

ALT-EVERYTHING

BY TERRY SIMONS

'Fear is the first natural enemy a man must overcome.'
~DON JUAN

The relationship between the counterculture and the forces of capitalism is fraught with paradoxes. An interpretation of the relationship obliges an examination of the rhetoric associated with both countercultural expression and business. In his introduction to *A Freak's Anthology: Golden Hits from Buddha to Kubrick* (1972), Michael G. Horowitz argues that the textual record of the counterculture — writings by such luminaries as Marshall McLuhan and Herbert Marcuse, — provides society a foundation of "accountability," something "all people" can grasp in an idealized society. That, of course, gives value to countercultural expression among those who reject society, as well as the marketers of rejection — the anti-capitalists for whom 'hip' means profitability. Horowitz's democracy is fancifully utopian, and ill-equipped to resolve the tension between the rhetoric of countercultural expression and the soldiering workers that society's elite institutions demand.

Utopian ideals are flashpoints of resistance ignited by what McLuhan describes as the evolving tribal-to-individual construct of Western thought, first recognized and communicated by the Greeks. With Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (1437), the cause of tribalism eroded further, upping the ante of individual expression. It is paradoxical that counterculture 1960s communal experiments were deliberately tribal in nature yet yielded a nearly pathological individualism among the hippies who scorned labels. In "On Being Wrong," from *The Upper Left Edge* (November, 2000), Alison Clement recalls, with a sense of awe and bitterness, her realization that her communal vision may have been flawed and wrong-headed when she moved with "Chuck" to a remote outpost near the Oregon Coast "years ago." She lamented the lack of plumbing and cupboards in the house she shared with her daughter and Chuck. Material things, she realized, were important to her as an *individual*. Her story is a brutally sad and honest exposé of where doctrinaire thought leads — no matter its intended direction.

The paradoxes of hippie experience are central to understanding how cottage industries created by entrepreneurial dreamers became the lifeblood of the hippie movement — or how closets and bathrooms were not completely thrown over a countercultural cliff. Burton H. Wolfe, in *The Hippies*, takes us to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury, circa 1965, which was, in Timothy Leary's words, "the hippie beginning." One business catering to hippies, the *Blue Unicorn Coffee Shop*, functioned in much the way an old-timer's bar might, by becoming a message room for the habitually transient. A hippie down on his (or her) luck in *The City* might wait anxiously outside until the place opened while hoping the wire from Mom or Dad was in the offering. The abundant free love, joints and tabs of LSD floating around the perimeter were important, but survival was an instinctual necessity. If the hippies sought freedom, they often found enough of it to second-guess their tribal instincts — and quickly. The entire movement was rife with weekend hippies in from the suburbs, but what about those who arrived by Greyhound from Chicago, only to discover that life was a bitch and cosmic consciousness might be a tad doctrinaire? The buses to and fro, guitars and packs stuffed in the overhead storage, were always full. The city's ride boards bulged with desperate yearnings: Ride needed South, North, East, Anywhere! For some, going home became freedom.

The doctrinarism in countercultural expression is paradoxical. Certainly that is the point San Francisco 'Digger'

PAIGE PINNELL



Emmett Grogan made in his 1972 autobiography, *Ringolevio: A Life Played for Keeps*. Recounting a speech he gave to radicals in London in the late 1960s, he writes that he cribbed the entire text from a 1937 Adolf Hitler Reichstag oration. A remarkable testimony to a stunning lie, Grogan told his cheering audience that "the revolution will never end!" They were Hitler's exact words. Grogan had, in a sense, co-opted Hitler and the "movement" simultaneously. After confessing his mischief he left the stung-radical conference, saying "thank you, 'n' be seein' you."

