

THE YOUNG AUDIENCE

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For many young people, Britain in the fifties and sixties has been a society in transition, a society throwing out a number of confusing signals. Teenage culture is, in part, an authentic response to this situation, an area of common symbols and meanings, shared in part or in whole by a generation, in which they can work out or work through not only the natural tensions of adolescence, but the special tensions of being an adolescent in our kind of society. Sometimes this response can be seen in direct terms—kinds of radical political energy with certain clear-cut symbolic targets: (the threat of nuclear weapons, political apathy, the bureaucratic quality of political life, all that is summed up in the term “the Establishment”). Sometimes, the response takes the form of a radical shift in social habits—for example, the slow but certain revolution in sexual morality among young people. In these and other ways the younger generation have acted as a creative minority, pioneering ahead of the puritan restraints so deeply built into English bourgeois morality, toward a code of behavior in our view more humane and civilized. Much of the active participation of the younger generation in their own subculture has this flavor about it—a spontaneous and generative response to a frequently bewildering and confused social situation. In these conditions the problems of the young seem important largely because they are symptomatic of the society as a whole. The shift in sexual attitudes, for example, draws attention to itself not only because it contrasts sharply with the code of behavior subscribed

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to by adult society (though rarely lived up to), but also because it illuminates in a striking way the confusion about these questions among people of all ages and all backgrounds. There is no common consensus any longer among adults about sexual attitudes or about the role of authority in society, or even about our expectations of how young people should behave. The young sense the absence of this consensus. And this stimulates the trend toward independence, self-reliance, and spontaneity, and exposes them as well to powerfully suggestive alternative models such as the media put forward.

Of course, there is always a gap between the generations, and it is difficult to judge whether the gap is now wider than it has been in the past. The conflict between generations is really one form of the maturing process in adolescence, and should trouble us only when it is so wide that the maturing process itself is disrupted. But it does seem likely that when we have, on the one hand, parents occupied with making the adjustment to a new tempo of life and, on the other, a young generation which is itself the product of those changes to which adults are adjusting, the gap in social experience and feeling between the generations can become dangerously wide. Parents are always one generation behind their children: today they seem to be two generations behind. Naturally, there are many young people who don't experience these tensions at all, and one must be constantly aware of how varied the pattern is. But there is something like a majority feeling, even if the trends are really set by a small minority, and in the age of the mass media these tensions communicate themselves much more rapidly from place to place, group to group. One of the special features of this is the role of the media in speeding up the fashion cycle among the young.

This helps to isolate teenagers as a distinct grouping from the rest of society. Paul Goodman suggests that youth is the only subculture which behaves as if it were a class. And this isolation is often stressed and validated by the media themselves. Some teenagers are genuinely "misunderstood": Dr. Winicott has suggested that at this stage of adolescence they don't really want to be understood. But many more learn to feel misunderstood because they are told so often that they are. One could cite a host of articles, features, and reports which, without trying to probe to the heart of the problem, loosely glamorize this feeling of group isolation.

The isolation of the subculture also becomes a major emphasis in the songs, lyrics, interviews with pop stars, teenage films, comics, and stories. The culture provided by the commercial entertainment market therefore plays a crucial role. It mirrors attitudes and sentiments which are already there, and at the same time provides an expressive field and a set of symbols through which these attitudes can be projected. But it also gives those attitudes a certain stress and shape, particularizing a background of feelings by the choice of a certain style of dress, a particular "look," by the way a typical emotion is rendered in a song or depicted in a drawing or photograph.

Teenage entertainments, therefore, play a cultural and educative role which commercial providers seem little aware of. Their symbols and fantasies have a strong hold upon the emotional commitment of the young at this stage in their development, and operate more powerfully in a situation where young people are tending to learn less from established institutions—such as the family, the school, the church, and the immediate adult community—and more from one another. They rely more on themselves and their own culture, and they are picking up signals all the time, especially from the generation just ahead.

