1968: The Year That Changed Everything

In Europe and the United States, the generation of 1968 had an idealistic core expressed in culture, politics and a distinct way of looking at the world. Its legacy lives on.

Christopher Dickey
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In May 1968, students ripped up the cobblestones along the rue Gay-Lussac in Paris to build barricades and, in the process, exposed the sand foundation that lay under them. It was one episode in an orgy of confrontation with stolid authority that started out partly as protesting, partly as partying, and grew into a chaotic nationwide strike that shut down France. They were heady times. Fractious left-wing ideologues filled the air with strident declamations—Marxist, Trotskyite, Maoist, anarchist, situationist and more. But the reigning sentiment was simple enough: strip away the edifices of established order. Get to a better—and above all, a fairer—future. Of the slogans shouted by the barricade builders on Left Bank streets that May, those best remembered almost 40 years on are "It is forbidden to forbid" and the weirdly frivolous but expressive, "Beneath the cobblestones, the beach!"

What happened in France that spring was inspired by, and inspired, a global season of rude awakenings that resounds still, even if it comes back to us now summed up in the singular date "1968." America's Vietnam War rumbled as a raging undercurrent, prompting the first protests of the French uprising. But in Czechoslovakia, the "Prague Spring" that began in March 1968 pushed aside the Iron Curtain—until Moscow sent troops to crush the opposition. Ghettos burned and assassinations changed the political landscape of the United States. But at the end of the year, a triumph of American technology unexpectedly created environmental awareness: images of Earth taken from Apollo 8 showed just how vulnerable the Blue Planet looked in what astronaut Jim Lovell called the "vast loneliness" of space.

People who did not come of age then (which is to say the vast majority of the world's population today) may tire of hearing how epochal it all was. French conservative President Nicolas Sarkozy, only 13 when the barricades went up in the Latin Quarter, ran his victorious presidential campaign this year against those "sixty-eighters" who still had an odor of irrational left-wing romanticism clinging to them. Yet Paul Berman, a New York University historian, and author of "Power and the Idealists," argues that in Europe today, and especially in Sarkozy's administration, the '68 generation is perhaps more influential than ever. He says there are two very different legacies: the cliched sloganeering associated with what he calls "antique" 19th-century ideologies, which mostly died of their own irrelevance, and the core sentiment that ruled the streets in Paris, a visceral hostility to ruthless authority, continued, says Berman, as a legacy of "anti-totalitarianism and human rights."

In this, the European and American experiences were very different. Overt colonialism and violent, overwhelming fascism were living memories in Europe, and not, as in the United States, mere words in overheated left-wing rhetoric. The European protests and the government responses, moreover, while violent, were rarely deadly. Thousands of people were arrested and injured, but not a single person was killed in France's May uprising. In the United States the leaders of the civil-rights movement, if they survived, endured, matured and became influential inside and outside of government. In Europe, a handful of well-known student leaders would do the same, holding on to the idealism that marked 1968, but adapting to the demands of realpolitik, including "the use of Western power against extreme repression."

One of the leading '68ers is Joschka Fischer, foreign minister of Germany from 1998 to 2005, representing the Green Party, but a street-fighting leftist radical in the early 1970s. When pictures of him hitting a cop during a 1973 protest appeared in 2001, they provoked outrage. The photographs came from the daughter of Germany's most notorious woman terrorist, whom Fischer had admired. Not only was he pilloried, but, by extension, 1968 was put on trial. Yet Berman portrays Fischer as the man who "ushered the Germans into the actual modernized world by making them active participants in NATO, first in the Kosovo war, and now in Afghanistan." In France, Bernard Kouchner epitomizes the flamboyant style and the moral imperatives of 1968, as well as the rejection of its antique ideologies. Once a communist, he cofounded the humanitarian organization Medecins sans Frontieres in 1971 to defy Third World dictators and help people in need. His experiences trying to rescue "boat people" fleeing Vietnam after the fall of Saigon dispelled whatever illusions he might have had about Hanoi's tyranny. He went on to work with Afghans fighting the Soviets, and with Kurds fighting Saddam Hussein. In 2003, Kouchner was one of the few prominent French politicians to support the idea of liberating Iraq, but, from the start, had serious reservations about the way the Americans planned to do it.

