The 1950s in America

Youth culture and the generation gap

by William Rice

**Definition** Emerging interests and pastimes of American youth and the conflicts the pursuit of them created with older generations

Young people of the 1950's began rebelling against their parents and mainstream culture in the music they listened to, the clothes they wore, and the values with which they identified. By the end of the decade, there was an ever-expanding gap between young and old.

The rebellion of youth during the 1950's had its roots in the economic expansion that occurred in the United States after World War II. It created a rift between the young and their parents that would be labeled the “generation gap” and would become a standard feature of late twentieth century life. There was an intrinsic difference between the world that had shaped and molded the lives of the adults who came of age during the 1940's and that in which they raised their own children. The adults had grown up in a world of economic depression and war, a world where scarcity and sacrifice determined the choices one made in life. They brought their children up in a world where the great sacrifice of war had brought about the great gift of a booming economy. This hard-won prosperity created a world where fathers could go to college on the G.I. Bill and mothers could stay home and raise children in comfortable, quiet suburban homes. The average teenager during the 1950's lived amid a kind of prosperity that would have been unimaginable twenty years earlier.

In 1955, the average American teenager had an income of $10.55 per week. Though by later standards such a figure seemed unremarkable, at the time it was unprecedented: This figure approximated the weekly disposable income of entire families only fifteen years earlier. Thus, one of the primary factors that separated the young during the 1950's from their parents was their view of money. While adults during the 1950's had become accustomed to the reality of hard times, their children lived in a world of comparative plenty. However, the backdrop of this world for both parents and children was the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation, graphically etched in every mind by the atomic bombs that the United States dropped on Japan to end World War II. While life might have felt full and rich to many during the 1950's, many also understood that it could be temporary and ephemeral. Because the Soviet Union's growing nuclear arsenal was an issue in American life, the very sacrifice that had brought about prosperity and peace also made a sudden nightmarish end to all life a very real possibility. The unresolved tension between peace, prosperity, and tranquility, on one hand, and destruction, privation, and annihilation on the other was a central component in a growing gap between old and young that would become a chasm by the end of the 1960's. The youthful rebellion that came to characterize and epitomize the 1960's and 1970's had its beginnings during the 1950's.

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<th>The Cultural Generation Gap During the 1950's</th>
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<td><strong>Preferred by the younger generation</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Musicians</strong></td>
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<td>Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard (Richard Penniman), Elvis Presley.</td>
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Celluloid Images of Conformity and Rebellion

Two of the most popular films of the decade reflected the increasing anxiety and dissension that resided beneath the calm conformity of 1950's life for both young people and their parents. Sloan Wilson's 1955 best-selling novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, was made into a successful film starring Gregory Peck and Jennifer Jones in 1956. A year earlier, James Dean and Natalie Wood starred in the classic epic of juvenile delinquency, *Rebel Without a Cause*.
A central theme of Rebel Without a Cause is a breakdown of communications between Tom Rath (James Dean) and his parents.

(Museum of Modern Art, Film Stills Archive)

Wilson’s story explored the frustration, anxiety, and eventual redemption of Tom Rath. Like so many adults during the 1950’s, Rath carries buried within him the tortuous memories of war, yet lives every day in the conflicts of social class. He and his wife, Betsy, are able to maintain the outward signs of 1950’s success, though every month financial security seems more tenuous. Rath’s redemption comes as he decides not to be an organization man, even if it will end his dream of upward mobility. Instead of working late into the night, he decides to spend every evening at home with his family. He also chooses to accept the man he was during World War II, acknowledging and supporting the illegitimate child he fathered while stationed in Italy. In Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, Wilson voiced the unspeakable reality of adult life during the 1950’s: Beneath the surface of 1950’s conformity lurked the jagged edges of real life, ugly and incomplete.

