

## Seeing the Hippies beyond Stereotypes and Deciphering the Message of the Hippie Movement

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**ABSTRACT:** Speaking of the hippies, it is often associated with weird dress and behaviors, drug using, rock and roll fans, holding radical political views etc. Even today, in American society, the term “hippie” generates anger, fear, hostility and resentment among many people. In my paper, I shall try to go beyond stereotypes and understand the hippie movement within the larger historical and cultural context and find the positive message which is still valuable today.

**KEY WORDS:** hippie, stereotypes, positive message

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### I. BACKGROUND

In 1992, when Bob Dylan recalled the United States in 1960s, he said: “People today are still living off the table scraps of the sixties. They are still being passed around - the music and the ideas.” In spite of being only an outsider and observer of that decade, I still feel overwhelmed by its richness. The 1960s represented an age of illusion, hope, dream, struggle and rebellion. In finding my own way to answer the question “what is the sixties?”, I was inspired by Maggie A. Meacham, my interviewee. She is a retired middle school teacher in Nevada and a relative of my former language partner. The interview was conducted via sending e-mail. She told me that the hippie movement was an indispensable part of understanding the culture or the counterculture of the 1960s. At that time, she was a college student in her 20s. She said: “I have always told my family that during the 60s I was a bit of a mover and shaker. I had told them that I was an avid music fan, attending gigs and festivals, and even seeing the Beatles live.” “In the flower power decade, we were indulged in the summer of love, the Beatles and hippies.” Thus I wondered why the hippie movement exerted such a magic power and its influence can be still felt today, so I decided to decipher the message it conveyed.

Before doing any research, there was ossified stereotype about the hippies in my mind, such as weird dress and behaviors, drug using, rock and roll fans, holding radical political views etc. Even today, in American society, the term “hippie” generates anger, fear, hostility and resentment among many people. In my paper, I shall try to go beyond stereotypes and understand the hippie movement within the larger historical and cultural context and find the positive message which is still valuable today.

### II. THE MEANING OF HIPPIE AND THE ORIGIN OF THE HIPPIE MOVEMENT

Before going any further, we need to know what a hippie actually is and where the hippie movement originated from, or those circumstances that preceded the birth of the hippie movement.

Timothy Leary, a guru in the hippie generation said in his *The Politics of Ecstasy* that: “Hippy is an establishment label for a profound, invisible, underground, evolutionary process. For every visible hippy, barefoot, beflowered, beaded, there are a thousand invisible members of the turned-on underground, persons whose lives are tuned in to their inner vision, who are dropping out of the TV comedy of American Life.”<sup>1</sup> As far as Skip Stone, the author of *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present* is concerned, focusing on the most visible behavioral traits or family background or social milieu will fail to reveal what lies in the hippie heart. He thinks that: “being a hippie is a matter of accepting a universal belief system that transcends the social, political, and moral norms of any established structure, be it a class, church, or government. Each of these powerful institutions has its own agenda for controlling, even enslaving people.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy* (Berkeley, California: Ronin Publishing Inc., 1985) p118

<sup>2</sup> Skip Stone, *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. (New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p10

The origin of the hippie movement can be traced back to the beat generation which took shape in the 1950s and declined in the 1960s. The distinct cultural and political circumstances of the post WW II era shaped the course of its development. The post-war America was economically prosperous and a kind of complacent mood was arising among the people, but it still faced various political tensions. The Cold War had already taken shape and the terror of McCarthyism was haunting the country. The beats represented a cultural and spiritual displacement from the comfortable corporate culture that was prevalent in America. They chose to live away from the mainstream by deliberately marginalizing themselves and indulging themselves in the drugs and jazz. In their spiritual and artistic pursuits, they hoped to find a higher truth than what they saw as the coldly efficient producer-consumer relationship in America.<sup>3</sup> Their influence can be seen in the hippie movement of the sixties and seventies. The beat generation helped steer the direction of the hippie movement of the sixties: many of the main beat figures participated in it, for example Allen Ginsberg was deeply involved in many of the Summer of Love Sessions and Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters were almost iconic for the young in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

