

# Do we still have youth tribes?

Stephen Lambert

Last month a number of national papers ran moving obituaries about the untimely death of Steve Strange, lead singer of the new wave band Visage, and style icon of the 1980s. Steve was part of the new romantic youth movement which had its roots in punk rock which marked out the mid 1970s. But youth culture has origins way back in the 1950s.

The concept of 'youth-subculture' or 'teenage culture' was first coined in the USA in the post-war era and exported to the UK in 1955. Many writers suggested that the young aged 15 to 23 were 'socialised' into a

special set of values, attitudes and behaviour patterns separate from those of adult society; a 'society within a society' had been born. The British market researcher Mark Abrams in 1962 argued that this new phenomenon was a classless product of affluence and rising living standards. More teenagers had cash to spend, and a new consumer industry sprang up to meet their demands for fashionable clothes and music.

Sociologists at the time noted that adolescence was a turbulent period of preparation for adulthood. Personal problems were a feature of growing up as

the young negotiated their 'rite of passage'. Group rebellion against adult society was predictable among the young, noted many social analysts. Put simply, youth culture was best understood as being a reaction to being young. In the States, this was reflected in the popular culture of film, including *Rebel Without a Cause* featuring James Dean, and in rock and roll by Elvis Presley, which appealed to thousands of teenagers across the USA and UK.

But it wasn't till the mid '50s that 'Teddy Boys' appeared on the British youth scene, much to the alarm of respectable society. The

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'Teds' had a fearsome reputation for violence and were marked out by their drainpipe trousers, Edward VII long coats and slicked back hair.

By the 1960s this youth phenomenon gave way to the emergence of Mods and Rockers. Employed during the day as 'blue-collar' workers, the Mods with their distinctive green Parkas took R&B and soul to their 'purple hearts' and sped to all-night clubs on Vespa scooters. Rockers clad in heavy black leather and chains had beefier bikes and were hostile to the comparatively effete Mods. Street battles took place every bank holiday weekend at the seaside resorts of Brighton, Clacton and Margate. These events, grossly exaggerated, sparked off tabloid media hysteria, creating a 'moral panic' amongst Britain's establishment.

During the late 1960s and early seventies, parents were getting concerned about 'hippies', mostly from middle-class backgrounds, morally corrupting their daughters with free love and marijuana joints, whilst in the tough working-class neighbourhoods of London's East End, shaven-headed skinheads with their Doc Marten bover boots and rolled-up denims intimidated London's growing Asian communities through the unsavoury practice of 'paki-bashing'.

Punk rockers took the mainstream by surprise in 1976 with their colourful spikey hair and pierced noses, committed to bands including the notorious Sex Pistols, Clash and The Damned. This youth tribe confirmed many people's fears of degeneracy and anarchy.

The development of these spectacular youth cultures didn't escape the attention of academia. Radical, left-wing sociologists, such as Hall and Jefferson, dismissed the old notion of a classless youth culture. Real youth culture, they argued, with

its own style and music, was a working-class symbolic protest against dominant business class power in post-war capitalist society. Yet style commentators such as Peter York dismissed this view as being naïve. Vandalising community bus shelters and assaulting ethnic minority groups hardly fitted in with their theory that youth culture was a shared response to their social position as the underdog in British society.

A multiplicity of conflicting styles and youth groups has ranged from new romantics and acid house culture with its repetitive beat to satanic middle-class Goths and the much-maligned 'chavs' trapped in inner-city neighbourhoods and outer-council estates. But we must not get carried away with all these accounts of youth tribes. Most youth culture revolved around dance, music, language and

fashion, and is perhaps best understood as simply being about style.

Several writers have pointed out that the vast majority of young people since the 1950s onwards were simply unaffected by youth tribes or cultures. And the notion that there exists a 'generation gap' has been grossly over-exaggerated. Most young adults in contemporary society share the same values and beliefs as their parents. Many have become individualistic, seeking an identity through consumerism in our postmodern times without the need to join groups. As Robin Simmons, one of the country's lead experts on young people's experiences, points out, what most ordinary young people want today is a meaningful apprenticeship, a well-paid job, a decent home and to start a family.

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