

Teaching the 1960s to Japanese College Students

Russell NOTESTINE

In the spring semester of 2019, a freshman college student would most likely have been born in 2000 or 2001. This would be about 40 years after the final year of the 1960s which would be the same as myself looking back to the early 1920s. With this perspective, it is certainly not unexpected that recent high school graduates would know very little about the amazingly transformative 1960s. Despite this ever-widening gap, it still personally bothered me when students not only knew very little about the iconic events, cultural transformations, music and movies of the 1960s, but often showed very little interest in even hearing about them. With this background, the idea to begin a liberal arts seminar entitled *The History and Culture of the 1960s Through Music and Movies* was formed out of my own personal crusade to share all of the amazing and interesting things that happened in this decade and not to let them fade away and be overridden by the very insular world of today's smart phone generation. This paper will discuss the rationale for, implementation of, and early observations from the first five years of this seminar class.

The initial rationale for the class was my own personal belief that the 1960s has been the single most important and influential decade in modern western society. The scope of the social changes that transpired are still very relevant today: music, movies, fashion, technology, sexual sensibilities, social charges,

expression, geo-political events, and race relations are some of the major areas of change that took place. The most important specific events would include: the Vietnam War, anti-Vietnam war protests, assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy as well as Martin Luther King, the Apollo moon landing, the Beatles coming to America, the explosion of hippie and beatnik culture, widespread drug use among others. America and the world are still trying to come to terms with many of these changes. The framing and context of many of today's social issues and divisions are often directly influenced by the huge social changes that exploded during the 60s.

This paper will focus mainly on the efforts that I have personally undertaken to create, plan and implement a class taught to Japanese university freshmen about the 1960s. Specific curriculum and syllabus issues will be addressed in addition to various anecdotal observations and student survey data about the class.

Finally, a couple of caveats about this paper: 1) Readers looking for academic scholarship about the deeper meaning of the 1960s and perhaps some fresh, new insights therein will be severely disappointed. The focus of this paper is what I have chosen to teach to 18-year-old students at Aichi Gakuin University which necessarily means that most of the content will be considered common knowledge to any reasonably educated English speaker over the age of 30. 2) I will address the content in the order that it is taught to the student. This means that certain basic topics such as music will not be addressed in one place but rather in different parts of the paper.

The Basic Syllabus

The first basic consideration was to balance academic content vs.

entertainment. It unfortunately seems more and more difficult to teach many students classic style academic content. I thus endeavored to keep the class reasonably simple and focus on what I believe to be the most important overriding iconic theme of the decade: youth rebellion leading to radical social change. Most of the changes that took place had a basic relation to a desire to change and redefine social norms, such as the civil rights movement and the hippie sub-culture's protests against the Vietnam War.

The 1950s: The lead up to the 1960s

Obviously, the end of the 1950s define the starting point of the 1960s and it is not at all surprising that many of the important themes of 1960s had already been set in motion. The early incidents of the civil rights movement were already beginning and the youth rebellion that would explode in the 1960s was starting to take form in well-known films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). In general though, the feel of the 1950s is indeed quite different. There was very little long hair as American schools still had traditional codes of appearance and what will seem by today's standards shockingly white-male centered basic sensibilities. Black athletes and musicians were just starting to become household names. The swagger and cockiness of Mohammed Ali was still very far away. Young people still dressed up nice and cute and went to the local drive-in burger restaurant for soda floats and fun. The social narrative was by and large far more controlled and sedate compared to what was coming and thus offers a very clear contrast which serves to even further enhance interest in the subject matter.

In this seminar class, the 1950s are introduced to the students through clips from the films *Back to the Future* and *American Graffiti* as well as the music

of Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley. *Back to the Future* is especially ideal as it shows a slick Hollywood-style stereotypical image of the 1950s seen from a 1985 perspective. The stereotypes are indeed humorously exaggerated which helps show themes of conformity and social/economic abundance that can help students understand how this era helped launch the 1960s.

From Blues Music to Rock and Roll

As for music, the most important anthems of the 1960s were Bob Dylan style protest music and psychedelic Beatles music which both had their elemental roots in the blues, R & B and early rock music of the 1950s. I have very recently started using *The Blues Brothers* to introduce blues music and the history of blues music to students. It works surprisingly well. It has an outstanding array of legendary performers and styles, and they are presented in perfect order: 1) James Brown sings a gospel number in church, 2) Ray Charles sings a blues number, 3) Aretha Franklin does soul, 4) The Blues Brothers band are humorously forced to sing country which offers a contrast to blues music and finally, 5) the Blues Brothers perform modern-style blues and Elvis Presley. Obviously, this content is all presented in a very popular and entertaining movie so the students end getting a good basic blues music education.

