

# INTRODUCTION

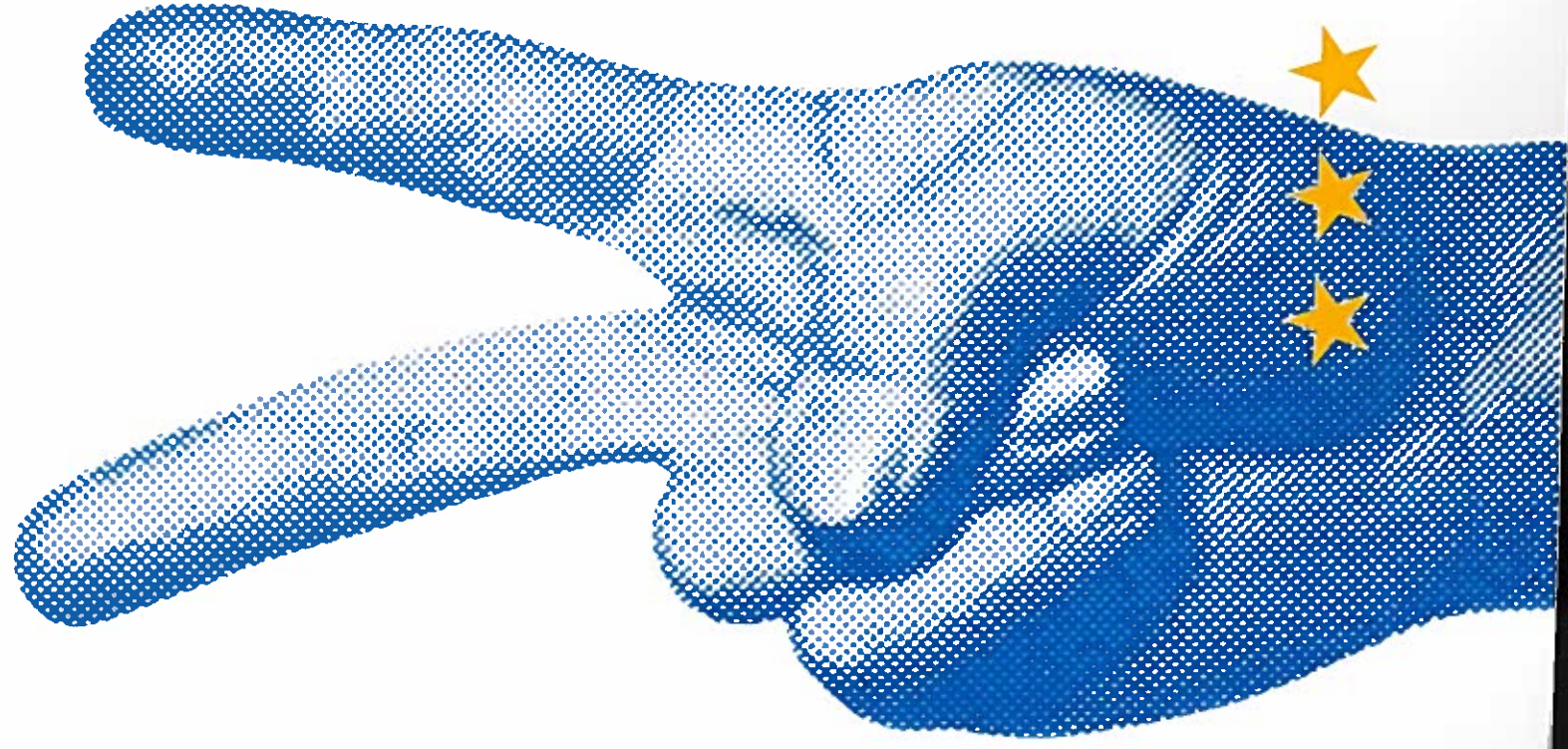
Whether you call them the “Boomer Generation” or the “Pepsi Generation,” those who came of age in the '60s make up the largest and most influential generation ever in American history. Wilder than Gen X, more activist than Gen Y, these youths changed their world like no other generation has before or since. Their music, their language, and their style still define our culture today. *America Dreaming* is more than the story of a youth movement. It's the story of the power and optimism of young people building a world in their own image. Through the lens of pop culture and rock-and-roll, this book tells the story of teens and twenty-somethings who caused a seismic change in American culture.

The full impact of the '60s on American culture has been obscured by the media. When we think of this era, we picture an age of “sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll” radical-

ism. We imagine a period of extremes and excess. This image has been reinforced not only by films—such as the rockumentary *Woodstock*—but also by memoirs celebrating campus protests of the Vietnam War. In truth, only a small minority of '60s teenagers were hippies and/or campus radicals. The real story of the '60s depicts the largest generation in American history coming of age in an unprecedented period of economic growth, and questioning the very basis of our government, culture, and economy. This is the story of young African Americans, young Latinos, young women, young Native Americans, and simply young Americans who woke up one day and decided they wanted something more.

These were teens who dared to dream of an America that was fair and just. *America Dreaming* tells their story.

—LCH



**Romper, bomper, stomper,  
boo. Tell me, tell me, tell  
me do. Magic mirror, tell  
me today. Did all my  
friends have fun at play?  
I see Natalie, I see David,  
I see Ella...**

