

Sixties People



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Sixties People by Jane and Michael Stern. MacMillian; London, 1990. 231 pages. Illustrated.

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Fashion: bright colours short hems and flowing lines were in.



Jane and Michael Stern were not 1960s celebrities, but as they were fourteen in 1960 they saw the decade unfold as they experienced their teenage years.¹ They were also participants in the youth rebellion and the 1960s massive cultural and social changes. Their personal development from High School students twisting to Chubby Checker at the start of the decade to college kids who met during a student strike late in the 1960's, to living communally at the decade's end mirrors the development of their American generation.² They are almost perfectly placed to be chroniclers of the decade. In 1990 their chronicle of the times, *Sixties People* was published. Written from the viewpoint of "our sober middle years" they now find it "embarrassing and startling" to look back on "that decade of sudden change."³ This makes for a long and wide view rather than an immediate primary source focused on one event, time or individual and they realise this:

It is customary to remember the sixties as a pageant of big events, great speeches and tumultuous social unrest. They were all these things, but most people (like us) were not at the front lines of the war, or hobnobbing with the jet set, or burning down the dean's office. The decade's significant moments touched us in that public way which made the sixties feel like a group event. If the seventies were to become the Me Decade, the sixties were the We Decade. p4.

In this passage from their introduction the Sterns have stated their role, how they perceive the sixties and what their focus will be and will not be. Although they frequently mention celebrities, styles, technological developments and famous sixties events, their focus is on trends - and the groups who made those trends or followed them. They segment *Sixties People* into mostly self-explanatory chapters which each focus on one group; 'Perky Girls,' 'Playboys,' 'Young Vulgarians' 'Surfers, Twisters, and Party Animals,' 'Folkniks' 'I'm English,' (which deals with the English cultural invasion of America) 'Hippies,' and 'Mr. and Mrs. Average.' While all but the latter are agents of social change *Sixties People* ends with how middle America's 'Mr. and Mrs. Average.' were and were not changed by the events of the 1960s.

While their book has many personal observations and viewpoints, most of the information the Sterns give about themselves appears in the introduction: they almost vanish behind their presented details, descriptions and their analysis. Apart from many illustrations from the era, *Sixties People* comes across more as presented facts and observations than a trail of primary source evidence leading to a conclusion. The illustrations and many of the comments are so apt, so full of wit, shrewd observation and humour, so accurate in capturing the changing moods, ebullience and charms of the era, that the reader can be lulled into accepting everything the writers say uncritically and also be unaware of what the writers omit. They develop their viewpoints within these segments by details that are sometimes homely, frequently vivid and often revealing. This is what they intended:

To capture the essence of sixties people for this book, we have tried to look beyond front page events. Our interest is in the shapes and sounds and smells of life as

¹ Jane and Michael Stern, *Sixties People*. MiacMillian, 1990. p3.

² *Sixties People*. p3.

³ *Sixties People*. p3

real people lived it: in shared attitudes and fashion statements, in hit records, dance crazes, sideburns, hemlines, recipes, popular colognes and College yearbooks. History's dustbin, like our attic, can be a fascinating cache of details. It is out of details that lifestyles are built, and through them that people signify their ideals. p4.

This approach gives the book both strength and weaknesses. It allows for a tight focus which is much needed in an illustrated book of only 231 pages. It identifies what the authors are doing, giving a cultural history which they saw unfold. However by setting aside the headlining events they are setting aside so much that gave the sixties that decade's ambience and importance. Despite the titles of both the book and the segments much remains missing: mainly the rest of the world outside the United States. The French events in May 1968, the Czechoslovakian crisis, the changes in Russia and the Warsaw Pact nations, decolonialization, Castro's rise and the subsequent missile crisis, Mao's great leap forward, and then his cultural revolution, the wars in Biafra, the Congo and Israel, the student riots in Europe and Latin America, the tragic 1968 Olympic games in Mexico City, all get at best, in passing mentions. If the focus is on people then Mao, Castro, Ché Guevara, Dubček, de Gaulle, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Khrushchev, Yuri Gagarin, Brezhnev, Harold Wilson, Bertrand Russell and Pierre Trudeau were also sixties people. The extremely important cultural and social revolution in England only gets assessed in relation to how it affected America. This is because like the other previously mentioned global events, that would move their focus away from their cultural history of America. The essential problem could be solved by changing the misleading title from *Sixties People* to *Sixties Americans* or *Sixties People: a Cultural History of America 1960-1969*.