Grogan was an interesting figure, often less naïve than the minions who sat at his feet or assisted him in the noble con of his *concept*. In his communiqué "There is a Great Deal to be Silent About," one of the regular missives he distributed throughout San Francisco, he wrote: "Politics is an arena where words are juggled in a gigantic hoax." What a wonderfully paradoxical slab of rhetoric, particularly for a writer who had made his own politics personal to the extreme. He must have known his very declaration made a hoax of his own scribbling. The Dadaists wouldn't have put an overt political tag on their brand of nonsense. The essay was a hilarious send up of automatic writing, but it did nothing to expose the political chicanery of anybody but himself.

The counterculture is riddled with other instances of the message being lost in the chaos of its own rhetoric. Exemplar of this was Bob Dylan, who began his career in 1960, singing in Greenwich Village coffee houses. His politically charged 'protest' songs, such as 1962's "Blowin' in the Wind," denounced the complacency of middle-class society and quickly became an anthem of liberal dissent," write David A. Horowitz and Peter Carroll in their survey, *On the Edge: The U.S. in the 20th Century*. Dylan soon tired of providing the drumbeat of the countercultural political nexus and struck out on his own, pissing off folksters by first electrifying his sound, then turning to wordplay and surrealism at the expense of a hardcore political stance. When his message turned out too personal and not political enough for liberals, many of them abandoned him. That was a big mistake as, ironically, Dylan's new voice would eventually formulate a truer expression of counterculture modalities — by personalizing his politics into abstraction. Here is the opening verse of "My Back Pages," off *Another Side of Bob Dylan* (1964). Clearly, Dylan is in the open field, running away from his tacklers:

*Crimson flames tied through my ears
Rollin' high and mighty traps
Pounced with fire on flaming roads
Using ideas as my maps
"We'll meet on edges, soon," said I
Proud 'neath heated brow
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.*

Free to do his own thing, Dylan could speak through abstraction while not pretending to have the answers to the alienation sweeping 1960s youth culture in what Theodore Roszak, in *The Making of a Counterculture* (1969), called a "generational disaffiliation." In arguing that technology had transformed society by turning it into a "regime of experts," Roszak was among the first to understand the commonality of hippies and leftists as those two segments of the counterculture rejected the status quo. The rhetoric of the technocratic elites created generalized "assumptions about reality" and led to "quarrels between technocrats" that the disaffected were ill-equipped to understand, said Roszak. Technology workers became the new royalty, and the distribution of goods and services grew imbalanced among these elites and the burgeoning population of have-nots. Misdistribution, not scarcity became the norm.

At the same time, the media's message was clear. If you were to live well on the planet, you needed to keep up with the Jones's. The expectations were lies that Americans believed — advertising ploys couched in the rhetoric of meaningless gibberish. (One of my fondest, "*Raid kills bugs dead!*" was a wonderful television cartoon/ad written by Lew Welch, who gave up advertising glory to become a San Francisco poet.) You ignored the advertisers' claims at your own peril. Rebellion, as everybody knew, brought hardships. And the point of existence was not *meaning*, but the sort of ease a good electric can opener provides.

*Michael G. Horowitz is co-publisher of Times Eagle Books and author of its three titles, *Equator*, *Sunbelt Stories* and the soon to be published *Split Creek*. David Horowitz is Michael's brother and professor of history at Portland State University. His most recent book is *America's Political Class Under Fire*, and he is on sabbatical, he says, "working on memoirs and a populist cultural history of modern America." His 64th birthday is August 17, and Michael turns 60 on September 2.

THE SELF-INDULGENT SIXTIES

BY MARY PERALTA

Someone recently told me that the revolution of the 1960s was a failure, caused by self-indulgence. This is not the first time I've heard this point of view, and I wish to respond.

