Bob Dylan grew up listening to rock ‘n’ roll on the radio. As a teenager, he thought he wanted to become a rock star himself. However, while attending the University of Minnesota in 1959, he became passionate about traditional American folk music. Dylan dropped out of college, moved to New York City, and began performing as a folk singer in tiny Greenwich Village nightclubs.

Unlike many performers, Dylan was not showy or handsome, nor did he have a strong singing voice. Still, people paid attention to his music. Accompanying himself on guitar and harmonica, Dylan sang about racial injustice, nuclear war, and other serious issues that engaged people living in a time of social change. His lyrics held more in common with beat poetry than with the simple rhymes of teenage love songs. In one of his early hits, he warned of an emerging clash of values between parents and their baby boom children:

Come mothers and fathers throughout the land
And don’t criticize what you can’t understand.
your sons and your daughters are beyond your command.
your old road is rapidly agin’.
Please get out of the new one if you can’t lend your hand,
For the times they are a-changin’.
—Bob Dylan, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” 1964

In the 1960s, the themes of Dylan’s lyrics resonated with millions of young people, as well as with many of their elders. They considered the racial discrimination, riots, poverty, and political assassinations occurring in the United States and concluded that society had to change. As some people experimented with new ways of living, they redefined old ideals, such as freedom and democracy, on their own terms. They created a counterculture—a group with ideas and behaviors very different from those of the mainstream culture.

Baby Boomers Launch a Cultural Revolution
The postwar baby boom created the largest generation of children in American history. By the early 1960s, the oldest baby boomers were nearing their twenties. Most looked forward to futures full of opportunities. However, some baby boomers felt guilty about growing up with advantages denied to many Americans. They believed American society was deeply flawed—rife with materialism, racism, and inequality—but they also believed it could change.

Activists on College Campuses Form a New Left
Responding to the plight of the poor, small groups of student activists formed a movement called the New Left. Some members of the Depression-era “Old Left” had been radicals who supported a worldwide communist revolution. The students who made up the New Left rejected communism. Inspired by the civil rights movement, they were committed to more traditional American ideals, such as the democratic goal of allowing all people to take an active part in government.
The strongest voice in the New Left was a group called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 1962, SDS founders met to craft their vision of a just society. “Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live,” they declared. “We would replace power . . . rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity. During the first year, SDS membership grew to more than 8,000 students—a small fraction of all college students.

In 1964, a student protest at the University of California at Berkeley radicalized large numbers of students across the country. The Free Speech Movement developed in response to a university rule banning groups like SDS from using a plaza on campus to spread their ideas. Freedom of expression, declared student activist Mario Savio, “represents the very dignity of what a human being is.” Comparing the university to a factory, he urged his fellow students to “put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels.” Thousands of students joined the Free Speech Movement, shutting down the campus for weeks. Eventually, the university lifted the ban.

The student uprising at Berkeley was the first of many protests at colleges across the country. Some protests revolved around local issues. Others were reactions to the growing U.S. military presence in Vietnam. Student activists called on college officials to ban military recruiters from campuses and to end weapons-related research. In 1965, SDS held a rally in Washington, D.C., against the Vietnam War, attracting nearly 25,000 people.

An Emerging Counterculture Rejects the Establishment
In another form of rebellion against social expectations, many young people dropped out of school and rejected the “rat race” of nine-to-five jobs. Known as hippies, they developed a counterculture seeking freedom of expression. Shunning conventions, hippies dressed in jeans, colorful tie-dyed T-shirts, sandals, and necklaces called love beads. They wore their hair long and gave up shaving or wearing makeup. Many lived on handouts from their parents, by begging, or by taking short-term jobs.

Although no organization united members of the counterculture, a number of beliefs did. One was distrust of the Establishment, their term for the people and institutions who, in their view, controlled society. Another was the sentiment embodied in the counterculture motto of “never trust anyone over 30.” Members of the counterculture also shared the belief that love was more important than money.

Many members of the counterculture rejected political activism in favor of “personal liberation.” As one hippie put it, “Human beings need total freedom. That’s where God is at. We need to shed hypocrisy, dishonesty, and phoniness and go back to the purity of our childhood values.” Hippies talked of creating a new age of peace and love in which everyone was free to “do your own thing.”

In the late 1960s, counterculture members of the Youth International Party, known as yippies, tried to combine their hippie lifestyle with New Left politics. Led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the yippies attracted media attention by carrying out amusing pranks. In one of them, they poked fun at the Establishment’s love of money by throwing dollar bills off the balcony of the New York Stock Exchange. As the money floated down, the stock traders below dropped their work to scramble for free cash. Hoffman called such stunts “commercials for the revolution.”
A Generation Gap Opens Between Rebellious Youth and their Mainstream Parents

Hippies were a minority of 1960s youth. But media coverage made their values known to other young people, many of whom responded sympathetically. To their parents’ distress, these youth let their hair grow long, wore hippie clothes, and criticized the Establishment, especially the war in Vietnam. The result was a growing generation gap, or difference in attitudes and behaviors between youth and their parents.

For millions of Americans, the post-WWII period of 1945 to 1960 brought an unforeseen era of economic growth and affluence. These Americans—adult, mostly white, middle and upper-middle class people—were the mainstream of the population. Mainstream men and women had survived the Great Depression and learned the values of frugality, how to make the smallest amount of money, or food, go the furthest. This was also the generation that fought and sacrificed during WWII. After coming together as a nation to defeat an evil enemy, this generation displayed a sense of patriotism not shown since the American Revolution. Mainstream Americans welcomed the hard-earned peace and economic stability of the postwar era. They bought homes in the suburbs, found good jobs, and settled down to raise families with the assumption that their children would go to college.