Last June, Sarkozy picked Kouchner as his foreign minister, and they've built warm ties to the United States, which they talk about, sincerely, as a land of liberty. And they've been tougher on Iran than any other European government. These policies are the natural outgrowth of the spirit of '68. If some of their old slogans seemed playful to the point of nonsense, others still make sense when applied to governments, like Iran's, which maintain power by stifling freedom. "It is forbidden to forbid," they used to say on rue Gay-Lussac. One day crowds may say the same thing in Tehran. They might even discover the beach beneath the stones.

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Eyes On The Past

Europe's '68ers are forever fighting yesterday's battles.

Mark Lilla
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When Germany was in the throes of what we now call "the '60s," conservative commentators coined an unlovely term to describe the unlovely radicalism of the time: *verspätete Widerstand.* It means "delayed resistance." The thought behind it was that the young Germans kidnapping CEOs, throwing bombs and beating up policemen were unwittingly acting out the drama of resistance to Nazism that never took place in the 1930s. They viewed politics as a kind of pantomime in which public officials were fascists, businessmen were collaborators, schools were prisons, soldiers were murderers, and parents were the secret police. They could not see that Germany had become a healthy liberal democracy, a pillar of the West. In fact, they weren't terribly interested in the present. What excited them was the chance to re-enact the shameful history of modern Germany, casting themselves as heroes of a cinematic remake in which they would redeem the fatherland.

Delayed resistance goes a long to way toward explaining the psychodynamics of this European generation. Accepting the peace and prosperity of the new Europe seemed to entail forgetting the reality of fascism and genocide in the past, burying it. Anger about this massive cover-up manifested itself in the '60s with the student left's contempt for Western liberal democracy, along with a romanticization of Third World tyrannies. Many of the young people in those fetching pictures of street demonstrations in Paris and Berlin shouting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," while wearing Che Guevara T shirts and carrying Mao Zedong's Little Red Book meant what they were saying: they would have preferred Ho, Che or Mao to their democratically elected leaders. Only in the late '70s, after Cambodian and Vietnamese boat people brought out tales of butchery, did they experience a crisis of conscience.

Now the talk was of universal human rights and the need to defend them, through velvet revolutions if possible, with international armed forces if necessary. In the '80s and early '90s, this ideal did some good. Western European governments timidly chose not to side publicly with anticommunist movements in Eastern Europe, for fear of angering the U.S.S.R., but the '68ers openly supported the protesters of Poland and Czechoslovakia. When the Balkans descended into war, they argued for intervention. But this was delayed resistance, too. The '68ers were resisting their youthful selves, those long-haired naifs who cheered for Che and jeered at soldiers, no matter what they were fighting for.

Today the most difficult issues facing Europe—immigration and terrorism—have little or nothing to do with these ancient squabbles. European countries find themselves host to millions of new immigrants, predominantly Muslim, and have not managed to assimilate them or their children into mainstream society. This is an unprecedented situation in modern European politics. And if ever there was a need for fresh thinking, it is now. Yet once again, the '68 generation is mired in the past—and more than one past. For the past three decades, the European left has viewed the immigration problem exclusively through the lens of past anti-Semitism and colonialism. Immigration was to be welcomed as a way of making up for past sins. Anyone who raised doubts about integrating the newcomers was branded a racist, or worse. Expressing frustration with the changing face of Europe fell in the '80s to unsavory right-wingers like Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or J?rg Haider in Austria. Solidarity with the immigrants seemed the noble course, and the '68ers could be found arranging asylum for those threatened with deportation and leading candlelight vigils against racism. The Dutch prided themselves on Amsterdam's diversity, and progressive-minded Germans embraced their Turkish neighbors. French '68ers helped create the group S.O.S. Racisme, which printed up fashionable little lapel buttons that read HANDS OFF MY PAL! Moderate legislation to curb immigration went nowhere, thanks in large part to the opposition of the '68 generation.