Teenage culture is a contradictory mixture of the authentic and the manufactured: it is an area of self-expression for the young and a lush grazing pasture for the commercial providers. One might use the cult figure of the pop singer as an illustration. He is usually a teenager, springing from the familiar adolescent world and sharing a whole set of common feelings with his audience. But once he is successful, he is transformed into a commercial entertainer by the pop music business. Yet in style, presentation, and the material he performs, he must maintain his close involvement with the teenage world, or he will lose his popularity. The record companies see him as a means of marketing their products—he is a living, animated, commercial image. The audience will buy his records if they like his performances, and thus satisfy the provider's need to keep sales high; but they will also regard the pop singer as a kind of model, an idealized image of success, a glamorized version of themselves.

The economic base for this revolution in cultural tastes is the increased spending power of unmarried young people. This has been much exaggerated—it is part of the current myth that teenagers all over the country have money to burn. In fact, consistently high earnings are limited to a minority of jobs and to certain parts of the country. There is now some evidence that the contribution made to home and upkeep has been underestimated. Thousands of young people are in badly paid dead-end jobs, and the employment situation has noticeably worsened in recent years. Their prospects are not good. However, Mark Abrams estimated in his early study, *The Teenage Consumer* (since supported by further studies), a growth in the real earnings of unmarried teenagers of 50 percent as compared with 1938. This is double the rate for adult earnings in the same period. In 1958 he estimated that Britain's five million unmarried teenagers were grossing about £1.48 billion annually. More significant was the proportion of uncommitted or "discretionary" spending money they had available—about £900 million. This is a rise in discretionary spending of 100 percent as compared with 1938. The significant point is the high concentration of spending in certain limited fields. Nearly a quarter of that sum went for clothing and footwear (£210 million), another 14 percent on drink and tobacco (£125 million); 12 percent on sweets, soft drinks, and snacks (£105 million); £40 million

on records, record players, papers, and magazines; £2.5 million on bicycles and motorcycles. These sums are decisive in the chosen fields of purchase: 25 percent of all consumer spending on bicycles and motorcycles; records and record players, cinema and other entertainments; and between 15 percent and 25 percent of all expenditure on sweets, soft drinks, footwear, women's clothing and cosmetics. On the other hand, in the main consumer range (household purchases and fuel, furniture and consumer durables, insurance) their contribution is negligible—less than 3 percent of the total.

These large sums reflect the rise in living standards generally as well as the trend toward personal consumption in Britain in recent years. But the teenage contribution is most significant because it is concentrated in the whole range of goods and services which reflect cultural tastes, social life, gregariousness of the group or gang or clique, leisure and entertainment, and the consumption of provided teenage culture. It is in these fields that the most noticeable increases are to be found.

Commercial providers have been quick to cash in on this volatile market—one which is easily stimulated because turnover is high and the market is highly fashion conscious. The providers know that fashion and style play a key role in governing the flow of teenage purchase. As Mark Abrams remarked, "Teenagers more than any other section of the community are looking for goods and services which are highly charged emotionally." In a contribution to a BBC symposium on *The Young Affluent* a social worker described the teenage propensity to consume in this way: the woman who wants a sweater primarily to keep warm will buy a single one; but the teenager who wants a pink sweater in order to feel bright and gay and extrovert on one day, and a purple sweater to feel dark and intense and introspective the next will feel she needs two, and perhaps many more, if she can afford them. We are all subject to the play of fashion, but teenagers seem to be particularly so. The search for a "style" among young people is really part of a deeper search for a meaning and identifiable pattern in life.

When commercial providers become involved in creating new fashions and setting styles, they are inevitably caught up in the psychological processes of adolescence, in the crisis of identity which many experience at this age. They provide one set of answers to the search for more meaningful and satisfying adult roles. And the danger is that they will short-circuit this difficult process by offering too limited a range of social models for young people to conform to, a kind of consumer identity, which could be dangerous even when ultimately rejected by them. There seems to be a clear conflict between commercial and cultural considerations here, for which commercial providers take no responsibility.