When the 1950s turned into the 1960s, not much had changed superficially, and the society of America seemed to work together, and the youth of America did not have much to worry about materially. After 1963, things started to change slowly in how America viewed its politics, culture, and social beliefs, and the group that was in charge of this change seemed to be the youth of America. The Civil Rights Movement, President Kennedy's death, new music, the birth control pill, the growing illegal drug market, and the Vietnam War seemed to come together to form a new counterculture in America: the hippie.<sup>5</sup>

### III. THE POSITIVE MESSAGE CONVEYED IN THE HIPPIE MOVEMENT

The movement is often seen by both those baby boomers who lived through it and by subsequent generations not as a valuable critique of a troubled society, but as the root of many of the today's societal problems.<sup>6</sup> More often than not, the positive message conveyed in the hippie movement was disguised by their non-conforming behaviors and hippies were accused of going to extreme and despised by the mainstream culture. Unlike the society before this movement, the hippie did not try to change America through violence and the hippies tried to change things through love, freedom and peace, which, I think, is far from being the rhetoric of the hippie movement but the core part of the hippie counterculture.

Many people accuse hippies of being promiscuous. There's no denying that many hippies were involved in temporary sexual relationships and sexual experimentation unlike any generation before them. Yet this huge experiment with Free Love was actually a sexual revolution that liberated millions of Americans from the prevailing rigid and puritan sexual attitudes and behaviors of the 1950's. Betty Friedan said in her influential work *The Feminine Mystique* that: "Instead of fulfilling the promise of infinite orgasmic bliss, sex in the America of the feminine mystique is becoming a strangely joyless national compulsion, if not a contemptuous mockery."<sup>7</sup> The hippie movement had a profound influence on sexual freedom in the U.S. and elsewhere. They liberated both sex and love from conventional stereotypes and found their deeper meaning. In their eyes, sex is just another part of life like eating and sleeping. It's a completely natural way to express ourselves. They were encouraged to learn to overcome those fears inhabiting in them, and to share their bodies as easily as people share their food or thoughts. The concept of Free Love expressed by hippies meant you were free to love whomever you pleased, whenever you pleased, however you pleased. This encouraged spontaneous sexual activity and experimentation.<sup>8</sup>

The hippie spared no efforts to explore the real meaning of love. What they advocated was a kind of unpretentious real love which went beyond the prevailing hypocritical morality, just as Jim Morrison, poet and rock star at that time, said: "That's what real love amounts to- letting a person be what he really is. Most people love you for who you pretend to be. To keep their love, you keep pretending- performing. You get to love your pretense. It's true, we're locked in an image, an act- and the sad thing is, people get so used to their image; they grow attached to their masks. They love their chains. They forget all about who they really are. And if you try to remind them, they hate you for it, they feel like you're trying to steal their most precious possession."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Holly George-Warren, *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and the American Culture*. (New York: Hyperion, Ltd., 1999) p56

<sup>4</sup>*The Effects of the Beat Generation* <http://library.thinkquest.org/C007236/pages/effects/effectsbody.htm> July 10, 2006

<sup>5</sup>*The Hippie Counterculture* <http://www.123helpme.com/preview.asp?id=69503> July 10, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Skip Stone, *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. (New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p14

<sup>7</sup>Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1963) p98

<sup>8</sup> Skip Stone, *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. (New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p58

<sup>9</sup> Found at [http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/jim\\_morrison/](http://en.thinkexist.com/quotes/jim_morrison/) July 10, 2006

What's more, this breaking down of society's traditional sexual concepts by hippies led directly to the Gay and Women's Liberation movements. So hippies freed Americans from their puritanical sexual inhibitions through the practice of free love and rejection of the prevailing hypocritical morality. This resulted in the free flow of information about sex, an expansion of women's and gay rights, and society's increased interest in the health issues surrounding sex.<sup>10</sup>

Freedom is also what the hippie had been hungered for. John Lennon wrote in the song Come Together that: "One thing I can tell you is you've got to be FREE!" Their pursuit of freedom is often misunderstood as to be arrogant and self-centered. According to my understanding, by freedom, they meant that they wanted to break away from the established order. The hippie movement was actually a revolution against the established order.