If Wilson understood the frustrations of adult life, in the film Rebel Without a Cause James Dean embodied the alienation and frustration of being young. Having come from a family in which his mother died of cancer and his father passed him off to relatives while he was a boy, Dean understood what it felt like to doubt one’s parents and to have no one around who sympathized, gave good advice, or listened. However, more than understanding these features of teenage life during the 1950’s, through his film character, Dean reflected that vulnerability and alienation in every gesture he made, in every grimace that moved across his troubled face. The classic story of a directionless young man with a weak father and a nagging mother, Rebel Without a Cause was a perfect vehicle for Dean’s talent and background. His profound ability to express and embody the feelings of so many of his generation gave to the film a kind of timeless quality.

The very title of Rebel Without a Cause expressed the position of so many who were young during the 1950’s. They rebelled against the nebulous qualities of 1950’s life—the conformity, the cookie-cutter set of values, the materialism. However, the rebellion only seemed to prompt more rebellion. Furthermore, in the context of a world in which millions of people had recently starved and died in war and in the context of potential nuclear annihilation, such rebellion seemed without an explanation. All of the young were essentially rebels without anything tangible against which to rebel. Dean’s famous portrait on the movie advertisement—cigarette in hand, slouching with a dark scowl across his face—was to be in subsequent decades a standard poster for college dorm room walls and a timeless symbol of youthful alienation. Dean himself did not last nearly so long. He died during the same year in which Rebel Without a Cause was released. Reflecting once again the lives of those to whom he had already become a powerful symbol, Dean died in an automobile crash after driving his sports car recklessly fast. He was, in death as in life, the ultimate rebel.

The Role of Music

Though Dean became emblematic of rebellion during the 1950’s, he did not invent it; rather, he reflected the rebellion that was quietly taking place all around him. In fact, by the mid-1950’s, when he starred in Rebel Without a Cause, the rebellion of the young against the world of their
parents was already in full swing. Much of the rebellion grew out of music.

By the late 1960’s, rock music had become the focal point for all youthful rebellion. In many respects the music of the 1960’s represented the clarion call for all those who actively refused to be a part of the world their parents had created. Though the youth of the 1950’s were not nearly so radical or so conscious of social issues as their counterparts during the 1960’s, they did begin to distinguish themselves from their parents by their music. The popular music of the 1920’s, 1930’s, and 1940’s had been shaped largely by the influence of African American musicians such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong—musicians who wrote brilliant music but who also catered to some extent to white audiences. However, the young people of the early 1950’s did not listen to musicians of this sort. White teenagers began listening to black rhythm-and-blues musicians, and young black musicians began rebelling against the jazz their parents generation had created by playing something called be-bop. Both trends would have a major impact on creating a generation that was increasingly fragmented from its parents.

Although the leading rock-and-roll musicians of the 1950’s were primarily white (notable exceptions were Chubby Checker and Chuck Berry), almost all of them were influenced by black rhythm and blues. Sam Phillips of Memphis, who recorded and produced Elvis Presley’s first records during the mid-1950’s, quit his conventional job at the famous Memphis Peabody Hotel in 1950 to record black singers and musicians whom he heard on Beale Street. He found in black music a power and a beat that white music lacked. Phillips reportedly quipped to friends, “If I could find a white man with a Negro sound I could make a billion dollars.” Phillips found such a man in Presley, a poor young man who claimed, “I don’t sound like nobody.” Ironically, the first people who heard Presley’s recording of “That’s All Right, Mama” thought he did sound like somebody: somebody who was black. By the end of the decade, when RCA had bought his contract and marketed him to phenomenal success, he essentially had taken the black rhythm-and-blues music that he heard in Memphis and made it mainstream for American teenagers. The fact that his act and his elaborately gyrating hips shocked the parents of these teenagers became one more emblem of the growing distance between young and old. Parents could not understand the appeal of Presley’s music, and they were shocked by his stage performances.

