

# Youth

DON WISHART\*

HOW DO WE MEET THEM? How do we introduce ourselves and share our ideas with the "now generation"?

We can stand silently and not risk an encounter because we feel we do not know them well enough to begin a conversation. We can initiate a lopsided dialogue and present our ideas to them in our words. Or we can start successful communication by listening to and talking about things that mean something to young people.

YOUTH—That's a vast and very diverse audience! I've 1) explored some areas that were meaningful to me, and 2) limited most of the discussion to teens.

In putting these 30 minutes together, I learned that teens don't like to be grouped. I'll not attempt to describe individual youths, but I will explore some of the major thrusts of the young adult generation. To understand the forces operating with youth, we have to listen. We have to pick a strong in-going channel, and the one I believe in at this point is music.

There is an intense communication going on between the words and music of a rock artist and his listeners. The best artists recognize the thoughts and needs of their audience, and if they're smart they respond to those needs in their music. You'll find freedom, honesty, and concern for persons expressed in much of the youth music of today (2). The themes of popular favorites are a running commentary on the changing lives of youth. It is forceful, whether it's loud or soft, fast or slow. Realism is here, and the simple-minded jingles are becoming fewer. Music has a message, and it sometimes provides directions about what to do, or it may clarify a young person's own vague feelings (10).

---

\* Assistant Extension Editor, Iowa State University.

Dr. Joyce Brothers:

"I think that we've come full swing. We first had very intellectual, fantasy words . . . the music that most of us are familiar with . . . the June Moon kind of lyric which became quite sophisticated in the rhymes itself, not necessarily in what was being said. And as a reaction to this very fantasized, romanticized nonsense we had the expression of feeling, and the rejection of intellectualism . . . now we're moving into a new era . . . where it will take us I don't know, but a combination of both feeling and thought, not just breaking things down, but beginning to wonder about how we're going to build them up again (9)."

But there have been other generations and other music. Is this one any different? I believe it is in many ways. There are more of them than ever before, and they are in a position of influencing society just from their numbers.

Because of their numbers, more than 25 million (6), they have made us aware of several things—the problems of poverty, pollution, war, loss of human meaning—and the apathy which exists right in the midst of all these crises. The 1960's made us as a nation sensitive to a great many social problems. Young people were active in forcing out into the open a contradiction between what people say they believe and what they actually practice. Although their actions were not then and are not today always mature, they have been pointed toward human needs (8).

Young people are a real economic force. Because of our affluent society, the 25 million teens have few worries about the material needs of life. The youth market became a major force back in the mid-1950's when a group by the name of "Bill Haley and the Comets" started selling "rock and roll." And what they didn't do, Elvis did. From there, business couldn't keep up with itself. Anything labeled "teen" sold (1). We've come a long way from "early Elvis," but his influence and that of others is still being felt.

Teens tend to be united around symbols of identity (clothes, language etc.). Radio, TV, and youth magazines are channels for linking youth together in a cultural system. Young people sense a pride in being young and a pride in what belongs to their generation. What used to be belonging to a gang or a local group is now more like belonging to a movement or a people (8).

One author constructed a six-point profile as a means of looking at the youth culture through music. 1—Young people are "irreverent" about the sacred of the past. The "holy" things held by

the older generation have little meaning for the young, and those growing up today must alter sacred cows to be meaningful to them. 2—The now generation is humanistic and concerned with people having some kind of meaning to their lives. 3—Youth like personal experience which is spontaneous. 4—They tend to reject the Puritan work ethic, or as one young man I talked with put it . . . “work just for the hell of it.” They see nothing mystical about a hard day’s work. 5—They dislike that which dehumanizes people in society. 6—They reject war (2).

Edwin Newman:

“There’s no way to exaggerate the importance of the war in Vietnam, in the feelings for young people, and in a great many other things, because there has been, I think, no event in our time that has so destroyed . . . respect for authority, respect for age, respect for experience, respect for established wisdom or respect for established ways of doing things. . . .”

Dr. Joyce Brothers:

“I don’t think there’s been a total lack of respect for adults. I think that you’ll find in various studies on young people around the country that many of them are carrying through in fact what their parents have taught them, and that they’re not very far removed in attitude toward events from their parents. It’s simply that they have the energy, the time, the commitment to do something about it rather than simply worry about it as many adults do. If you have a family to support and mouths to feed, you’re less likely to have the time and energy to accomplish and to devote your life to it as many of the students have (9).”

### *The Values of Youth*

The values held by the young are not greatly different from those held by adults. The difference is the priority that the youth place on the values and the methods used to achieve these values. They contend that people should act as they believe.