—“Mirror Song” from *Romper Room*



*the fifties*

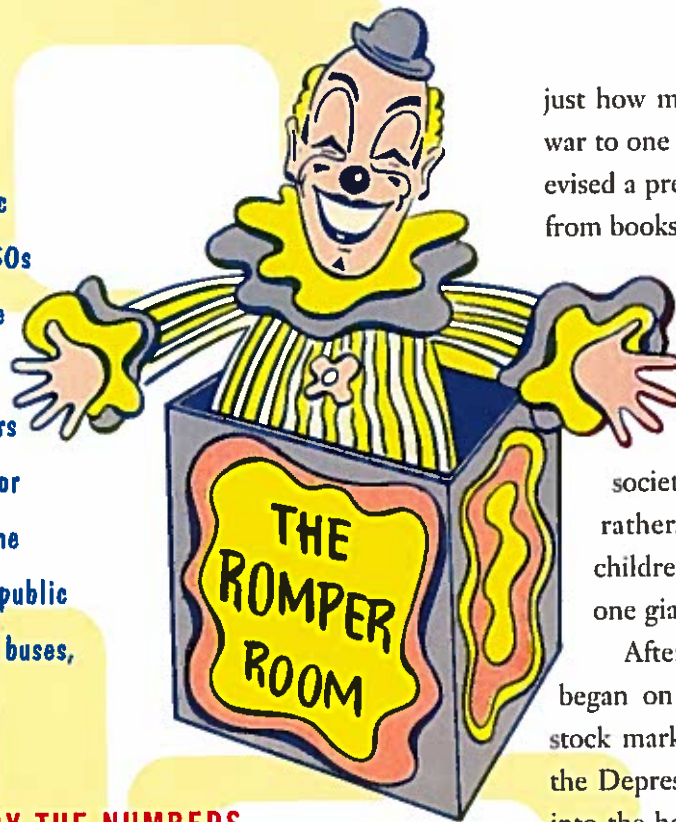
# ROMPER ROOM

PRESCHOOL FOR THE BOOMER GENERATION



**M**iss Nancy, the host of the children's television show *Romper Room*, sang this sugary little tune at the end of each episode. She sang it to you if you were part of the Boomer Generation. This generation represented an extraordinary spike in birthrates that began in 1945, at the end of World War II, and continued until 1964. First appearing on air in 1954, *Romper Room* showed

The only massive public project begun in the '50s was the building of the interstate. This put people in their own cars and made it possible for them to drive across the country without using public transportation such as buses, trains, and airplanes.



#### BOOMERS BY THE NUMBERS

- 80 million children born between 1946 and 1964
- By 1959, more than 50 million children (30 percent of the population) under the age of 14 lived in the United States.
- There were as many children in 1959 as there were people living in the United States in 1881.
- By 1965, 41 percent of all Americans were under the age of 20. (In 2000, 25.7 percent of the U.S. population was under 18.)



**Your future is great in a growing America. Every day 11,000 babies are born in America. This means new business, new jobs, new opportunities.**

—sign in the New York City subway in the 1950s

just how much America had changed from a country at war to one of rebirth. The half-hour show essentially televised a preschool class in which Miss Nancy would read from books to seven or eight kids on the set and teach the alphabet, manners, and values in a *gentle way*. Like this popular show, America was all about raising children. The idealized *Romper Room* world marked the degree to which the country had changed from a society in crisis to a community in renewal—or rather, a community preoccupied with raising children. In short, 1950s America became essentially one giant playpen.

After fifteen years of decline and suffering that began on Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, with the stock market crash, continuing through the 1930s with the Depression and mass unemployment, and morphing into the horror of World War II, America was ready for prosperity. Winning the war raised America to global supremacy, and the country hungered to taste the fruits of this success. Americans were tired of the social and political demands of the previous decade and a half. They were desperately eager for the American Dream—marriage, children, good jobs, a home. The peace dividend of winning the war made all this possible to a large percentage of the population for the first time in history. America was no longer in a depression, and the economy was no longer pouring every cent into the war effort.

The U.S. government helped the boom along by providing returning soldiers with the Serviceman's Readjustment Act, commonly known as the G.I. bill, which Congress passed in 1944. This program offered veterans unemployment compensation, medical benefits, loans to start new businesses and buy a home, and tuition benefits for higher education. The result was that the government infused the economy with hundreds of millions of dollars just when it was needed most. This spurred an economic boom, which led to the largest expansion in American his-

**Every seven seconds, a woman became pregnant. This added about a city the size of Los Angeles to the U.S. population each year.**

—historian William Manchester

tory. With the U.S. government directing public funds into private spaces and private goods, not public services—such as dams, rural electrification, executing the war, and other large government projects—as was done in the previous decades, there was a profound change in the American psyche. The result was that all segments of society were improving their positions. This improvement was not in relation to one another, but in relation to every person's past and that of his or her family. This meant that everyone in the country was doing at least a little better than they had before. In the beginning, that was enough to fuel a kind of euphoria not seen previously in America. For the first time it appeared possible that the country would achieve that ideal of the "city on a hill" that was first imagined by the early Puritans. This new economic security fueled a confidence in the future and a dream that America could truly become the first utopian society.

#### **BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME**

The first step to achieving the good life was to own a home. A home represented the embodiment of the American Dream. Home ownership offered all the possibilities that Hollywood films and television sitcoms depicted: the perfect family where dad had a good job, mom was the doting housewife, the kids went to good schools and, eventually, college. America was meant to be just like the television shows *Leave It to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, and a dozen others. In these sitcoms the dad went off each day to work, the mom stayed home and took care of the kids, who somehow got into some domestic trouble that was resolved by the end of the half hour.

Two brothers, Alfred and William J. Levitt, recognized this shift in the culture. The skills they learned building military housing and instant airfields in the



#### **SPOCK BABIES**

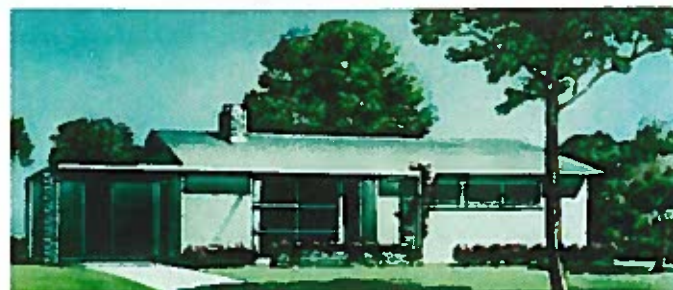
Pediatrician Benjamin Spock, MD, wrote the child-rearing bible for Boomer parents, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946). This book changed the way Americans raised their children. His most common advice was: "Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do."

