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American Counterculture Ideals Expressed through the Music of the 1960s

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ABSTRACT

The 1960s era was one of the most divisive, turbulent periods in American history. In many ways, the decade was defined by the Counterculture Movement and by those who resisted the demands of a conformist society rooted in Cold War values. This historical study first contextualizes the emergence of the Counterculture Movement of the 1960s within the historical period of mid-century America. Next, the paper provides an analysis of the values of the Counterculture Movement expressed through music. Exploration of counterculture songs reveals that participants advocated the rejection of society through the expression of personal freedom, immediate gratification, anti-materialism, community, and free love. Furthermore, inquiry demonstrates that music was used as a vehicle to explain and promote the movement's ideals. Ultimately, the study demonstrates the ways in which music of the Counterculture Movement reflected Americans' broader questions of, and challenges to, the Cold War culture in the late-1960s.

KEYWORDS: 1960s, counterculture, music, protest, United States, Hippies, Beatles

INTRODUCTION

The 1960s era was one of the most divisive, turbulent periods in American history. The decade was in many ways defined by those who resisted the demands of a conformist society rooted in Cold War values. As Young (2002) explains in *Imagine Nation*, “the sixties were centrally about recognition, on the part of an ever-growing number of Americans, that the country in which they thought they lived—peaceful, generous, honorable—did not exist” (p. 3). This recognition was reflected in the emergence of a youth counterculture in the mid-1960s. The counterculture questioned society by opposing its emphasis on conformity, the nuclear family, delayed gratification and respect for authority, money, and competition. Counterculture participants advocated the rejection of this society through the expression of personal freedom, immediate gratification, anti-materialism, community, and free love.

Many musicians incorporated countercultural values into their music, using songs as a vehicle to explain and promote the movement's ideals. Lytle (2006) writes in *America's Uncivil Wars*, “No element did more to spread the word [of the counterculture] than rock musicians” (p. 207). Musicians expressed themes that were central to their lives and the lives of their followers, giving counterculture youth something they could relate to, contemplate, and discuss with one another. Many 1960s musicians believed their followers were just like them—youthful outcasts standing alone

in a corrupted world. Farrell (1997) in *The Spirit of the Sixties* explains, “young people constructed their counterculture to music, marching to the beat of different drummers and guitarists, who, in turn marched to the beat of different audience expectations” (p. 212). Many songs in the 1960s served as a running commentary on youths’ lives, capturing the central themes, ideals, and essence of the counterculture. Moreover, the music’s messages of free love, anti-materialism, community, and drugs reflected Americans’ questioning of consensus values and challenging of the Cold War culture in the late-1960s.

HISOTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Cold War culture that began in the late 1940s and existed through the late 1960s was defined by the conformity of the liberal consensus. The consensus was an attitude held by most white Americans, based on a set of shared values that they believed could quell the forces that held the potential to bring them down and result in benefits for the nation. The conformity of the consensus was rooted in notions of the cult of domesticity, containment of communism, and an optimistic ideology.

The cult of domesticity defined the relationship of men and women by creating separate spheres of existence—a women’s place was at home raising the kids, while a man’s place was at work, making money for his family. Many thought that the way for women to feel satisfied with life was to be married with children and part of a nuclear family. Anderson (1995) explains in *The Sixties and The Movement* that for women “marriage equaled success” (p. 21). The cult of domesticity indicated that if women failed to fulfill their role in society as mothers, children would become juvenile delinquents. Citizens who questioned the cult of domesticity were labeled neurotic—in the culture of the Cold War, dissent was dangerous. Non-conformity was believed to have major consequences that held the potential to cause an influx of rebellious teenagers and the spread of communism.

In addition, the conformity of the consensus stemmed from the optimistic ideology created by success in World War II and the fear produced by McCarthyism and the containment of communism. During World War II, Americans came together and successfully helped in the war effort against evil. As Anderson (1995) writes, “[World War II] enhanced America’s self appointed position as the beacon of freedom, the shining light, the ‘City upon a Hill’” (p. 5). Many believed that American military victory resulted because each citizen conformed to society, found their role, and worked hard to help the nation. Altschuler (2003) explains in *All Shook Up* that the nation had a “pervasive, powerful, public ideology proclaiming the United States a harmonious, homogeneous, and prosperous land” (p. 9). After winning the war, an extremely optimistic ideology emerged in America, as people were proud to live in what they believed to be the strongest country in the world.

