

The Beatles and the counterculture

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The counterculture represented one of the most virulent upheavals in 20th century American/western society. The 60's were a period of aberration; new ideas surfaced, along with new people, and unexpected things happened. The people involved in the counterculture confronted the political establishment and reacted against the dominant cold-war culture. In effect, thousands everywhere were challenging the prevailing attitudes in society. Youth everywhere were finding their voice; they questioned their parent's values and beliefs, re-evaluated them, and often rejected them. This is an important point: not only were the youth of the time questioning their parent's beliefs, but they also questioned authority, the government, and the establishment in general. What had been an unassailable confidence in the establishment during the years prior to the 60's was being undermined and slowly eroded. We might say that the youth, in rejecting prevailing societal values, were reclaiming their independence and free thought.

This challenging of America's values and beliefs was alarming for many. For perhaps the first time in history, parents and the older generation were being put on the defensive. An attack on their values and principles was, for them, an attack on themselves. Never before had people questioned these values, why start now? They asked, "what did we do wrong," or they pleaded with their children, "why can't you be 'normal?'" The old seemed entrenched in their conservative ways, while the youth were advocating change. Society watched in horror as an ever-widening gap emerged between the youth's polemic beliefs and the prevailing attitudes, principles, and ideals of their parents. Consequently, conflicts arose and friction was inevitably created between the establishment and those who sought alternatives.

Many students, activists, and hippies blamed the establishment for many of society's current problems, not the least of which was the war with Vietnam. The youth regarded themselves as having to fight in a war which was created by their parent's generation. This further divided the youth and their elders. "I lost respect for everything after Vietnam," said one soldier, "everything was just a lie." Another activist stated that "we bore witness to a whole generation starting to say to its parents: you can no longer expect us to kill and be killed for your uptight archaic beliefs." These attitudes represent the disillusionment with the system, which seemed to be spreading.

Students, activists, hippies, and the like wanted to change the system, but—in an irony—to change the system it seemed they ultimately had to work within it. They could speak out, but in a society where the older generation still 'held all the cards,' how could they hope to affect a change? Many 'dropped out,' disillusioned with present-day society; others, undeterred, strove to change it. That change would prove difficult. In a political system where they ultimately wielded little power, music was found to be an effective means to their cause. It was seen as revolutionary; it contained a power; it was a voice; it could carry a message, and it could communicate that message to the masses. Thus, it was a natural tool—or weapon, as it has been described—in the fight for Cultural Revolution.

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The Beatles were often criticized for being apolitical during this time, and were described as being connected only ‘symbolically’ to the counterculture. One song by the Beatles I’d like to examine, which I find to be an effective commentary on the then-current socio-political situation, is *While my Guitar Gently Weeps*. Coming from the *White Album*, this song was penned by George Harrison. Interestingly, I find it one of the more ‘political’ songs on the album, even though Lennon was traditionally the one identified as having more of a political involvement. I believe this song speaks strongly about the division of attitudes which existed across the generation gap, and touches on the crisis everyone perceived the state of the world to be in.

In *While my Guitar Gently Weeps*, Harrison is speaking to the older generation—or more generally, to anyone not ‘turned on’. The lyrics are presented from the point of view of the youth, and they are meant to portray how the youth viewed their elders. Specifically, how prevailing attitudes were interpreted—the youth are in the right while the Establishment is manipulative and deceitful. Lyrics like “someone controlled you,” and “bought and sold you” show the division: on one hand, there are free-thinking individuals as represented by the first person narrative, while on the other hand we have those who were a part of the system, “controlled” or “owned” by it. Harrison again speaks directly to those not ‘tuned on’ in the next stanza:

“I don’t know how you were diverted
You were perverted too
I don’t know how you were inverted
No one alerted you”

Again, these lyrics reinforce the division between reigning attitudes and beliefs of the time; either you were diverted along your path, having adopted the Establishments’ “perverted” ideals, or, as is implied, your head was free to make up its own mind, unpolluted with conservative standards. Harrison, in his questioning tone, is inquiring as to where these values came from in the first place; how and why has society adopted these ideals? Thus, he is imploring the youth to think for themselves.

The song also makes reference to the mess the world is in, with: “I look at the floor and I see it needs sweeping.” This could easily be a metaphor suggesting that positive action was required to fix or change the society of the day. It is an observation only, though; no action is suggested. This subtleness is indicative of the Beatle’s stylistic approach, commenting on the counterculture yet not actively participating.

An interesting element to this song is its sad, minor quality. This lends a patronizing feeling to what is being said. It is like he (us) feels sad for those ‘unenlightened souls’, and we pity them, almost. This tone gives implicit the idea that ‘we are right’ and they are ‘wrong’, being still rooted in their conservative ways. This culminates in a subtle attack on the Establishment: “Look at you all...” which is followed by the pitying (as it now sounds) last line.