Even allowing for the focus on American cultural developments some massive omissions are obvious. The burgeoning youth market, the easing of censorship and developing sophisticated tastes led to massive cultural changes, particularly in cinema. Older filmmakers and new talent emerged in ways that startled as they showed an America that were rarely seen before. Being sexually explicit and showing realistic violence were two obvious ways that the cinema changed, but there was also a more realistic depiction of human motivation, of how people interacted and of American society. Robert Altman, Sam Peckinpah, A.D. Pennebaker, Stanley Kubrick, Mike Nichols, Arthur Penn, John Schlesinger, Alan J. Pakula, Sydney Pollack, Sydney Lumet, Roman Polanski, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Michael Wadleigh, George Roy Hill and Peter Bogdanovich were directors in the forefront of this move for change as the old Hollywood studio system of tight control over stars, writers, publicity, costs and directors faded out in the middle of the 1960s. This system was replaced by a more fluid and independent system of production. Combined with similar changes in television the people making these changes were a vital part of the system and should have had more attention given to them, but although references are made to film and television nothing systematic or very detailed emerges. Considering how much of *Sixties People* is concerned with music another chapter, one entitled 'Filmmakers' would have made for a better book.



Music: tastes went to extremes; the simplicity and austerity of folk music or the luxuriant loudness of the discotheque



Another group who also deserve more attention are the astronauts and the others involved in the race in space. The Sterns do frequently refer to those involved in the space race, but as with the filmmakers, without much detail. They are depicted in relation to how they are admired as heroes by ‘Mr and Mrs Average.’ This admiration has a commercial side as they sell their stories to magazines and patriotically devour ‘Tang’ a dehydrated powder drink that is imitation orange juice. They believe this to be preferable to real orange juice because astronauts use it and because it costed millions of dollars to develop.⁴ In the two pages dealing with the astronauts the

⁴ *Sixties People* p224-225.

Sterns focus on how government selected and reinforced normality can be bizarre and almost paranoid. Walter Schirra is considered a non-conformist because alone amongst the seven astronauts he does not have a crew cut, but is considered to have long hair as it is an inch and a half long. In their two pages the Sterns give other examples of the mixture of almost paranoid concerns about normality, simple minded hero worship and patriotic hopes that many supposedly normal Americans gave to the astronauts and their space race. In the mid-sixties the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci visited many American sites concerned with the space race and interviewed many of the important people involved. She would write a four hundred page long account *If the Sun Dies* that came to the same conclusions that the Sterns gave in their two pages. While the Sterns were succinct and Fallaci was not, a chapter on the cultural effects of the space race with information such as Fallaci provides would have made their book more comprehensive.

Some omissions are odd. In their 'Perky Girls' chapter a section deals with perky 1960s nuns, but they omit the most salient example, Julie Andrews in *The Sound Of Music* (1965) Similarly in the 'Folkniks' chapter, Judy Collins, a close rival to Joan Baez for being the most important American folk singer of the 1960s, gains only two in passing mentions.⁵ This is despite her autobiography and *The Judy Collins Songbook* revealing much about the sixties. Her songbook could have been used to provide examples of lyrics, which showed the appeal of folk music, but no such lyrics appear. In the section on playboys four of the most salient suave sixties examples Roger Moore, George Hamilton, Tony Curtis and Gene Barry are missing.

After the omissions looking at what has been included reveals a pleasing array of topics that are often bypassed are dealt with succinctly. The feminism that emerged in 1970 gains a tremendous amount of coverage, frequently when contrasted with images of the American woman before the 1960s. Instead the Sterns use their mixture of affection, wit and shrewdness to look at that understudied group, the sunny, fun-loving young women of the period beginning in 1960 when the pill first went on sale. While they never really vanished their time became passe in the early seventies. Similarly the playboy, epitomised by James Bond and celebrated by Hugh Hefner, get the same treatment and meet the same fate.

When considering how going into depth led Fallaci to write four hundred pages on one aspect of the sixties, perhaps the Sterns were wise to focus only on American aspects of sixties culture in a succinct manner. The way in *Sixty-Eight: The Year of the Barricades* (1988) David Cate wrote another 407 pages to cover one year and was almost matched by Mark Kurlansky with his 383 pages in *1968: The Year That Rocked the World* (2005) doing the same thing shows that. Obviously like Fallaci both of these books supply much more detail than the Sterns, but by focussing on one year they miss so much, especially the early part of the sixties which the Sterns cover so well.

Although both men quote from sixties documents and sources that contains sixties idealism, their writings also usually miss what the Sterns possess in abundance, the wit, ebullience, optimism,

⁵ *Sixties People* p109 p116

energy and hope that characterised the sixties. This means that the Sterns retained much of the mood of the era and by doing so, they make the era come alive for their readers.

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Politics: Idealism ruled and confronted.

