

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #31

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 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.”

Huge outdoor rock music concerts were a popular source of community for hippies during the 1960s. 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, as well as 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 a 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 a good 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.