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Tune In, Turn On, Drop Out

Culture Goes Underground

Dustin Hoffman made his feature film debut in a 1967 movie called *The Graduate*, which became the number one box office attraction of the year. In it, he portrayed a neatly dressed, well-mannered youth on the brink of deciding what to do with his life after college. There is a scene in which Hoffman's character, Benjamin, is at a garden party and is collared by an effusive older man who hands him the perfect career path: "plastics." Now, Benjamin does not advocate radical politics or dress like a refugee, but he lives defiantly on the other side of the generation gap nonetheless, and makes it clear, in his own polite way, that "plastics" is the last road he would ever want to follow.

Most mainstream Americans in the second half of the 1960s dressed for success, listened to their President, followed the rules, and crossed at the green, not in between. But a counterculture sprang up at the same time. The members of this group, which was largely but not exclusively made up of youth, rejected every-

thing they regarded as "plastic." America became two nations unhappily sharing the same turf. Within a single family, one child might contentedly buy pretty pastels at the mall and work after school at McDonald's while her sister slipped away in the night to become a hippie in New York's East Village or San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district. This hippie might live in a commune, experiment with sex and drugs, and panhandle or play the guitar to help her new family earn money.

Many young members of this counterculture were politically active, especially in the anti-war movement. But thousands of others were attracted to this way of life because they felt stifled by parental constraints, suburban values, and the regimentation of daily life in the mainstream. In the first part of the sixties, pop groups like the Beatles had made it clear that young people's ideas and actions were valid, even if the older generation rejected them. The emergence of the counterculture offered these young people a chance to escape society's dictates and embark on their own "magical mystery tour" of discovery. And the rockets that launched some of the first voyages were mind-altering drugs, most often marijuana—which had been part of the jazz and beatnik subculture for decades—and lysergic acid diethylamide, popularly known as LSD.

LSD: The Mind-altering Drug

LSD had been first concocted back in 1938 by a Swiss chemist, Dr. Albert Hofmann, in the Sandoz Research Laboratories. Five years after he created the drug, Hofmann accidentally absorbed some through his skin and began to hallucinate. Fascinated by what had occurred, he then deliberately swallowed a dose, and wrote rapturously about the sensations that followed: "Sounds were transformed into visual sensations so that from each tone or noise a comparable colored picture was evolved, changing in form and color kaleidoscopically." LSD became known in psychiatric circles as a *psychedelic* drug, because of its mind-expanding quality.

Two Harvard psychologists, Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, began making American test studies of LSD in the early 1960s. In addition to trying the drug themselves numerous times, they gave it to an inner circle of students, fellow faculty members, writers, artists, and even volunteer prisoners. Around the same time, the U.S. government thought that LSD's disorienting effects might be useful to American soldiers in combat. They dosed a group of GIs without telling them what they were getting. (The government was *very* embarrassed when news of this leaked out years later.) LSD could be unpredictable in the visions it conjured up, and several of the unwitting servicemen had a rough time, vividly hallucinating and thinking they must be going insane. Eventually, the Harvard administration started hearing too many shocking stories about Leary and Alpert's LSD-tripping experiments, and in 1963 they were fired. At this point the two men became counterculture specialists on psychedelic drug use. It was Leary who came up with one of the catchphrases of the era: "Tune in, turn on, and drop out"—which people did with increasing frequency.

At the same time, on the West Coast, a veteran beatnik named Ken Kesey, who lived about an hour from San Francisco, secured a quantity of the drug and launched a series of "acid tests." Kesey's followers, who were called the Merry Pranksters, began an evening's entertainment by passing around a punch bowl full of Kool-Aid laced with LSD. Chemists, such as Owsley Stanley III, developed numerous variations on the drug, each with its own hallucinatory properties.

LSD and other drugs had a profound effect on the sexual behavior of young people. Until that time, it had been assumed that "nice girls didn't," although boys were expected to sow their wild oats before settling down with a virginal bride. In the late 1960s, however, millions of nice girls began to engage freely in sex. College parties were often the scene of quick pairings-off, followed by sexual activity. Young women got fitted for diaphragms, "just in case," as they headed off to singles bars or the

new singles-only weekends at big hotels like Grossinger's, a popular resort in the Catskill Mountains of New York.

As censorship barriers in films and literature began to topple, old rules about "saving oneself" for the right man didn't seem to make sense. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a sexually explicit novel by D. H. Lawrence, was released from censorship in 1960. Ten years later, thousands of middle-class Americans visited their movie theaters to watch *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, rated X because it showed frontal nudity and sexual acts. Buttons urging people to "make love, not war" appeared everywhere.

