

Nineteen-Ninety Whatever:  
The Historical Context of *The Grateful Dead*

“I want a tie-dyed shirt made with the blood of Jerry Garcia.”  
-Kurt Cobain, *Journals*

*The Grateful Dead* takes place in a significant though often overlooked era in American history, the early Nineties, a time when the aging, idealistic radical movement of the baby boomers of the Sixties contrasted vastly with the cynical, careless rebellion of Generation X. The early Nineties was a time of angry upheaval and introspection, of grunge music and the slacker subculture. People in their early twenties shared a core philosophy of frustration and rage that served as the antithesis of the hippie movement's ideas of freedom and love. Douglas Coupland's novel *Generation X*, Peter Bagge's *Hate* comic, grunge music like Nirvana, and Richard Linklater's movie *Slacker* are examples of artistic work wrestling with what it meant to be young and aimless in a post-Woodstock America, an America that didn't seem as shiny and free as the Sixties promised it to be, an America rife with a crumbling economy, familial and spiritual collapse, pollution, crackheads, and AIDS.

The youth of the Nineties suffered from what Douglas Coupland called “boomer envy,” or jealousy over the material wealth and long-range material security accrued by their elders by virtue of their fortunate births. The youth characterized the older generation to be “bleeding ponytails”, piners of the past, hypocrites glorifying their own youth with a sense of entitlement and self-involvement that blended with a snide reproach for the cynical, seemingly apathetic doings of the younger generation. The baby boomers had sold out to corporate America: their naïve ideals and self-seeking paths to Peace were discovered to be fraudulent excuses to live their lives guilt-free and reckless. No change had come despite their words of revolution. Once-radical music was being used in television commercials to sell everything from automobile insurance to laundry detergent. Many of the youths of the Nineties had parents that were once the freedom-loving, pot-smoking bohemians of the Sixties, and had lived in bitter resentment through the divorce of their parents' failed, phony, and bloated ideals.

To many young people it must have seemed there was a sense of legislative nostalgia for the Sixties. There has always been a mythological aspect to the hippie. Like the stylized cowboys found in Hollywood films since time immemorial, hippies as an actual movement lasted only a few years, yet had been fetishized out of proportion by pop culture into a legendary identity. Everything in pop culture forced the youth to have memories they did not actually possess. By the Nineties, the hippie movement had been transformed into a consumer youth culture. The neo-hippie, whose basic self was a hodgepodge of superficial elements of the hippie identity, including musical taste, pot-smoking and abstract ideas about politics and religion, faced few if any of the struggles of the Sixties hippie movement, and few if any of its virtues. There was too little and paradoxically too much to protest in the Nineties, and yet, as the slacker film *PCU* ingeniously illustrates, protests gave way to protest on everything from freeing Tibet to eating vegetarian.

But while feel-good baby boomer nostalgic trips like *Forest Gump* flooded the marquee, Hollywood films with an ironic pop-culture edge like *Reality Bites* were entering the fray to compete with them. This was the age of the slacker, and with the slacker subculture came the inevitable rise of “slacksploitation” flicks.

The slacker lifestyle was the most prolific youth movement to come around since the hippies of the Sixties, and in many ways the two groups were similar: both projected a disgruntlement with mainstream culture and proposed dropping out of society. But mindful of their aging Sixties nemesis, slackers were suspicious of the very idea of a movement; as *Slacker* filmmaker Richard Linklater wrote, “slackers don’t need or want to be part of a ‘movement’ that would inevitably be parodied into stupidity.”

While slackers may have appeared to believe in nothing, their very affront of all beliefs was based on a sense of personal independent growth. Linklater wrote, “the fact is, most slackers rejected society and the social hierarchy before it rejected them. However, slackers are usually on the lookout for an opportune moment to regurgitate it all back in the face of that society in any way that easily presents itself... Reject first: time will tell if it is worth replacing.”

But by dropping out of society slackers created their own society, one often as restricted and elitist as their hippie counterparts, yet with an overarching personal existential dilemma vastly different from the collective consciousness head trip of the Summer of Love crowd. Neil Howe and Bill Strauss’ book *13<sup>th</sup> Gen* explicated the sins of the baby boomer generation against the youth of the Nineties while Jason Cohen and Michael Krugman’s *Generation Ecch!* poked fun at the self-centeredness and whininess of the same generation. “Whining was very big back then,” wrote *Hate* cartoonist Peter Bagge, and whining was everywhere. Once slacksploitation took over, the slacker became caricatured into an overeducated do-nothing loafer, an unwashed and scraggly grouch and layabout; in other words, exactly what the slacker portrayed the hippie to be.

Imagine now entering this scene two hippies that have dropped out of society altogether, that have clung unrepentantly to their rebellious attitudes though the ocean of time has long passed them by, who have for better or for worse never aged, matured, never had to compromise their core philosophies like their aging counterparts.

What would these hippies be like? Would a lack of change, a lifestyle of unabashed freedom have driven them insane? Would the lack of stimulus coupled with ample drugs rotted their already susceptible minds? And how would the slacker generation respond (or not respond) to this embodiment of everything they hate?

Eno the Zero and Dr. Zog are the Grateful Undead, the zombie hippies of the title, though ultimately all the inhabitants of *The Grateful Undead* universe are undead, in feeling and deeds. They have all become in their own ways subordinate to their crass desires and absorbed into their own narrow perceptions of reality, selfish in their quests for self-imposed freedom and expression. Things change yet remain the same: the paranoid radical rhetoric characteristic of Eno the Zero has transformed into the ironic, cynical rants on brainless pop culture proffered by Papps Elroy, whose ultimate destiny is to find enlightenment in an over-saturation of meaningless catch-phrases and clichés; the new-age Me-ism of Dr. Zog has become the UFO conspiracy theories of junk tabloids of the over-educated Jessi Vandersnatch. Drugs addle the minds of those susceptible to influence: such is the fate of the comic-book binary-minded Yelpie, the neo-hippie Leslie and her father, baby boomer Moonchild. Those imperious to the hippies’ charms face a worst fate: turned to hatred by a society that hates them, driven to cannibal frenzy by their post-drug-rot minds, these vampiric purveyors of decrepit magic destroy any that stand in the way of their wanton lust for freedom.

In the final analysis, it seems that both the hippie and slacker movements were susceptible to being parodied into superficial caricatures of themselves, and likewise

manipulated into brands rather than permanent lifestyle philosophies. Any movement inevitably leads to a parody of itself: movements, despite the name, seldom ever change or grow internally, and to oppose change and growth is to profess a way of life that is based on a love of stagnancy and ultimately death, and after death, decay and devolution. Yet in this post-movement world, what will today's youth believe in? Hippie parodies like *Hair* have become the post-parody simulacra of *Across The Universe*, more amusement park ride than even hand-me-down hippie identity; the corruption of Sixties music has devolved into the nonsensical use of *The Who* in television detective shows and the soulless robots of Touch of Gray's "summer of your life" commercial. The Sixties has lost all context, all historical meaning; likewise, the slacker generation has devolved into a youth that has kept all the cynical flippancy of their predecessors but none of the serious existential fury. All past movements have been so watered down that nothing is left. There is a lack of confrontation between the hippies and the slackers in the *The Grateful Dead*, little perception among the characters that they experience guilt or a sense of self-will. Yet is all that transpires to them an act of fate? And will today's youth live in a world without any movements, a world lacking any action altogether?

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