After the film, it is much easier to show how rock evolved from the blues using Chuck Berry and Elvis. Chuck Berry was very innovative in his use of guitar riffs to jazz up basic rhythm and blues styles. Elvis of course used his amazing talent to introduce this music to a white audience. Indeed, one of things that has personally shocked me is the fact that probably less than 5% of young students today have even *heard the name* Elvis Presley. It is quite personally satisfying for me to introduce him. Although at the time, his gyrating

singing style was considered to be quite vulgar by older conservative people, his songs and lyrics are by modern standards very wholesome and pure and thus serve as another good example of the style of the 1950s in contrast to the more turbulent 60s.

***Some Like it Hot & Breakfast at Tiffany's*: Movie Themes Begin to Change**

The films *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Some Like it Hot* are shown in their entirety to the class early in the first semester. While this obviously introduces students to two wildly popular female icons of the 1950s~60s (Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn), the main purpose is to show that in the late 1950s, these two films were revolutionary and are a good introduction to what will come later in the decade. *Some Like it Hot* features two men in drag while *Breakfast at Tiffany's* casts Audrey Hepburn as a lonely prostitute. These films look forward to the even more revolutionary art cinema to come later in decade. *Some Like it Hot* brilliantly looks at sexuality and gender identity—very risqué topics for that era. Meanwhile in *Tiffany's*, Audrey Hepburn plays the role of a lost, lonely and confused call girl who is looking for love in all the wrong places. These films truly pushed the envelope of 1950s sensibilities.

JFK: From Camelot to Tragedy

Many consider the shocking JFK assassination as the event that triggered the tumultuous events that followed later in the decade. It therefore seems to be the best starting point for beginning to study the actual events of the decade. This event has to stand out as the single most shocking event of the 60s in

the US and perhaps even in the world. JFK's youthful exuberance personified the youthful energy of the decade in general, and sadly his sudden violent death was the first of several shockingly violent events which would also unfortunately characterize the decade. For students to understand the depth of the shock at the assassination, they must first understand how deeply loved and idolized JFK and his family were. I spend a lot of energy asking students to remember his life rather than only his death. Only by understanding the magic of the "Camelot presidency" and how popular he, Jackie and his family were can students truly understand the scope of shock and tragedy that the world felt that day and brought even the stoic Walter Cronkite to tears.

Although videos are grainy and usually black and white, JFK's charm and wit as well as his and Jackie's grace beauty still work very well. Despite being a bit difficult to find given the obsession with the events of November 22, I managed to find some good YouTube clips of the JFK presidency to show in advance of the assassination. I was personally surprised at the emotional reaction from students in class. I actually once noticed a student wiping away tears while watching the footage of the funeral and two-year-old JFK Jr. giving his famous salute to the funeral procession in front of Jackie.

Beatlemania!

Probably the highlight of the class for most students was the introduction of the Beatles and Beatlemania. While almost all students have at least heard of the Beatles, many don't really know any of their songs outside of a few such as *Help*, *Let it Be*, *Hey Jude* and *Yesterday*. To truly understand the scale and meaning of the popularity of the Beatles, it is necessary, to understand how they burst onto the scene in 1963/64 and also to understand their personalities

and who they were. The Beatles insane popularity is not simply explained by their music. The freshness of the rock and roll experience, their very charming and witty personalities, and the still relative novelty of television also significantly contributed. Showing highlights from the Beatles documentary *Beatles Anthology* along with watching the excellent film *Hard Day's Night* was indeed the most popular part of the class. In addition to the Beatles, a very brief introduction to the Beach Boys and the Rolling Stones was also given. However, I focused mostly on the Beatles for two main reasons: 1) their story and evolution perfectly reflect the changes that took place in the 60s, and 2) Their story is much better documented on DVDs such as the 8-DVD, 16-hour *Beatles Anthology* series.

