

The Coming of the Absaloms

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The fulcrumic year: 1955.



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Introduction

When it comes to the key events that helped to create the society that emerged in the American/Western World in the wake of the Second World War - arguably the most traumatic event in history - many would be inclined to cite the 1950s as *the* fulcrumic decade, and according to Charles Ealy, author of the article "Seeds of Change Sown in 1955", published in Nov. 2005 in *The Dallas Morning News*, that's especially true of its midpoint.

For all that, though, it's the mythic 1960s, with its Rock-Youth culture, and quasi-religious worship of sexual abandon and the use of mind-expanding drugs, that tends to be credited as the true decade of change, and with the reader's permission, I'd like to trace the evolution of the most revolutionary decade of the 20th Century, by briefly depicting the culture whence it sprang, and then - and at greater length - the decade that both preceded and birthed it, with special emphasis on its central year of '55.

Were they really so staid and conformist, those much treasured *mom-and-apple-pie* fifties? We've already established that they weren't, and that they didn't yield as if by magic to the wild, Dionysian 1960sâ ;

The truth is that far from being a sudden, unexpected event, the post-war cultural revolution, whose repercussions continue to be felt throughout a tragic broken West could boast historical roots reaching at least as far back as the European Enlightenment. Since that time, the Western World has been consistently assailed by tendencies hostile to its Judaeo-Christian moral fabric, and what happened in the 1960s was simply the culmination of many decades of activity on the part of revolutionaries and avant-gardists, especially since the First World War. Even Rock, a music which the celebrated American evangelist John MacArthur once described as having â a bombastic atonality and dissonanceâ was foreshadowed at its most experimental by the emancipation of the dissonant brought about by Classical composers of various Modernist schools.

Moving to the totemic year of '55, I begin with a day marked by an event which had a colossal if still largely unrecognised influence on the evolution of American and Western culture, that being the 7th of October, on which five major 20th Century figures, namely, Elijah Muhammad, RD Laing, Ulrike Meinhof, Oliver North and Vladimir Putin, attained the ages of 58, 28, 21, 14 and 3 respectively.

It was on that day that - at San Francisco's Six Gallery at 3119 Fillmore Street - about 150 people gathered to witness readings of poems by Allen Ginsberg, Phillip Whalen, Phillip Lamantia, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder.

All went on to be leading artists of the *Beat Generation*, a term which first saw the light of day in a 1952 article entitled "This is the Beat Generation", written for the New York Times by John Clellon Holmes, author of the proto-Beat novel "Go" (1952). Holmes had allegedly coined the term following conversations he'd had with Jack Kerouac in 1948 with regard to the disillusioned generation that had emerged in America in the wake of the Second World War.

Kerouac the self-styled "shy Canuck" from Lowell, Massachusetts, also attended this epochal clarion cry to the counterculture, but didn't read, preferring to cheerlead instead in a state of ecstatic inebriation. However, his roman à clef "On the Road" (1957) which centres on the mid-century wanderings he undertook in America

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and Mexico - largely with his muse and close friend Neal Cassady - remains Beat's defining work.

After the reading, the Beat movement, which had existed in embryonic form since about 1944, left the underground to become an international craze, with the Beatnik taking his place as a universally recognised icon with his beret, goatee beard, turtle-neck sweater and sandals.

'55 was also the year in which Rock and Roll assaulted the mainstream thanks to hits by Bo Diddley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and others, although it's "The Blackboard Jungle", which, released on the 20th of March, is widely credited with igniting the Rock 'n' Roll revolution, indeed late 20th Century teenage rebellion as a whole. It did so by featuring Bill Haley & His Comets' "Rock Around the Clock", over the film's opening credits. Originally a rather conventional blues-based song recorded by Sonny Dae and his Knights, Haley's version, which was remarkable for its earth-shaking sense of urgency, ensured the world would never be the same after it. In August of the year, Sun Records released a long playing record entitled "Elvis Presley, Scotty and Bill", featuring the so-called *King of the Western Bop* who went on to become Rock's single most influential figure apart from the Beatles.

On the 30th of September, James Dean died in hospital following a motor accident aged 23 after having made only three films, the greatest of which, Nicholas Ray's "Rebel Without a Cause" emerged about a month afterwards. It could be said to be the motion picture industry's defining elegy to the sensitivity and rebelliousness of youth, with Dean its most beautiful and tortured icon ever. As such his image has never dated, nor been surpassed. The modern cult of youth was born in the mid 1950s.

However, Dean himself had been powerfully influenced by Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando, arguably the two foremost pioneers of the Stanislavski Method within the Motion Picture industry, who'd honed their craft in the late '40s at the celebrated Actor's Studio in New York City. The screen personas of Clift, Brando and Dean, in which vulnerability and defiance were fused to luminously magnetic effect served as prototypes of the neurotic and narcissistic individualism that went on to exert such a seismic influence on the evolution of the sixties counterculture in era-defining movies such as George Stevens' "A Place in the Sun" (1951), Stanley Kramer's "The Wild One" (1953), and Elia Kazan's "East of Eden" (1954)

Their mixture of incandescent beauty and sullen defiance was hardly new though, having been a feature of Romantic rebels again and again at least since the heyday of Byron and Shelley; and it could be said that their true spiritual ancestor was none other than King David's much loved yet fatally rebellious son Absalom, of whom it was written in 2 Samuel 14:25: *But in all Israel there was none to be so much praised as Absalom for his beauty: from the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.*

Again and again, 1955 is cited by cultural commentators as the year in which things started to change in America and the West. When it comes to Britain, there seems to be no doubt that within the space of a mere two generations, a spectacular rise in criminal violence from the low rates of at least the previous *two centuries*, occurred from about 1955. This same rise coincided with increasingly large-scale denigration of such traditionally sanctified Christian institutions as marriage, pre-marital purity and the two-parent family, which had always been seen as the enemy by various revolutionary tendencies within art and politics, while being respected by the majority, and affected every industrial nation apart from Japan.

As in Britain, so in the US, but given America's far greater size and complexity, the situation has of necessity been more extreme. Take a remarkable article written for the Fall/Autumn 1955 edition of the Trotskyist Fourth International entitled "Youth in a Delinquent Society":

Its author, one Joyce Cowley, was at pains to emphasize the general conformity of American youth in the mid 1950s, while also making it clear that cautious conservatism was far from being the total picture, and that there'd been a sharp rise in crime since the onset of the decade. She also stated something to the effect that the nature of the crimes committed during this period were of a shocking gravity that had been relatively

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uncommon in the US in more recent decades. To support her point, she alluded to various phenomena which are all too familiar to those of us who came to maturity in the 60s and beyond, including the abuse of narcotics, and acts of gratuitous cruelty and violence, from teen gang rumbles to the senseless sacrifice of innocents.

But does all this mean that civilisation, not just in the US and the West, but as a whole, is irrevocably doomed? Many Christians are indeed of the belief that these are the final days prior to the return of the Lord, of which He speaks in Matthew 24:37: *But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of Man be.* They may indeed be right, and there are many indications that this is the case. However, in the verse immediately preceding the one just quoted, Jesus makes it clear that when it comes to the *precise* day of the Second Coming, only God the Father knows: *But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.*

Thence, it may well be that if the nations of the West return to the Judaeo-Christian values on which they were founded, not half-heartedly...but with the kind of uncompromising passion for God that provoked the great revivals of history, like prodigals, broken and contrite in spirit, our great civilisation may yet survive.

This essay was based on portions of the story *The Gambolling Baby Boomer*, chapter one of *Rescue of a Rock and Roll Child*, and was composed in a spirit of truth and integrity to the best of my ability.

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