But since 9/11, the mood has shifted in Europe, and the '68ers are themselves divided about what to do next. The Dutch were driven out of Eden by the brutal murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fanatic in 2004. The Germans keep hearing reports about honor killings involving resident Turkish families. The French suburbs were rocked by riots led by the children of immigrants in 2005. And the British are still digesting the significance of the London bombings by homegrown terrorists. Many '68ers still see the immigration problem in light of the 1930s and maintain their multicultural faith in toleration as the universal salve. But a dissenting group has now appeared, demanding that the new immigrants get with the Western program—immediately. Conscious of their own romance with despotism in the '60s, some important European intellectuals now see themselves as the sole defenders of liberty against "Islamo-fascism" and its multiculturalist sympathizers. They are outraged (understandably) at the death threats leveled against critics of Islam like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the writer who fled the Netherlands and found refuge at the conservative American Enterprise Institute in Washington. They are outraged (understandably) about the repression of women in many immigrant families. And they are outraged (understandably) about threats to freedom of expression made by those whose religious sensibilities have been offended.

The problem with all this outrage is that it is occasioned by a problem the '68 generation did much to create. A more sober, realistic assessment of the immigration issue, free from fixed ideas about the European past, might have helped reverse the lax policies that put Europe in its current predicament. But now Europe is home to millions of new immigrants and their families, many of whom are Muslims and who do not share modern cultural and intellectual assumptions.

What to do? A reasonable step forward might be to encourage moderate, credible figures within the Muslim community who promote coexistence. One such figure is the Swiss thinker Tariq Ramadan, who has a large following among young educated Muslims hoping to

reconcile their religious commitments with life in the modern West. Ramadan is not an enlightened liberal democrat, but his message does offer theological reasons for believing Muslims to live peacefully in the West and not treat it as alien, hostile territory. This is a huge step forward. But for '68ers defending human rights against what they perceive to be the latest form of fascism, Ramadan is a dangerous figure. Several books attacking him have come out in France, and now the debate has reached the United States. Last year the Bush administration prevented him from accepting a professorship at the University of Notre Dame, and today he teaches at Oxford.

These are hard calls to make, and many more will have to be made in coming decades. Europeans are in uncharted waters and will need a strong sense of present reality to navigate them. Fantasies about re-enacting past dramas just get in the way of this hard work. The '68ers, narcissistically focused on their own historical significance, simply aren't prepared for thinking about Europe's future. That will fall to a new, more mature generation.

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What the Beatles Gave Science

Their visit popularized the notion that the spiritual East has something to teach the rational West.

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Like millions of others who believed there must be more to life than the libertine exuberance of the '60s, the Beatles hoped that the Hindu teacher Mahesh Yogi—known as the Maharishi, or "great saint"—would help them "fill some kind of hole," as Paul McCartney put it years later. So in the spring of 1968, the Fab Four traveled to the Maharishi's ashram overlooking the Ganges River in northern India, where they meditated for hours each day in search of enlightenment, as Bob Spitz recounts in his exhaustive 2005 biography, "The Beatles." The high-profile visit still echoes 40 years later—in, of all places, science, for the trip popularized the notion that the spiritual East has something to teach the rational West. Soon the Maharishi was on Time magazine next to the line "Meditation: The Answer to All Your Problems?"

It wasn't. But in the late 1960s a few intrepid scientists began dipping their toes into the exotic new waters to study the effects of Transcendental Meditation (TM), which the Maharishi developed, and other forms of mental training. Most of that early research "was just not of high caliber," says B. Alan Wallace, president of the Santa Barbara Institute of Consciousness Studies. "Reputable scientists were told, 'We can't study that; we'll be tarred and feathered'." But just as meditation has become as mainstream as aerobics, research on it has achieved a respectability that astonishes those who remember the early floundering. With neuroscientists at the University of California, Davis, Wallace is leading a $1.4 million study of the effects of intensive meditation on attention, cognitive function and emotion regulation. Prestigious institutions such as the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center conduct studies on how Tibetan yoga improves sleep in patients with lymphoma, and top journals publish research on the brain waves of Buddhist monks. Studies of meditation are more than mainstream. They're expanding beyond the predictable—I mean, how surprising is it that meditating lowers stress?—into uncharted terrain, such as how different forms of meditation alter brain circuits in an enduring way.