Alcohol was regarded as a mind-deadening substance suitable only for the older generation, while marijuana and LSD were said to break down barriers between people and enhance sex. By the end of the 1960s, millions of couples regularly combined sex and drugs.

Young people looked upon these drugs as their own and felt they had as much right to alter their minds with LSD and marijuana as their parents did with alcohol. But the government became alarmed at the widening use of drugs. Marijuana was already illegal, although the penalties for using it varied according to location. Someone unlucky enough to be arrested for marijuana possession in Texas might face a thirty-year jail term, whereas the penalty for the same crime elsewhere might be a reprimand. In 1966, LSD was reclassified as a dangerous drug, but making it illegal did not decrease its popularity. More seriously, the ruling took LSD out of the laboratories, where it was manufactured with some semblance of quality control, and put it in the hands of street merchants, who might mix the pure drug with anything from amphetamines to rat poison. The number of "bad trips" increased after the drug was made illegal.

Taking drugs was nothing new in the world of popular music. The Beatles, for example, eventually admitted that they took pep pills while they were performing in Hamburg, Germany, and were often expected to play five or six sets each night. After they became the most popular rock group in the world, the Beatles

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began to keep to themselves, surrounded by a select company of other superstars. The members of this closed society began to depend on marijuana and later, around 1965, on LSD to bolster their creative process.

It was around this time that John Lennon's habit of speaking his mind got him and the rest of the Beatles into trouble. In 1965, just as the Beatles were beginning a U.S. tour, a fan magazine reprinted an interview in which Lennon was quoted as saying, "We're more popular than Jesus now." He later explained that many young people were more fervent in their worship of the Beatles and rock music than they were about religion or Jesus Christ. He said that he had not meant to imply that the Beatles were better than Christ. But fundamentalist congregations, which included many youths, rejected his explanation. In various parts of the country, people burned Beatles records, and some southern radio stations refused to play them on the air. Throughout the tour, Lennon was plagued by repercussions from that comment.

Meanwhile, popular music began to change. The Beatles and the other major groups who had begun experimenting with drugs gradually pulled away from the basic four-four beat and simple lyrics of their early work. The 1965 Beatles album, *Rubber Soul*, included a John Lennon composition called "Norwegian Wood." It described an adulterous one-night stand and featured George Harrison playing the sitar, an Indian instrument whose distinctive twang reverberated through the 1960s, reflecting the counterculture's interest in things Eastern. By the time they released *Revolver* in 1966, the Beatles were obviously under some new influences. Their desire to "hold your hand" had been replaced by a new message: "Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream." In California, when Beach Boy Brian Wilson discovered acid, his interest in surfboards and girls on the beach gave way to songs about "Good Vibrations."

As the new sounds emerged from both U.S. coasts and Britain, a new medium was used to transmit them. Stations that owned both AM and FM frequencies had been ordered by the

FCC not to duplicate their programming. It was at this time that the underused FM band became the home of "free form" or "progressive rock" music. Whether staffed by veteran disc jockeys, as at New York's pioneer WOR-FM, or by members of the counterculture, as on KSAN in San Francisco, the stations were free to play songs that ran much longer than the three minutes prescribed by Top-40 formats. This was perfect for the new, drug-influenced music. How was a composer who'd seen a marvelous vision while on LSD supposed to confine himself to some arbitrary commercial time limit? A single song by Love, Iron Butterfly, the Doors, Bob Dylan, the Velvet Underground, or the Chambers Brothers sometimes took up an entire side of an LP. The albums themselves became increasingly popular, with single records being marketed to the younger teenagers.

In addition to the rock stations, the Pacifica network of listener-supported radio stations became popular with members of the counterculture, now known as hippies. Stations such as New York's WBAI played every imaginable sort of avant-garde recording and broadcast news of the anti-war movement and the radical community.

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, released in June 1967, was considered the crowning achievement of the Beatles' career, and became eloquent testimony to the fact that rock was worthy of serious consideration. Music critics debated the intricacies of *Sgt. Pepper*—greatly amusing all the acid trippers, who simply grooved on it—and hailed the Beatles—who by this time had quit touring and become rock philosophers—as geniuses. As they listened to the strains of "A Little Help from My Friends" and "A Day in the Life," however, the hippies didn't really care what outsiders thought of their music. To the counterculture, *Sgt. Pepper* was a supreme mental excursion that blended elements of the British music hall, Far Eastern exoticism, and the apocalypse most believed was right around the corner.

