During the 1960s, the baby boomers — children born during the decade after World War II — became teenagers. Like all teenagers, they wanted to be different. The significant thing was that there was so many of them — 70 million in America alone.

The developments in the world as these baby boomers grew into young adults, together with the amazing and often disturbing events they witnessed, permanently changed the ‘face’ and attitudes of western youth. These changes were very much reflected in the cultural expressions of the time — in art, music, movie, photography, literature, to name some.

A rapidly changing world

The middle part of the twentieth century was a chaotic, yet exciting, time to be alive. World War II was over. But there was now a new and different war, the Cold War. Essentially, this was a war of ideologies — communism versus capitalism. Though they never directly engaged in physical combat, the world’s two new superpowers, United States of America and the then Soviet Union, fought to gain political and military advantage on the world stage. They competed to win the space race; their athletes competed to be the best at the Olympic Games; behind the scenes their political and economic alliances with other countries were designed to strengthen their own position. The ever-present risk of nuclear war between the two powers — should they ever declare a ‘real war’ — was a constant tension. Baby boomers felt this tension particularly hard. They wanted to grow up and have a life.

The world was changing very fast. Television sets were rapidly becoming a common piece of household furniture. The birth control pill was being used freely, revolutionising sexual attitudes and relationships. (AIDS was unknown then.) Teenagers who were not caught up in the surfing craze might be seen out and about on skateboards, and Barbie dolls (introduced by Mattel in 1959) were an essential present for many a young girl. The computer mouse had been invented (in 1963) and computers were beginning to be used in composing music. The modular synthesiser, developed in 1960, was making a marked (electronic) difference to the sound of popular music, which until then had largely been acoustic. Cameras started being produced with built-in electronic flashes. FM radio had started, and, by 1969, two American astronauts, Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin, had walked on the moon.

Changing attitudes

As the technology developed and lifestyles changed, so did the attitudes and behaviours of many young people, particularly in western countries such as the United States and Australia. There was a growing sense of disillusionment with governments and the ways in which societies were operating. Concerns included those over civil rights (particularly the oppression felt by Afro-Americans in the United States and by Indigenous people in Australia), the environment, women’s rights, health issues and the Vietnam War (1965 to 1975). A culture of protest among the youth was emerging. The baby boomers had a ‘big voice’ because of their numbers, and wanted to be heard. Many protested by being activists; others by just opting out of ‘the system’.

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Protests

There were protests in the streets and on college and university campuses. Often, these were marked with violence, such as at Kent State University (US) when four protesting students were gunned down by the National Guard during an anti-war protest. In Australia, the people who toured New South Wales by bus with Indigenous activist Charles Perkins on the Freedom Rides also encountered hostilities in rural communities they visited. Two of the US civil rights leaders — Martin Luther King (who spearheaded peaceful protests by appealing to people's ideals and sense of decency) and the more militant Malcolm X (who, with his Black Panthers organisation, stood for black supremacy) — were assassinated. Also assassinated was the then US President, John F. Kennedy (in 1963) and, five years later, his brother Robert (Bobby), a US Senator and potential future president.

Drug sub-culture

Respect for authority had been a common characteristic of young people in western societies before World War II. This changed with the baby boomers. The use (although illegal) of mind-altering drugs such as marihuana and LSD became widespread, giving rise to communes of hippies and a keen interest in alternative cultures (e.g. eastern religions). ‘Flower power’ — where young people wore flowers in their hair, used drugs and chanted slogans such as ‘Make love not war’ — was particularly strong in US cities such as San Francisco.

Woodstock, 1969

These ‘60s young people celebrated their alternative lifestyles and attitudes at events such as the Woodstock Festival, a three-day concert held between 15 and 17 August 1969 attended by half a million people. Among the crowd were pro- and anti-drug campaigners, Vietnam veterans and anti-war protestors, gay people and anti-gay activists, black militants and ‘rednecks’. Yet the atmosphere, as musicians such as Joan Baez, Arlo Guthrie, Creedence Clearwater Revival, Jefferson Airplane, The Who, Santana, Jimi Hendrix, Joe Cocker, Janis Joplin and Canned Heat rocked the crowd, was generally one of respect, assistance, sharing and caring. It was a remarkable cultural event. (If you want to find out more about what it was like to be there, check out the Woodstock web site at http://www.woodstock69.com/)

New cultural expressions

What was happening in western society during the 1960s was reflected across the arts. Feminist writers such as Gloria Steinem and Slyvia Plath fiercely raged against the unequal treatment of women, while Harper Lee, in her book To Kill a Mockingbird, exposed the racial prejudices still firmly part of American society. Anti-establishment books such as Catch 22 and One Flow Over a Cuckoo’s Nest revealed a new cynicism increasingly being felt by many, as well as a new sense of loneliness and disillusionment with some of society's institutions.