The commercial images sometimes work in this way because they invoke such powerful elements in the teenage culture. They play upon the self-enclosed, introspective intensity of the teenage world. One aspect of this

tribalism which the media exaggerate can be seen lying behind the remarks of a young girl interviewed in a series on adolescents on BBC Schools Television. "You see a woman who is well dressed," she said, "in the latest fashion, made-up and all that . . . Well, you wouldn't say she's 'modern'—she's 'smart,' but 'modern' is more for young people." This innocent comment catches a feeling which is stressed again and again in advertising for the teenage market. In a different mode, the song "Teenage Dream," sung by Terry Dene, carried precisely the same message:

Mum says we're too young to love
And Dad agrees it's so,
But the joy and bliss I find in your kiss
Is a thrill they'll never know.

This inward-turning, self-pitying quality of many of the slower teenage ballads, the community-of-lost-souls feeling invoked in words and rhythms, is both an authentic rendering of an adolescent mood and a stylized exaggeration of it.

This apparent self-sufficiency in teenage culture is not simply a matter of keeping adult experience at arm's length; it is also a by-product of the limited subject matter and emotions dealt with in commercial entertainments. A study of the lyrics of teenage songs and the situations dramatized in them shows the recurrence of certain set patterns. These all deal with romantic love and sexual feeling. The emotion is intensely depicted, but the setups recur with monotonous regularity and the rendered style stereotypes the emotion. They deal exclusively with falling in love, falling out of love, longing for the fulfillment of love, the magic of love fulfilled. Of course, this has been the typical subject matter of popular song throughout the ages. But one has then to compare the actual quality of the statement in pop music with, say, the folk song or the blues or even the pointed Johnny Mercer lyric of the twenties to appreciate the particular flavor, the generalized loneliness and yearning—a yearning of "no-body in particular for anyone-at-all," as Philip Oakes once wrote.

Johnny Angel
He doesn't even know I exist
... I pray someday he'll love me
And together we will see
How lovely Heaven will be.

These songs, and the romantic stories with which they have so much in common, portray what Francis Newton calls "the condition, the anxieties, the bragging, and uncertainty of school-age love and increasingly school-age sex." They reflect adolescent difficulties in dealing with a tangle of emotional and sexual problems. They invoke the need to experience life directly and intensely. They express the drive for security in an uncertain and changeable

emotional world. The fact that they are produced for a commercial market means that the songs and settings lack a certain authenticity. Yet they also dramatize authentic feelings. They express vividly the adolescent emotional dilemma. And since they are often written on behalf of the adult providers of the entertainment world by teenage stars and songwriters, who share the cultural ethos of their audiences, there is a good deal of interaction and feedback going on all the time.

These emotions, symbols, and situations drawn off from the provided teenage culture contain elements both of emotional realism and of fantasy fulfillment. There is a strong impulse at this age to identify with these collective representations and to use them as guiding fictions. Such symbolic fictions are the folklore by means of which teenagers, in part, shape and compose their mental picture of the world. It is in this identification that we find an explanation for the behavior of the teenage "fan" and the contrived absurdities of the fan club, with its sacred relics, ritual stripplings of the "hero," and personally autographed images. Fan club behavior has now extended to younger teenagers, as can be seen on any public occasion, such as the personal appearance of pop groups like the Beatles. At the same time the teenage magazines have to some extent institutionalized fan club behavior in their pages. Roy Shaw remarked that the tone of some of these magazines for young girls is so intimate that "the readers feel, and are intended to feel, that they are members of a vast teenage club, where no do-good youth leader obtrudes his presence." The same contrived intimacy is characteristic of teenage films—the Cliff Richard films, *The Young Ones* and *Summer Holiday*, are good examples of the deliberate manufacturing of this mood.