America's Hippie Havens

This music and the drugs that often inspired it were communal experiences. Young people fled their homes in ever larger numbers and headed for the places where hippies congregated. In the United States, the members of the counterculture gathered around the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, the East Village in New York, and the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, which became well-known throughout the world. In his 1967 hit, Scott McKenzie wrote, "If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear flowers in your hair." Thousands took his advice, and what had been an innovative center for artists in 1965 was a mob scene two years later.

San Francisco was well established as a spiritual home to the beatniks of the 1950s, some of whom, like Ken Kesey, easily transformed themselves into hippies, for the attitude of rebellion was the same in the 1960s as it had been in the decade before, even if the clothes and the sounds were different. Around this time, the Beatles were singing about the "Nowhere Man," and the Byrds, from Los Angeles, turned Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" into a style known as folk rock. Early variations of the groups that evolved into the Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead began to appear in Bay Area ballrooms like the Matrix and Avalon. After these musicians fell in with Kesey and began to experiment with LSD, their music changed accordingly. LSD was still legal in 1965, and it was often freely used at concerts organized by the Merry Pranksters and other entrepreneurs. The audience, many of whom were under the influence of acid, participated in the entertainment, swaying with the colored lights and wearing wildly colored and patterned clothing. Artists such as Wes Wilson designed concert posters on which the figures were incomprehensible—except to those who were high on drugs.

Each segment of this underground society reinforced the others. A nightclub culture flourished on L.A.'s Sunset Strip. Andy Warhol presented his artistic psychedelic band, the Velvet

Underground featuring Lou Reed, in a dance hall called the Dom—later the Electric Circus—on St. Marks Place in New York's East Village. Eventually, every major city had a special concert hall for hippies and their music. The best known spots were Bill Graham's Fillmore East and Fillmore West in New York and San Francisco.

Such places did not remain sheltered havens long, however. As the refugees of the middle class shed their inhibitions and poured into the rambling Victorian houses of San Francisco, concentrating in the region where Haight Street intersected with Ashbury Avenue, curious newspaper and television reporters began to write about these strange groups of outrageously clothed young people. Their stories attracted more and more kids to the hippie scene in Haight-Ashbury and the East Village. What had started as an experiment was now a media event.

At first, the hippies welcomed the attention, since it increased their numbers and gave them the illusion of strength. To proclaim their joy at being themselves, they staged huge gatherings, called "human be-ins" in city parks. Some 10,000 people gathered in New York, and 15,000 congregated in San Francisco on Easter Sunday, 1967, to publicize their message of love, sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

As the hippie movement gained momentum, an underground network of information and services arose to fill their needs. New stores opened in the areas where they lived, some offering the "antique" clothing and army surplus garments that hippies liked to wear. Head shops sold drug paraphernalia while the police looked the other way, preferring to concentrate on big-time dealers rather than on those who sold lava lights to enhance their customers' drug experiences. The largest hippie enclaves also had storefront medical clinics and shelters for runaways who needed help but would not go to a hospital.

Underground weekly newspapers written for hippies in their own language were published in these neighborhoods. The profusion of these journals was extraordinary. Dozens of them existed at the height of the movement, each reflecting the spirit of the

culture it represented. The San Francisco *Oracle* offered a profusion of swirling technicolor fantasies with stories woven in between. The Berkeley *Barb*, just across the river, had far stronger political content. London's *International Times* and New York's East Village *Other* were a blend of the two. New music publications also emerged to cover the progressive rock scene: *Crawdaddy* in New York and *Rolling Stone* in San Francisco.

The Commercialization of the Counterculture

Knowing they were on to a good thing—colorful, controversial, and impossible to ignore—the media zeroed in on San Francisco as 1967 was proclaimed the Summer of Love. It sounded great, but by naming the movement and by categorizing those who resisted the old categories, the media put so much pressure on the counterculture that it eventually collapsed under its own weight. The hippie scene in San Francisco had arisen spontaneously. But when the media discovered it and turned it into a tourist attraction, such intense exposure took its toll. During that summer, tourist buses were routed through Haight-Ashbury, and sometimes the natives didn't welcome the visitors peacefully or lovingly. Those who were committed to the hippie life-style found themselves surrounded by thousands of "weekend freaks" who were eager to taste the goodies but not prepared to sacrifice the comforts of home. Drug dealers unloaded foul concoctions on these gullible "weekend hippies." And the fact that the newcomers were crowding out and annoying the original residents of their neighborhoods—poor blacks, Hispanics, and elderly ethnic whites—did not bode well for the future of the counterculture.

