

# In Search of Then

By Jeff Greenfield

The celebration of the 1950s grows. Radio stations in New York, Boston and Los Angeles play "golden oldies" exclusively; rock revivals with the Cleftones, Chuck Berry, and other stars of the Alan Freed era pack them in around the country; contemporary rock musicians such as Elton John recall the days "when rock was young"; "Grease" evokes the '50s eight times a week on Broadway. A collection of Sid Caesar skits from "Your Show of Shows" becomes a hilarious movie; Buffalo Bob and Howdy Doody play college campuses; major national magazines attempt to explain *Why?*

*Why?* is, I think, a simple question to answer. The focus on the '50s is not a pining for simpler times, not a repudiation of the horrors of the 1960s, not an affirmation of the enduring worth of the Edsel, circle pins, or black-and-white television. *Why?* is simply that another generation is leaving its youth behind, and is not very happy at the prospect. The expression of that discontent with mortality is Nostalgia.

Nostalgia stirs early in life; it is no exclusive habit of old age. Studs Lonigan and his friends, at age 15, looked back fondly on their "youthful days" of 10 and 11. For them, each step closer to the monotony of adulthood made the years of growing up seem that much more glorious. I remember, at age 22, spending a summer night with a group of friends, singing songs that were—then—less than 10 years old, and feeling a sharp, painful sense of irretrievability and loss. We were growing up, getting older, and there seemed to be nothing we could do

All through World War II, we had told ourselves in song, advertisements, and speeches that we were fighting for Mom's apple pie and the right to boo the Brooklyn Dodgers. Our elders came home to find that Mom's apple pie was a division of General Nourishment Industries, and that the Brooklyn Dodgers were no more. We were fighting for peace; we came home to discover that a new, ruthless enemy was (if senators and newspaper editorials were to be believed) burrowing its way into our schools, churches, and movies. There was no peace.

We had, beyond all else, fought to restore a sense of tranquility in our lives—defeat the Hun and the Jap, and then come home to a new age of ease and prosperity. But the home we came back to often was not there, cleared for a shopping center or superhighway. And the ease was not there, either. All through the 1950s, certainties were stripped away from us ruthlessly. The heroes of television quiz shows were fed the answers; the technology we had invented was appropriated by Russia, and a Communist satellite was orbiting the earth; somehow a bunch of backward Orientals had held the country that never lost a war to a stalemate.

It is in this context that the rise of rock and roll becomes interesting for reasons beyond Nostalgia. This was strange music, the music of adult, ghetto blacks "discovered" by the children of the white middle-class. More than jazz, swing, or be-bop, this music was *dangerous*; frankly sexual in rhythm and lyrics ("rock and roll" was a slang expression for sex); capable of taking fresh-scrubbed Andy Hardys and turning them—so it seemed—into crazed strangers. It was, in the '50s, the first tangible sign that the children of World War II were growing apart from their elders in a more fundamental and embittering way than had happened before. The perennial Generation Gap would become a Generation Fault by the time the '60s had begun.

None of these difficult and often painful theses is the business of Nostalgia. When I hear a record of a song I grew up to, my emotions take over; when my friends and I remember the television shows we laughed at (or with), we are not probing the sources of the youth culture. We are turning to our memories for joy and for solace.

Nostalgia has nothing at all to do with the painful, embarrassing, or scarring moments of the past. To

celebrate what we remember of the 1950s is not to say that the Eisenhower Era was a shining moment in the republic's history. There is, after all, very little sentiment for a revival of McCarthyism (save, perhaps, in the Justice Department); H-bomb tests and air-raid drills in the schools are not "coming back"; nor are rigged quiz shows, the Korean war, or segregation. It is the job of History, not Nostalgia, to sift through the past and discover what happened to us and what still affects us, beyond memories distilled through the pleasant, distorting haze of time.

Meanwhile, we are doing one of the things necessary for human beings to do in order to remain sane—and that is to remind each other that all of us are inching closer each day to oblivion. So if our elders seem puzzled by the celebration of the next generation's youth, it is not blindness to the hypocrisies of the 1950s, or a desire to flee from the realities of the 1970s. It is just that we have joined you on the far side of youth; and the other side of the shore looks so much better from over here. □

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growing up, getting older, and there seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

If you are now in middle age, the prospect of a wave of sentimentality among 30-year-olds may seem absurd—just as it seems ludicrous to me that 20-year-olds are “nostalgic” over events barely five years old. Perhaps it is that, with television and other devices of mass media, nothing endures quite as long as it once did, and therefore an event of a few years ago is, indeed, way back when. For the generation that grew up in the '50s, however, the sense of fleeing time is genuine: It is more than 20 years since the first inauguration of President Eisenhower. The 13-year-old facing parental outrage as she danced to “Rock Around the Clock” is now in her 30s, quite possibly with children as old as she was when rock and roll began.

More important, the children of the '50s are now entering positions of power and influence in this society. Senators, congressmen, newspaper columnists, television reporters and magazine editors—there are enough of us around to make *our* memories count. When I was in my early teens, there were *no* rock-and-roll groups on network television (Elvis and his censored pelvis being the exception). Grown-ups in the '50s considered rock and roll something between a flash in the pan and the latest ploy of the Communist conspiracy.

It was in the 1950s, I think, that America first began to realize that it was not what it thought it was. The sense of America as a small-town country had endured all through the first half of the 20th Century; by the 50s, it was clear that most of us were living atomized lives, separated from our work and our roots by miles of highways and millions of television aerials.



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