This was a revolutionary idea when traditional baby manuals offered authoritarian directives on strict feeding schedules and rigid routines. Instead, Spock mirrored the optimism of the era by reinforcing that parents were their own experts. They had the power to raise a perfect child without interference by so-called authorities. Spock was one of the first influential proponents of what would become a search for self-fulfillment in the 1960s.

Pacific during the war taught them that the old ways of building were obsolete, simply because those methods took too long. Together the brothers broke down the construction of a house into twenty-seven separate steps and trained twenty-seven separate crews to specialize in just one step. Borrowing Henry Ford's mass production system for cars, William Levitt flipped the model. Instead of moving a car along an assembly line past each workstation, the workers themselves would move from one house to the next. Each house stood on a 60-by-100-foot plot, and the crews would perform their individualized tasks and move on. One crew would pour the foundation. The next would build the frame. This would continue until all twenty-seven construction crews had completed their tasks and a new house was finished.

The Levitts revolutionized the way homes were built. In the past, the typical builder constructed fewer than five houses a year. By 1948, the Levitts were able to build 180 houses a week, which broke down to thirty-six houses a day. "Eighteen houses completed on the shift from eight to noon, and eighteen more houses finished on the shift from twelve-thirty to four-thirty," noted Bill Levitt. Because of these innovations, it was possible for ordinary people—people who had never thought of themselves as middle-class before—to own an inexpensive, attractive home. The first housing development built by the Levitts was located twenty miles outside New York City on Long Island. It contained 17,000 homes, and 82,000 people lived there. Schools, churches, and grocery and other retail stores quickly followed.

This plan for building homes was soon duplicated all over the country. In a matter of years, suburban communities just outside cities sprouted where farms used to be, and families achieved the American Dream. Along with a new home, people had good jobs that paid a decent wage, and they could afford things that just a few years before were beyond reach: new cars, televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, and a host of other appliances and technolo-



gies that made life easier and more convenient. Suddenly, it seemed that everyone was affluent, not just the rich.

Economist John Maynard Keynes coined the term "relentless consumption" to describe the new era, meaning that as long as industry produced enough goods and services to employ most of the country, people would have the financial means to purchase these goods and services and better their lives. The argument concluded that nearly *all* economic and social issues would be solved because goods and services would be plentiful and affordable, and

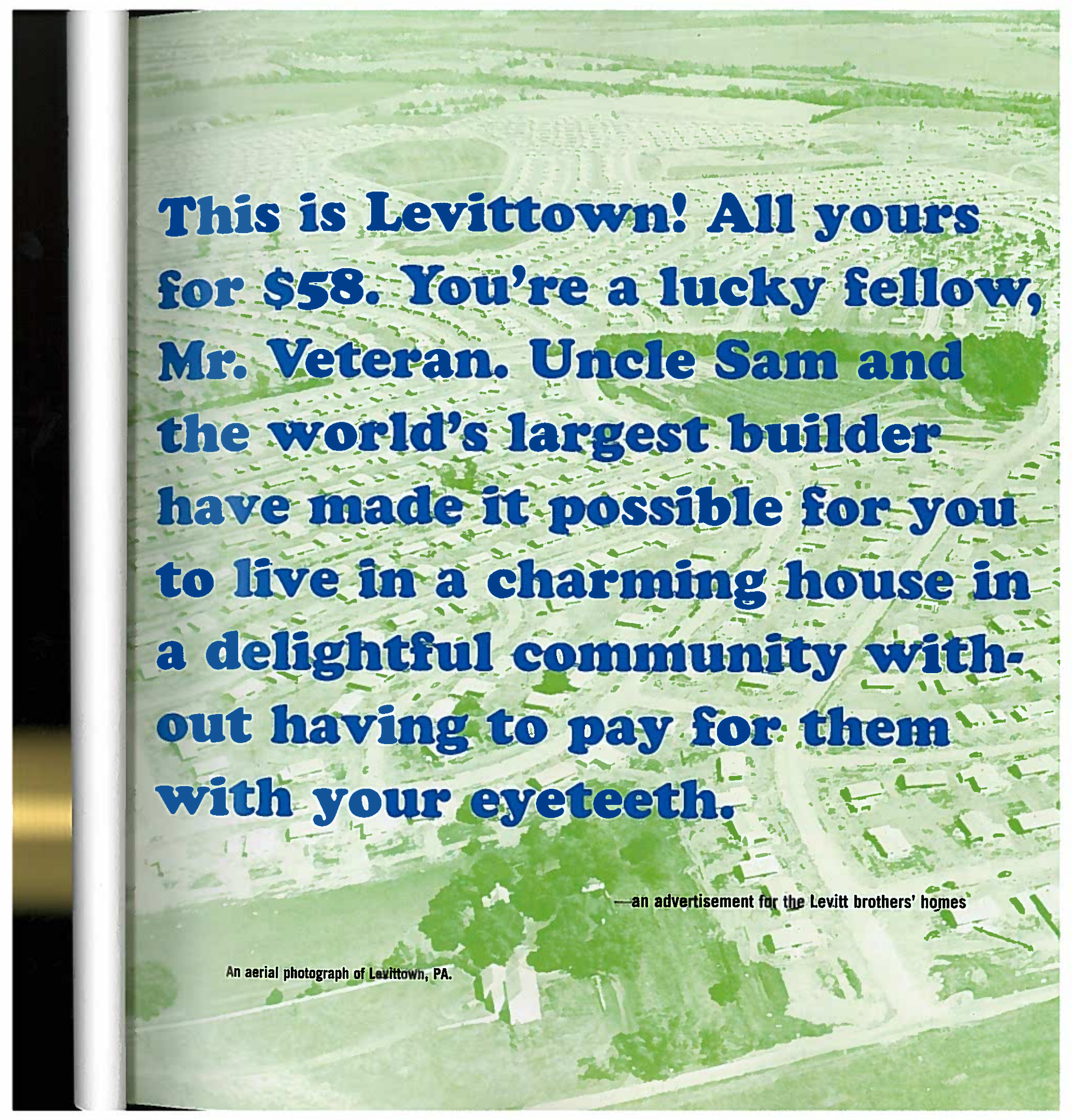
## *The Levittowner*

**PRICE: \$10,990**

**\$67 A MONTH**

people would have the income to purchase them.

