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Countercultural Representation

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Countercultural Representation

Abstract: Counter cultures have been prevalent throughout modern American history. Accompanied with music, these movements break the barriers of time and live on. Starting with an anecdote, the rapper Lil peep is given as an example of what the movements and music has led up to. To highlight modern movements that lead to that, the flower power movement is given first light. This leads into the punk/ hip-hop era, which gives way for the emocore movement that ultimately defines what our current generation considers to be the counterculture. Movements and music change over time and along the way people get hurt. Essentially music that aligns itself with a movement starts as counter cultural and gains mainstream popularity where it gets sold to death and gives birth to a new genre.

On a crispy fall afternoon in 2017, Gustav Ahr, better known by his stage name Lil Peep, performed at a music festival in Mountain View California. His set started with his hit single, "Benz Truck," which surprised me because every other artist put their hits in the middle of their sets. Peep's appearance spoke as loud as the lyrics of his songs as his auto tuned vocals dominated the audiences' headspace. Everything about this performance and his public life hung on the fine line between caring too much or not caring at all. He was wearing a massive chain commemorating the venue given to every artist that performed there. The difference between Peep and the other artists was that the other artists made a spectacle of being given the chain by the event coordinator, whereas Peep just wore it. The chain wasn't the only thing unusual about his appearance that day. Donning massive Gucci sunglasses and a beanie, most of his face was hidden. Ironically, everything he was wearing from the waist up was pink and brandished with Hello Kitty. Given the energy of the performance and his covered up face, it was pretty safe to say that he was on the same drugs he was singing about. During the set, the high school kids in front of me were snorting "cocaine" and I couldn't help but observe everyone else there was around my age (19) or younger and white. Two months later Lil Peep died of an overdose and he's still being mourned through post-mortem releases and tributes to this day.

Gustav is just one of the martyrs of the countercultural movement in the mid 2010's. Every generation has a countercultural movement from the field workers in the 1730's to the scene kids ten years ago. In our globalized world these countercultures bash heads and evolve. It's an ever-turning cycle that keeps changing and testing the status quo, giving a voice to the youth from generation to generation.

New music genres are almost always hated by the preceding generation that grew up on something else. Music holds power like nothing else, it's an art form that moves, influences, and informs. To start, the blues movement in the early 20th century. Robert Johnson notably invented the Delta Blues, which in turn we can thank for changing the way we think about music forever. Delta blues allowed the artist to sing about their woes. Today we'd call that Emo. Blues is a good jumping off point because in a sense it's emo-core's great-great grandfather and came from the biggest hardship this country has put its people through: slavery. Singing was a way for the field slaves to let each other know when the masters were coming. Talk about a genre that defied the status-quo and gave a voice to the voiceless. As blues evolved into delta blues and then rock 'n' roll on, there's been a wake of angry parents, confused grandparents, and disgruntled civil servants. Effectively skipping over the rhythm, soul, harlem renaissance, and early rock movements, we're going to dive right into the summer of love.

The summer of love is part of one of the most influential cultural movements in recent history. The generation that preceded them was busy fighting Axis Powers around the world. This "newer" movement was fighting war and inequity on its home turf. Music and protests followed crying out for a more peaceful world. Artists like Tom Paxton and his hit, "Lyndon Johnston told the nation," hit the nail right on the head. The protests against the Vietnam war were happening almost in tandem with the Civil Rights Movement. They were fighting for something and had a message for the world. Similar movements were happening in other countries most notably Chile. According to Patrick Bar-Melej, the Hippismos were fighting for economic and systemic socialism. They weren't happy with the way people exploited each other and these young rebels became known as Siloists. According to the New York Times, they followed a non-materialistic lifestyle and had philosophical beliefs based on the teachings of buddha. The Siloist movement actually began in Argentina and evolved in Chile to fight for a socialist system loosely based on Marx's communist ideology. As the music got better, the message became more and more diluted in the United States. The fight for peace became more about loving one another and doing lots of recreational drugs. This marketed image of the movement in theory was to sell more records. "Selling out" and going mainstream is a surefire way to kill almost any movement. As soon as values become for sale on the open market, we open ourselves up to the temptations that come with money and success. In the shift from the '60's to the '70's we lost a few great artists adding to the 27 club. Jannis Jopplin, Jimmy Hendrix, and Jim Morrison were the big three that died in this transition much like the

aforementioned Gustav Ahr. Live fast die young is always the motto when it comes to music, fame, and success.