Presley and Phillips were not the only ones to understand, emulate, and popularize the radical music of the young. Alan Freed, a music disc jockey in Cleveland, Ohio, learned about the interest that young whites had in black music from a music store owner. In mid-1951, he created his nickname, the Moondog, and became the star of the most popular radio show in Cleveland, The Moondog Show. Freed featured black artists and white artists on his show, but all of the artists that he featured had the heavy beat and rough edges of black rhythm and blues. Freed began booking live acts for rock shows in Cleveland. His shows were so popular that teenagers lined the streets to get tickets and sometimes were turned away by the thousands.

Part of Freed’s appeal grew out of the fact that he was an adult who actually understood the music of the young, an adult who straddled the growing generation gap. Many parents of his young fans were quickly becoming convinced that rock and roll was “the devil’s music” and that Freed was leading their children into Hell. A few years later, television host Ed Sullivan reflected this unease with rock music when he insisted Presley’s first performance on his program be filmed only from the waist up, to prevent home audiences from seeing Presley’s controversial hip gyrations. Sullivan proceeded to invite Presley back for three performances—despite initially claiming he would never book Presley—and eventually showed all of his stage dancing, testifying to the amazing cultural and financial power of the young. Like Freed, in order to remain an entertainment impresario, Sullivan had to bridge the generation gap.

Be-bop and the Beat Generation

Not all rebellion that took place during the 1950’s consisted of young white teenagers listening to “the devil’s music” or recklessly driving automobiles through neighborhoods. The heirs to the jazz that had come along during the 1930’s and 1940’s rebelled against the music of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong by creating a kind of music that was frenetic and not entirely melodic. They played it at such breakneck speeds and with such amazing skill that it was hard for those who loved the classic jazz of the 1940’s to appreciate or understand it. Musicians such as Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie sought a different kind of success than older black musicians had. They wanted music of their own and music that would not be easily made into mainstream pop music.

The spirit of rebellion that existed among these musicians deeply influenced a group of young intellectuals of the time who were also seeking a way out of the conformity of 1950’s life. Though most of these writers were white, they all felt a strong identification with those who did not fit into the mold of 1950’s existence—thus their admiration of be-bop musicians. Various members of the movement, such as the important poet Allen Ginsberg, were gay. Others, such
as the novelist Jack Kerouac and poet and City Lights Bookstore owner Lawrence Ferlinghetti, were the children of immigrants. Still others, such as William Burroughs and Neal Cassady, were simply nonconformists who actively sought to live on the fringes of 1950's life through drug use and sexual experimentation. They came to be called the "Beat writers," a term that variously has been defined as a feeling of being "beat" or tired of living in a rigid society, as an abbreviation of "beatific" or saintly, or as providing a beat in a world without rhythm.

Beat writers created the coffeehouses and bars that would provide a place for "beatniks" to go and listen to music and read poetry. The young literary figures of the movement were in many ways the predecessors of the "hippies" a decade later. Moreover, no survey of twentieth century literature would be complete without Kerouac's On the Road (1957) and Ginsberg's Howl, and Other Poems (1956). They were young naysayers in a world of parents who had said yes to suburbs and new cars and installment loans. Ironically, however, the very materialism that Beat writers rebelled against made possible their vagabond existence. Only in a culture of wealth could a group of intellectuals rebel so completely against materialism yet not starve to death.

**Impact**

"Generation gap" became a household term by the late 1960's. In many ways the concept enabled young and old to explain events and trends such as the hippie movement, peace marches, campus riots, draft card burning, sit-ins, love-ins, and the counterculture focus of San Francisco's Haight and Ashbury Streets. Despite the popularity of the term during the 1960's, the sociological forces and cultural trends that brought the generation gap into existence were clearly evident during the 1950's.

**Further Reading**

1. Engelhardt, Tom. End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation. 2d ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998. Explores how the Cold War created a new kind of victory culture that focused on defeating any enemy to national interests, in turn creating a growing disillusionment with American foreign policy and culture.


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