The nation’s optimistic ideology included an emphasis on materialism rooted in the prosperity caused by World War II. Spann (2003) explains in *Democracy’s Children*, “[World War II] established the United States as the dominant power in the world...and introduced Americans to the longest period of prosperity in their history” (p. 3). The nation’s economic wealth enabled couples to move to suburbs like Levittown and begin families, contributing to the baby boom. The suburban life was a manifestation of the “American dream”—the dream to own a house with a new car parked in the driveway, surrounded by a white picket fence, with a family inside watching television. American culture put a high importance on material goods, as Americans were eager to spend their money on new appliances that would allow them to keep up with their neighbors. Potential for the nation was presumed to be limitless if citizens continued to fit into

society, work hard, and wait for gratification to come. Altschuler (2003) writes that the “‘great expectations’ Americans had for the future depended on stable, nuclear families with each member performing his or her assigned roles” (p. 9). Americans viewed their economic prosperity as a result of their conformity to society during WWII. The nation believed that the liberal consensus had guided America to the top, causing citizens to enforce conformity in order to maintain prosperity and shield the nation from its potential threats.

By the mid-1950s, the U.S. was fully engaged in the Cold War and on a mission to defend freedom by containing communism. For Americans, the world was bi-polar—the U.S. stood for freedom while communism stood for evil. Anderson (1995) explains, “the world was filled with good and evil forces. We had been the good guys before, and we would be in the future. That was the ‘truth’: my country right or wrong. Love it or leave it” (p. 14). In order to protect the security of the nation, many searched out communists within the country. Led by Senator Joseph McCarthy, the domestic anti-communist crusade known as McCarthyism resulted in innocent people being blacklisted, arrested, and having their reputations ruined. Anderson (1995) explains, “[Americans] were ‘communist-inspired.’ Most citizens felt that it was in the national interest to maintain the status quo, both abroad and at home” (p. 8). The nation was supposedly riddled with dangerous communists, and groups such as The House of Un-American Activities Committee went on crusades to cleanse America of communism. In New York City alone, 380 teachers were forced to resign because of anti-communist pressures (Anderson, 1995). Citizens who spoke out against the values of the Cold War culture were linked to communism and pushed to the fringes of society—dissent had its penalties. Americans learned that it would more beneficial for them to stay in line rather than challenge social norms. Anderson (1995) explains that “in a world frozen by the Cold War, most Americans began to accept another notion: there were no just causes for revolution” (p. 8). By the mid 1950s, with Cold War culture in full force, Americans believed in the values of the consensus, were optimistic about the future of the nation, and confident about their role in the world. Most everyone conformed to Cold War culture, resulting in what Anderson (1995) describes as “homogenized, classlessly middle class” (p. 16). Americans believed that life was as good as it could possibly be—they lived in a society that would only continue to improve if they continued to conform and follow the values of the consensus. Movements voicing opinions that questioned the nation’s values existed, but were silenced by the majority.

THE 1960S: A PIVOTAL DECADE

By the mid-1960s, the Cold War culture of America had begun to come apart. Many Americans realized that their society, guided by the consensus, was not operating as they had expected. Anderson (1995) explains, “a more militant form of civil rights, an expanding conflict in Southeast Asia, and an emerging ‘counter’ to mainstream culture all provoked citizens to question, to make decisions about their own view and about the direction of the nation” (p. 132). Disturbed by the issues of race, poverty, endless war, the economy, and unreliable leaders, many Americans began to question and challenge their society.

Protest movements that had been developing in isolation began to merge into mainstream American life. Political activists mobilized large numbers of dissenters who took to the streets. The political became personal for youth activists who had been inspired by President Kennedy’s idealism, provoked by the Freedom Summer in the South, and angered by strict speech regulations on college campuses. Race riots exploded in New Jersey and Michigan, free speech activists organized in Berkeley,

California, and anti-war supporters marched in New York. As expected, protestors were met with strong opposition and violence all over the nation, with activists across the country who were being beaten, tear-gassed, and arrested. The American public took notice of the violence and many sympathized with activists, claiming “the system” was undemocratic, as it used its power to suppress people who were searching for freedom.