The Civil Rights Movement

Certainly one the most important social upheavals of the 1960s was the Civil Rights Movement led most notably by Martin Luther King. Not a very simple topic to investigate in any sort of depth in only a two-to three-week period. For topics that seem complex, it is important, I believe, to simplify complex topics into their elemental themes and for the Civil Rights Movement, I have used the key words of the American Declaration of Independence to do this: *We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal*. These words were written by Thomas Jefferson whose eloquent ideas of freedom and democracy have helped to form the modern western world. But there will forever be an asterisk of some kind after these words due to the inconvenient truth that they were written by a slave owner. The same words were invoked by Lincoln at Gettysburg when he noted that the nation was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Finally, they are once again mentioned by Martin

Luther King in 1963 quite literally in the shadow of Lincoln on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. King implores the nation to “rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed ‘*We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal.*’”

This is all explained to the students and supported with video clips of King’s speech and a reading of Lincoln’s speech as well. It really is amazing how long these changes took. The basic civil rights of black Americans were very commonly abused even after I myself was born. The famous videos of police violently breaking up peaceful protest marches in Birmingham, Alabama with fire hoses have a very strong impact. Finally, the film *In the Heat of the Night* was shown to the students. It was made in the year 1967 at the height of the ongoing civil rights movements and one year before the assassination of Martin Luther King. (The brilliant eponymous theme song by Ray Charles is also another wonderfully powerful example of blues/soul music). The story also illustrates well (much better than any history book or documentary) the feel of small-town reality of racism in the South. Indeed the movie’s title shares the same metaphor that MLK used when he referred to *the heat of oppression*. The movie’s most famous line is when asked by the local white police chief what they call a “nigger boy like you” up in Philadelphia, Sydney Poitier in the role of Virgil Tibbs delivers his single most famous cinematic line, “They call me *MISTER* Tibbs!” In the end, the movie optimistically tells a story of black/white redemption and healing as the two men work together and come to respect each other by the end of the movie for a very satisfying conclusion.

Vietnam War, Peace Movement & Hippies

I personally feel that the most enduringly important aspect of the 1960s was

the anti-mainstream, hippie rebellion that developed mainly as a reaction to the war in Vietnam. In this class, not a lot of time is spent on the details of the war itself, but rather the perception of the war back home. This is when the flower children and beatniks of San Francisco developed into psychedelic hippies who glorified social rebellion through their music and anti-social worldview. Much of this was fueled by experimentation with drugs. Many of the lasting images, ideas, fashion, music and movies were based upon the idea of getting “groovy” and tuning out the establishment.

The Beatles Grow Up

One of the most important events in the evolution of the Beatles was the Beatles meeting Bob Dylan. Bob brazenly told them that their music was essentially nice and cute but intellectually vacuous. After this, as John Lennon later pointed out, “We were all potty over Dylan.” Soon after this, they visited California for a concert tour and started experimenting with drugs. These two events completely changed everything about their outlook, music and personality. They soon stopped touring and started reflecting the social changes taking place. The albums *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* were released after this and are regarded by most to be among their very best (this writer personally favors *Rubber Soul*). Songs such as *In My Life*, *Eleanor Rigby* and *Norwegian Wood* told stories with poetic depth, imagination and sensitivity.

As they began to stop focusing on live concerts, they quickly started to employ more sophisticated studio techniques such as double track recording, orchestration, sound loops as well as the use of different instruments. This creative explosion continued through 1967 with the release of the album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* which is widely considered as the most

brilliant concept album ever made. It was the first major album with an overall theme and was indeed a psychedelic masterpiece. The visual and poetic imagery and emotions conveyed by the lyrics were absolutely brilliant. It is even more amazing when you consider that during the Sgt. Pepper recording sessions, the masterpieces *Penny Lane* and *Strawberry Fields Forever* were written and recorded, but were not included on the Sgt Pepper album! George Martin (the Beatles' producer) has said this not including these songs on the album is his greatest regret today.

Rebellion through Film

The films used to focus specifically on the youth rebellion aspects of the era are *The Graduate*, clips from *Easy Rider* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. *The Graduate* is widely considered to be *the* film of the 1960s because it parodies the emptiness of mainstream society and by default glorifies youth culture. It is however a very abstract and dark film that paints a negative picture of American society. It is quite difficult, and in many cases, impossible to get most students past this. For this reason, it has proven to be the most challenging part of the class for me. In the past, I have shown this film as one in a series of films telling the story of the history of Hollywood. However in this class, I focused on explaining the social setting of the era which significantly helped the students grasp the main themes dealing with generational and social gaps between young people and their parents of this era. It is still very difficult to get students to try to look past the twisted storyline and appreciate the abstract message the director is trying to convey.