What are the values they prize? These for sure . . . personal expression, self-development, personal conscience, and the social welfare of others. There are fewer now who pursue achievement for achievement’s sake. Young people are trying different methods of finding meaning in their lives.

Edwin Newman:

“There’s a much greater variety of life styles now, certainly that have existed than at any other time that I’ve been alive, or aware of it . . . I think this is one of the values of music for the young person. Through the music they can try out various life styles, good and bad (9).”

Although to be an adult is not a goal right now, they are attempting to find new levels of maturity. And in finding these new levels of maturity, one of the most notable features of young people is their impatience.

Dr. Joyce Brothers:

"The older person has had all of the worries that the young person has today. And it bothers almost all adults . . . the war, the destruction of our environment . . . but young people have an urgency to accomplish something right now. . . ."

Here's what some young people say:

". . . when you have a problem, you wait till the last minute. That's what adults think they can do with pollution . . . and they probably could do it; they could wait till maybe 1980 when everybody's starting to cough, and then they could probably lick it. But why can't they do that now?"

". . . There's a good chance that as a 19-year-old and as a I-A that I might be going over there . . . and that right now I don't really know if I'm going to come back if I do go. So I really don't have a lot of worries about whether or not I'm going to need to be in any kind of shape in 20 years, cause I don't know about the next two or three years. . . ."

Dr. Joyce Brothers:

"And so the teenager is impatient; he wants things to happen quickly. The older person has discovered that things don't happen overnight; that you can't make that many changes, and so he has in some ways adjusted, in some ways given up, and in some ways become a little more cynical. But the young person wants it this minute, now; he can't put it off, he has to make things happen quickly. And so I think you've got a lot of thrust from this impatience. . . . (9)."

They want things now. The present is where the action is. One author cites two factors that have contributed to this impatience. 1—Time has collapsed, and 2—the horizon has disappeared. And television, more than anything else, did it. Events thousands of miles away reach our front rooms in minutes. Young people know more about a presidential candidate than they know about their city council. Youth are brought up in an instantaneous world, and when they come out of the front room they wonder why it takes so long to get something done in a world of red tape (4).

And in this world of red tape they see the person losing control. So it's not surprising that one of the basic pleas today is the cry for feeling. You'll find this, for instance, in the writings of the underground student press (3). (And don't be fooled that the underground press is limited to college or high school.) This feel-

ing is evident in music. Sometimes the tunes are about personal anguish, a yesterday, a solitary man, or a "real" situation.

### *Young People are Concerned*

So young people are concerned. And they're concerned about things like the draft, drug abuse, the polarization in society (black against white, rich against poor), teacher-student communication problems, the over-emphasis on college preparatory courses in high school. And the group that gave me that list added three other items . . . what they called three basic desires of young people, in this order . . . the need to be liked by other teens and adults, the need to be trusted, and finally the need to be liked by members of the opposite sex (7).

Because of the rapid mobility of today's society, I believe that young people feel they don't have the time for formalities of getting acquainted slowly that other generations enjoyed. (This shows up at a rather young age. A third grader's mother in our neighborhood asked him why he didn't have a favorite friend . . . he had a different friend nearly every week . . . and he replied, "Well, Mom, that's just the way life is.")

Others of high school age say they don't like the cliques that form in their schools, they feel that people should be more open and honest with one another. They feel that youth alcohol problems are being overlooked with all the attention being paid to drugs (11).

Kids like to experience, they are sensitive, they want to be a part of something. So how do we communicate so that what we have to say "MEANS" something to a young person? I believe that if we hit upon the right combination of both content and media, we stand a better chance. This is precisely what rock music performers and writers are doing (2). Let's take a look at part of a combination of content and media that I know communicates with a youth audience.

### *What Persons Do They Believe*

I was curious about what else or who else was believable. Early last winter I began an informal survey of Iowa young people (4-H groups, schools, church youth groups, Scouts, YMCA-YWCA), and received 650 completed questionnaires from youth 12-18 years old. I divided them by ages, and into four other cat-

egories—boys from the country, boys from town, girls from the country, girls from town. I don't know if my results stand up under statistical tests, and besides, I had no hypotheses. The interpretations are my own, and not necessarily those of a computer.

My first question was: "Suppose that you could discuss issues that concern you with anyone you chose. What one person would you consider most believable from the following list?" And these were the choices from which they selected—television personality, newspaper columnist, book author, someone your own age, your parents, someone two-three years older than you, a priest or minister, a teacher, some other adult. Regardless of where they lived, kids 12-13 years old rated parents as highly believable. Those 14 years old and older ranked parents and others their own age as most believable on an equal basis. If I were to rank the "most believables" in descending order, two other groups show up as commonly mentioned—ministers and young people two-three years older than the respondent.