The 1970's counter cultural movement got angry. The Beatles broke up and summer of love was over. Punk of course started in the '60's, but didn't become a full on youth movement until 1974. At this time we had pulled out of Vietnam and Nixon was impeached. The punks were just angry kids rebelling against their parents, the government, their teachers, the man, and just anyone they perceived as authority. In many ways, this movement against almost nothing has had the biggest impact on angry white suburban kids. These kids found their voices in loud guitars and angry lyrics, which isn't a bad thing. Everyone deserves a voice however they can get it. Several years later in New York, Hip-Hop was born. Like blues, hip-hop gives the artist a way to tell a story about their current situation in a way that rock and punk couldn't. This isn't necessarily saying that punk is strictly white and hip-hop is strictly black. One of the most influential punk bands X-ray Spex was headed by a black woman named Poly Styrene. For a long time these two genres just wouldn't intersect and seemed to almost bash heads. As a kid you were either into punk or hip-hop in the late 70's early 80's.

The 1980's saw the introduction of crack cocaine in lower income neighborhoods under the Reagan administration. If there was anytime to be simultaneously angry at the government and woeful about your situation as a youth in the streets, it was the 80's. With the rise of gangs across the U.S. gangsta rap became bigger and bigger. Punk also got more violent in sound and tone. One can imagine the parents of this generation of kids were not happy. In general these parents were former flower children in the 60's also known as baby boomers and their children were known as gen x. Generation X was responsible for ushering hip-hop into the mainstream and effectively kill the 1970's brand of punk. Punk would still live, just in different forms as it became the antithesis of itself and become pop-punk. Of course pop-punk wouldn't be the only rendition of punk as emo and grunge would dominate the 90's.

The 90's emo movement as far as anyone is concerned is the last of this traditional punk rock emocore that is held so highly on a pedestal today. Later on, it will mix with rap and become about selling out and doing drugs, but we're not there yet. Among the kids who don't belong, labels like emo and punk have specific meanings, and like nicknames, must be earned. Ian MacKaye, lead singer of Minor threat and Fugazi, was the first to be brandished with the emo label by Thrasher Magazine. He immediately rejected it saying it was, "The stupidest thing he ever heard." Little did MacKaye know, this label would go on to define an era less than a decade later.

Emocore let it's fans know it was okay to be sensitive and to have feelings in a way that contradicted what "society" said was acceptable. Through the music, loners could be alone together. It "idealized the expression of extreme emotion beyond sense"(Nehrig,2006) This extreme emotion was expressed not just sonically, but in the clothing and aesthetic as well. The biggest and most accepted emo scenes were in the United States and the United Kingdom. As the genre has changed and morphed over the years, emo became a broader and broader term and sub cultures emerged from this subculture. Some of these branches actually became very popular among the young and disturbed. In the mid 2000's , viral marketing really took hold of what everyone including myself knew as emo. The dress code had gone from beat up flannels, and faded jeans to all black and extremely skinny jeans. Commonly the only color you'd see is from a streak in their hair. The sound of common emocore shifted too. Bands like Dashboard Confessional, Taking Back Sunday, and Thursday had put on the backburner while emo music turned screamo. Good examples of screamo bands would be Black Veil Brides, Bring me the Horizon, and The Used. This music had been around since the 90's, but mainstream Myspace Emo kids wouldn't wholeheartedly endorse it until this time in the mid 2000's.