By 1968, there was a fissure in American society. The Tet offensive led by the Vietcong against American troops in Vietnam on January 30th, 1968 sent the nation into question over the legitimacy of President Johnson’s control over the war in Vietnam. With television coverage of the war being broadcasted constantly, the negative impacts of Vietnam were becoming increasingly apparent to mainstream America. Anderson (1995) explains that “the public had been waiting for two years for some sign of victory and what they sensed was growing frustration. Many wondered whether there was a credibility gap between administration’s statements and the reality in Vietnam” (p. 163). Youth activists organized on college campuses against the war. At Columbia University, students demonstrated in opposition to the nation’s involvement in Vietnam until the New York City police arrived and forcibly removed the rebels. Located in the heart of New York City, a community considered the finest by many Americans, Columbia University stood as a symbol of the elite. The news of demonstrations in such a highly regarded place shook the nation. On April 4th, 1968 the assassination of Martin Luther King revealed another ugly side to America. Many saw Martin Luther King’s death as the end of the era of non-violent protest. With disturbing events occurring across the nation, many Americans lost their trust in a society full of violence and destruction. According to Anderson (1995), “by 1968 it appeared to most citizens that the nation was in decline, or at least much worse off than when the cool kids of the sixties generation were surfing and bundling on the beach” (p. 171). With major institutions being put under question, American society was not what it had once been. Challenges to the nation’s Cold War culture came to a climax in 1967 and 1968—the liberal consensus was no longer a consensus among Americans.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this study was historical and utilized a thematic analysis design. The research questions asked, 1) what are the salient themes of counterculture songs of the 1960s? and 2) how was music used by counterculture participants as a vehicle to promote their ideals and challenge the consensus of American society? Numerous historical texts were consulted to properly frame the context of the music of the counterculture movement. Then, songs were selected purposefully from the Billboard Charts of the late 1960s. The music was listened to and studied in the context of historical analysis of the time period. Dozens of songs were assessed over the course of several months. Through an iterative process of song analysis, the researcher identified major counterculture themes, and then focused on key songs that exemplified these themes. Musical themes and analysis are presented below, followed by a discussion and conclusion of the study.

FINDINGS

Released on the verge of the summer of love in 1967, The Grass Roots’ “Let’s Live for Today” describes countercultural notions of immediate gratification. Willie Fulton, the Grass Roots’ lead singer, urged his listeners to reject planning and take one day at a time—life was all about living in the moment. For many in the counterculture, the world was meant to be an enjoyable place and the stresses of money, materials, and competition only served to bring them down. The song’s first line rejects the “worries

people seem to find” and denounces those who are “in a hurry to complicate their minds/ by chasing after money and dreams that can’t come true.” For counterculture participants, being involved in politics, activism, and business was being a part of the system, detracting from their fun. For hippies, life was never meant to be a burden and the idea of stress bummed them out. The Grass Roots reflect this sentiment when they sing, “May other’s plan their future/ I’m busy loving you.” The Grass Roots completely reject the values of the Cold War culture through their anti-political and anti-material message. Instead the counterculture embraced a life bent on pleasure and immediate gratification. Anderson (1995) explains, “A theme of cold war culture was ‘just say no.’ The motif of the sixties was ‘just say yes,’ and the canon was the Pleasure Ethic: fun. Live for the moment. Have a Happy Day” (p. 162). The Grass Roots echo this point when they sing, “We’ll take the most from living/ Have pleasure while we can.” The counterculture’s emphasis on immediate gratification as opposed to an emphasis on hard work and delayed gratification illustrates their rejection of Cold War culture. As Edward Spann (2003) concludes in *Democracy’s Children*, “The hippie life was a rebel life” (p. 110). Members of the counterculture did the things their parents told them to not to do—especially drugs and sex.

The Beatles “All You Need is Love” is very indicative of the notion of free love. When the Beatles sing, “All you need is love (all together now)/All you need is love (everybody)/All you need is love, love, love is all you need” they describe a world whose problems can be fixed by the social harmony of love. For members of the counterculture, free love represented peace between people who were willing to learn from one another. Miller (1991) explains in *The Hippies and American Values*, “love meant non-violence. Violence, [hippies] argued, was the product of a corrupt society and was one of society’s dead ends” (p. 105). According to counterculture participants, love could solve the Cold War culture’s problems. The Beatles reveal this sentiment with their lyrics, “There’s nothing you can do that can’t be done/ It’s easy/ All you need is love.” Counterculture youth believed that love could make police put down their arms, convince activists to stop their marches, and bring peace abroad. Love was free and available for everyone—all it took was a change of attitude and an open mind.