On the surface, this seemed to work exceedingly well. Not only were plenty of homes being built, but other businesses were popping up to fill needs that hadn't existed before. With everyone so busy enjoying improved lives, families didn't always have time to make dinner. McDonald's filled the void and changed the way a family ate together. With more dollars in their pockets, families could afford to travel and see the country. Holiday Inns sprung up along the new interstates, with affordable accommodations. This affluence also gave people more choices in how they spent their money. To give consumers this variety of choices in one convenient location, shopping malls spread across America where dozens of stores



**This is Levittown! All yours for \$58. You're a lucky fellow, Mr. Veteran. Uncle Sam and the world's largest builder have made it possible for you to live in a charming house in a delightful community without having to pay for them with your eyeteeth.**

—an advertisement for the Levitt brothers' homes

An aerial photograph of Levittown, PA.



The average Baby Boomer had viewed between 12,000 and 15,000 hours of TV by the age of sixteen.  
—political scientist Paul Light

**Get It New!**  
New is good, better, best.



"Hug the hoop to the backside, push hard with the right hand, now rock it, swing it, sway it...you got it." So goes the advice given by Wham-O to 30 million hula hoop users in 1959.



Advertisers discovered in the '50s that the best way to get consumers to identify with their product was to humanize it. Alka Seltzer's Speedy was one of the most successful of these campaigns.

competed to give shoppers a cornucopia of products. All of these goods and services changed the way America lived, and at the time it all seemed for the better. Life was indeed very good and quickly getting better.

One person's paradise, however, can be another's hell. Social critic Lewis Mumford tartly characterized these suburban utopias as actual suburban dystopias:

A multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances on uniform roads, in a treeless command of waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same incomes, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold manufactured in the same central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.

For Mumford and many others, the new suburban communities were a wasteland, soulless and culturally empty. These critics had a point. Everything was new, and if it was new, it was not broken, dirty, or worn out, like just about everything had been during the Depression and World War II.

**Never has so much been available to so many of us as now...that open sesame to wealth and freedom... freedom from tedium, space, work and your own inexperience.**

—Food writer Poppy Cannon in *Life* magazine, 1954



Writer John Updike wrote the satiric poem "Superman" in 1954 to poke fun at the era's unfounded optimism:

I drive my car to supermarket,  
...  
A superlot is where I park it,  
And Super Suds are what I buy.

Many saw the social conformity of the era as not just soulless but dangerous to the culture as a whole. Columbia University sociologist and philosopher C. Wright Mills wrote two groundbreaking volumes on the subject: *White Collar* (1951) and *The Power Elite* (1956). In these criticisms of contemporary culture, Mills warned that America was becoming an affluent society without purpose. He argued against materialism and the predictability of corporate life. Around the same time, social scientist David Riesman examined how the increasing power of corporate and government organizations influenced national character. The result of Riesman's study was the critique *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), in which he suggests that every age produces certain personality types: Wars create warriors, and an era of expansion creates adventurers. He concluded that the '50s required people who were flexible and willing to accommodate others to win approval: in short, people pleasers. This was the era of conformity. According to Riesman's estimation, these types of people were essential to big organizations, but they were not innovators or visionaries.

Economist John Kenneth Galbraith attacked what he saw as a fatal flaw in the era. In his bestseller *The Affluent Society* he challenged Keynes's economic theories about the primacy of affluence. Galbraith argued that what Keynes's notion of investing in production and acquisition really accomplished was an impoverished society, starved of public services. He wrote that in placing so much faith in the general curative powers of increased production, America was inviting grave social ills. In order for a community to

function well, "even the stalwart conservative who dares not to venture out in the street at night, pays heavily for private security guards, thinks often about kidnapping and hesitates on occasion to drink the water or breathe the air, must, on occasion, wonder if keeping public services at a minimum is really a practical formula for expanding his personal liberty."

The questions these critics raised would not have an immediate effect on America, but these dissensions sowed the seeds of discontent that set the stage for the coming '60s decade.

Interestingly, horror movies as well as comics became incredibly popular during the '50s. When **The Invasion of the Body Snatchers** hit the screens in 1956, screenwriter Ron Rosenbaum explained that the film was "about the horror of being in the 'burbs, about neighbors whose lives had so lost their individual distinctiveness they could be taken over by alien vegetable pods—and no one would know the difference."



## PARANOIA REIGNS SUPREME

The entire country seemed to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Every time a threat appeared on the horizon, America responded dramatically, extensively, and often out of proportion to the actual danger. Suburban homeowners built bomb shelters in their backyards to protect them from the remote possibility that the Soviet Union would drop an atomic bomb in their neighborhood. Local schools held atomic bomb drills in which students hid under their desks, even though a desk or a wall would provide no protection in the event of a **real A-bomb explosion.**



A family climbing into their backyard bomb shelter.

## PROTECTING UTOPIA

For a country willing to drop an atomic bomb to end a war, it was not surprising that this same country would go to almost any length to protect the greatest economic boom in its history. After fifteen hard years, America wasn't about to let this prosperity disappear. When the USSR, America's ally in the war, became its major political opponent, the country did not stand still. Its mission became to reconstruct the war-torn world and protect it against another totalitarian regime—the USSR, or the Soviet Union.

Throughout its history the Soviet Union had publicly declared itself to be dedicated to world revolution and the overthrow of Western capitalism, in short, America's new suburban and consumer paradise. To that end, the Soviet Union had begun a campaign of encroachment on Europe, where it set up satellite countries, or "People's Democracies," that operated under its control. These countries included most of Eastern Europe (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Rumania, and East Germany), whose borders became known as the "Iron Curtain." In response, the United States initiated the Marshall Plan to rehabilitate Western Europe after World War II through an infusion of economic support.

