

## 1968

Recently I saw a documentary on the year 1968 by Tom Brokaw. It covered all the usual events of that year, protests over the Vietnam War, the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the race riots, women's lib, black power, hippies and drugs. This documentary was a little different in that it was more of a personal take on the events as Tom Brokaw was already working as a reporter at that time and these were his personal recollections. Also, he interspersed many interviews with contemporaries of the present year, 2007, and asked them to look back and interpret events of that year. It seems as if we never tire of trying to make sense of the sixties; were things really different, were there any permanent changes, what positive or negative things came out of that period, and was that year (era) an aberration? Having lived through that era these questions are up for continual evaluation in my own mind. It seems to me that no one ever gets it completely right when they try to evaluate this period. I guess with enough different opinions and perspectives that one should get a fair and approximate interpretation of that era, but maybe not.

I think that most people look at individual events and interpret them as good or bad instead of looking at an overall mood or energy of the times. Now, with distance, it is more and more difficult to sense the mood of the times. Instead we tend to look at actual events and make sense of them. I think that in a lot of ways the 60's were like an octopus whose tentacles reached into every nook and cranny of the country in subtle ways. Were there permanent changes? probably not, just the gradual shifting of societies values as is continually happening. That is the great disappointment for people of that era; that the revolution failed. Arlo Guthrie made some of the truest comments looking back on the sixties. He described an excitement that things were definitely going to change for the better but they didn't, although he remains optimistic. In, many ways it's fairly obvious that we live in an even more conservative era now. The forces of good were beaten back and the forces of evil once again took control.

The 60's was first and foremost a rising up of freedom: freedom of choice, freedom of lifestyle, of gender, of government, of human rights, and of artistic expression. And it was an era of individualism as opposed to accepting the society and roles of society as ordered. But what is hard to understand now is how this wasn't nearly as all pervasive as it might now seem, but at the same time how far reaching this energy was. What I'm saying is this; in any one era only about 2 or 3 percent of the people are free or creative or individuals. In the sixties this percentage blossomed to 5 to 10 percent of the population. It was still a small minority but when the creative individuals are doubled or more, it seems earth shattering. Now at the time things weren't so dramatically different, but as a lot of borderline people saw the changes and opportunities to be free or different they latched on to the movement and expanded their own freedom. A lot of these people then retreated to their conventional ways later (in the 70's) and readjusted to the order of society as handed down. These people never really believed in "the revolution" but they swelled its ranks for a while and sometimes for the better as in protesting the war. Some of these people simply dressed freaky or used the sexual liberation to prey on women to get laid more often. But there were true believers who got a whiff of possibilities and dared to dream that things could be better, that people could be more responsible, that politicians could be more honest, that people could stop a war they didn't want, that

drugs could open their consciousness, that women and blacks could be equal with whites, that profits weren't the most important thing and that brotherhood could be real. Another curious aspect of the youth movement was the idea of leaders or lack of leaders. Tom Brokaw asked Mark Rudd, who was the leader of the SDS, the radical student group, if the movement makes the leaders or if the leaders make the movement. He said the movement makes the leaders without hesitation. Unfortunately, the leaders were not always the best. The movement was not something that looked to leaders; it was bubbling up from below and not something handed down from above. The Beatles were looked to as leaders but this was a role they were reluctant to accept. The straight society wanted answers as to what was happening among the young people and they looked for some leaders to explain it. Like my grandfather who couldn't understand my radical opinions in college; he thought it was because I had fallen in with some communist groups at school. The movement was truly democratic and without clear leaders for the most part. Even the rock stars who were heroes to the young seemed much closer to their peers. The Grateful Dead lived in Haight Asbury among other freaks, just part of the scene. Tickets to concerts of even the biggest groups were generally a few dollars and never more than five dollars. And perhaps for the first time performers wore no costumes but simply came onstage dressed like anyone else in the crowd, generally a flannel shirt and patched jeans. Their raw talent was on display and they weren't hiding behind any costume. They were our friends who just happened to play music, not untouchable idols who were better than us. Even in college, the old institutions of fraternities and sororities seemed hopelessly out of date. The idea of exclusiveness and privilege seemed ridiculous and something of our parents' generation. At the time it seemed as if the Greek system was due for extinction. But with such vast numbers of young people feeling many of the same things it was natural that some leaders would emerge. I think that people like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin emerged more for their own self aggrandizement than as to contribute to a cause. They were jokers and seized on the old idea of "épater les bourgeois", that is, shocking the upper classes for the hell of it. That was the title of Hoffman's book, "Revolution for the Hell of It". But that's where straight society got it wrong. Young people really weren't looking to Abbie Hoffman, Tim Leary, or the Beatles as leaders; they got their inspiration from their friends and people around them. These so called leaders were just entertainers who popped up in the media. The fact is most hippies didn't give a shit about media attention. They didn't need to be waving at a camera shouting "look at me" like many people do today.