Because of its high emotional content, teenage culture is essentially nonverbal. It is more naturally expressed in music, in dancing, in dress, in certain habits of walking and standing, in certain facial expressions and "looks," or in idiomatic slang. Though there is much to be learned from the lyrics of pop songs, there is more in the *beat* (loud, simple, insistent), the *backing* (strong, guitar-dominated), the *presentation* (larger than life, mechanically etherized), the *inflections* of voice (sometimes the self-pitying, plaintive cry, and later the yeah-saying, affirmative shouting), or the *intimations* (at one stage mid-Atlantic in speech and pronunciation, but more recently rebelliously northern and provincial). One can trace a whole line of development in popular music by listening to intonations—Louis Armstrong's gravelly rasp on the last word in "I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby" becomes Elvis Presley's breathy, sensual invocation, "Baby, eh," is then Anglicized into Adam Faith's "Boi-by," with a marked Cockney twist (in "What Do You Want if You Don't Want Money?"), and provincialized by groups like the Beatles.

Certain attitudes seem not only to recur with emphasis in the provided

culture, but to have found some specially appropriate physical image or presence among teenagers themselves. This teenage "look" can be partly attributed to the designers of mass-produced fashions and off-the-peg clothes and to the cosmetic advice syndicated in girls' and women's magazines. But these styles have a deeper social basis. The very preoccupation with the image of the self is important—pleasing, though often taken to extremes. Dress has become, for the teenager, a kind of minor popular art, and is used to express certain contemporary attitudes. There is, for example, a strong current of social nonconformity and rebelliousness among teenagers. At an early stage these antisocial feelings were quite active—the rejection of authority in all its forms, and a hostility toward adult institutions and conventional moral and social customs. During this period, adult commentators often misread this generalized nonconformism as a type of juvenile delinquency, though it had little to do with organized crime and violence. The "teddy boy" style, fashionable some years ago, with its rumbling waterfall hair style, fetishistic clothes, long jackets, velvet collars, thick-soled shoes, and the accoutrements which went along with them—string ties with silver medallions, lengthy key chains, studded ornamental belts—was a perfect physical expression of this spirit. Contrary to expectations, this style did not disappear, but persisted in the dress of motorcycle addicts and "ton-up" kids, and reappeared with the "rockers." A variant of this nonconformity could be found among "ravers" or beatniks, with the trend to long hair, heavy sweaters, drain-piped jeans and boots, or black stockings and high heels. The teddy boy look, a historical throwback, with its recall of Edwardian times, matched exactly the primitivism of the attitudes it expressed.

Sometimes this attitude is more inward and internalized, relating to real failures in the relationships between children and parents, and the sense of being misunderstood. For two teenage generations at least, James Dean did much to embody and project this image and to give it a style—his films *Rebel Without a Cause* and *East of Eden* are classics which, despite their exaggerations (e.g., the chicken-run scene in *Rebel*) and emotional falsity (the relationship between Dean and his parents in the same film), have a compulsive and hidden quality, due largely to Dean's true dramatic gifts. *Rebel Without a Cause*, directed with disturbing indulgence by Nicholas Ray, who seemed incapable of placing any distance between his dramatization of the teenage world and his own point of view, is really a cult film, and its most impressive moments are ritualized scenes from the teenage fantasy viewed from within the culture itself. In all his films, James Dean portrayed the ideal of blue jean innocence, tough and vulnerable in the same moment, a scowl of disbelief struggling with frankness for mastery in his face and eyes, continual changes of mood and expression on his features, still, as Edgar Morin describes him, "hesitating between childhood's melancholy

and walk. The Dean films have never left the circuit, playing continuously since his death to teenage audiences at the local cinema.

Related to the same set of attitudes, but more recent in origin, is that style of "cool" indifference—a kind of bland knowingness about the ways of the world, even, at times, a disenchantment, an assumed world-weariness. This detachment can be either cynical or sad. It is best described by that evocative word "beat"—but *not* beatnik. It lies behind the masklike, pasty-faced, heavily mascara'd look which became fashionable among teenage girls—originally a copy of a Paris style, but when assumed by teenagers suggestive of so much else. There is something of it, too, in the variations of the "continental" or "Italian" style which became required wear for teenage boys when dressed up (elsewhere, jeans are ubiquitous), with its modern, lazy elegance; its smooth, tapered lines; light materials; pointed shoes or boots; and the flat, rather dead "college" haircut which often accompanies it. A model of innovation in this field was the drained face and the whole casual ensemble of Adam Faith. This style, with certain bizarre innovations, is that of the "mods."