Elsewhere in the world, the United States took a military stance to staunch the "red tide" of Communism. In 1949, China had fallen to Communist forces, and the Korean peninsula was divided along the 38th parallel into South Korea and communist North Korea. When communist forces crossed into South Korea, U.S. forces arrived in June 1950 to stop them in what was then called a "police action" and is now called the Korean War. In July 1953, the war ended with an armistice agreement, but a peace treaty was never signed. This stalemate in Asia and Europe eventually evolved into the Cold War—a war without explosions and fire. As long as neither side made encroachments into the other's territory, an uneasy peace would remain and America's political, social, and

economic security would be preserved.

On the home front, this meant protecting America against “otherness,” or rather, anything that didn’t fit within the consumer culture. Already the country had reduced the possibility of difference with the restrictive immigration policies that went back to the 1920s. For approximately thirty years almost no one was allowed to immigrate to the States, except a trickle from Europe. This created a country that was predominantly white and of European background. As a result the only easily identifiable outsiders were African Americans. The color of their skin made them an easy mark for exclusion. This was achieved throughout the country with the Jim Crow laws. “Jim Crow” was slang for the racist rules and laws that separated blacks and whites. Because of this, many of these new suburbs barred black families. Levittown, the country’s emblematic new community, did not allow an African-American family into the development until



Senator  
Joseph R. McCarthy

## WHITES ONLY

1957, ten years after the first house was built, and this could occur only with around-the-clock police protection for the black family. In addition to housing, blacks were barred from many public spaces and jobs.

**The World Book annual list of new words and phrases for 1954 included the word “desegregate.”**

Politicians were quick to exploit this fear of “otherness” or anything that was different. Perhaps the most despicable misuse of the public’s trust was exemplified by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, who conducted hearings before the Senate Committee on Government Operations.

In 1950, McCarthy, a Wisconsin Republican, used the country’s general anxiety about a Communist threat to make numerous charges—usually with little evidence—that certain public officials and other individuals were Communists or cooperated with the Communists. In these hearings McCarthy berated and threatened witnesses and labeled them Communists publicly. Eventually, the Senate censured him for his behavior. But before McCarthy’s downfall, many of the individuals who were accused but never convicted were blacklisted from their professions, particularly Hollywood writers, directors, and actors. This meant that they could no longer get and hold jobs in their fields. Being branded a Communist or a Communist sympathizer ruined many lives long after McCarthyism disappeared. The blacklists remained well into the ’60s and kept people from being able to make a living.

This general fear and anxiety in the country created a culture of intolerance that was clearly vulnerable to and deserving of backlash.



### WHADDAYA GOT? BOREDOM AND CONTEMPT

Although there was real danger to the expansion of American ideals in the rest of the world, the country itself was relatively safe and content. One unexpected threat to this new paradise—this American Dream—came from within. The children growing up in all those tranquil cul-de-sacs were bored.

Perfection was boring. An endless future of idyllic days spent in communities with perfectly manicured lawns, lovely homes, well-behaved pets, and ideal families could be horribly dull and predictable. Everyone wants a little excitement—the unexpected—in his or her life. This was particularly true for a generation who never experienced the hardship and unpredictability of the Depression and World War II—namely the kids.

This restlessness manifested itself almost immediately in the films, comic books, and other media of the era. The theme of the juvenile delinquent loose in the community became a popular plot in films. One of the first and most popular of this genre was *The Wild One*, the landmark film of '50s rebellion. Premiering under the title *Hot Blood*, it was the first feature to examine outlaw motorcycle gang violence in America.

By today's standards, *The Wild One* was definitely tame, but what resonated in the film was one particular scene. The young, attractive waitress in the town's café/bar was disgusted by the boorishness of the gang's leader, played

by Marlon Brando, and asked impatiently, "What are you rebelling against?" A side-burned, leather-clad Brando famously replied, "Whaddaya got?"

Brando's belligerent pose resonated with young people and inspired a slew of juvenile delinquent movies. This culminated two years later in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), a movie starring the legendary James Dean, who portrayed a confused teen questioning his parents' authority.

*Rebel Without a Cause* offered for the first time a sympathetic perspective on the misunderstood American youth. The film became an instant classic, in part because it looked at the world of the conformist mid-'50s from the point of view of the restless, misunderstood middle-class youth, but also because James Dean died in a car accident one month before the release of the film. By dying so young, Dean became an instant legend—the mythic, eternal rebel whose promise would never be fulfilled, and who would never suffer the indignity of growing old.

While some found the American Dream simply dull and constricting, others were troubled by what else they saw in suburbia: monotony, soullessness, cultural emptiness, and materialism. For these people, life was not like an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*, the popular TV show about a traditional, suburban family. Their lives did not mirror a world where the day's big crisis was "the Beave" forgetting to do his homework. Ironically, as much as the majority of Americans wanted to buy into this fantasy of conformity, nobody's life was really all that perfect.

## HOT BLOOD

"Hot feelings hit terrifying heights in this story that really boils over!"

The criticism of this new life exhibited itself in a variety of ways. For teens, comic books became one of the major outlets for rebellion. Clearly not literature meant to improve moral character, the most popular comics exploited teens' desires to escape their humdrum suburban life. Some of the most popular were horror comics—gruesome tales of the undead and vampires—that touched a deep psychic desire in teens for excitement. Quickly, adults decided that comic books were corrupting the younger generation. Adults responded to this new threat to utopia much like they did to communism. Like McCarthy's interrogation committee, the Comic Magazine Association of America was formed in May of 1954. This new association created a "code" that banned popular horror comics.

Luckily, this new turn did not deter William Gaines, horror comics' most creative voice. Instead, Gaines cast his inspired gaze toward satirizing the society that was set on shutting him down. He gave his editors the green light to start a new kind of humor magazine. It was titled *Mad* and was completely unique because it skewered conformist '50s culture. Each issue offered up a satirical, skeptical portrayal of American life, which clearly was taking itself too seriously. *Mad* ridiculed everything and everyone. Without a doubt, adolescents recognized the magazine as the perfect antidote to the pompous and pretentious adult world. Ironically, *Mad* did for youth culture what horror comics never would have done: It put a name to their discontent.