In large part, that research is making headway because it's much more rigorous than in the early days. Then, few studies accounted for the annoying little fact that meditators' low levels of stress might reflect self-selection (maybe only mellow people chose to meditate and stuck with it) rather than the practice itself. Nor did they consider that the reduction in stress, blood pressure, heart rate and other measures between the beginning and the end of a meditation course might reflect the placebo effect: you expect something good to happen, and it does. "You can't really control for that," says Robert Schneider of Marahishi University of Management in Iowa, a center of research on TM, "but new studies come close." Although relaxation techniques and TM both lower blood pressure, for instance, the effect of TM is twice as big. Top hospitals from Stanford to Duke are convinced: they have instituted meditation programs for patients suffering chronic pain and other ailments.

Afraid to sully their reputations, it took three decades for scientists to ask the obvious: does meditation change the brain? But in the 1990s British psychiatrist John Teasdale became intrigued with mindfulness meditation, a Buddhist practice in which you sit quietly and observe whatever thoughts and perceptions arise in your consciousness, but without judging them. He and colleagues showed that mindfulness training halves the rate at which people treated for depression relapse. That set the stage of studies showing that mere thought can alter brain activity in a long-lasting way that benefits other forms of mental illness.

Neuropsychologist Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin had practiced meditation since the 1970s but didn't dare study it. Only in the 1990s did he "come out of the closet," he says. Now Buddhist monks and yogis trek to his lab to have their brains scanned. They look different from the brains of undergraduates (but then, whose doesn't?), having stronger electrical waves of the kind that knit together disparate thoughts into the grand enterprise of consciousness.

Even in novices, meditation leaves its mark. An eight-week course in compassion meditation, in which volunteers focus on the wish that all beings be free from suffering, shifted brain activity from the right prefrontal cortex to the left, a pattern associated with a greater sense of well-being. And three months of intensive training (10 to 12 hours a day) in mindfulness meditation had a remarkable effect on attention. Usually, when something attracts your attention—in this study, a number interrupting a stream of letters on a screen—it takes the brain's attention machinery time to reset. If two numbers flash less than 0.5 seconds apart, most people don't see the second one. But after mindfulness meditation, with its focus on sharpening attention, volunteers detected many more numbers, Davidson's team reported this year. What happened was that the meditators used fewer attention circuits to perceive the first number and therefore had enough left over to detect the second. Meditation is still not "the answer to all your problems," but it's having a good run unveiling the brain's secrets.

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Tuned In, Turned On

The times they were a-changin', but in the arts only music kept pace.

David Gates
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When you think of 1968, you think of riots, assassinations, the Vietnam war, the youth revolt, the backlash—and the songs that reflected it all. It was the year of "Hey, Jude," "Revolution" and "Street Fighting Man"—the last two making it clear that wealthy rock stars didn't want to push this youth revolt thing too far. It was also the year James Brown, in "Say It Loud (I'm Black and I'm Proud)," told his fellow Americans that blacks would "rather die on our feet than keep livin' on our knees." At least he had some grit—when he wasn't cozying up to Hubert Humphrey. Strange days.

And no refuge. You went to a movie, turned on the TV, and there it all was. The radio, most of all, was a cultural war zone, with Johnny Cash's gangsta-country "Folsom Prison Blues" ("I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die") followed by Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild" followed by Tammy Wynette's "Stand by Your Man." (Tammy's vote for George Wallace canceled Brown's vote for Humphrey; no wonder Nixon won.) The high-culture types couldn't get away from the chaos either. One of the few great works of fiction that year was Donald Barthelme's collection "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts," whose first story, "The Indian Uprising," conflated the frontier west with Vietnam: "We killed a great many in the south suddenly with helicopters and rockets but we found that those we had killed were children." The white settlers' improvised barricades were made up of such contemporary bric-a-brac as "a hollow-core door in birch veneer on black wrought-iron legs," and intellectual bric-a-brac as well, including "thoughtfully planned job descriptions (including scales for the orderly progress of other colors)." It was a verbal collage-much like the radio's aural collage-of American smugness under attack from the Other. And vice versa. From Vietnam to Haight Ashbury to Chicago's Democratic convention to the inner city, what else was 1968 about?