To look at these high ideals and if and how they were realized you have to go back and deconstruct all of the various elements of the movement. The major players were the youth movement, equal rights for blacks, the anti-war movement, and equal rights for women. There were other smaller movements that may have been independent or results of these major groups such as the liberalization of religions, interest in foreign religions, radicalization of fashion and music and art, and a back to nature movement. But what makes the 60's look so different and powerful and important is because all these groups were united under the banner of the anti-war movement. That was the first test to see if anyone was "hip", were they opposed to the war? This made the numbers and power of the movement or revolution or whatever you want to call it, powerful and shattering. People clearly saw this war as wrong and wanted it stopped. It sounds like a simple thing that should happen often in history, but for one of the first times people rejected the

phony call of patriotism and considered that loyalty to their country meant opposing the war. For one of the first times in our history or any country's history, the people were living up to the promise of democracy and were living up to the ideals that were proposed by the Founding Fathers. Going to war was a choice and not automatic. But what a difficult choice they made it when service was compulsory and prison was the alternative. Being against the war gave everyone of these various groups the impression that we were all on the same side.

All of these sub-movements had their origins in the 1950's or earlier, they just blossomed at about the same time. The largest group was the youth movement. A small element of bohemians or Beats had grown into a large group of Hippies or "Heads". Again, the anti-war movement gave this group a voice and a presence, but music and drugs gave it a sense of otherness which permanently set them apart from their parents. The drugs and the music was a radical departure from what came before. In the 1960's no one listened to the music of their parents, the Big Band sound, although that was only about twenty-five years previously. Now, in 2007, young people still listen to the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, or the Doors. And the drugs were so new that LSD wasn't even illegal until around 1968. As Tim Leary said, "Turn on, Tune in, Drop out." This outraged parents, but that was one of the key elements of the drug use. Getting high enabled you to see the phoniness in society. Seeing the phoniness and hypocrisy of society, many young people wanted nothing to do with it. This was incomprehensible to older people who had worked so hard to raise their standard of living to the highest in the world and provide their children with the best material goods. How could children reject the good life they were being offered? This dilemma was described by the Beatles in their 1967 song, "She's leaving home." Hippies were doing the unthinkable, rejecting capitalism. They rejected being told what to wear, what to eat, where to live, etc. Later, Madison Avenue would get its revenge by dressing everyone in ridiculous pseudo hippie clothes in the 1970's. A lot of the hippie ethos was similar to the American Indian lifestyle which was widely admired at the time right down to living in teepees. But like the American Indian, the hippies were doomed to near extinction because the world view of capitalism and the world view of communal living could not exist side by side. The ultimate problem in communal living turned out to be "Who is going to take out the garbage?" Just like communism, a lot of the flower power movement overestimated the good will of the human species. Selfishness always triumphs and capitalism is the system which rewards selfishness. Rejecting material goods and comfort outraged the establishment because it rejected their values, which was an insult.

With the blacks, their movement was about human rights, not an expression of individual freedom although there were elements of that as well. Women's Lib was more about lifestyle choices but it too was about political power and equal rights within the system. The youth movement sympathized and often backed up these movements but essentially they were very different from the youth movement. So when the Vietnam War came to an end it seemed as if these various groups woke up and realized that they didn't have that much in common after all. Blacks realized that they didn't really like hippies, or hippies didn't really care about women's lib, or women didn't care about blacks, or any other way you want to reconfigure it. For some of these groups it was about politics and when the war ended these groups seemed smaller when they stood alone. At the same time, bad things were happening which reduced the sympathy and marginal support that these

groups were feeling. For the blacks, the race riots which followed Martin Luther King's death permanently alienated white people from their movement to the point where white people abandoned their cities to get away from black people. Drugs turned harder and more dangerous with cocaine and heroin and several celebrity deaths such as Hendrix and Joplin turned society more against drugs. The hippie lifestyle was tarnished by Charlie Manson and the music was tarnished by Altamont. The movement couldn't sustain itself. The sad thing is that the whole movement was never about politics; that just brought these groups together. The real movement and what made the 60's special was the blossoming of freedom. There was an optimism that things could change for the better. Despite all the bad things happening in 1968 such as the assassinations, the 1968 Democratic convention, the election of Richard Nixon, and the growth of the war, there was still an incredible flowering in the arts. Richard Nixon was right; there was a silent majority and they were too afraid to tolerate change. They would prefer an unjust war and keeping blacks down than to rethink their lives or society. It was too painful to think or consider that these different looking young people might be on to something. At the time young people were rejecting corporate America and capitalist society, that era seemed rather simple and bucolic compared to present days and the near future. But the hippies were among the first to react to the idea of conformity. Nowadays young people start out their lives in deep debt from credit cards or student loans but they don't protest, they accept that as a small price to pay to be part of the information age. They don't realize that the information age is the age of vanishing privacy and surveillance. When you start out your life in debt then you are already sold to the system. You will never make free choices about society because you will be indebted to playing the game and getting a job and paying your debts. You have bought the notion that happiness lies in acquiring the goods the capitalist system is pushing on you. Dropping out, in Tim Leary's vernacular is no longer an option, not if you want health care or a mobile phone or satellite TV or an Ipod or any of the other things which weren't concerns in 1968. The 60's were all about freedom, freedom of expression and freedom of choice. As the Kris Kristofferson song goes, "freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." Well, now when young people are already in debt to the system there is much less opportunity to be free or make free choices. When a young person gets their first credit card in college or even before, they feel empowered and ready to participate in the delights of the consumer society but they have become permanently indebted and slaves to the system. And when they get their cell phone they feel connected and part of a world wide community, but they have really been fitted with an electronic tether just like criminal so they are never out of reach and all of their moves can be tracked.