Even though the song has a mournful quality, it paints the possibility of a positive outcome: “With every mistake we must surely be learning.” The first line in the song too, shows the potential for understanding: “I look at you all see the love there that’s sleeping.” This implies a deeper good within everyone, and we only need to awaken this “love” to turn people on; it’s there, it has just been buried by years of conditioning.

While My Guitar Gently Weeps is one of the few powerful examples of a Beatles' song with political connotations, perhaps all the more so coming from George. As I said, Lennon was usually perceived as the 'political' one, so any political involvement on the Beatles part (such as advocating political change) would be primarily through him. Yet here we have a song which I believe makes effective, insightful observations, and ones which support the counterculture's cause. However, it doesn't so much promote change as it is a commentary on the division of society. Therefore, it serves to reinforce the original perception of the Beatles' symbolic affiliation with the counterculture.

One band which had a more direct connection with the counterculture, and one which was more active in promoting change, was The Who. Many of their songs can be heard as catalysts for revolution. For example, one particular song, *My Generation* (written by Pete Townshend), is not only merely commenting on the division of societal values, but is also actively promoting it. In comparing The Who's role in the counterculture to that of the Beatles, we see that the former had adopted a more active role. Their songs were not commentaries, or symbolically representative of the movement, but instead had an energy which encouraged people—revved them up, if you will—to take part and contribute.

My Generation, like *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* is also speaking to an older generation. But unlike the Harrison tune, *My Generation* is not a commentary; rather, it seeks to dynamically reinforce the gap which was opening between generations, as I mentioned. With the opening line: "People try to put us down," Townshend immediately sets himself up as identifying with the youth generation, and as being a part of it. Furthermore, he sets the division up with an 'us' or 'them' duality (*People* try to put *us* down).

The first verse sends a powerful message to youth to reject their parent's values, it shows the conflict between generations and—almost militantly—it advocates resistance to it in whatever form you can muster. Lyrics like "I hope I die before I get old," and "Why don't you fade away" are a call to arms to resist and reject the Establishment. In fact, "Why don't you fade away" is speaking directly to it.

Indeed, The Who are very invested in carving out a niche for the young generation. There had never been a youth identity prior to this decade, so the Who have set out empowering teenagers everywhere to create one. This is continually reinforced in the lyrics "Talkin' bout *my*¹ generation" which appears at the end of every line, or the chorus of:

"This is *my* generation
This is *my* generation, baby"

In creating the division, Townshend takes the opportunity to parody the Establishment with his stuttering lyrics. While this at first might seem to be mocking the youth, he is in fact doing two things. First, he is further adding to the divide in doing something the older generation wouldn't 'get.' His stuttering also seems to be a humorous spoof on how the elder generation viewed the youth—as babies, or immature. So he's making fun of a (perhaps non-existent) stereotype, one at least which he sets up.

¹ Italics added by me

Thus The Who are (subtly) setting up the establishment as being condescending, and of looking down upon “my generation.” With one gesture, he sets them up and simultaneously mocks them.

The upbeat tempo, and its infectious rhythms are also very influential in carrying the message across. The music is infused with energy, which is important as it imparts that energy in its listeners, and encourages their participation. This is quite the opposite of the laid-back and sad (yet insightful) commentary that *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* offers.

One similarity between these two songs is that they both comment on the dire situation which existed at the time. “The floor...needs sweeping,” or “Things they do look awful cold” both show an alarm for the current state of affairs. Both Harrison and Townshend voiced their concerns over the dichotomy of society which had come about, aware there was a problem, but uncertain as to what the resolution should be. Nevertheless, The Who forge on, promoting the revolution although ultimately unsure of where it may lead.

The Who’s more direct approach to song-writing illustrates one fundamental difference between the Beatles and other bands during the late ‘60s. The Beatles, while they may have had political affiliations or preferences, were never so vocal in voicing them as other groups of the time. *While My Guitar Gently Weeps* is more of a commentary than a call to arms. True, they did have a few singles which gave an insight to their (i.e. Lennon’s) political leanings, such as “Revolution” or “Come Together,” but by and large the Beatles always seemed to be about the music. Any messages in their songs were often obscure, hidden, or were in-jokes that only they would understand. In essence they were still having fun by the late 60’s whereas other groups, such as The Who, were more involved, more actively advocating change, and more vocal about spreading a revolutionary message. The Who’s participation in the counterculture and encouragement for the revolution was, perhaps, more influential; the Beatles seemed content just to observe.