

Jacob Hermann

Professor Kearney, Gallagher, Savage

1968 Now

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While learning about the complexity and significance of 1968, I was struck by the passion, creativity, and individuality youth culture expressed and their courage to fight important social and political issues during this important time in history. This was evident in the magnitude of important historical events that occurred, including the Vietnam War protests, European student protests, Civil Rights Movement, Women's Movement, and general protests against oppressive regimes across the globe. Learning about the cultural identity and ethos of youth culture in 1968 was a major contrast with the ethos of apathy and contentment I've experienced while growing up. Many youths today do not reflect and spend the time to find their own identities and are afraid to go outside the box. As a result, there is a lack of creativity, innovation, and courage to face important current social and political issues. The music today reflects this sentiment just as the music of 1968 reflects the passion of the time. I will examine this difference in philosophical and cultural ideology between 1968 and 2018 and how it is reflected and reinforced by the music of the time and then investigate the cause and implications of this ideological shift.

The sheer amount of inspired, new, unique music coming out in the '60s demonstrates the passion and responsibility the youth culture felt not only for their own lives but the lives of others. The youth truly felt that they could make important changes in the world and this sentiment was expressed by important student protest leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit: "The feeling we had in those days, which has shaped my entire life, really, was: we're making history. An

exalted feeling—suddenly we had become agents in world history” (Leggewie and Cohn-Bendit, 2018). This belief in the power of the individual and the power to achieve significant social change is exemplified by the outburst of musical innovation established by the creation and popularization of rock & roll, psychedelic music, folk music, funk, and R&B music. In the popular music of the '60s, instruments were being mastered and experimented with, particularly the electric guitar being revolutionized and popularized by guitar virtuosos like Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, Carlos Santana, and others. Additionally, a majority of the popular music coming out in the '60s had a quicker pace and strong beat, pushing the song forward. These new creative instrumental techniques and a new fast and strong rhythm reflected the increased passion and desire for youth culture to express themselves and make noble changes in the world. The freedom and imagination found in the culture and music in the late '60s is described in the Guardian article, “1966: The Year Youth Culture Exploded”: “Young people were creating an exciting, progressive mass culture in plain sight. They dared to dream. For a while, they got away with it, and that spirit remains inspirational” (Savage). Not only did the musical creativity and innovation itself reflect the sentiments of the youth in 1968 but the lyrics did as well, as they were insightful about the social and political state of humanity.

The content and concerns of the lyrics of many popular artists brought important current issues and important themes about humanity to the forefront of the youth's consciousness in 1968. The youth's cultural ideology in the '60s was heavily influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's humanistic philosophy explained in his work, *Existentialism is a Humanism*: “I am responsible for myself and for all men, and I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be. In fashioning myself I fashion man” (Sartre, 2005). The youth interpreted his philosophy as a call to be responsible for the course of humankind and affirm life by engaging in noble and truly

human pursuits as a result. Popular artists such as Bob Dylan and Marvin Gaye felt the same way and expressed these sentiments back to the people, as is evident in theirs' and other popular artists' lyrics. Bob Dylan's song "Blowin' in the Wind" expresses important universal themes about humanity but also brought attention to the inhumanity of the killings in wars and revolutions across the world in the late 1960s: "Yes, 'n' how many deaths will it take till he knows, That too many people have died? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind" (Dylan). Marvin Gaye echoed this sentiment, calling for the people of America to learn to love others by stopping and talking to them in order to recognize that we all share in the human experience: "War is not the answer, For only love can conquer hate. Picket lines and picket signs, Don't punish me with brutality, Talk to me, so you can see, Oh, what's going on" (Gaye). Dylan, Gaye, and many other popular artists were speaking from a worldwide lens, speaking to all of humanity. Being a musician was about having something important to say in 1968. By writing and putting their music and lyrics out there, Dylan, Gaye, and many other popular artists were not only reflecting but reinforcing the desire of the youth to discover themselves and make a positive change in the world.