Another Barthelme story, "Game," about two technicians in a missile bunker, faced the dread that lay under it all: "Shotwell has a key and I have a key. If we turn our keys simultaneously the bird flies." So many of 1968's books, songs, movies and TV shows were haunted, however covertly, by all those birds on hair-trigger alert, and what they might or might not do. Both NBC's "Star Trek" and the exploitation film "Barbarella" posited a distant, better, future in which Earth had somehow gotten through an era of violent confrontation intact, and was now on a mission to set the rest of the universe straight. (You can take the characters out of America, but.) Like Jane Fonda's Barbarella, William Shatner's Captain Kirk was an enlightened earthling who didn't see why primitive spacelings couldn't all get along. But he was willing to use phaser or fisticuffs when he had to-that is, in nearly every episode.

But in other, stronger works, the birds had already flown. Philip K. Dick set his sci-fi novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" (the model for the film "Blade Runner") in the year 2021, on an earth ruined and mostly depopulated by "World War Terminus." No one, Dick wrote, "remembered why the war had come about or who, if anyone, had won. The dust which had contaminated most of the planet's surface had originated in no country, and no one, even the wartime enemy, had planned on it." In post-apocalyptic "Planet of the Apes-with Charlton Heston, of all people, bearded and half-naked, railing against war like a Yippie outside Chicago's International Amphitheatre apes have learned to speak (and to kill for sport) while humans have devolved to mute feral creatures. The final scene, a darker analogue to the smooching-in-the-surf scene in "On the Beach," is the worst homecoming in movie history. In the crude and powerful horror flick "Night of the Living Dead," radiation turns an ever-increasing number of smalltown Americans into zombies-all speechless, like the humans in "Planet of the Apes." What was that about? Whatever you dreaded back then: robotic conformity, voracious capitalism, a violent, countercultural mob metastatizing to undo all civilization, the id let loose.

So it was understandable that an obsession with Evil was taking hold; Satan made a pop-culture comeback. He fathered Mia Farrow's child in the film "Rosemary's Baby," implicitly making just the sort of pro-choice case you'd expect from him. And Mick Jagger impersonated him in the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"-"I rode a tank, held a general's rank/When the blitzkrieg raged and the bodies stank." The Stones embraced, as William Blake had, the notion of Old Scratch as an archrebel against the Celestial Stodge Himself-the year before, they'd released an anti-"Sgt. Pepper's" called "Their Satanic Majesties Request"-yet the evil in this song really was evil: the Holocaust was not a war of liberation. How did a song implicitly arguing we each had ultimate evil within us—"Everybody's Lucifer," Keith Richards said in an interview—become a pop hit? It wasn't just Richards's stabbing, soaring guitar solo.

By the way, that line "I shouted out 'Who killed the Kennedys?'" originally went "'Who killed John Kennedy?'" After June 5, it had to get an emergency update-a typical 1968 moment, in which reality kept breaking the frame. Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans and stylized Marilyn Monroe portraits had celebrated surface and celebrity-ironically or not; who could see beneath his relentless deadpan?-and rigorously excluded emotion: we were through with sentimentality. But in the same month RFK was assassinated, Warhol's controlled esthetic space was invaded by an over-the-edge radical feminist named Valerie Solanas, who shot and nearly killed him. Solanas was clearly deranged-though the president of the New York chapter of the National Organization of Women (also clearly deranged) called her "the first outstanding champion of women's rights."

Tom Wolfe recorded an analogous moment in "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," his 1968 chronicle of Ken Kesey, the acid-powered Merry Pranksters, and their bus driver, Neal Cassady-who'd once been Dean Moriarty in "On the Road." Kesey had turned the Hell's Angels on to LSD, hitherto a drug for seekers and aspiring mystics. During a summit meeting between Kesey and Augustus Stanley

Owsley, the Henry Ford of high-quality acid, an Angel named Terry the Tramp humiliated and terrified a harmless kid from San Francisco State; the Pranksters had to plead with him not to kill the boy. The Angels, Wolfe wrote, "came to symbolize the side of the Kesey adventure that panicked the hip world. They were too freaking real . . . The majority of the hip world . . . were still playing the eternal charade of the middle-class intellectuals—Behold my wings! Freedom! Flight!—but you don't actually expect me to jump off that cliff, do you?" The destination card on Pranksters' 1939 International Harvester school bus read "Furthur"—yep, two u's but how far did Kesey's psychedelic anarchists really want to go? As the Beatles sang, "When you talk about destruction/Don't you know that you can count me out?"