The writer who did more to expose the hypocrisy in contemporary culture, however, was J.D. Salinger. His novel *The Catcher in the Rye* caused such a stir when it was published in 1951 that it was banned in many communities. Still, it became a bestseller because it spoke directly to the emotions of teen and adult readers alike. The main character, Holden Caulfield, sees adulthood as full of superficiality and hypocrisy, or in his word "phoniness,"

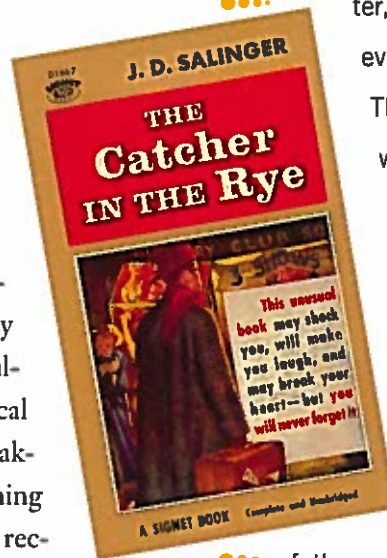
## THE Catcher IN THE Rye

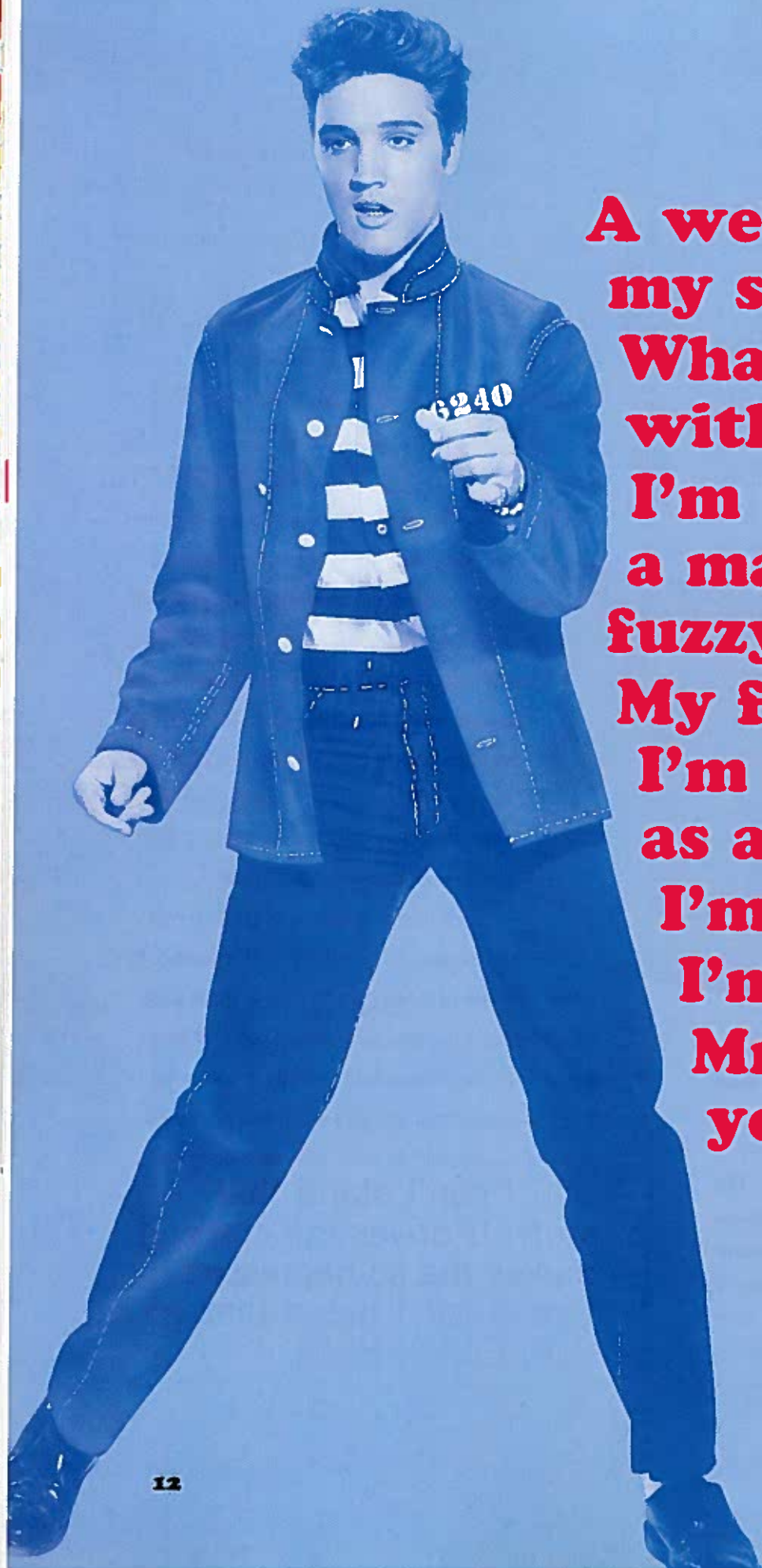
In this excerpt from *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield describes his old boarding school and phonies:

One of the biggest reasons I left Elkton Hills was because I was surrounded by phonies. That's all. They were coming in the goddam window. For instance, they had this headmas-

ter, Mr. Haas, that was the phoniest bastard I ever met in my life. Ten times worse than old Thurmer. On Sundays, for instance, old Haas went around shaking hands with everybody's parents when they drove up to school. He'd be charming as hell and all. Except if some boy had little old funny-looking parents. You should've seen the way he did with my room-mate's parents. I mean if a boy's mother was sort of fat or corny-looking or something, and if somebody's

father was one of those guys that wear those suits with very big shoulders and corny black-and-white shoes, then old Haas would just shake hands with them and give them a phony smile and then he'd go talk, for maybe half an hour, with somebody else's parents. I can't stand that stuff. It drives me crazy. It makes me so depressed I go crazy. I hated that goddam Elkton Hills.