The desire for artists to be authentic and express their concerns about the state of humanity is very limited in popular music today. Much of the youth today would rather live easily and comfortably in a state of materialism, rather than try to challenge themselves to be unique or do something bigger than oneself. In an article entitled "Jean-Paul Sartre: More Relevant Now Than Ever" by the Guardian, Stuart Jeffries brings up the influence Sartre's humanist philosophy had on the youth of 1968, but how this ideology has been lost in the youth culture of today. Sartre's image of a waiter who fulfills his role too perfectly is representative of the inauthenticity and loss of individuality found in culture today. Additionally, Sartre's belief in

the autonomy of the individual and the ability to make change is a principle that is lacking in culture today (Jeffries). The music today reflects this ethos. It is heavily processed, autotuned, simple, and repetitive. Record companies do not seem to be concerned with developing artists' creativity so individual expression too often discouraged and musical innovation is stultified. This is true not only true for the music but also the popular artists' lyrics.

Many popular artists' lyrics today represent youth culture by glorifying hook-ups, money, material possessions, social status, and other trivialities. The philosophical identity of youth culture of 2018 is one of nihilistic existentialism, which Sartre warned about in *Existentialism is a Humanism*: "So there remains within me a wide range of abilities, inclinations and potentialities, unused but perfectly viable, which endow me with a worthiness that could never be inferred from the mere history of my actions." (Sartre, 2005) The youth live a passive life, but are tethered to material possessions, social status, and hook-ups, but feel entitled due to these empty and base pursuits. Record companies key in on these features of youth culture and promote artists to represent these aspects and concerns in order to sell more records. Post Malone exemplifies the contentment and complacent lifestyle of the youth of today: "I don't even worry about tomorrow, It might be some money it might be a hoe, I don't know where I'm a be tomorrow". (Malone) Many of Post Malone's songs contain similar content of boasting about himself and not worrying about anything. The Chainsmokers is another popular artist that also writes lyrics that come from a more immediate and self-centered lens: "So, baby, pull me closer, In the backseat of your Rover, That I know you can't afford, Bite that tattoo on your shoulder" (The Chainsmokers) This song is about hooking up with someone and then recognizing them at the club later and reigniting the spark that was established before. This song is supposed to be as relatable as possible since the artist and record company understand that this type of materialistic

and self-focused song is appealing to much of today's youth. The Washington Post article, "Post Malone is the Perfect pop star for this American moment", points to this problem in artistry today: "Post Malone's music is dead-eyed and ignorant, astonishingly dull in its materialism, an abandoned lot of creativity with absolutely no evidence of traffic in his cerebral cortex... The problem isn't necessarily that it's crass but that it's meaningless. It's not that it's stupid but that it's vacant" (Weiss). These artists' songs glorify and reinforce the youth's general contentment with living a comfortable life of materialism and stagnation, without any regard for achieving more for oneself or for others. There does not appear to be much interest for the music industry to go outside the box in terms of musical innovation or addressing bigger, more provocative social or political issues.

It is evident through the musical identity of the times that today's youth are content with living a stagnant lifestyle, for themselves and others, while the youth of 1968 were concerned with changing themselves and the world around them. So what has caused this shift in philosophical and social ideology and musical character? A major factor may be the advent of social media and the hold it has taken on the thoughts and character of youth today. Since we are spending greater time in virtual realities, there is a greater affinity for the virtual world and less concern about making real connections with others in reality. This would naturally lead to a lack of passion and concern for important current social issues. Also, it is possible that the passion of 1968 was, for the most part, a product of the culmination of major social and political issues directly affecting many people across the world. This would mean that enough reforms to protect basic human rights were achieved at the time to create a society where fewer people today are directly affected by oppressive and corrupt governments and companies. There are still people around the world today that are not provided basic human rights, however, it is possible that the

number of these people has decreased due to reforms during and after 1968 to a point where a large-scale revolution for these people's rights has difficulty gaining the attention and support of today's youth. On the other hand, it is quite possible that a year like 1968 may occur in the near future, where the youth eventually become fed up with the social and political state and begin to demand change. The increasing political polarization of the United States at the moment could lead to a more radical response from one side or the other if the political and social state continues to become more volatile. Understanding the socio-cultural identity of youth from different eras can provide insight into the possible political responses in the future and the music can help illuminate and predict these changes as well, as it tends to move with the flow of the youth and acts as a reflection of their voice.

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