Compared to Wolfe's reportage-written in a free-form style meant to fit his subject-much of 1968's literary fiction was stuck in the past. John Updike's "Couples," set during the Kennedy years, had become a quaint historical novel by the time it was published. Journalists wrote better, and closer to the moment: Wolfe, Norman Mailer in "The Armies of the Night," his Pulitzer Prize winning "non-fiction novel" of the previous year's march on the Pentagon, and Joan Didion in her collection of reported essays "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." The title piece, a group portrait of San Francisco hippies during 1967's supposed Summer of Love, will still curl your hair. These people did have their limits—a subject told Didion that shooting crystal meth "can lead to the hard stuff"-but one woman gave her five-year-old regular doses of acid and peyote: she and the child both called it High Kindergarten.

Predictably, the mainstream entertainment biz did its damnedest to cash in on the hippie craze. The musical "Hair" presented a Broadway vision of the counter-culture, with gruesomely clueless "rock" music and mass full-frontal nudity in the first-act finale. And the sketch-comedy series "Laugh-In" tried to hide its vaudeville roots with obsolescent jargon (sit-in, teach-in, be-in, love-in) a painfully "wacky" style and a "mod" fashion sense dating from back when people called the Beatles the Fab Four. Leaving aside the debuts of "60 Minutes" and Mister Rogers, the TV event of the year was Elvis Presley's "comeback" special. It varied Vegas-style production numbers with a sequence in which the rebel angel of the 1950s, clad in skin-tight black leather, sat-sat!-with some of his old bandmates and revisited the songs that had made him famous. A startlingly powerful performance, but it wasn't the sort of thing Elvis did anymore, and nobody in the counterculture would have been caught dead watching it. Who even knew it was on?

Despite all its potentially rich tensions and complications, 1968 didn't produce much fiction, film or art worth remembering. But popular music, in energetic transition from old to new-and new to old-left its mark. Soul music still clung to its gospel roots: Otis Redding's posthumous "Dock of the Bay" was still on the charts, and Aretha Franklin had such hits as "Chain of Fools"; she won a Grammy for the previous year's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T." (Which provided "Laugh-In" with its catchphrase "Sock it to me!") Yet James Brown and Sly Stone ("Dance to the Music") were inventing funk, and the Dells ("Stay in My Corner"), the Delfonics ("La La Means I Love You") and Marvin Gaye ("I Heard It Through the Grapevine") were moving toward the urban R&B that would dominate the '70s. Country music veered between the traditionalism of Merle Haggard's "Sing Me Back Home"and Glen Campbell's modernist "Wichita Lineman."

The Beatles' untitled White Album raced off in all directions at once: the rustic sound of the faux-cowboy song "Rocky Raccoon," the Led Zeppelin-like "Helter Skelter," the bluesy shuffle beat of "Revolution," the art-noise endurance test that was "Revolution #9." (Roll over, Stockhausen.) This was also the year they visited the Maharishi in India and the cutesy-poo animated film based on "Yellow Submarine" put a smiley-face on psychedelia. And the Velvet Underground's "White Light/White Heat," with its proto-punk rave-up "Sister Ray," pointed the way to one of rock and roll's many futures-though its title song was driven by a pounding piano straight outta Jerry Lee Lewis.

Inevitably, the musical and cultural explosions of the '60s led to retrenchment. Creedence Clearwater Revival's 1968 debut album was a return to meat-and-potatoes two-guitar rock, as if in response to the Beatles' arty productions. On "Beggars Banquet," the Stones-always traditionalists at heart-balanced "Sympathy for the Devil" with a purist cover version of "Prodigal Son," by the old Mississippi blues and gospel singer Robert Wilkins, and their own acoustic hillbilly lament "Dear Doctor." The Byrds, whose 1966 "Eight Miles High" had featured a trippy twelve-string guitar solo inspired by John Coltrane, released "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," a straight-up country album with steel guitar and fiddle. For psychedelic rockers to embrace the music of the hippie-bashers was revolutionary-or counter-revolutionary-and began bridging one of the era's great cultural divides. The album opened with "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," a hitherto unheard Bob Dylan song with the exhortation to "strap yourself to a tree with roots"-as opposed to being on your own with no direction home. By the end of 1968, hadn't we had enough of that?

