

YORKVILLE AV.

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Ad-men are creating a hoax Yorkville hippies are a myth

by Alex Cramer

A small Toronto street consisting of about two dozen discotheques and shops has received national notoriety as a den of all the vices known to man. According to the magazine articles, Yorkville is a distinct society, living apart from the rest of us. It is supposed to have its own values which are fundamentally opposed to those of the surrounding society.

In reality a casual visit to Yorkville will quickly reveal that the public has been the victim of a journalistic hoax. It is, in the parlance of the hippie, a gigantic put-on.

Recently there was a dispute between the hippies and the city government. Was it over civil rights? The legalization of marijuana? The hippies' welfare? Artistic censorship? A voice in political decision-making? No, it concerned the closing of Yorkville Street to traffic. For this the hippies slept in at City Hall, sat-in, and even took over the city chambers.

That traffic problems should concern hippies seems strange, but that it should lead to demonstrations is fantastic.

Who are the real hippies? They certainly aren't the several thousand teen-agers who invaded city hall; there are probably less than 6 genuine hippies in the whole city. All the others who swelled the protest ranks are Sunday hippies, high school students who come to Yorkville on the week-ends. While some of them may have long hair and dress like hippies, they are basically as square as the shiny Hi-Y types. They dress in this fashion because this is supposed to be hip and the accepted costume for Yorkville.

The journalists and advertising people are, of course, adept at exploiting the hippies by appropriating those elements of their culture, and especially their slang, which are saleable as commodities in the communications marketplace. It is now fairly common for even the squarest columnist to use words like 'hang-up', 'put-on', and 'cop-out'. Advertisers include in their copy phrases like 'tune in, turn on' (but not 'drop out') to sell their wares. Radio disc jockeys call their programs 'love-ins' and their young listeners 'flower children'. The hippies have been a veritable gold mine to the communications people who want to inject excitement into their products.

It appears from that the 'hippies' are the losers. True, they are used by the village businessmen to create the right atmosphere, by the visiting teen-agers and tourists who come to gawk at them as freaks, and by the ad-men who are inspired to create 'hip' ads. But at the same time 'hippies' are able to hustle a subsistence from the society which ex-



ploits them. From the journalists they receive their identity and a bagful of illusions which sustain them through the difficult times. For a life without worries, the hippies are willing to do without a few luxuries. In any case the hippie lasts only a year or two before he settles down to get a job. In retrospect his adventures will seem like a youthful lark.

Then there are the tourists. They come to the expensive restaurants like Mister Tony's and the Gaslight, and after blowing 50 dollars on food and drink, they go slumming. They wander down the street shaking their heads at the sick hippies addicted to drugs who don't even have the decency to wash. These are the high schoolers who, to the tourists, appear like the real thing. The tourists get a vicarious thrill and a sense of self-satisfaction as Solid Citizens.

Yorkville is the story of commercial exploitation. It

is in the best tradition of real estate speculation, stock market promotions, oil field discoveries, and the settlement of the West. In short, it is as Canadian as a uranium stock swindle.

Several years ago when folk music was popular, a number of coffee houses were spawned in Yorkville. The owners were people who had managed to scrape up a few hundred dollars and wanted to get into business for themselves. The procedure was easy enough. One didn't have to fix the old converted house up very much.

Rent was cheap and one could get a singer with a guitar for practically nothing.

When folk music began to die down, the coffee houses had to change over to rock. The customers wanted to dance, and entrepreneurs found out that rock bands were cheap. During the folk music period, most of the patrons were university students or recent graduates. When rock was introduced there was a huge influx of teen-agers. This was their music.

To the teen-ager, Yorkville was particularly appealing, for it offered him the place to express his discontent with parental authority.

This malaise took the form not so much of deep conflicts, but of trivial disputes over clothes and personal behaviour. In Yorkville, on the other hand, the student could dress and act as he pleased (so long as it met the approval of his friends).

To perpetuate the Yorkville myth it was not enough that there should simply be a dozen discotheques. This, in itself, was insufficient to sustain the illusion of a separate community. What was needed were full-time inhabitants of the village who looked and acted the part of real hippies.