Sexual freedom was a central component of free love. Released in February of 1967 on the album *Surrealistic Pillow*, the Jefferson Airplane’s “Somebody to Love” captures the counterculture’s sexual openness found within free love. Free love allowed for the exploration of sexuality by Americans in the late 1960s, as never before had sexuality been as out in the open. Grace Slick, the front woman of the Jefferson Airplane, urged her followers to go out and find someone to be with as she announced, “You better find somebody to love.” Youth encouraged each other to explore other people’s bodies as well as their own. Anderson (1995) explains, “sexual liberation meant that all private acts between consenting people should be legal and probably attempted” (p. 108). The Jefferson Airplane’s song reflects these sentiments with their sexual calls, “Wouldn’t you love somebody to love” and “Don’t you need somebody to love.” Youth often had sex with people who they hardly knew, experimenting with sexual acts they had never tried before. Anderson (1995) explains, “free love meant a couple ‘making love,’ any time any form, out of wedlock, and especially without guilt” (p. 260). The counterculture ignored the cult of domesticity and its emphasis on marriage, family, and separate spheres for men and women. Anderson (1995) explains that “influenced by the rise of feminism, hippies became aware of equality in free love, and more tolerant of all forms of sexuality—masturbation, homosexuality, bisexuality” (p. 261). For counterculture youth, free love was a liberating experience, as it rejected the cult of domesticity’s strict sexual mores.

For many in the counterculture, sex was complemented by drugs, which further emphasized their rejection of Cold War values. Many hippies felt that psychedelics and marijuana were aphrodisiacs that heightened sexual pleasure. The Grateful Dead illustrate the counterculture's emphasis on drugs in their 1967 song "The Golden Road (To Ultimate Devotion)." The band sings, "So take off your shoes, child, and take off your hat/ Try on your wings and find out where it's at," urging their listeners to experiment with drugs and enjoy their effects. The counterculture wanted everybody to enjoy the bliss and immediate gratification of dope. The Grateful Dead announced, "Hey Hey, come right away/ Come and join the party everyday." Many people used drugs as a way to feel connected to their immediate surroundings and get away from the troubled society guided by the consensus. For users, drugs provided an escape, an expansion of their consciousness, and a search for freedom within one's self. The Grateful Dead echo this notion when they sing, "Take a vacation, fall out for a while." Doing drugs felt good instantaneously and rejected the straight laced Cold War culture. Anderson (1995) explains that the counterculture "violated the norm because they were rebels and because they enjoyed experimenting" (p. 260). The Grateful Dead illustrate this point when they sing, "We'll lie down smoking, honey, have yourself a ball." As they passed communal joints around, counterculture participants enjoyed rejecting the strict values of the consensus.

Hippies maintained a seemingly ironic sense of community that included an emphasis on personal freedom and "doing your own thing." Community within the counterculture involved the joining together of similarly outcast individuals seeking personal freedom apart from mainstream American society. The Jefferson Airplane's song "We Can Be Together" from 1969 captures this ironic sense of community. The Jefferson Airplane illustrates this notion when they sing, "We are all outlaws in the eyes of America/ In order to survive we steal cheat lie forge fred hide and deal." While maintaining their individuality, counterculture participants sought out others who, like them, had chosen to reject society. Farrell (1997) writes, "championing community in a culture of individualism, [hippies] tried to live in collaborative harmony with each other and with the earth" (p. 229). As a collective of individuals, the hippie community could do the things they wanted, including having sex, doing drugs, listening to rock and roll, and being naked. Rock and roll music was crucial in uniting this group of collective outcasts, as rock and roll was a form of communication for the counterculture. The Jefferson Airplane sang to their youth, "We can be together/Ah you and me/We should be together." Rock bands called for communalism among their followers and also served as examples of successful communal living on a small scale. Miller (1991) writes, "many rock bands were models of communal living centered on a specific purpose" (p. 89). The Jefferson Airplane motivated counterculture youth by singing, "Come on all you people standing around/ Our life's too fine to let it die." Hippies responded to the music's influence by creating a conscious community of artists, friends, and lovers who could smoke dope together, play music together, and spread the word of their movement.

DISCUSSION

Many Americans became activists in the late 1960s, working to change society and improve the American culture that they viewed as being led astray by the consensus. However, for members of the emerging counterculture, society *was* the problem. Counterculture participants felt that trying to fix America's inherently corrupt society was just buying into the system. Instead, the counterculture created a lifestyle based on values completely opposite to the Cold War culture's emphasis on conformity, delayed gratification, the nuclear family, respect for authority, and materialism. The

counterculture endorsed everything that would challenge the Cold War culture: communal living, personal freedom, immediate gratification, free love, anti-materialism, and the disrespect of authority. Cavallo (1999) writes in *A Friction of the Past*, “counterculture attitudes towards sexuality, drugs and work challenged the work-obsessed, sexually repressed ways of mainstream America” (p. 143). Rock and roll was central to the counterculture’s rejection of American society, as themes of rock songs of the late 1960s captured the essence of the counterculture lifestyle. According to Farrell (1997) in *The Spirit of the Sixties*, counterculture participants “used rock music to shape the contours of their ‘here and now revolution’” (p. 229). Rock and roll music was an avenue for youth communication—a secret language for the counterculture. In 1969, Gleason (1969) wrote in *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*, “rock and roll is the new form of communication for our generation” (p. 2). Rock and roll gave youth an avenue to discuss their counterculture lifestyle, as the music honored drug use, sex and free love, and the rejection of authority, money, and material goods. As Gleason (1969) put it, “music was the most beautiful way to communicate, it’s the way we were going to change things” (p. 3).