Maybe it was a year like any other, with its tensions, dangers, horrors, griefs and a hit or two of joy. But it was also a year more like any other than any other: everything was raw, in-your-face, extreme. The best—"I'm Black and I'm Proud," "Sympathy for the Devil," "I Heard it Through the Grapevine—were full of passionate intensity and the worst-the 1910 Fruitgum Company's "1-2-3 Red Light," and the Ohio Express's "Yummy, Yummy, Yummy" ("I got love in my tummy")—didn't just lack all conviction: it smelled. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive," as Wordsworth wrote of the French Revolution, "But to be young was very heaven." Or something. So many of the creators are gone now: James Brown and Marvin Gaye, John Lennon and George Harrison, Johnny Cash and Tammy Wynette, Philip K. Dick and Donald Barthelme, Andy Warhol and Fred Rogers. But we still have the artifacts, safely digitized for all time.
Or until the birds fly.

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The Earth Behind a Man's Thumb

The first orbit of the moon reminded us of life's fragility. In a new book, the author of 'The Greatest Generation' looks at how a year ended, and a new age began.

Tom Brokaw
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There was at the end of 1968 an event that remains an inspirational symbol for the challenges ahead. For the Sixties were also the glory years of the American space program, and of astronauts such as Captain Jim Lovell. Lovell, who will be eighty in 2008, retains the boyish enthusiasm of an Eagle Scout, an award he earned growing up in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, during the Depression, the son of a single mother. His father had died, and times were not easy for the Lovells. "We had a one-room apartment with a Murphy bed that came out of the wall," he remembers.

The young Lovell was fascinated with rocket science. He'd read Jules Verne's "From the Earth to the Moon" at thirteen and he began building and launching some primitive backyard rockets a few hundred feet into the air.

When he realized his family couldn't afford to send him to the big-time science institutions such as Cal Tech or MIT, he applied to the U.S. Naval Academy. He was rejected on the first pass but got in after two years at the University of Wisconsin.

When he graduated from Annapolis in 1952, he became a Navy fighter pilot and then a test pilot. By 1959 NASA—the National Aeronautics and Space Administration—was looking for seven pilots with the Right Stuff, in Tom Wolfe's enduring phrase about the first astronauts. Lovell was among the thirty-four military pilots considered, but he was rejected because he had a rare blood-pigmentation condition; it wasn't life-threatening, but it took him out of the running.

He was disappointed but not discouraged. He wrote in his diary, "There will be other space projects and who knows, I might be part of them … We learn through failure."

Three years later he was selected for the second group of astronauts. In 1965 and again in 1966 he went into space aboard a Gemini module, spending almost three weeks orbiting the earth.

The big goal was leaving Earth's atmosphere and landing on the moon, to keep the pledge President Kennedy had made at Rice University on September 12, 1962. JFK inspired many all around the world with his words that day: "We choose to go to the moon in this decade, and do … other things, not because they are easy but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win."

By 1968 Lovell, William Anders, and Frank Borman were training for Apollo 8, a dress-rehearsal flight for a lunar landing. Originally they were not scheduled to leave Earth's atmosphere. They were only going to test the slingshot effect—a high-velocity orbit of the earth that would launch the capsule on a flight to the moon. But there were rumors that the Russians were trying to get there first, so NASA changed Apollo 8's flight plan.

Now Apollo 8 would fly to the moon, orbit around the dark side, and return to Earth in the last week of December. If it all went well, the spacecraft would be orbiting the moon on Christmas Eve, 1968. The training for the momentous flight went on feverishly all during 1968. When I met Lovell at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago—where he helped organize an elaborate exhibit commemorating the flight—I asked if the astronauts had been aware of all that was going on outside of NASA that year—the riots, the assassinations, the antiwar protests.

"We were all senior military people," he said, "and we were so intent on our project we put all of that aside. We did talk about the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and we worried the cost of the war would eat into the space program."

Lovell says that even though he wasn't paying too much attention, he thought the culture was disintegrating. "My background," he says, "was more patriotic. Listening to your elders, taking direction, trying to be a leader. The hippie movement sort of soured me."

