

WHY I KISSED THE CARPET GUY

I guess it's true that if all the people who claimed to have been at Woodstock were really there, no one would have had the space to *groove to the music*, let alone lie down and fornicate at Max Yasker's Farm that summer of 1969. What tweaks me even more these post-millennium days, though, is a refrigerator magnet that proclaims: *If you remember the 60's, you weren't there....*

Many people were part of the so-called 60's (more accurately, a span of years from about 1964 to 1971), but not so many *embodied the time*, according, at least, to my personal requirements for dubbing one an elder of the era. At the time, you didn't have to categorize yourself as a hippie, a yippie, a draft-dodger or an activist. (Others let you know what you were soon enough.) You didn't even have to be under 30. Minimally, however, you had to be migratory (that meant anything from *crashing*—moving in—with assorted friends to becoming a W.T.—world traveler or international drifter); you had to be capable of getting stoned (some people really couldn't); and, finally, you were required to be in the thrall of the music of the time. Much of the music is familiar today, because it was good enough to endure.

Despite what contemporary fashionistas tout as the retro 60's look, there was a broad spectrum of style in the 60's, and a wide range of political views among those who defined the period. The prevailing milieu, however, was “them against us”, and it was generally accepted that “if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.”

Prior to about 1970, you could observe how someone dressed, or listen to their conversation and music, and pretty much know where they stood. Flashing the two-fingered symbol for peace, sharing a joint (the operative word being *sharing*, not joint), or rapping about “the man,” were political acts, not mere fads or diversions. Buttons with slogans and sentiments, or love beads and bell-bottoms, were not just pop-culture props. That was the genuine *stuff of the revolution!*

John Lennon was right, of course, that Americans used up all their true revolutionary zeal in the 1700s. Yet, don't for a minute think that the 60's was all narcissistic posturing or much ado about flower-powered nothing. Those of us who were really *there* understand that, in America, the 60's were about cultural defection: it was a time that was to change some of our lives, some of our families, some of our nation, forever. Dropping out of the culture, or the army, for that matter, may have gotten you noticed, but it didn't make you popular, powerful, or wealthy, especially in the early days of the era. At that time, marching and protesting were not acceptable means of expression across America. In those days acting out against the war, against racism, or against the “military-industrial complex” was a dangerous, albeit thrilling endeavor. Participating in a demonstration could get you arrested, without any fanfare from the networks; carrying a protest sign could get you knocked on the head, or worse, if you just happened along in the vicinity of the National Guard confrontation at Kent State.

These are some of the perspectives I want to bring to my story about the carpet guy. It was 1992, and I was 47 years old, shuttling from store to store at the Jersey shore trying

to buy a rug for a beach house. Accompanied by my four-year-old daughter—some of us 60's types settled down late in life—I finally came upon a promising-looking store on Route 71, somewhere between Ocean Grove and Spring Lake, New Jersey. I meandered about the store until the salesman noticed me mouthing the words to a *Jefferson Airplane* song that happened to be piped through the store's sound system, likely from some golden oldies station. The salesman smiled and asked, nonchalantly, "Do you remember where you were when that song first came out?"

"Oh, yes," I responded with enthusiasm, "I was in the streets of Berkeley, California."

"Far out," he replied, "that's where I was, too!" (Former *60's people* have a disconcerting way of being "triggered" into electric kool-aid acid flashback persona when acknowledging someone who they ascertain was really "there" *back in the day*.) The carpet guy and I quickly established that we had never met and did not have any friends in common, but we continued to exchange stories and reminisce about places, events and "happenings" in Berkeley, circa 1966. I never learned how he ended up at the Jersey shore selling rugs, and I don't recall his name. But I knew that man! And each of us knew that the other was "there" during the 60's. I am not sure whether I bought a carpet that day, but I did walk away with some of my youthful idealism validated. As I departed the store, the carpet guy and I spontaneously, quite naturally, stepped forward and gave each other a hug and a kiss. And yes, Austin Powers be damned, we each raised two fingers for the symbol of peace.

I would not have given this incident so much thought had not my four year old, who had been atypically quiet during the above exchange, turned to me as I drove away and inquired, “Mommy, why did you kiss that man?”

I didn’t know how to answer her. I tried, “ Oh, we had a very nice conversation about the time I was in California.”

My daughter pressed on, “But Mommy, you talk to people in stores all the time, and you don’t kiss them!”

I laughed, and tried a few more lame explanations about how the man and I must have done some of the same things when we were young, how we may have lived near each other. But I knew I could not convey to my four-year-old what it was like to be “there” in the 60’s, anymore than I could have explained it to my family during the actual time. I recalled some Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young lyrics regarding intergenerational exchanges: *Don’t you ever ask them why; if they told you, you would cry; just look at them and sigh, and know they love you.*

Unfortunately for its aficionados, the time period known as the 60’s, and its aftermath, was fraught with assassinations (Malcolm X, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King) and suicides (Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Phil Ochs). It was hard to get over each of those, and nowadays I still feel a deep sadness when I hear of the passing of people who, for me, personified the 60's, people who were really “there”: Bella Abzug, Tim Leary, Allen

Ginsberg, Abby Hoffman, Stokely Carmichael, Philip Berrigan, just to mention a few.
Really being “there” in the 60’s left an imprint on you forever, in a transformational way.
Not even everyone who was actually at Woodstock understands that. Those who do
understand know very well why I kissed the carpet guy.

"Why I Kissed the Carpet Guy" in The Writers Post Journal, Vol.1 (July, 2005).