In Mexico, emo culture was not endorsed the way it was in the U.S. and the U.K. Emos experienced violent attacks and death threats for many years. Emos are not violent people and would often be subject to abuse and beatings just because other cultural groups didn't like the way they looked. Goths and Punks especially didn't like emo kids calling them less hard copycats. Most people who had a problem with the scene cited the "boys looking more like girls," and "effeminate because of their declared melancholy and emotionally sensitive demeanor"(Magdelana,2010) Despite the hatred and ridicule, they continued to fight for their lifestyle and would eventually change like their brethren around the world.

Viral irony turned the black clad outsiders into brightly colored scene kids who would take internet culture by storm sometime in 2007. Viral irony is described as, "processing ironic messages on literal and figurative levels, the latter often evoking strong emotions may compel said messages to be shared."(Plangger,Mills,2011)This force would drive the scene kid movement until it's death sometime in 2012. Like every cultural movement and phase of mainstream emocore, there's going to be lingerers and people that stick with the movement long after it's death. Just look at the people who are stuck in the 60's peace and love era, or the 80's punks that still push their way to the front at concerts as a prime example. Going back to scene kids, their music tastes were branching beyond punk based hardcore depending on how deep into scene culture one was. Electronic music like, drum and bass, dubstep, and dance/rap

dominated high school myspace pages. Other scene kids were into more pop punk giving the emo branding to bands like Paramore and Fall Out Boy. Whatever they were into, they were posting about it and made it very easy for companies to market their lifestyle and sell it back to them. Stores like Hot Topic were a one stop shop for everything scene/emo. Vlogs and internet personalities would drive the movement further, but it eventually plateaued and the only music content gaining traction was from artists signed to a label and less about the vlogs and peer to peer shared culture.

Artists like Kanye West and Kid Cudi had introduced a new form of rap in the mid 2000's that focused on melodic hooks and subject matters that didn't focus heavily on gang themes. Lil Wayne, who focused on gang and skate culture had introduced a sound unlike any other with his higher pitched vocals and flow would arguably inspire literally every rap artist to come after him. With not only his sound, but face tattoos and demeanor, his influence is undeniable. Wayne would influence rappers to take the movement further into the future with artists like Young Thug. Thug obliterated what anybody thought rap should sound like. A good example would be his verse on the song "Lifestyle". Rap became a genre younger "misfits, outsiders, and emos" could flock to and express themselves. After Myspace faded from the collective consciousness, and the young scene kids started to emerge and present themselves in a new light. Rap music and emo culture collided, mixing values and cultural data. People could share the music they made with each other more easily and without ads on sites like Soundcloud. Soundcloud rappers would become a phenomenon that gave birth to super-stars and launch rap to constantly dominate the top of the billboard charts. Emo culture and viral irony drove many rappers in the underground dark-rap scene where artists belch out lyrics about drug abuse and feeling sad and alone. While scene kids and emo kids from the late 2000's still exist, they aren't mainstream anymore, but their messages and influence lives on in a new generation.

Gustav stemmed from a bigger rap group and an even bigger internet subculture that glamorized drugs, sex, and selling out. Much like the music that so greatly defined the summer of love, it's sold out and killing it's stars. Onlookers and people from the outside looking in may not quite see the appeal seeing that he raps and sings using filters over a beat he didn't make. What works for him and many other performers in his generation is aesthetic and emotional appeal. Throughout the decades it's been around, emo would prevail through grassroots movements and would be a beacon of representation for the emotionally vulnerable around the world. Today we're moving towards an almost satirical genre of pop that lives to be commercialized and has no message. As it assimilates with contemporary culture, emo has

found a home in rap music and continues to be shared through platforms like soundcloud, Youtube, and Spotify.

From the dawn of time, music has moved whole generations like nothing else. With movement comes resistance, with resistance comes change. Counter cultural movements through music butt heads and evolve, invoking the ever turning cycle that keeps evolving. By testing the status quo, it has blazed a path for the youth of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. The affective labor of the young rappers, some of which are now deceased, puts their problems into the spotlight and can either serve as a warning or a dangerous influence.

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