The Adam Faith look contrasts sharply with the more moody, insolently sensual appeal of, say, the early Elvis Presley or his transatlantic mirror image, Cliff Richard (both Faith and Presley became the prototype for illustrations in the girls' romantic comics) or the "popper" appeal of the Beatles.

Against the somewhat limited range offered in the provided culture, we have to set the real access of independence and the genuine charm—the naive as well as the assuredness—which allow teenagers to play, mold, or conjure with their experiences and derive pleasure from them. This life and spontaneity is never far from the surface, however powerful is the pull of fashion toward conformity. A light-footed, freewheeling quality comes through, both in the elegance of casual dress and the grace of movement in dancing, walking, or animated conversation—a real growth of sophistication which has taken place since the "teenage thing" first began. The sullen teddy boy style was a copy of an already exaggerated upper-class fashion; now the balance has shifted, and the fashion trends move the other way—the wool shirt and the slim Italian line penetrated to the West End and Chelsea from the outer working-class suburbs.

The Melody Maker (August 1959) reported that when jazz critic Bob Dawbarn asked Larry Parnes, the pop music impresario, whether he thought teenage tastes had changed much over the past couple of years, Parnes replied, "They have not so much changed as had their tastes changed for them." One of the main controls which the record and promotion companies exercise over the teenage taste in the pops is the pop singer himself, around whom in recent years there has developed something of a youthful religion of the celebrity. But the intensity of rapport between audience and singer

cannot be explained wholly in terms of the contrived engineering which makes the singer an idol. As Edgar Morin said in relation to cinema idols, "In the last analysis it is neither talent nor lack of talent, neither the cinematic industry nor its advertising, but the need for her which creates the star."

Something in this primitive force depends upon the representative character of the idol's biography. These singers are not remote stars, like Garbo, but tangible idealizations of the life of the average teenager—boys next door, of humble beginnings, almost certainly of working-class family, who have like the Greek gods done their "labors" as van boy, messenger, truck driver, filmmaker, or clerk in a routine occupation (that is, if they have not come straight from the "labors" of the classroom). What makes the difference between himself and his fellows is that he has been touched by success—picked out by a talent scout from Denmark Street or given a break in some provincial beat club or created a stir in the columns of a provincial paper. He is marked out, not so much by his musical talents (which more than one recording manager has said can be a distinct handicap in the business) as by his personality. He's got "something," and luck has come his way.

In the pop music business, "personality" as well as names is manufactured and marketed. What the audience sees (or saw: stars now seem more real and audiences less naive) as a magical process is very Big Business in the pop world. A whole industry has gone into the "production" of the star.

In the production of the pop-singing idol the manager comes first. He takes the risks on which there is no certain return, backing unknown singers whom he believes to have "star quality"—though most managers today hedge their bets by running a whole stable of singers so that losses on the swings can be made up on the roundabouts. Bunny Lewis, one of the successful managers, says that he looks first of all for the boy who is physically attractive, vocally individual, easily recognizable. Then, he advises, the embryo star has to be groomed—"style their hair, fix their teeth, dress them properly, coach them vocally. Instill a little sanity into them—they are going from a few pounds a week to a lot of money, and they must remain sound about it all." The manager not only grooms the star but often chooses the appropriate look for his personality, for this is the point of real connection with the audience.

The next important link in the promotion chain is the Artists and Repertoire (A&R) man, who is either employed by a record company or freelance. He is really the record producer, who puts the singer and his manager in touch with the media through the disc company. He selects the artist and the song, decides the style, length, and accompanying group as well as the place for recording. His role is vital, for he exercises a real power of choice over what material gets recorded. He is also closely in touch with composers of teenage ballads—very often themselves teenagers.