Movies

These sentiments were also evident in movies, such as the strong anti-war movie Dr Strangelove and some years later, in the string of anti-Vietnam war movies — Apocalypse Now, The Deer Hunter, Platoon, Born on the Fourth of July to name some. All of these anti-Vietnam war movies captured the horror many felt about the war, either as participants or observers. More explicit sex and realistic violence in movies were becoming common, forcing a revision of the censorship rating scheme. Similarly, topics once considered socially taboo (e.g. more explicit sexual references, drugs) began to be mentioned and/or introduced into television shows.
Art

Andy Warhol (1928–1987) was one of a number of artists producing a new type of art called pop art. This style focused more on everyday items (rather than grand subjects) with mass-produced, materialistic objects regarded as highly as subjects for painting as those that were unique or extraordinary. One of his paintings was of many cans of Campbell’s soup, arranged in rows. Other artists began ‘pushing the edges’ of what till then had been considered ‘art’, increasingly seeking to shock by their difference. This trend gained more momentum over the following decades.

Music

Rock ‘n roll singers such as Elvis Presley, Bobby Darin, Del Shannon, Frankie Avalon and Paul Anka were all the rage in the early 1960s. By the middle of the decade, new, aggressively different bands such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were creating a surge of hysteria worldwide among many western young people. In the United States, the black Motown sound was gaining strength — with Gladys Knight and the Pips, Aretha Franklin, James Brown and Jimi Hendrix. Hippy communes ‘nodded wisely’ to the protest lyrics of folk singers such as Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Peter Paul and Mary, while surfers headed off to catch the waves to the beat of the Beach Boys. By the late 1960s, the drug culture had impacted on the sound of popular music, with the lyrics and sounds becoming more ‘psychedelic’.

... And the baby boomers themselves?

If they did not have long hair (both sexes), bare feet, flowing cheesecloth shirts or dresses, beads, and headbands (with or without flowers), they were commonly wearing mini skirts or hot pants (girls) or flared jeans and chunky, built-up shoes (boys). Many young men wore their hair at least to shoulder length and the Afro hairstyle (a thick mass of curls) was common for many Afro-Americans and those caucasians with tight curls.

Activities

1. Young people who were teenagers during the 1960s or early 1970s significantly influenced the culture of western society, many argue permanently.
   (a) Suggest why their influence was so strong.
   (b) Think about the different ways they did influence cultural expressions. Which do you think was most significant? Why?

2. Why do you think there was a general sense of disillusionment in the western world in the decades following the end of World War II? How was this reflected in some of the artistic expressions?

3. Suggest how the changing cultural expressions — for example, in respect to women’s rights and to the environment — may have laid the foundation for attitudes held towards such issues today.

4. Many teenagers today consider popular music recorded 30 to 40 years ago — for example, by bands such as the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, AC-DC and Pink Floyd — to be among their favourites. Why do you think music that is so ‘old’ still has such appeal for young people today? What does this suggest about its cultural impact?

5. Think of the different ways in which present-day technology assists cultural expressions. (For example, audiovisual clips, music online, digital cameras etc.) In your opinion, which technological advance do you think has had most impact on western culture in your lifetime. Justify your opinion.

6. The Vietnam War was one of the most significant — certainly one of the most traumatic — events of the 1960s. It is not surprising that it was then (and later) represented through a range of different cultural means — photographs, art, song and movies to name four. Browse the web links listed in the References below, and others if you wish.
   (a) What messages do the representations in these cultural expressions convey?
   (b) Which art form (e.g. film, photography, song, art) do you think best served as a means of protest against (or support for) this war? Explain.