Mainstream American Culture in the early 1960s, to some extent, reflected the consensus attitudes of the 1950s - a capitalistic, materialistic culture, a belief in government, and a faith in Christianity.<sup>11</sup> The counter culture of the 1960s came out of a generation of young people endowed with an abundance of material goods. They were locked in an educational system. Some educators described it as multiversities, that is, the huge institutions of higher learning were operated in a machine-like and impersonal way and the individual student needs were neglected.<sup>12</sup> They were troubled by the prospects that the world they lived in seemed increasingly bureaucratized and technologically driven. They were irritated by the Vietnam War and the draft. They were wakened by the inequities and hypocrisies of their own system. Although it was stipulated in the constitution that black people had equal rights with the whites, but in reality America was still practicing Apartheid. Segregation was the law in the south.

At its core, the hippie counter culture was anti-modern and anti-establishment. Rationality was questioned and rejected. Capitalism was accused of being responsible for the ills of contemporary society, such as, poverty, alienation, pollution, the Vietnam War. Especially as the Vietnam War intensified, the government and the military were seriously challenged. The hippie counter culture questioned not only the U.S. government and institutions, but the 20th century capitalism, the western way of life, the scientific, enlightenment modern world view since the 18th century.<sup>13</sup> Counter culture had dreams that were lofty and ambitious - to change society so that it was more equal, more tolerant, freer and less violent. They were fighting to transform the American society into one more understanding, more active, and more respectful of individual rights and freedom.

Skip Stone commented in the end of his book that: "We were the essence of freedom. By rejecting the social program, its values, its prejudices and its fears, we discovered something beautiful inside ourselves yearning to be free. We were free to think, to do and to be whatever we wanted. Once we stopped seeking and experiencing this freedom, an important part of us stopped growing."<sup>14</sup>

The popular stereotype about hippies describes them as lazy, unmotivated, and even apathetic. This accusation is also unfair. As a matter of fact, they were very active politically. If we look back the history, the hippies involved in many causes and activities. And they want to change the world through a peaceful and non-violent way. Even when violent protest was prevailing nationwide, peace was still their most salient theme. The term Flower Power was used to describe hippie ideas and behavior as early as 1962 when Beat poet and anti-war activist Allen Ginsberg used it to describe how the power of nature could defeat war.

Hippies were part of the first generation to face the real threat of nuclear weapons as children. The anti-nuclear movement started gaining ground in the early '60s as well. With more countries testing nuclear weapons and production increasing dramatically, the concern was worldwide. They were inspired by what John Fitzgerald Kennedy said in his inaugural address: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can

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<sup>10</sup>Skip Stone,*Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present.*(New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p67

<sup>11</sup> John Hunner, *Beyond Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll: The Legacy of the Counter Culture.*  
<http://www.vxu.se/hum/publ/humanetten/nummer8/art0107.html> July 11, 2006

<sup>12</sup>William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II.*( New York: Oxford University Press,1995) p323

<sup>13</sup>John Hunner, *Beyond Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll: The Legacy of the Counter Culture.*  
<http://www.vxu.se/hum/publ/humanetten/nummer8/art0107.html> July 11, 2006

<sup>14</sup> Skip Stone,*Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present.*(New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p156

do for your country.” In their eyes, it was President Kennedy who stood up to Premier Krushchev over Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba which nearly causing WW III; but it was President Lyndon B. Johnson who was to lead America into a full-scale war in Vietnam. Some believed Kennedy was about to withdraw from involvement in Vietnam when he was assassinated on November 22, 1963. People, young and old, felt that the American dream was buried along with President Kennedy. They awoke quickly to face the nightmare of reality.<sup>15</sup> Hundreds of thousands of young people had to give up their dream of college but to go fight a terrible war in a distant land. Bob Dylan lamented in *Blowin’ in the Wind*: “How many deaths will it take 'til he knows, that too many people have died?” “Hell no, we won't go!” was a famous anti-war chant at that time.