Even as the hippies enjoyed their last summer of glory before the long decline, violent crimes rocked their once idyllic havens. An upper-class Connecticut girl and her hippie lover were killed in their East Village "crash pad" by several men who were high on amphetamines. Her parents had known nothing of the double life their daughter led. Ed Sanders, who was a member of the

deliberately foul-mouthed rock band known as the Fugs and who later became a journalist, described the downfall of Haight-Ashbury in his book, *The Family:* "Bikers tried to take over the LSD market with crude sadistic tactics. Bad dope was sold by acne-faced Methedrine punks. Satanist and satanist-rapist death-freaks flooded the whirling crash pads. People began getting ripped off in the parks. There was racial trouble."

Straight Americans were appalled by the hippies because they were dirty, foul-mouthed, and disrespectful. The new political left distrusted the hippies because of their disregard for political problems.

Not all hippies isolated themselves from politics, however. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were two Yippies—members of the Youth International Party—who played pivotal roles in the 1968 Chicago convention demonstrations. They and six other activists were charged with inciting to riot and tried for their involvement, in a notorious example of courtroom misconduct, the "Chicago Eight" trial of 1969 and 1970.

The media machine was ready to exploit all the "good vibrations" of the hippies, but when the reporters found despair instead of delight, they folded their tents and moved on to the next sideshow.

As the Western world began to focus its attention on youth, advertisers and the "straight" media sought to exploit the phenomenon. News that London was "swinging" with sounds and styles led to the discovery of a 91-pound fashion model named Lesley Hornby, nicknamed Twiggy because she was so slim. You really couldn't be *too* thin in the sixties, as miniskirts rose way past the knees to the upper thighs. Americans rushed out to buy home-grown versions of the trendy clothes being sold in London's Carnaby Street and Kings Road. There were even dresses made out of paper to be worn once and thrown away.

Eventually, hippie fashions filtered into the national consciousness, and the mainstream media began to take them for granted. The same long hair that got high school boys expelled in 1965 was celebrated two years later in *Hair*, a musical staged by

Joseph Papp, director of the New York Shakespeare Festival. In 1968, *Hair* moved to Broadway, where it was seen by the same parents who had pleaded with their own kids to get a haircut.

Hollywood, never a place to let a trend get away unexploited, churned out low-budget youth-oriented movies. In the late sixties, one could watch Jack Nicholson as a hippie guru in *Psych-Out* or Peter Fonda as a convert to LSD in *The Trip*. Other films, such as *Easy Rider*, seriously examined the schism that pervaded the country in its saga of two freedom-loving hippie motorcyclists in a fatal encounter with rednecks.

Television Starts to Get Hip

Once the television networks discovered the counterculture in their news broadcasts, it was only a matter of time before the programmers found ways to absorb this alternative way of life into the mainstream by airing prime time series about hippies. First up was *The Monkees*, which starred four madcap rock musicians who bore more than a passing resemblance to the Beatles in *A Hard Day's Night*. This was not a coincidence. The show's creators had auditioned thousands of performers before organizing the Monkees, who were sarcastically dubbed "The Prefab Four."

Some shows attempted to bring more black performers to television. In 1966, Bill Cosby became the first black actor to star in a series, *I Spy*. Three years later, Diahann Carroll began her run on TV as *Julia*. This series, which was one of the year's top ten, was the first to feature a black woman with a responsible job and a place in the mainstream middle class. Another black actor was featured in *The Mod Squad*, a police drama tailored for the youth market, in which three hippies became police officers—a lot of wishful thinking there. And then came *Star Trek*, whose interstellar crew included a black woman, an Asian man, a Russian, and an alien, all working beside Captain James T. Kirk to help unite the universe under the flag of the Federation.

Three series, two American comedy shows and a British spy program, came closest to mirroring the comprehensive changes that were wrenching society. In 1968, CBS aired the British show *The Prisoner*, a seventeen-episode drama starring Patrick McGoohan as a secret agent being held captive in The Village because he had tried to resign his post. Inhabitants of The Village had numbers, not names, but Number Six cried out every week, "I am not a number, I am a free man!" The Prisoner's constant battle with authority as he strove to uncover the identity of Number One, and escape his captors, was readily understood by the millions of Americans who by then were locked in combat with their government.

Traditionally, comedy series had ignored world events, but when the Smothers Brothers' weekly series and Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* took over the airwaves, all that changed. *Laugh-In*, performed by an ensemble cast that included Goldie Hawn (she usually wore a bikini and was covered in body-paint graffiti), moved at a dizzying pace. It mixed pratfalls with one-liners that zapped the establishment before anyone, including the censors, realized what had happened. When *Laugh-In* presented its news feature, no politician was immune—not even President Nixon, who once made a guest appearance on the show and delivered the catchphrase, "Sock it to me!"