They were then asked who was least believable. Television personalities and newspaper columnists were chosen most often. (One finding that I'll classify as "interesting"—boys 12-15 years old living in town tended to list those their own age as least believable.)

I then asked them to name some qualities about their "most believable" choice. The respondents who chose their parents gave essentially the same reasons regardless of their age or where they lived. They believed parents because they understand; trust them; parents are honest. Young people also said that their parents know them, and they know their parents.

One boy said that his parents had never lied to him in 18 years. This goes along with a finding in the *Life* magazine youth poll of last winter. Their poll showed that their teen respondents felt their upbringing had been "about right," that they were happy partly because they had a good family, and that they had little trouble communicating with parents (5).

The young people who chose ministers or priests as most believable were somewhat more varied in their reasons. According to kids, clergy are honest, they don't lie (some said that ministers can't lie), they're up-to-date, they listen, understand kids, not prejudiced, close to God, and they have faith in young people.

Youth two-three years older than the respondents were chosen as believable because they've had the same problems, they are

older but not too old to forget what it's like to be two-three years younger, older young people are more experienced.

Young people who chose their age mates as most believable did so for these reasons: they said that someone their own age had their same problems, would understand, they would listen, they were loyal, and would keep a confidence.

### *Youth's Use of the Media*

Another question dealt with their use of the media: newspapers, television, radio, and magazines. First, about newspapers . . . everybody reads the comics, boys are more interested in sports sections. The older kids in my groups read more of a variety (columns, news, sports), but this may be for school assignments rather than for personal interest.

Radio? Everybody listens, and the overwhelming majority listen to rock music stations. And in nearly every group, the music that a DJ plays was rated higher than his personality as a reason for listening.

In answer to the question about their favorite magazine, boys mentioned magazines in the broad categories of sports, car, and outdoor, most often *Sports Illustrated*, *Hot Rod*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Field and Stream*. Girls read teen magazines, especially *Sixteen*, *Teen*, and *Co-Ed*. Others named by both boys and girls were *Readers Digest*, *Mad*, *Playboy*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Life*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Look*.

Everyone who answered my questionnaire said they watched some television (no surprise), and the favorite shows were easy to spot. Situation comedies were popular with 12-14-year-olds, and so were what I called adventure shows. Older young people watched these too, but the medical shows began showing up, especially with the girls over 14. My groups also indicated that movies were more popular with boys and girls over 15. Some comedians mentioned as well-liked were Carol Burnett, Flip Wilson, Red Skelton, and "Laugh-In" and "Hee-Haw" as comedy shows. Adventure favorites were "The Bold Ones," "Mod Squad," "Adam-12," "Mannix," "Hawaii 5-O," and "Star Trek."

Their most-mentioned newsman was Walter Cronkite, which surprised me. I would have guessed Roger Mudd, Peter Jennings, or Frank Reynolds.

I asked what books young people read for pleasure outside of

school assignments. One boy said, "Any book I read outside of school is a pleasure." I was amazed at the vast number and the variety of books teens read. The younger teens liked mystery stories, adventure, stories about sports figures. The girls liked books about teen-aged girls especially. *Love Story* was named often, as was *Christy*. The older ones in my groups listed books such as *The Cross and the Switchblade*, *Black Like Me*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, again *Love Story* (mostly girls), *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones*, *Invisible Man*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Airport*, *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden*, and *The Godfather*.

Movies are popular, which is no surprise, and again there is a tremendous variety that young people see. "Love Story" was mentioned often (mostly girls admitted it), "For Pete's Sake," "Cold Turkey," "Patton," "MASH." The older ones listed "The Graduate," "Easy Rider," "Woodstock," "True Grit," "Catch-22," "Romeo and Juliet," and "Maybe I'll Come Back in the Spring."

### *Heroes and Non-heroes*

The *Life* youth poll asked for heroes and non-heroes (5). I listed 45 national figures and asked them to select four most-admired and four least-admired people. My respondents chose John F. Kennedy, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and John Wayne as most admired. The girls didn't rate John Wayne as high as the boys did. They did choose Peggy Lipton ("Mod Squad") more often than the boys. The least-admired people were: Fidel Castro, Vice-president Agnew, Mrs. Aristotle Onassis, and President Nixon. The girls cast the deciding vote of no confidence for Mrs. Onassis.

The final question I asked the young people was "Who or what says best how you feel about things?" Name any recent rock music group or song and the chances are excellent that young people agree with you. Of the people named, nearly half were either song writers or recording artists. The song most often mentioned was "Reach Out and Touch."

A few young people said that they themselves said best how they felt about things. Some named their sister, brother, boy friend or father, and only one named a teacher (11).