America’s willingness to change was reflected in the success of the Beatles’ album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, released on June 1, 1967. The album exploded in popularity and commercial success, bringing counterculture themes of free love, drugs, and community to the attention of mainstream America. The Beatles’ musical and thematic shift away from their earlier, safer songs such as “I Want To Hold Your Hand” to challenging songs such as “She’s Leaving Home” brought national attention to the counterculture. The Beatles, a band from Liverpool, England, came to embody the counterculture, with mainstream America using the musical group as a measure of cultural change. The album also unified counterculture youth under their new cultural leaders, The Beatles. Steven Stark (2006) explains in *Meet the Beatles*, “[*Sgt. Pepper’s*] had the effect of legitimizing the youth culture in its own eyes” (p. 207). Many youth spent hours analyzing and discussing *Sgt. Pepper’s*, taking cues on style, drugs, love, sex, and the older generation. Reflecting the popularity of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Peppers*, hundreds of youth across America joined the counterculture movement, tuning in and dropping out of society.

This counterculture lifestyle was particularly popular in San Francisco, in a neighborhood called Haight-Ashbury, where art, music, and style developed strongly along anti-establishment lines. Released in 1967, Scott McKenzie’s hit single “San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)” became an anthem for the youth movement during the summer of love. McKenzie urged his listeners to engage in this “strange vibration” that was occurring “all across the nation.” The song’s lyrics, “If you’re going to San Francisco/ you’re going to meet some gentle people there” resonated with youth who rejected the restrictions of “the man” and sought out Haight-Ashbury as the counterculture’s sanctuary. Responding to McKenzie’s enticing description of the San Francisco scene, thousands of youth flocked to the Haight in order to take part in the drugs, free love, and rock and roll culture cultivated by the counterculture. Farrell explains that the “vortex of the Summer of Love was Haight-Ashbury where [the counterculture] had developed a distinctive American subculture in the district and they advertised it to America.” McKenzie illustrates Farrell’s point, as “San Francisco” describes the positive changes being developed by the counterculture in Haight-Ashbury. McKenzie sings, “There’s a whole generation/ with a new explanation,” referring to the counterculture’s attempt to construct a utopian society as a solution to the corrupted culture rooted in Cold War values. With the Haight and San Francisco emerging as the music capital of the nation, or as Gleason (1969) announced in 1969, “San Francisco IS

the Liverpool of America now,” the counterculture aimed to create a utopian society that revolved around immediate gratification, drugs, free love, and a sense of community (p. 1).

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, songs from the 1960s capture the ideals of the counterculture and the American shift away from the values of the consensus. However, as the baby boomer generation came of age at the end of the 1960s, they found themselves in a “ball of confusion.” Fatigued from the drugs and drained from all the sex, counterculture participants were forced to reconsider their tactics. Although this exhausting fun had been their intention, stemming from their “live for the moment” ideals, the grave reality of disjointedness forced them to realign themselves with factions of society. The counterculture’s disillusionment at the close of the decade reflected an American sentiment of tiredness, fragmentation, and confusion about what it meant to be a citizen of the United States. The counterculture’s movement toward a utopian society had failed, or as Miller (1991) puts it “bloomed and died like a century plant, spectacularly but only once in a lifetime” (p. 125). For many hippies, dropping out had been more of a concept than a regiment, and while some had found independent means of surviving, most had still made a living in mainstream culture. As Miller (1991) observed, “the counterculture was not entirely—or even mainly—free from the lure of the allegedly evil artificial substance, money, and if only for economic reasons, most [hippies] kept one foot firmly in Establishment society” (p. 125). Thus, the counterculture’s idealist goal of existing completely separate from the mainstream had been virtually impossible to achieve. With the closing of the decade, many counterculture youth reentered mainstream America with a sense of ambivalence and confusion indicative of the nation’s fragmented society, continued problems, and nostalgia for the past.

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