Define self-indulgence. Before the '60s, college for women was considered indulgent; not self-indulgent, because the woman in question was indulged by her father, husband, brother, etc. Indeed, any kind of education that did not contribute directly to securing and maintaining a career (earning "good" money) was considered indulgent. Women were expected to shave their legs and armpits and to wear "foundation" garments. If that sounds like something made of bricks, you're getting the idea. Women, especially young women, should not jiggle in an unseemly fashion. By the late '50s, women were wearing pedal-pushers and toredors, but *not* to the office. Waitresses wore high heels to work. I had an aunt whose house slippers had a three inch heel because it hurt her to wear flat shoes. Working every day of her life in heels had deformed her feet. Men wore military haircuts and were, generally, clean-shaven; the exception were the occasional small closely trimmed mustache. In certain rare circumstances, a professor of anthropology wore a beard, again, neatly trimmed. This was not allowed by the rules, but certain people were considered exempt, the way a foreign ambassador is exempt from our traffic laws. And all men dressed alike. "Rednecks" wore Levi's, flannel shirts and boots; "businessmen" wore white shirts and suits, of neutral colors. Well, Texas businessmen wore suits, and cowboy boots.

Take the issue of "free love." The whole thing about free love was, it gave a woman permission to do what men have been doing for centuries, *i.e.*, making love when, where and with whom she chose. The idea of decisions about a woman's sex life being made without the input of her father, doctor, priest or policeman, was damn near blasphemous before the '60s. It's really too bad the concept of safe sex had to wait for the advent of AIDS. A doctor who performed an abortion (and got caught at it) during the '50s and early '60s went to prison. We're not all in agreement about this issue, but I treasure a woman's right to an abortion. If men carried babies, this would be a whole different thing. In ancient times, when people lived in hunter/gatherer tribes, babies born at a time when they could not be fed and cared-for were exposed or killed outright so that the adults and children already claimed by the tribe would have a better chance of survival. No one in our society makes this kind of decision; we just breed like there is no responsibility attached. I realize that the right to abortion was achieved by the women's movement, but the "indulgence" to do so was suggested during the '60s.

Then there's the drug thing. First of all, I don't believe that intelligent well-adjusted young people, or for that matter stupid well-adjusted young people, become addicted simply because it was the thing to do. Addiction is part of a life-long process and it does not suddenly occur at age 17 because of bad company. And frankly, experimentation with marijuana, at least, is not my idea of disastrous. Nobody ever died because of overdose, or withdrawal from marijuana. It's not as if we did not use drugs before the '60s, but those drugs were socially sanctioned. Smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol were so prevalent there were jokes. What are the three best things in life? A drink before and a cigarette after.

Last, but not least, I believe the '60s exposed us to certain kinds of information we preferred to keep hidden. One example of this was conspicuous consumption. Automobile advertisements bragged about how long a car was, as opposed to such qualities as ease of parking, gas mileage or how much space was required to turn around in. Another well-hidden fact that was exposed during the '60s was police brutality. My sister's minister told her that the power wielded by a policeman was God-given. Policemen, after all, are human, subject to the same foibles and blunders as the rest of us. Sassy "love children" who grew up believing "the policeman is my friend" were shot, beaten and dragged to jail for doing things like talking back and sitting down ("sitting in"?).

Certainly in the area of spiritual growth "indulgence" made great headway. The minister of my church never says, "Give 'till it hurts." She says, "Give until it feels good." Instead of teaching the idea of original sin our church teaches original divinity: you are a child of God. Christ said, "I came that you might have life and have it more abundantly." How about "Know ye not that ye are Gods?" Nobody taught this stuff when I was a kid, at least not where I ever heard it.

The whole concept of individual value and the validity of self-direction required us to make that change in our definition of "indulgence." Society's attitudes were challenged and changed, not as much as I'd like, but at least some. Nobody will ever convince me that the '60s were a failure, a waste of time, etc. The '60s *did* commence the erosion of traditional family values, and all I can say is, thank God.

Mary Peralta lived in Astoria when she wrote this article for the July/August 1996 NCTE.

AVAGALLERY

ASTORIA VISUAL ARTS
160 10TH ST., ASTORIA
BACK ON THE BLOCK 2 DOORS DOWN