

The Death of Cool

By Ben Lass

“The act of discovering what’s cool is what causes cool to move on.” (Malcolm Gladwell, *The New Yorker Annals of Style*) This is precisely what makes cool the central component of consumerism. The fickle nature of cool makes it the natural bedfellow of planned obsolescence. While cool was born in the ghettos and alleys of America, it has now been standardized, packaged, and distributed worldwide. Cool is no longer an attitude, it is a product.

Cool originated as a way for African American men to deal with racist oppression by projecting an aura of silent self-confidence, as they were denied traditional expressions of masculinity, such as monetary value or achievement. Cool gave pride to the poor, power to the oppressed, and respect to the downtrodden. Cool was something that anybody could earn. It was the look in your eye, the swagger in your step, the way you held yourself so that when a banker walked by wearing a suit worth more than your whole family, that banker wished he was wearing your leather jacket. Cool was the way Bogart held his cigarette; cool was the way Miles Davis wailed on the trumpet; cool was the way Dr. King made his dream a reality. Cool was the child of those who stood up to “the man.”

Today, Cool—as we knew it-- is dead. Not only is Cool dead, Cool’s corpse has been desecrated by becoming the mocking standard of consumerism. Instead of questioning the powers that be, cool supports the President. Instead of slinging coke, Cool sells Pepsi. Instead of taking a stroll down the boulevard of broken dreams, Cool rolls down Sunset Boulevard in her Escalade. Cool lives on the red carpet. Cool has her own clothing line and sits in the corner office and counts her money. Cool was the pride of the poor, but “the man” tied her down and stamped a price tag on her head. Cool had been the

one thing that the underprivileged had that the rich couldn't own. Today the poor can't even get into the stores where Cool is sold. Cool is no longer anti-establishment, it *is* the establishment. How did Cool change from being the rebel without a cause to the boobs without a brain?

If "the man" murdered Cool, then globalization was his weapon. In the infancy of cool, it was spread by word of mouth, by merit, by legends. It didn't cost anything; it owed its popularity to no man. Today, cool spreads like a virus, borne through a network of billboards, television, and the Internet. Before, cool was standing out from the crowd, being different, and being you. Today, cool *is* the crowd. Cool was an elusive quality, like silence: once it was recognized, it was lost. But the man tore the roof off the underground, and snatched Cool from her bed. Musical artists are now slaves to their record companies. If they disobey, the money disappears, and they fade out of existence, as they are easily replaced with a blond with the right clothes and some pitch-correction software.

Does anybody even remember when it was cool to be poor? Springsteen told us tales of everyday heroes trying to get by with enough bombast to make a meat packer from New Jersey come off like Sinbad the Sailor. When did it become cool to write songs about how much you spent on a watch? About your favourite brand of sneakers? About how much your girlfriend cost?

Pop culture has gotten to the point where the man itself manufactures its own cool. After years of observing the necessary elements from afar, it has made its own recipe. Add in a pinch of originality, a cup of sexuality, a teaspoon of talent, and a pound of marketability-- but hold the rebellion.