### *Plus and Minus Sides*

I don't suppose you agree with everything you've heard, but that wasn't part of my assignment, making you agree with me.

Let's take a look at one author's view of the plus and minus sides of the young adult generation. Don Fabun in *The Children of Change*, says:

The minus side. . . .

1. Lives have been lost and property has been damaged in their quest for change.

2. Young people lack a sense of the continuity of history. Youth generally does not seem to grasp that our society, though far from perfect, has been built on the honest efforts of people who have never stood in a picket line or gone to jail, but they did get up every morning and go to work. And that, Fabun says, is what has made the affluent society that has made it possible for youth to involve themselves in issues to the extent that they have.

3. Youth lacks a sense of humor. It laughs at the Establishment, but does not seem capable of laughing at itself.

4. The young adult generation has not controlled the cutting edge of its own violence. And that has alienated many people who might otherwise have supported it.

And the good side. . . .

1. Youth has established itself as a force to be reckoned with.

2. Young people have turned what Fabun called a rather drab society into one exploding with color, sound, and light.

3. Students have been given some voice in campus and school affairs.

4. They've called our attention to some of the social and economic inequalities in our society. Helped give a sense of direction to some of the minority movements.

5. Youth have caused many adults to re-examine their way of life and their value system, and whether their value system fits in today's world (4).

I heard a line recently that I think fits rather well at this point. "Listening is a key to understanding. Understanding shared is a key to communication" (9).

Dr. Joyce Brothers:

"For many parents, the reason that they object to the sounds is not so much the volume as that they don't understand. And if they listen to what is being said and they talk about it with the young people in their family it doesn't become quite as annoying. It isn't the volume of sound . . . we can find very low-volume sound irritating if we find that it closes us out . . . if we don't understand it (9)."

## Literature Cited

- (1) BELZ, C. (1969). *The Story of Rock*. New York, Oxford University Press.
- (2) BENSON, D. C. (1969). *The Now Generation*. Richmond, Virginia; John Knox Press.
- (3) DIVOKY, DIANE (1969). *How Old Will You Be In 1984?: Expressions of Student Outrage From The High School* Free Press. New York, Avon Books.
- (4) FABUN, D. (1969). *The Children of Change*. Beverly Hills, California, Glencoe Press.
- (5) GRAVES, R. (managing editor, *Life*). (Jan. 8, 1971). "Change—Yes, Upheaval—No." A *Life* youth poll. *Life* 70:1.
- (6) HARPER, P. C., JR. (1969). What's Happening Baby & Company, From an address before the Off-the-Street Club, Chicago, Illinois. Published in *Adolescence for Adults: A Report by Blue Cross*. Vol. XXII, No. 1. Blue Cross Association.
- (7) Iowa Governor's Commission on Children and Youth seminar reports of concerns voiced by Iowa young people. 1968-70.
- (8) MOORE, A. J. (1969). *The Young Adult Generation*. New York, Abingdon Press.
- (9) NATIONAL EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION. "Why Can't You Hear Through the Noise in Your Ear?" A program in the series "The Turned-On Crisis." Broadcast in winter, 1971. Produced at WQED, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Excerpts by Edwin Newman, Dr. Joyce Brothers, and others.
- (10) "SONGS OF THE HANG-LOOSE ETHIC" (1969). Excerpts from the book by Simmons, J., and Winograd, Barry, *It's Happening: A Report of the Youth Scene Today*. Santa Barbara, California, McNally and Loftin. 1967. Excerpts published in *Adolescence for Adults: A Report by Blue Cross*. Vol. XXII, No. 1. Blue Cross Association.
- (11) WISHART, DON. (1971). Unpublished research.

### Other sources not cited

- BOYD, M. (1971). "Age Alone No Explanation of Why There Is a Lack of Understanding." *Des Moines Sunday Register*. February 28.
- BRAY, J. (1971). "Working With Younger Members." *National 4-H News* 49:5.
- COHN, N. (1969). *Rock from the Beginning*. New York, Stein and Day.
- HEMPHILL, P. (1970). *The Nashville Sound: Bright Lights and Country Music*. New York, Simon and Schuster.
- KAGAN, J. (1968). "Pop in Perspective; A Profile." *Saturday Review*. October 26.
- KORALL, B. (1968). "The Music of Protest." *Saturday Review*. November 16.
- MICKLIN, B. (1971). "An Obsession With Religion: What's Behind It?" *Des Moines Tribune*. February 24.
- WINTER, G. D. AND E. M. NUSS (1969). *The Young Adult: Identity and Awareness*. Glenview, Illinois, Scott Foresman and Company. A collection of 33 articles from various sources.