

50 Years Later, the Spirit of '69 Feels Like a Hangover

The August 16 death of actor Peter Fonda comes as a jolt to Baby Boomers, including this one. Most of us will always think of Fonda as the young and vigorous star of the 1969 film *Easy Rider*.

Perhaps Fonda, dying of lung cancer, willed himself to live long enough to see the golden anniversary of that movie, which earned him an Oscar nomination. Indeed, over the last half-century, *Easy Rider* has made an epochal transition, from counterculture-ish critique to time-burnished classic.

And yet to re-watch the movie after five decades is to see some time-specific assumptions that haven't aged well – making the film more anachronistic than timeless. Such discordancies tell us a lot about how the nation has changed since the film's release in the United States on July 14, 1969.

For instance, there's the breezy assumption that drug use, including LSD, is not only a good thing for its mind-expanding (sic) properties but also, crucially, a marker of social superiority. Moreover, the lead characters, played by Fonda and Dennis Hopper, are actual drug *dealers*, trafficking in cocaine from Mexico. That's a bit much, to be sure, even for progressives. And come to think of it, today's audience will also notice that Fonda and Hopper are both white males – they're not the least bit diverse.

Another antique assumption is the exaltation of the motorized joy of the open road, as best expressed by the soundtrack's biker anthem "Born To Be Wild." In 2019, not everyone agrees that zooming down the highway astride a big hog is a good thing. Can today's green wokerati even bear to think about the carbon footprint?

Of course, some elements of *Easy Rider* aren't so much anachronistic as eternally predictable: *it's a liberal Hollywood movie*. Thus we get progressive sermons from a flawed but noble ACLU lawyer, portrayed by Jack Nicholson. The ACLU man explains things to the biker hippies, who fail to comprehend the danger they face as they travel through rural Louisiana, surrounded by brutish rednecks. "What you represent to them," Nicholson warns, "is freedom."

This assertion that "freedom" could be a threat puzzles both Fonda and Hopper, and so Nicholson explains: "It's real hard to be free when you are bought and sold in the marketplace." Ah yes, American backwoodsmen have been folded, spindled, and mutilated by IBM and the rest of the corporate elite. That explains at least part of their meanness.

Nicholson continues with a stark warning: "Don't ever tell anybody that they're not free, 'cause then they're gonna get real busy killin' and maimin' to prove to you that they are." Thus the fate of the heroes is portended.

Yes, in this telling, the only thing we have to fear is... Middle America. We might add that this theme of hippie martyrdom popped up a lot back then: in the 1970 movie *Joe* and in the 1968 musical *Hair* – and, more allegorically, in the 1970 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the 1974 TV movie *The Execution of Private Slovik*.

To be sure, enough innocent people are killed – in any era, in any number of circumstances – to make the subject of murdered innocence perpetually compelling. So perhaps the fate of the easy riders can be connected to the mass shootings that are so lamentably prevalent today.

If *Easy Rider* is remembered as a mixed bag, other aspects of 1969 culture have fared less well. For instance, there's the Woodstock music festival, held in upstate New York 50 Augusts ago. To many, it was muddy and ugly, yet to many others –

especially those at the vanguard of cultural change – it was a beautiful rebuke to the hated Establishment, a welcome signal that the Age of Aquarius was dawning.

Typical of this new feeling was the 1970 song written by Joni Mitchell and recorded by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, *Woodstock*, which [begins](#), “Well, I came upon a child of God/ He was walking along the road.” And this child of God, of course, was headed to Woodstock; as he explains, “Got to get back to the land / And set my soul free.”

In fact, the song contains more than its share of spiritual aspiration and immodest biblical allusion: “We are stardust, we are golden... And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.” Today, those lyrics might seem risible, yet at the time, to many, they seemed credible, a fair characterization of the moral superiority of the young and uncorrupted.

Still, by 2019, the spirit of “Woodstock Nation,” such as it ever was, has been demonstrated to be strictly a one-off. Thus an attempted 50-year reunion festival – complete with geezer rockers as well as fresh talent – failed to materialize. Indeed, just in time for the anniversary, *Rolling Stone* [bannered](#) a deeply reported story, “How Woodstock 50 Fell Apart.” As the article details, the hoped-for redux was riven by organizational incompetence, personal avarice, and NIMBY opposition.

As the authors slyly note, “Everything that was invented at Woodstock – mores, attitudes, production concepts, everything – is now totally integrated and taken for granted in American society.” In other words, whatever was unique or interesting about Woodstock has become folded into the American mainstream – and maybe that’s not so wonderful.

Yet if we *really* want to see how much has changed in the last 50 years, we might consider a new movie that gives a gleeful finger to the cherished pieties of liberal convention – that

being Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*. That film is centered on another event of August 1969, the celebrity slaughter committed by followers of Los Angeles hippie commune leader Charles Manson.

The "Manson Family Murders," as they were called back then, were so vile and gruesome that they caused a media sensation. Even at the time, it was understood that they signaled something ominous about the counterculture. That is, hippiedom wasn't just about flower children and free love; there was also a dark side.

In the decades since, much of the hippie lifestyle, like Woodstock, has been, er, *incorporated*, for better or worse, into the American mainstream as sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll have become big businesses. Admittedly, there aren't many hippie communes these days, nor cultish murders, although there are some – and Manson, who died in prison two years ago, still retains a diabolic resonance.

There are still plenty today who draw at least some inspiration from the '60s, be they sexual explorers, drug takers, organic farmers – or computer programmers. And oh yes: many people of all ages think of themselves as golden children, seeking ecstatic ways to set their souls free.

Yet now, half a century after the Manson slayings, Tarantino has made a film that focuses on that dark side, even as it celebrates the oppositional "square" culture of Western movies and TV shows – even the Vegas-y Dean Martin. Indeed, the film is so eager in its execration of the counterculture that it tosses around an epithet of the era, "dirty hippie."

So what remains of 1969? One might recall some of Fonda's last words in *Easy Rider*, "We blew it," and think of them as an epitaph for an era as well as a film. Yet then comes the wizened voice of archetypal wisdom: *the past is never past*.

So maybe we can say that what's really happened is that

Fonda's thesis has been layered by Tarantino's antithesis. And the resulting synthesis will be obvious to all in, oh, 50 years.

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