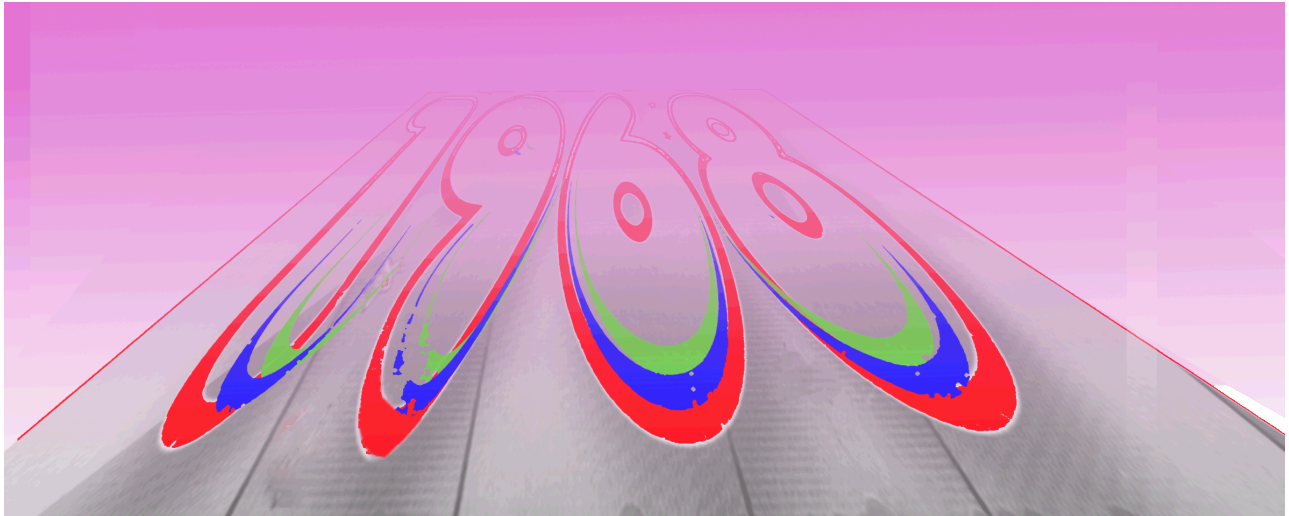


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1968: The Odes Are Over



By Donato (Danny) Pietrodangelo

Thankfully, it appears to be over. Not the year, but the endless odes to the 50-year anniversary of 1968 - the year that “changed everything” or that “shattered America,” they said.

They missed the point. I guess you had to be there.

I graduated from high school in 1968 (please don't do the math). At our reunion this summer, I got to thinking. Those deep retrospectives have been sensational - or sentimental slosh. Radical chic - as Tom Wolfe called it - by proxy.

1968 wasn't a year, it was a point on a continuum - a span of time - that started with rock and roll and ended with disco. It went from innocent fantasies about surfer girls to dancing with disco queens; from Donna Summers; from the Beatles to the Bee Gees. Then, generationally, the music was over; turn out the light.

Think of 1968 as a point on a bell curve. Beginning with the silliness of “duck and cover” - putting your head under the desk so you wouldn't be vaporized by Russian nukes - then ascending, often darkly, upwards through the Gulf of Tonkin, Watts, the assassinations, the summer of love, Tet, Woodstock, the Chicago police riots, Kent and Jackson State - then downward to Nixon, Watergate and the fall of Saigon.

The retrospectivists like to wrap up this single year in a nice bow: political and social turmoil, the Silent Majority, groovin' sex, drugs and rock and roll - radicals, dopers and Young Republicans.

I went to all boys Catholic high school where, in 1968, the most subversive things we did was get high behind the handball courts at lunch, analyze Simon and Garfunkel lyrics for universal truths and try to convince girls from,

our sister school that, "...Catholic girls start much too late...sooner or later it comes down to fate, I might as well be the one..."*

When we arrived at 1968 we were innocents. Yes, we prayed for Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. But, until we registered for the draft, Vietnam, racial injustice, women's rights and politics were abstractions. The Brothers of the Holy Cross - who taught and tortured us - had no time for social analysis. You were going to college or Vietnam. In 1968, 17,000 of the latter died in jungles - the most of any year in the war. It's not that we weren't aware or didn't care. We basically didn't know any better. The feature writers made it seem like the class of 68 was the tip of an explosive spear. Dramatic, but totally wrong. The class of 68 was the peak of the baby boom coming of age. It grew up in postwar prosperity; in a world of "Father Knows Best,

"and the "Rifleman," wearing "six shooters" in a holster; singing "Happy trails to you..." with Roy and Dale.

I think my first realization that something wasn't right was in the late summer of '68, driving on I-95 - the "expressway" - in Miami, and looking up 62nd street and seeing Liberty City burning. At the reunion, I was dancing with an African-American classmate. At a break, I described the experience, seeking absolution for my obliviousness? She smiled a charming, "Yeah, I know, you moron." Then she invited me to meet her grandson, who had just earned his doctorate in education. As socially conscious beings, in 1968, we still in the oven. If we were destined to change the world, we didn't yet know it. I'd like to believe that later, fully baked, we gave it a shot. The continuum was fun - until it wasn't. I guess you had to be there.

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*Billy Joel, *Only the Good Die Young*, Columbia Records, 1978