The *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, though less frenetic, delivered its share of political humor. Tom and Dick Smothers were veteran nightclub entertainers whose dry wit and iconoclastic attitudes seemed like a breath of fresh air. Begun in 1967, the series was a modest success, especially with people under thirty. However, the brothers openly voiced anti-war sentiments, and for that reason they were forever battling the CBS censors. The Smothers Brothers presented blacklisted performers such as Pete Seeger and Joan Baez, but they also suffered many cuts from the censors. In April 1969, after CBS had handed down much tougher censorship edicts to the brothers than to any other show, it abruptly canceled their series.

Woodstock and After

For young people, the decade of the sixties was a communal era when events drew like-minded people together. In the spring of 1967, before the Summer of Love became a media event, a committee of California music executives and performers organized a festival in the seaside town of Monterey. For three days and nights, 50,000 people, primarily peace-loving hippies, enjoyed the performances of American and European musicians both old and new, black and white. Monterey Pop introduced the world to the intense blues-wailing of a hard-living, hard-drinking singer named Janis Joplin and her group, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and to Jimi Hendrix, a black man who had left the United States and become a superstar in London. The mellow sounds of the Mamas and the Papas shared the spotlight with the Who's autodestructive fury, soul singer Otis Redding, and African percussionist Hugh Masakela. Monterey was a magical moment at a fragile time. Before the decade ended, the races were polarized and the hippies were decimated by drugs. Redding, founder Rolling Stone Brian Jones, and the Beatles' manager Brian Epstein died in the late 1960s. Hendrix, Joplin, and the Doors' Jim Morrison perished soon afterward.

But before all the goodness was gone, there was Woodstock, a gathering of 400,000 souls in the rural New York village of White Lake, August 15–18, 1969. Traffic jams extended ten miles along the Catskill Mountain highways, and torrential rainstorms turned the festival site into a sea of mud, but nothing stopped the crowds of young people from enjoying three days of "peace, love, and music."

Reporters at the site, who had anticipated a disaster, were astonished at the serenity of the festival. The performers recognized the potential danger in such a large crowd and urged people to look out for one another. Medical treatment was available for anyone who experienced a bad drug reaction. The visitors seemed to enjoy themselves too much to create disturbances,

however, and a police officer described the crowd as "the most courteous, considerate, and well-behaved group of kids that I have ever been in contact with." After Woodstock, many had to revise their negative opinion of hippies.

But not every member of the "Woodstock Nation" was benevolent. Take, for example, a warped, twisted example of a psychopathic fox loose in a barn full of chickens, Charles Manson. Manson, a small man in his thirties, had spent much of his adult life in jail. When he wasn't out committing savage crimes, he drifted along the edges of the counterculture, hoping to become a rock star. To that end, he actually got acquainted with one of the Beach Boys, but Manson was simply not star material.

Instead, he cultivated dark visions of a time when race war would devastate America, with a few well-armed bands of whites, like his own, triumphant at the end. To prepare for this eventuality, Manson gathered a cadre of hollow-eyed, stoned-out followers around him and isolated them in a commune in the harsh California desert.

On August 8, 1969, Manson dispatched a death squad of "family" members to a lovely house in Los Angeles' Benedict Canyon. That night, they stabbed to death its five inhabitants, including actress Sharon Tate, who was eight months pregnant. The murderers mutilated the bodies of their victims and scribbled messages in blood on the walls. The next night, they added two more murder victims to their grisly list.

The era of peace and love was definitely over, as panicked Los Angeles residents bought guard dogs and hired locksmiths and security experts. As a result of an intensive manhunt, Manson and his crazed followers were apprehended in December.

As the dark side of the counterculture rose to drown out its good vibrations, music festivals were no longer harmonious. The Rolling Stones, by then the world's most popular rock and roll band, decided to cap their 1969 American tour with a free concert in California. Unlike Monterey and Woodstock, however, this event was poorly planned, and certain hastily made

decisions proved tragic. After the site was switched several times, the event was finally held at the Altamont Speedway, a dismal contrast to the bucolic setting of Woodstock.

Unaware that California bikers were not polite and mild mannered like the English motorcycle gangs, the Stones hired the Hell's Angels as concert security guards and provided them with beer. Several hapless concert goers who encountered the vicious bikers were beaten, and when several musicians tried to intervene, they were beaten, too. Tainted drugs were easily available at the site, adding to the mounting danger. Altamont reached its hideous climax while the Rolling Stones were singing "Sympathy for the Devil." Believing that a black man named Meredith Hunter was holding a gun, the Angels moved in for the kill. On stage, Mick Jagger looked out at the riot in despair and moaned, "Why are we fighting?" It was a sad end to a way of life that had begun as a search for paradise.