Mainstream Americans believed their shared belief in traditional American values were the foundation of a better life.

- First, they were very patriotic, as evidenced by a popular bumper sticker they put on their cars—“America: Love It or Leave It”
- Second, men and women who said they were in love got married—and stayed married. For unmarried couples to consider living together was not only unacceptable, but almost unheard of.
- Third, the mainstream generally believed that the “American Dream”—a good education, a good job, and a good home—could come true for anyone who worked hard, was dedicated and honest, and believed in the United States. Anyone who challenged this kind of thinking was accused of being “un-American”. The mainstream often dismissed “long-haired hippies” as spoiled rich kids. They resented the counterculture’s focus on hedonism (pursuit of pleasure) and its lack of concern for their future.
- Fourth, mainstream Americans believed people should conform to traditional values in everything from personal behavior to fashion and grooming. For example, many people expected men to have short hair, be clear shaven, and wear suits. Women were expected to wear tasteful amounts of makeup, have their hair done, and mostly wear dresses, even while relaxing at home.

Peggy Noonan, a presidential speechwriter and newspaper columnist, was one of those mainstream youth. While hippies were dreaming of personal liberation, Noonan accepted the idea that “not everything is possible, you can’t have everything, and that’s not bad, that’s life.” Rather than chanting anti-Establishment slogans such as “Make love, not war,” her motto was “Show respect, love your country, stop complaining!”
Changing Views of Love and Marriage
The counterculture’s openness about sexual behavior took place amid rapidly changing views toward love and marriage. The sexual revolution was a by-product of the introduction of the birth control pill early in the decade. More couples were living together outside of marriage, and more marriages were ending in divorce. Millions of Americans came to see a loveless marriage as worse than no marriage at all. As a result, many states eased divorce laws. Between 1960 and 1970, the annual divorce rate rose from fewer than 10 couples per 1,000 to almost 15. The number of children living in single-parent families rose along with the divorce rate.

While numbers of young people experimented with the freedom the sexual revolution brought, mainstream adults focused on problems it created. They worried that young people were being pressured to engage in sexual behavior. Adults also expressed alarm at the rapid rise in the number of children born out of wedlock. Just as shocking was an increase in sexually transmitted diseases.

Hippies Experiment with Freer Lifestyles
Many hippies created mini-societies in which they could live by their own values. Some congregated in crash pads, free and usually temporary places to stay. Others experimented with more permanent group-owned living arrangements, called communes. Members of communes shared responsibilities and decision making. During the 1960s, about 2,000 communes arose, most often in rural areas. Many mainstream parents reacted strongly to communal modes of living. Some parents felt that by choosing such unconventional lifestyles, their children may have been limiting their prospects for future success.

The counterculture also held changing views on the recreational use of drugs. At the 1967 Human Be-In, psychologist Timothy Leary urged the crowd to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” The casual attitude of young people toward illegal mind-altering drugs appalled mainstream adults. They pointed out that some drug users experienced “bad trips” that led to panic attacks, depression, violence, and death. Government spending on antidrug programs increased from $65 million in 1969 to $730 million in 1973.

Hippie Fashion
Hippies dressed in outrageous, colorful, controversial, and sometimes ridiculous clothes that shocked the mainstream. They wore beads around their necks, and shirts tie-dyed in crazy colors or covered with odd designs, even replicas of the American flag. Young men wore fringe jackets and army surplus clothes. Young women often went braless and wore blouses that left their midriff exposed. Some women wore the mini-skirt that rose three inches above the knee, but while short skirts were in, short hair was out—especially for men. Not since the colonial days had so many American men wore their hair in pony tails. Others let it grow ½ way down their backs. Many mainstream adults claimed it was difficult to tell the boys from the girls. The hippies’ final fashion statement was flowers in their hair, a sign of “peace and love.” This trend earned the counterculture youth the nickname of “flower children”.
Rock ‘n’ Roll Gives Voice to the Counterculture

Hippies also embraced the changing music scene. Counterculture rock bands soon developed a new sound known as psychedelic rock. They experimented with free-flowing songs that used elements of jazz and Indian music, sound distortion, and light shows to create vivid musical experiences. Many mainstream adults worried this type of music promoted increased drug use.

The counterculture was at its height at Woodstock, a 1969 concert in rural upstate New York. About 400,000 people convened at the festival—far more than expected. Despite rain and food shortages, the gathering was peaceful.

Woodstock helped popularize a new generation of rock performers. It also drew media attention to the counterculture. In August 1969, Time magazine reported, “The festival . . . may well rank as one of the significant political and sociological events of the age.” However, just a few months after Woodstock, four people died at a rock festival staged by the Rolling Stones in Altamont, California. The mainstream culture pointed to this event as an example of the dangers of rock ‘n’ roll.

Hippie Political Activism

In the minds of many Americans—particularly the mainstream—the counterculture and the antiwar protest movement of the 1960s were inseparable. By the late 1960s, the media showed images nearly every week of long-haired protesters marching against the Vietnam War. Despite what many Americans thought, these protestors never fit into one easily categorized group. Some protestors were confrontational, burning the U.S. flag and screaming “Stop the war!” as they cursed and goaded the police or National Guard troops who were on duty. Other protestors were more interested in making a gentle “statement for peace.” They often marched in silence, carrying peace signs, and frequently placing flowers in the gun barrels of government troops to show their nonviolent nature. This “dual nature” of the protest movement was often lost on mainstream Americans. They often saw all student protestors as disloyal Americans who were betraying their country.