On December 21, 1968, in the predawn darkness, Lovell was getting ready to enter the spacecraft atop the giant Saturn V rocket at Cape Canaveral, Florida. Borman and Anders were already inside the vehicle. Lovell tells me, laughing, "I was left alone. I looked down, and I could see the lights of the press cars coming in for the launch. I thought, 'These people are serious. We're going to the moon!' "

At 10:41:37 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, less than three hours after the launch from Florida and an orbit of the earth, Apollo 8 went into what was called "the trans-lunar injection." They were headed for the moon, 240,000 miles and three days away.

"We got the proper course and velocity … and we looked back at Earth. You could see it getting smaller and smaller because our velocity was so high. It reminded me of driving through a tunnel and looking out the back window and seeing the entrance shrink in size."

Early in the morning on December 24, Apollo 8 was within reach of the moon's gravitational pull, but the astronauts couldn't see the lunar surface. The spacecraft's blunt end blocked their view. The crew fired an engine and manipulated the spacecraft to get into position for a lunar orbit. Lovell's voice still rises slightly with excitement forty years later as he recalls the moment. "All of a sudden … just sixty-nine miles below, the ancient craters of the far side of the moon were slowly slipping by. We forgot the flight plan. We were like three kids in a candy store window."

The best was yet to come. "As we kept going, suddenly on the lunar horizon, coming up, was Earth." He remembers the vivid contrast between the lifeless moon and the vibrant earth. "The moon is nothing but shades of gray and darkness. But the earth—you could see the deep blues of the seas, the whites of the clouds, the salmon pink and brown of the land masses."

He says, "At one point I sighted the earth with my thumb—and my thumb from that distance fit over the entire planet. I realized how insignificant we all are if everything I'd ever known is behind my thumb. But at that moment I don't think the three of us understood the lasting significance of what we were looking at."

Borman, Anders, and Lovell had another gift to the world on that Christmas Eve. Before launching they had wrestled with what they might say with so many people listening in— estimated at a billion—and so a NASA executive contacted a friend in Washington, who in turn got in touch with Joe Layton.

Layton was a newspaperman famous for his later career as a government public information officer in several administrations.

He was struggling with what the astronauts could say, so the story goes, when his wife suggested the opening verse of the Bible, from Genesis in the Old Testament.

And so it came to pass that on Christmas Eve, 1968, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders divided up the scripture and began to read.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good; and God divided the light from the darkness.

"And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night."

When Borman read the final passage—Genesis, chapter one, verse ten—the long, deeply painful, and disorienting year of 1968 and all those who went through it had an opportunity to stop and contemplate their place in the vast universe of history.

"And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering of the waters he called Seas; and God saw that it was good."

Lovell says when Apollo 8 returned safely to Earth three days later, the crew was inundated with messages from people around the world saying, "Thank you for saving 1968."

Two years later Jim Lovell assured himself a place forever in the dictionary of memorable quotations. As mission commander of the crew of Apollo 13, he expected to achieve his childhood dream and finally set foot on the lunar surface.

They were almost 200,000 miles from Cape Canaveral when a small explosion on board wrecked their chances of landing on the moon and possibly of even getting back to Earth.

Lovell's laconic test-pilot Right Stuff notification to NASA headquarters of trouble on board remains a classic:

"Houston, we have a problem."

There followed four harrowing days of seat-of-the-pants flying with NASA engineers radioing instructions and suggestions.

As we all know, Lovell and his crew of Fred Haise Jr. and John L. Swigert Jr. made it back.

Lovell says that very close call changed him. "I live my life one day at a time now. Nothing rattles me."

He's been married for almost sixty years to his college sweetheart, Marilyn, and they have four grown children, two daughters and two sons. He is a partner with one of his sons in a restaurant in Lake Forest, Illinois. Lovell likes to visit with patrons and answer questions about the space memorabilia on display.

When he's at the family cabin on a lake north of Chicago on a summer night, Jim Lovell will look up at a full moon and remember Christmas Eve, 1968. "When you see Earth from the moon," he says, "you realize how fragile it is and just how limited the resources are. We're all astronauts on this spaceship Earth—about six or seven billion of us—and we have to work and live together."

Stewart Brand placed that shot of Earth on the front and back cover of the Whole Earth Catalog with the inscription, "We can't put it together. It is together."

Forty years after one of the most divisive years in American history, I asked Brand what that means.

He replied, "I suppose it is seeing what connects rather than what divides."

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