The two films *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Easy Rider* are both films dealing with young people on the go and running away from society, and in this way,

they are metaphors for some of the most important social themes of the whole decade. They brilliantly capture the glorification of breaking away and enjoying the complete freedom of having nothing—a la Kris Kristofferson's *Bobby McGee* sung by Janis Joplin, "*freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.*"

The Evolution of Rock Music

The explosion of personal freedom and expression that took hold in the later 1960s founded the beginning of what would later come to be known as hard rock and heavy metal. Jimi Hendrix exploded onto the scene in 1967 and took rock music to entirely new and more hardcore psychedelic areas. Idolized by his peers (including the Beatles and Rolling Stones), Hendrix took the rock world by storm with his high energy and high impact songs like *Purple Haze*, *Foxy Lady*, and *Fire*. Hendrix took emotional, spiritual and psychedelic expression on stage to new groundbreaking heights. For the older generation as well as some in the younger generation however, rock music had gotten completely out of hand. Hendrix at one point famously burned his guitar on stage and later Jim Morrison of the Doors actually exposed himself on stage and was arrested during the show by the Miami Police Department. Tragically yet perhaps not so surprisingly, these two artists paid the ultimate price for the decade's intense, out-of-control trajectory of drugs, social revolution and pushing the envelope in general. They both died young at the age of 27 and both deaths were related to drug usage.

1960s in retrospect

The effects of the social and political changes that took place in the 1960s have proven to be very lasting and are indeed still very real today. The elemental idea of social discontent and protest for change that exploded then still widely exists today. Recently gay and LGBTQ civil rights movements have taken place. The “Occupy Wall Street” movement of the past two years as well as the Bernie Sanders political revolution which swept over a significant part of the American electorate in 2016 are both very 1960s-like movements with very similar objectives. Even in Japan, the protests against prime minister Abe’s positions on self-defense have sometimes had the feel of 1960s style protests. Expressive fashion and music are still very influenced by the 1960s. Movies and society in general are much more tolerant of sexual content. The 1960s are certainly the object of much sentimentality now that its history is over fifty years old.

To tie all of the era together as well as to demonstrate the powerful sense of sentiment that the era still holds, the final film students are shown is *Forrest Gump*. This is a film which is essentially a sentimental look back at the era and its events by a “baby boomer” director (Robert Zemeckis). *Gump* is about a young boy named Forrest Gump who grows up in the 1950s~1980s. The film features many of the music and events that have been presented and studied in class: Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, civil rights, Vietnam War, hippies, drugs, JFK, John Lennon, Marilyn Monroe etc. In previous classes that I have taught, *Gump* (like *The Graduate*) was shown in the context of the history of Hollywood movies. However, the fact that the students in this class had already studied so much of the culture and history of the 1960s very much helped them to follow the movie and understand much more of the content. I was personally quite gratified by this.

In conclusion, I am reasonably satisfied with the level of interest most of the students showed in the content of the class. It was not always as easy and fun as simply listening to Beatles songs. Many ESL teachers and researchers claim that it's better to focus on more modern and relevant content when using films to teach English which leads some to choose modern Disney and action films in class. I completely disagree with this. It has been shown that when stimulating new content is learned through a second language, the learner more deeply comprehends and acquires the language. The 1960s would certainly, in my mind, pass the test of being stimulating and interesting! Today's students seem to be more and more engrossed in a wasteland of social media and smart phones in an immediate-gratification centered world. It is therefore, I believe, an especially valuable experience for them to study another era and try to understand the hearts and minds of people from another generation especially when these are the hearts and minds of their parent and grandparents.

References

- Brode, Douglas, (1990), "The Films of the sixties: From La Dolce Vita to Easy Rider." Virgin Books, UK.
- Ebert, Roger, (1994), "Forrest Gump", *Chicago Sun Times*. July 6, 1994.
- Fairbanks, Brian, (1999), "Tom Hanks Makes it Work", *IMDb User Reviews for Forrest Gump*. April 18, 1999.
- Groom, Winston, (1986). "Forrest Gump." Washington Square Press.
- Hays, Charlotte, (2009). "The Best Conservative Movies of the Last 25 Years", *National Review*, Feb 13, 2009.
- Hoff, Benjamin, (1983). "The Tao of Pooh." Penguin.
- Mordden, Ethan, (1990). "Medium Cool: The Movies of the 1960s." Knopf Doubleday, New York.
- Notestine, Russell, (2005). "A Year at the Movies." Sankeisha, Nagoya.