**A well I bless  
my soul  
What's wrong  
with me?  
I'm itching like  
a man on a  
fuzzy tree  
My friends say  
I'm actin' wild  
as a bug  
I'm in love  
I'm all shook up  
Mm mm oh, oh,  
yeah, yeah!**

—lyrics from Elvis Presley hit “All Shook Up”

and childhood as the true sanctuary of honesty, curiosity, innocence, and purity. Holden symbolizes pure, unfettered individuality in the face of cultural oppression.

### ALL SHOOK UP

While many white youths might have been rebelling for the sake of rebelling, others were looking beyond the manicured boundaries of their neat little communities for a more interesting world. One of the first places these white suburban youths looked was in black culture. Because African Americans were excluded from much of America's rising mass culture, the white youths were drawn to this forbidden and exotic-seeming community. Perhaps the best avenues for exploring black culture were the radio stations that played a new kind of music called rhythm and blues. R&B was a high-energy mix of several traditional black musical styles: field, church, and juke joint.

One white teenager was particularly inspired by the music he heard on these black stations. His actions, according to *Rolling Stone* magazine, began one of the most influential and lasting musical traditions in America: rock-and-roll. Rock-and-roll was born on July 5, 1954, when a nineteen-year-old truck driver for Crown Electric entered the Memphis Recording Studio owned by Sam Phillips. This was the moment when Elvis Presley opened his mouth and sang "That's All Right (Mama)," a cover of a 1947 tune written and first sung by black singer-guitarist Arthur Crudup. Elvis fused the several musical styles of R&B into a high-energy, expressive sound. Backup guitarist Scotty Moore remembered in 1991 about the session: "We just sort of shook our heads and said, 'Well, that's fine, but good God, they'll run us out of town.'" Tolerance for anything other than mainstream culture was in short supply.

Though the record did not sell very well, it was the first note in a great tidal wave of new sound. Over the next few years some of the greatest rock-and-roll classics were cut:

THE FIFTIES ROMPER ROOM

**"Elvis Presley is the greatest cultural force in the twentieth century."**

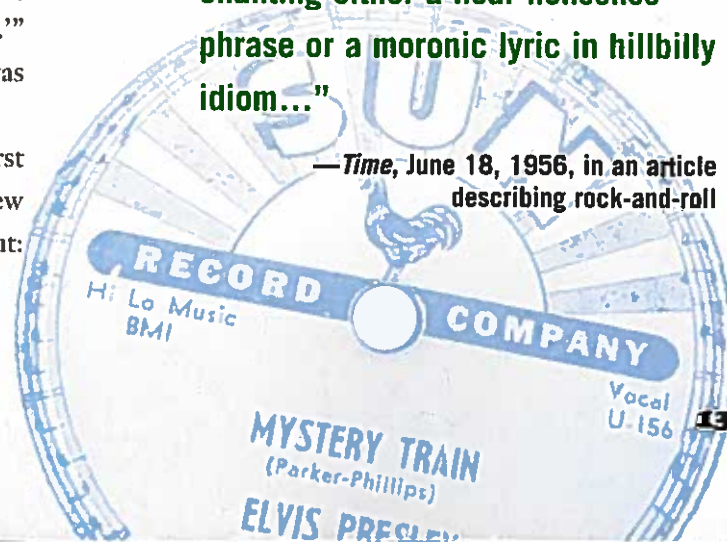
—Leonard Bernstein  
Classical composer and conductor

**"This hooby-dooby, oop-shoop, ootie-ootie, boom-boom, de-addy boom, scoobledy goobledy clump—is trash."**

—The *Denver Post* commenting on rock-and-roll

**"An unrelenting, socking syncopation that sounds like a bull whip; a choleric saxophone honking mating call sounds; an electric guitar turned up so loud that its sound shatters and splits; a vocal group that shudders and exercises violently to the beat while roughly chanting either a near-nonsense phrase or a moronic lyric in hillbilly idiom..."**

—*Time*, June 18, 1956, in an article describing rock-and-roll



# HIPSTER LINGO

<b>Axe</b>	a musical instrument
<b>Baby</b>	a loved one
<b>Bad</b>	good
<b>Bag</b>	someone's particular interest or talent
<b>Beat</b>	tired or exhausted
<b>Blow your top</b>	to get overly upset or angry
<b>Bomb, The</b>	someone or something extremely cool
<b>Bread</b>	money
<b>Bring down, Bringdown</b>	to depress; someone who's depressed
<b>Bug</b>	annoy
<b>Cat</b>	a cool person
<b>Chick</b>	a young, pretty girl
<b>Crazy</b>	weird
<b>Crumb</b>	someone who is disrespectful
<b>Dad, Daddy-o</b>	what hipsters call other guys
<b>Dig</b>	totally understand
<b>Disk jockey, Deejay, DJ</b>	someone who announces and selects records on the radio
<b>Down by law</b>	someone who has paid their dues
<b>Drag</b>	someone or something that depresses
<b>End, The</b>	crazy, incredible

- The ultimate party song of all time, "Louie, Louie" by the Kingsmen
- The historic thirty-sixth take of "Maybellene" that turned Chuck Berry into a household name
- The rockabilly sound of Memphis Recording Studio powerhouses Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash
- The crazy frenzy of Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti"

Rock-and-roll was here to stay. This music brought to life the same kind of rebellious attitude and energy that movies like *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause* were able to tap into. The difference, though, was that it didn't simply celebrate nihilism and powerlessness. Instead, it opened the picket fences of the dominant white culture to a truly entertaining—and truly American—musical tradition.

