

WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #17

The numbing events of the 1960s led many disaffected activists away from radical politics altogether and toward another manifestation of that decade's youth revolt – the “counterculture.” This was a general revolt against authority and middle-class respectability. Long hair, ragged blue jeans or army fatigues, tie-dyed shirts, sandals, mind-altering drugs, rock music, and cooperative living arrangements were more important than revolutionary ideology to the “hippies.” They were the direct historical descendants of the 1950s Beat culture of New York's Greenwich Village and San Francisco's North Beach as well as of the romantic utopians of the 1830s. The advocates of the counterculture were primarily affluent, well-educated young whites alienated by the Vietnam War, racism, political and parental demands, runaway technology, and a crass corporate mentality that equated good life with goods. In their view, a bland materialism and smug complacency had settled over urban and suburban life. But they were uninterested in or disillusioned with organized political action. Instead, they eagerly embraced the tantalizing credo outlined by Harvard professor Timothy Leary: “Tune in, turn on, drop out.”

By the mid-1960s winds of change in popular music came from the Beatles, four working-class Brits whose awe-inspiring music – sometimes lyrical and sometimes driving – spawned a commercial and cultural phenomenon known as Beatlemania. As young people embraced the Beatles – as well as even more rebellious bands, such as the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Doors, the Yardbirds, and the Kinks – the generational divide deepened between those young people and their elders.

For some the counterculture entailed the study and practice of Oriental mysticism. For many it meant the recreational use of drugs – especially marijuana and hallucinogenic drugs popularly known as LSD or acid – which was celebrated in popular music. These were deemed necessary to strip away what the historian Theodore Rozak, a friendly chronicler of the counterculture, called “the myth of objective consciousness.”

For a brief time, adherents of the counterculture believed that a new age was dawning. In 1967 the “world's first Human Be-In” drew 20,000 people to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. That summer – called the “Summer of Love” – San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, New York's East Village, Chicago's Uptown neighborhoods, and Atlanta's Fourteenth Street swelled with young dropouts, drifters, and teenage runaways whom the media dubbed “flower children.” Although most young people had little interest in all-out revolt, media coverage made it seem as though all of American youth was rejecting the nation's social and cultural norms. Collective living in these urban enclaves was the rage for a time among hippies, until conditions grew so crowded, violent, and depressing that residents migrated elsewhere.

Rural communes also attracted many of the bourgeois rebels. During the 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of young and inexperienced romantics flocked to the countryside, eager to

be liberated from parental and institutional restraints, to live in harmony with nature, and to coexist in an atmosphere of love and openness. But only a handful of these utopian homesteads survived more than a few months. Commune dwellers were frequently the victims of their own liberationist philosophy and their affluent backgrounds. Disgusted by the modern work ethic, they tended to exchange the materialistic hedonism of the consumer culture for the sexual and sensory hedonism of the counterculture. Rooted in the pleasure principle, rustic hippies often produced more babies than bread. One such “flower child” confessed that “we are so stupid, so unable to cope with anything practical. Push forward, smoke dope. But maintain? Never. We don’t know how.”

Initially intent upon rejecting conventional society, many found themselves utterly dependent on it. They were soon panhandling on street corners or lined up at government offices, collecting welfare, unemployment compensation, and food stamps to help them survive the rigors of natural living. They had hoped to create a self-sustaining “lifestyle which united a generation in love and laughter.” Instead, they saw increasing friction among themselves. Drifters, runaways, addicts, and crazies soon crowded into the hippie settlements scattered across the country. A participant of Paper Farm in northern California said of its residents: “They had no commitment to the land – a big problem. All would take food from the land, but few would tend it...We were entirely open. We did not say no. We felt this would make for a more dynamic group. But we got a lot of sick people.”

Huge outdoor rock music concerts were also a popular source of community for hippies. The largest of these was the Woodstock Music Festival. In August, 1969 about half a million young people converged on a 600-acre farm near the tiny rural town of Bethel, New York. The musicians – including Joan Baez, Jimi Hendrix, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, Carlos Santana, and Richie Havens – were a powerful attraction. So, too, was the availability of drugs. For three days the assembled “flower children” reveled in good music, cheap marijuana, and free love.

But the Woodstock karma was short-lived. When other promoters tried to repeat the scene four months later, this time at Altamont, California, the counterculture encountered the criminal culture. The Rolling Stones hired Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang members to provide the “security” for their show. In the midst of Mick Jagger’s performance of “Sympathy for the Devil,” the drunken white motorcyclists beat to death a black man wielding a knife in front of the stage. Three other spectators were accidentally killed that night. Much of the vitality and innocence of the counterculture died with them.

After 1969 the hippie phenomenon began to wane. Drug guru Timothy Leary lamented, “It was good for a time, then we went so far that we lost it.” The counterculture had become counterproductive. Thousands of young teenage runaways had joined the movement, bringing with them plenty of adolescent idealism but no historical consciousness of the roots of cultural rebellion or the practical consequences of bohemian living.

The counterculture also developed both faddish and fashionable overtones. Entrepreneurs were quick to see profits in protest. Retailers developed a banner business in faded blue jeans, surplus army jackets, beads, incense, and sandals. Health-food stores and “head” shops appeared in shopping malls alongside Nieman Marcus and Sears. Rock music groups, for all their lyrical protests against the capitalist “system,” made millions from it. As one wit recognized, “the difference between a rock king and a robber baron [was] about six inches of hair.” Many of the “flower children” grew tired of their riches-to-rags existence and returned to school to become lawyers, doctors, politicians, accountants, and university professors. The search on the part of alienated youth for a better society and a good life was filled with both comic and tragic aspects. It reflected the deep social ills that had been allowed to fester throughout the post-World War II period.