consumer market was demanding something new by the 1960s already (17). This was a false revolution where the Counterculture just so happened to present a stream of marketable ideas and images at the same

time that larger society was shunning Organization Man. Once the consumer market was done with the idea of the Counterculture being mainstream it was tossed aside as another fad.

“*Advertising Age*, never much of a creativity partisan in the first place, took to declaring the creative era at an end” in 1970, Frank laments (225). Have we as a society been riding that 1960s wave for all of our Countercultural concepts, doomed to never enjoy anti-establishment and organically developed concepts again? A bleak picture has been painted so far, but there is hope for the future which lies in the past.

The “standard binary narrative” as Thomas Frank calls the transition of the 1960s is deeply flawed. Society doesn’t work like a light switch. It’s not like there was nothing but darkness until LSD was invented, the walrus was Paul, and everyone immediately realized lots of things they never knew before. Looking at the history of the Counterculture itself shows that it’s been an ever-evolving landscape.

With his 2004 book *hip: the history*, John Leland strikes a note of optimism regarding the future. If you’re hip, you don’t use capital letters. Mr. Leland once wrote for and edited *Spin* magazine in the 1990s(an alternative music periodical), and served as a senior editor of *Newsweek*. He backs up the notion of Frank’s that the Counterculture is un-cooptable by labeling the 1960s as one of five “hip convergences,” where the Counterculture surged into the mainstream of society, by force of consumer sentiment and little else. These five hip convergences started in the 1840s as the first advertising agencies created what we know as “hype” today by embedding values upon objects, the second is vividly remembered as the roaring 1920s as prominent Lost Generation authors took to advertising. This second convergence is fun just to be able to repeat “Brevity is the soul of lingerie,” written by Dorothy

Parker (291). The third is the 1950s *and* 1960s as the beats and existentialists of the postwar period paved the intellectual road for the hippies of the 1960s who generally get more credit.

If the Counterculture burned brightest and vanished after Woodstock, two more hip convergences would be impossible. The fourth hip convergence is what most would call the do-it-yourself movement of the late 1970s, when all institutions and decency were rejected: this era stressed development from nothingness and disillusionment and is where we start to hear Punk and Hip-Hop music, along with seeing an explosion of graffiti and underground self-published “fanzines.” It took media such as film and print and seized it for the people. The fifth is where we are today, the internet age. In Leland’s summation of our current era, “there is no dominant square ideology, just niche cults that chug along independent of anything but themselves” but this seeming destruction of hip is the only thing it consistently honors: a cycle of self-destruction (338). Leland calls this process of degeneration and regeneration the Counterculture’s “loftiest tradition” (338). Leland calls on all of us to seize on this new paradigm of the wired world where everyone is a different kind of hip. “In the post-hip era, the new battles begin” against consumerism and social conventions (338).

That’s certainly more heartening for the Counterculture’s chance of survival. Perhaps it isn’t dead, merely fractured across so many different identities that it’s harder to spot than a flapper’s comically long necklace, a beatnik’s beret, or a punk’s mohawk. If *it is* that scattershot, does this mean that the profiteers of that Counterculture succeeded? After all, if *everyone* is just a different kind of cool now, that doesn’t leave us with a neckbone of the Counterculture’s carcass for a new, unifying movement like the punks going out to spit on society’s false promises since no one really cares about the veracity of the promises anymore. Little appears on the horizon that might rock the boat. An era where advertisers have more insight into what you want

than you do yourself (thanks to online data) and are already focusing on sinking their teeth into children is frightening. I'm excited about the prospect of the internet's ability to mobilize and spread subversive thought, but by design it's a filtered experience which prevents you from seeing things which are displeasing or potentially uncomfortable. Any Countercultural pockets which exist today will remain as pockets for the near future until a way is found to break through our new barriers of 1's and 0's as opposed to barriers of church or state before. Fortunately, those walls also shield people from influences by those institutions and have prolonged the life of any underground.

This is cause for celebration indeed. While any Counterculture is currently relegated to being a scattering of adherents, those scatterings will be able to sustain themselves and each other through message boards, Facebook pages, and a democratization of media not seen since the DIY era. Tyler Oakley was just a kid with a webcam before Pepsi was inviting him to produce videos at the Super Bowl on their dime if he wears a Pepsi-themed football jersey. This same kind of potential for influence exists for someone who would rather burn that jersey.

I doubt the people in those upstate New York fields in August of 1969 thought their way of life was already on the way out of vogue, but *no one* in 1969 could have predicted the nihilism of the vomiting mosh pit ten years later. I see there being no more hip convergences, but rather a degree of how much Countercultural thought and dress bleeds into the mainstream we have left. It may not happen overnight, but history says it can and will happen again. One day the freak flags will unfurl anew.

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