## THE MARKETING OF ROCK-AND-ROLL

The rise in popularity of rock-and-roll did not happen through traditional avenues. Rock groups were first recorded by independent record producers. At the beginning of the '50s, the recording equipment to produce records cost approximately one thousand dollars. Anyone could open a recording studio in their basement, and many did. Sam Phillips's Sun Records was a tiny recording studio in Memphis that got most of its business from walk-ins who wanted to record something and paid to cut a record. Elvis had originally entered the studio to make a record of gospel songs for his mother, but Phillips recognized the young nineteen-year-old as something special. Phillips also recorded such rock pioneers as Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash.

While production was inexpensive, distribution became equally simple. The jukebox industry at the time was run by the mafia. Because the mob was interested only in profits, not the morality of young people, mobsters were happy to stock their jukeboxes with whatever recordings kids wanted to hear at the local drive-in, bowling alley, or drugstore. At the same time, young DJs like



Alan Freed in Cincinnati spun rock-and-roll platters on their radio shows despite disapproval from the older generation. Both the mob and disk jockeys let the marketplace determine what product was available, and in doing so they were a step ahead of the large media companies. That would change, of course, when RCA bought Elvis's contract and master recordings from Sun Records in 1957 for a measly \$35,000. Other major labels would follow. The phenomenon of rock-and-roll showed not only just how powerful the youth marketplace was, but also that not everything was mass-market driven.

### GO, CAT, GO!

The Beats took it even further. Beats were counterculture mavens who railed against conformity by celebrating the underside of America, the hidden America. That meant not only black culture but also street culture, drug culture, and whatever else was decidedly not the American Dream. The Beats venerated whatever was taboo, and in a conservative society like America in the '50s, there were many taboos. A 1954 article in the *New York Times Magazine* titled "This Is the Beat Generation" by Clellon Holmes quoted writer Jack Kerouac as saying, "You know, this is really a beat generation." Holmes went on to explain what that meant:

The origins of the word "beat" are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul, a feeling of being reduced to a bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from their youth.

<b>Flip</b>	go crazy; an eccentric person
<b>Flip your lid</b>	blow your top
<b>Gas</b>	stir up feelings, something that moves you
<b>Gig</b>	a paying job
<b>Gone</b>	crazy
<b>Hand me that/ some skin</b>	shake my hand; give me five
<b>Hep, hip</b>	used to describe someone who understands well
<b>Hipster</b>	someone who follows the different types of bop jazz
<b>Jake</b>	okay
<b>Junk</b>	heroin
<b>Kill</b>	excite
<b>Out of this world</b>	incredible
<b>Out to lunch</b>	lame
<b>Pad</b>	bed, home, apartment
<b>Scene</b>	a place, atmosphere, environment
<b>Send</b>	move emotionally
<b>Snap your cap</b>	flip your lid
<b>Solid</b>	dependable, cool
<b>Square</b>	unknowing
<b>Wild</b>	crazy
<b>Witch doctor</b>	a minister or priest



"When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It's only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own."

—Jackson Pollock, *Possibilities I*, Winter 1947–48

### WHAT'S IT A PICTURE OF?

During the '50s, visual artists rebelled against conformity by questioning the very assumptions of what a painting represents. This new movement was called abstract expressionism. Rather than a painting being merely a picture of the concrete world—however distorted or interpreted—painters began to explore the basic elements of painting as ends in themselves. These works of art expressed the painters' vision purely through the use of form and color. Now considered to be the first American artistic movement of worldwide importance, the abstract expressionists can be divided into two groups: action painting (typified by artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, and Philip Guston), which put the focus on the physical action involved in painting, and color field painting (practiced by Mark Rothko and Kenneth Noland, among others), which was primarily concerned with exploring the effects of pure color on a canvas.

Clearly, the "beat" attitude did not promote the kind of optimism and abundance that the dominant culture revealed in. Kerouac was able to capture this "beat" sensibility, its aspirations and soul, in his explosive novel *On the Road*. The novel wore the clothes of fiction but was really a nonfiction account of Kerouac's own experiences. In direct opposition to the "company man" mentality, *On the Road* celebrated the individual in all his eccentricities and shortcomings. Unlike the careful, methodical, hardworking, and conscientious approach the '50s morality promoted, Kerouac wrote the novel in a blinding, nonstop, adrenaline- and speed-inspired burst of creativity. Essentially, the manuscript was one long paragraph typed on a continuous roll of paper, which his publisher broke down into paragraphs and sections. The novel portrayed an underground America full of what critic Ted Morgan has described as "pure, meaningless, abstract motion." The main character, Sal Paradise, follows his hero, Dean Moriarty, ricocheting across the country like a rubber Super Ball™ hurled into space. The main energy of these men is their drive to exist outside the mainstream. They do not want to play by the rules of society. They avoid work whenever possible, and when they have to work, they take meaningless, dead-end jobs. All this was antithetical to the mores of the era. In the novel, Sal describes exactly the kind of life he is searching for:

**The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"**

Kerouac wasn't alone in his search for what he called the "beatific." Like Kerouac, poet Allen Ginsberg was part of this group that included writer William Burroughs, Neal Cassidy, poet LeRoi Jones, and a number of other artists, hipsters, and writers on both the East and West coasts. Ginsberg came to prominence with the publication of his first book of poems, *Howl and Other Poems*. It was originally published by City Lights Books in the fall of 1956. Subsequently seized by U.S. customs and San Francisco police, the book was the subject of a long court trial at which a series of poets and professors persuaded the court that the book was not obscene. In the title poem,

"Howl," Ginsberg sets out to celebrate all that is not suburban conformity. He begins by paying homage to all non-conformists: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked..." He also rails against the decadent materialistic society, which he likens to Moloch, who in the Bible was the god of the Canaanites and Phoenicians to whom children were sacrificed.

Ironically, while the greatest boom in America's history was welcomed by most, the few who found fault in this prosperity would come to define the next era—the '60s.

**Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks!**

**Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!**

—from "Howl," by Allen Ginsberg

The Beat Generation:  
• (l to r) Hal Chase,  
Jack Kerouac,  
Allen Ginsberg, and  
William S. Burroughs.