This was accomplished easily enough, for the high schools are so organized that they annually produce more drop-outs than graduates. Most of them take up menial jobs. However, a few, dissatisfied with their positions as mail clerks and stock-



You are the eggman; we are eggmen; I am the walrus. Goo-goo-goo-joo.

boys, decided to move into the cheap rooming-houses near Yorkville and become full-time villagers.

There are two schools of thought on the identity of the hippie. The uneducated conclude that the hippie is a dirty drug addict, perverted, and a semi-criminal, living on hand-outs or on the earnings of prostitution. The educated think that the hippies are intellectuals, politically radical and artistically inclined, who are living a gay bohemian life. Both views are incorrect.

It's not necessary to give here the reasons why the hippies are not drug addicts, perverts, or criminals. On the other hand, the hippies are not intellectuals or artists either. They might pretend to be concerned with ideas, but actually they read very little, and most of this reading is done on the popular level. It is significant that there is no bookstore in the village, unlike bohemian areas of many other cities.

The hippies are not apolitical artists; their artistic production is nil.

Despite all these handicaps and limitations, the hippies are still valuable to society. They are exploitable.

The Yorkville businessmen thrive because the hippies provide the atmosphere which attracts the kids and tourists. For this the merchants are grateful. But

there are conflicts. The hippies are poor and they have little money to spend in the village. Often they hang around the steps of the shops. This, the entrepreneurs feel, hurts business.

Then too, the general scruffiness of the poor hippies lowers the class of the street. Poverty and asceticism can be quaint and this is perfectly acceptable to the businessmen so long as it is clean.

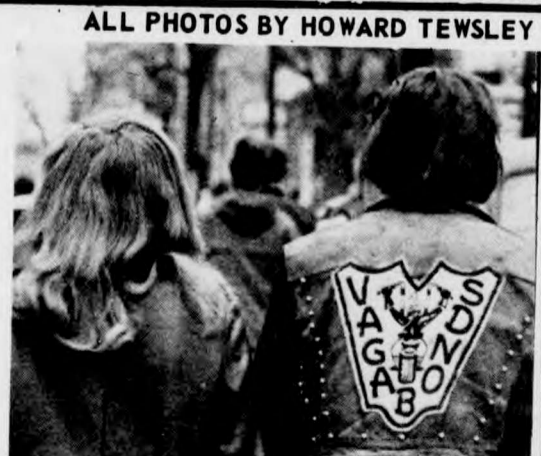
These are not the only conflicts in Yorkville. The boutiques of Cumberland Street serve a rich clientele of Rosedale matrons who don't particularly care for the hippies overflowing from the adjacent street. The Cumberland merchants resent the coffee house owners who are turning the village into a vulgar entertainment district attracting all sorts of undesirables, which is to say anybody who can't afford to buy in their shops. Consequently there is a great deal of friction between these two groups of businessmen.

The most important factor in creating the Yorkville myth has been the mass media. It is perhaps a compliment to the persuasive powers of journalists, that they can transform in the minds of Canadians, two small blocks of discotheques and shops into a full-fledged community with a culture of its own. They have done their job remarkably well, for in a period of a few years Yorkville has become something of a legend. The myth is powerful enough to attract runaway teen-agers from as far away as Nova Scotia who are led to believe that a life of good times and freedom await them in Yorkville.

Anytime the newspapers were short of copy, they simply had to dispatch their reporters to Yorkville. If they wanted to write about draft-dodgers, LSD, rock music, peace demonstrators, modfashions, alienated youth, etc. reporters went, as a matter of course, to the village.

The journalists also invented Yorkville as an outlet for their illusions as serious writers where they could forget their work as hacks. Yorkville, in effect, became a stage for the pseudo-bohemianism of the ad-men, the interior decorators, and the CBC set designers. It wasn't very much, but in the absence of a Left Bank, it had to do.

As Nathan Cohen stated, Yorkville is not so much a place as a state of mind. That is to say, if one's mind happens to live in a fantasy world, then Yorkville does seem terribly sophisticated. It ranks right up there with one's photograph in TORONTO LIFE and owning a painting by Town. The irony is that the creators of the Yorkville illusion should fall victims of it.



Created by the press, Yorkville hippydom consists of drop-outs and frustrated teens.

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