The hippies desired to “give peace a chance” and they demonstrated their faith in peace by showing it in non-violent way of protest. In 1967, when the hippies celebrated their freedom with the Summer of Love in San Francisco, and Flower Power Day in New York, in the black ghettos of America, a Summer of Rioting was actually on the way. Some blacks regarded a race war as the only way to freedom. Years of peaceful protests had not really changed much for black people. The black and hippy protests during this period were often overlapped, but most hippies were still intent on peaceful protest.<sup>16</sup>

On October 21 and 22, 1967, 35,000 anti-war protesters gathered before the Pentagon building. They were attacked brutally by tear gas. Eventually all the demonstrators sat down in front of the Pentagon and the assembled troops. The protesters held teach-ins, sang songs, chanted and listened to speeches. Many demonstrators went up to the troops and talked to them about peace and love. A famous photo shows a young man placing a flower in the rifle barrel of a guardsman.

“Make Love, Not War” is another famous slogan. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, spontaneous riots erupted in 125 cities across the country. Days later, hippies held a Love-in at Malibu Canyon, California. and the Spring Mobilization against the Vietnam War began soon after.

As 1969 began, violence was everywhere. The U.S. launched the biggest bombing campaign against North Vietnam. Student movement was reaching its high and students all over the country were taking over campus buildings and issuing demands. In New York City, police raided a gay bar in Greenwich Village. This incident led to the Stonewall Uprising. 2000 protesters battled 400 police and the Gay Liberation Movement started. On May 15, 1969, hippies camping out peacefully in People's Park in Berkeley were attacked and forcibly removed by police and the National Guard. Among all this violence, over half a million hippies managed to have three days of peace, love, fun and music at the Woodstock Music Festival in August 1969. In a way this was one of the most political statements ever made by hippies. The only agenda anyone brought with them was to have a good time, enjoy the music and each other. Without leaders, without police, without government, without violence, they managed to feed, and care for themselves outdoors despite the heat, rain and mud.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In my opinion, in the 1960s, Love, Freedom and Peace are the most valuable message that the hippies wanted to share with anyone. The hippie movement is a kind of idealistic movement and contained some lofty and ambitious goals. The hippie wanted to get rid of the hypocritical morality and pursue real and spontaneous love. They wanted to overthrow the old establishment and realize equality and freedom for everyone. They preached peace and demonstrated their belief amid violence. According to them, love and peace are real weapons to change the world. I think, to a large extent, the hippie movements succeeded as cultural movement. They liberated both sex and love from conventional stereotypes. They highlighted the abuses of government, corporate greed and problems inherent in the system. They examined and criticized the concepts and lifestyle of a consuming society. Their influence is far-reaching. But as a political movement, the hippie movement failed. The power structure that caters to the rich and powerful has not been changed. The hippie opposed any power, leader and authority. In that case, they did not establish their own power and the hippie counter culture lacked the plans and the organization. In that case, they were powerless to overthrow the old power. It was an inherent paradox within this movement.

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<sup>15</sup> Skip Stone, *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. (New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p123

<sup>16</sup> James K. Sayre, *Hippies: Late 1960s and early 1970s anti-Vietnam war protests* <http://www.bottlebrushpress.com/hippies.html> July 11, 2006

<sup>17</sup> Skip Stone, *Hippies from A to Z: Their Sex, Drugs, Music and Impact on Society from the Sixties to the Present*. (New York: Hip, Inc, 1999) p152

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