**The 1960s Counterculture**

In the 1960s many Americans began to look for alternative to traditional patterns of living. Young people, in particular, adopted values that ran counter to, or against, the mainstream culture. Drawing on the example of the Beat Generation of the 1950s, members of this counterculture rejected most of the conventional social customs. They experimented in new forms of dress, different attitudes toward sexual relationships, and the recreational use of drugs. Their rejection of accepted ways of life in favor of change and individual choice still affects society today.[[1]](#endnote--1)

**A Time of Challenge**

By the end of the 1960s the prosperity and the tranquility of the 1950s had passed. The war, inflation, and race issues led to growing divisions in the country. Students on college campuses challenged the establishment. Throughout the country students staged sit-ins and organized demonstrations that gradually become militant protests.

* Students for a Democratic Society. Organized by Tom Hayden; described their intentions in the “Port Huron Statement”; criticized the military-industrial complex; called for an end to poverty; sought to bring about “a democracy of individual participation” in which all members subject to the authority of a government institution would participate in its decision-making process
* Free Speech Movement (Mario Savio and Jack Weinberg). Transferred experience with civil rights movement to anti-establishment efforts; rebelled against university leaders who were “willing servant[s] of a corporate order that controlled society and maintained an economic system that oppressed blacks and poor people”; demanded student voting rights on university boards; objected to course offerings; protested rules that regulated personal lives
* The New Left. (the “Weathermen”) The most radicalized minority of student protestors; advocated revolution; formed terrorist groups which bombed public buildings and corporate headquarters

The student protests, though highly publicized, impacted a relatively small number of campuses. Most demonstrations were held in the urban areas with little influence in the rest of the country. The students themselves, for the most part, came from upper middle-class families, were of liberal and affluent backgrounds.[[2]](#endnote-0)

**A Time of Change**

People’s appearances reflected the social changes that were taking place. Hippies—people who were “hip”, or aware of the latest styles wanted to look different. Some women wore their hair long and chose freer fashions, such as loose-fitting clothes. Others chose to wear tight mini-skirts, which were introduced by British designer Mary Quant in 1965. Men often let their hair grow long and wore beards. Many hippies adopted the dress of working people, which seemed somehow more “authentic” than the school clothes of middle-class youth. Both men and women wore blue jeans (often with bell bottoms), plain cotton shirts, and other simple garments that were intended to look natural.[[3]](#endnote-1)

More people fled from society than confronted society.

* Mystic enlightenment replaced scientific rationalism
* Infinite replaced finite
* Feeling and intuition replaced though and knowledge
* Eastern religions replaced western religions
* Natural replaced synthetic

Many advocates of this new lifestyle “dropped out” of society to live in communes as neighborhood and rural retreats. The appeal of the commune movement lay in a romantic urge to return to the land: to take up a simpler lifestyle, to regain physical and mental health and perhaps to seek spiritual renewal. [[4]](#endnote-2)

*The Sexual Revolution*

The new views of sexual behavior advanced by the counterculture were labeled “the sexual revolution.” The young people who led this revolution demanded more freedom to make personal choices. Some argued that sex should be separated from its traditional ties to family life.

The sexual revolution in the counterculture led to more open discussion of sexual subjects. Newspapers, magazines, and books published articles that might not have been printed just a few years earlier. The 1962 book by Helen Gurley Brown, *Sex and the Single Girl*, became a bestseller. In 1966 William Masters and Virginia E. Johnson shocked many people when they published *Human Sexual Response*, a report on their scientific studies of sexuality. The “free love” movement, in which people abandoned traditional social constraints on sexuality, reached a peak during the 1960s.

*The Drug Scene*

Some members of the 1960s counterculture also turned to psychedelic drugs. These powerful chemicals cause the brain to behave abnormally. Users of psychedelic drugs experience hallucinations and other altered perceptions of reality. The beatniks had experimented with drugs a decade before, but they had been relatively few in number. Now the use of drugs, especially marijuana, became more widespread among the nations’ youth.

One early proponent of psychedelic drug use was researcher Timothy Leary. Leary worked at Harvard University with Richard Alpert on the chemical compound lysergic acid diethylamide, commonly known as LSD. The two men were fired from their research posts in 1963 for using undergraduates in experiments with the drug. Leary then began to preach that drugs could help free the mind. He advised listeners, “Tune in, turn on, drop out.”

Soldiers who had used drugs in Vietnam brought them home when their tours of duty were completed. Marijuana became common among middle-class college students. Todd Gitlin, a radical activist who became president of the SDS, explained that “the point was to open up a new space, an inner space, so that we could space out, live for the sheer exultant point of living.”

This view presented just one side of the drug scene. On the other side lay serious danger. The possibility of death from an overdose or from an accident while under the influence of drugs was very real. Three leading musicians—Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Jimi Hendrix—died of complications from drug overdoses. Their deaths represented the tragic excesses to which some people were driven by their reliance on drugs as a means of escape.

*The Music World*

Music reflected both reflected and contributed to the cultural changes. The rock and roll of the 1950s and the folk music of the early 1960s gave way to a new kind of rock—overt sexuality. The Beatles heavily influenced the music of this period. Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones was a dramatic and electrifying showman on stage. Janis Joplin was a hard-drinking singer whose powerful interpretations of classic blues songs catapulted her to stardom.

The diverse strands of the counterculture all came together at the Woodstock Music and Art Fair in upstate New York in August 1969. About 400,000 people endured brutal heat and rain to listen to major bands of the rock world. The police avoided confrontations by avoiding the law.[[5]](#endnote-3)

**A Time for Contemplation**

The counterculture movement was relatively short-lived, but it was a powerful decade.

* It heightened consciousness of imperialism, war, poverty, and racial injustices.
* It called attention to the negative consequences of ecological and human consequences of modern technology.
* It forced people to confront the disparities between their professed ideals and the lives they lived.
* It altered mores on dress, art, and sexual practices.
* It made people more aware of their potential as an individual rather than just a member of society.[[6]](#endnote-4)

1. From Cayton, Andrew, et al. America: Pathways to the Present. Prentice Hall: Needham, MS, 2002. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. From Moss, George Donelson. Moving On: The Amerian People Since 1945*.* Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-0)
3. Cayton. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. Moss. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
5. Cayton [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
6. Moss. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)