The recording engineers will be almost as responsible as the singer, in

many cases, for the final quality of the record. A song can be recorded many times until it sounds just right to the A&R man's ear, and, if necessary, a good first chorus can be spliced with a good second chorus from a different take to make the perfect record. Depth, resonance, volume, and pitch can all be created in the modern recording studio. The voice can be made to resound from the heavens by the skillful use of an echo chamber. A heavy hand on the guitar can be softened, or a beat of the bass accentuated, by the turn of switches.

But making records is only one aspect of the pop singer's career. There is the whole business of keeping the star fixed in the teenage firmament. This is partly a matter of sheer hard grind on the part of the star and the agent or manager—one-night stands in different towns, the summer season in a seaside town, a good deal of traveling and rehearsals. It is also a matter of highly organized and sustained publicity—radio and television appearances and interviews, feature articles, gossip news, original or ghosted columns in the teenage papers. For example, as well as the photographs of the stars which are found in the illustrated love comics for teenage girls, each one of these papers has a pop singer or two as resident columnist, plus large color photo inserts, details about the singers' tastes and love life, letters requesting information about them from fans, their horoscopes, and so on.

In what terms is it possible to establish even rough standards of judgment about this kind of music? There are many forces at work which inhibit any judgment whatsoever: pop music is regarded as the exclusive property of the teenager, admission to outsiders reserved. In these terms, disqualification is by age limit. But, of course, this is nonsense. Like any other popular commercial music, teenage pop is light entertainment music, intended for dancing, singing, leisure, and enjoyment. It differs in character, but not in kind, from other sorts of popular music which have provided a base for commercial entertainment since the advent of jazz, and before. If we are unable to comment on its quality and to make meaningful distinctions, it is largely because we lack a vocabulary of criticism for dealing with the lighter and more transient qualities which are part of a culture of leisure. We need that vocabulary very much indeed now, since this is the area in which the new media are at play.

On the other hand, there are counterforces at work which dismiss *all* pop music simply because of its teenage connections and its cult qualities. This reaction is just as dangerous since it is based upon prejudice. It springs in part from the inability of adults to establish their own points of reference in relation to popular culture—even though, lying behind the rejection of Elvis Presley, there is often a secret addiction to Gracie Fields or Vera Lynn or the Charlestone or Al Jolson or Nelson Eddy. There must also remain the suspicion that pop music provides a sitting target for those who have, for some unaccountable reason, to work off social envy or aggression against

the younger generation. From this point of view, contemporary pops could not be better designed, since they are basically loud, raucous, always played at full volume, an obvious affront to good taste. They are frankly sensual in appeal, with persistent themes of youth, love, and sex. These themes are given a physical image in the pop singer himself, whose behavior on and off stage is a challenge to British modesty and reserve. Worst of all, the music itself is an affirmation of a spirit of adolescent rebelliousness, and independence, and therefore, it is supposed, symbolizes some sort of deep undermining of adult authority and tastes.

Pop music may well be all of these things, but that does not help us much at the end of the day. For it is more difficult to judge, keeping one's respect both for the lively qualities embodied and the standards of light entertainment generally, the quality of a music which is so entwined with the cult of its own presentation, so mixed in with the mystic rites of the pop singer and his mythology, and so shot through with commercialism. It might be said, then, that the pops cannot be judged at all—but have rather to be seen as part of a whole subculture, and handled as one would the chants and ceremonies of a primitive tribe. Are the only standards anthropological?

This method, too, has its pitfalls. It invites a slack relativism, whereby pop music of any kind is excused because it plays a functional role in the teenage world. Functional it is—but the relationship between what is authentically part of teenage culture and what is provided for that culture by an adult and organized industry is not a simple one. If we add the evidence of the first part of this chapter, which deals with authentic features of the culture, to the second part, which describes the organization of the industry, we see how necessary it is to view this phenomenon both from within and without teenage culture itself. And this consideration brings us back to one of the basic problems in popular culture—does the audience get what it likes (in which case, are those likes enough?) and needs (in which case, are the needs healthy ones?), or is it getting to like what it is given (in which case, perhaps tastes can be extended)? Nowhere in this whole field is it so true that the real answer lies in an understanding of how these two factors interact in contemporary popular culture.