

towards_a_genealogy_of_hipster

Let's All Stop Using 'Hipster'

Who, or what, are hipsters? We all think we know. Those people who live in that converted warehouse are hipsters. That guy with a beard and plaid shirt is a hipster. This cupcake with a picture of a cat on the top seems 'pretty hipster'. The term has achieved a commanding presence in discussing alternative culture in the West at the beginning of the twenty-first century – describing lifestyle choices and economic status, categorising large groups of people, acting as stock characters or tropes in film/TV. But how did this happen?

'Hipster' has its origins in the 1930s American jazz age. 'Hip' sat alongside 'hep' to connote being fashionable and in-the-know about the latest trends. At this point 'hepsters' and 'hep-cats', according to Cab Calloway's *The New Cab Calloway's Hepster's Dictionary of Jive* (1939), filled smoky clubs, dancing to jazz and swing-music. The original use of 'hipster' is contested, though the famous jazz pianist Harry 'The Hipster' Gibson is usually credited with introducing the term in 1940 as a derivative of hepster and hep-cat. Specifically, hipster meant a white fan of jazz, as elaborated later by various counter-cultural figures such as Norman Mailer in his essay 'The White Negro' (1957).

Part of hipster's emergence in the mid-twentieth-century involved an exporting overseas. The growing influence of American culture on Western European nations from the 1920s allowed it to circulate to places like Britain. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the foremost British Marxist historians of the twentieth-century, used hipster freely during his time as a jazz critic for the *New Statesman* in the 1950s. In *The Jazz Scene* (1959), however, Hobsbawm observed important changes in its use after the Second World War. The post-1945 hipster, he believed, held distinction from its 1930s incarnation in shunning fraternalism. 'He is', wrote Hobsbawm, 'the collective 'outsider'. He does not live in this world, but escapes from it into a world of bop music, which the square cannot understand, and pot (marihuana), of 'kicks' – sensations – which the square cannot feel'. As the 'swinging sixties' came into view, hipster began to evolve towards that enduring symbol of the decade, the 'hippie'. As Hobsbawm suggested, recreational drug use, the pursuit of escapism, and a sense of 'outsider' status as a badge of honour, attached themselves to the term. All of this followed rising incomes among young people in the 'affluent society', disillusionment with formal political structures, and the rise of 'identity politics'. Transformed, hipster could inform politics too. Back in America, *The Economist's* San Francisco correspondent reported that municipal elections in 1967 witnessed a clear manifestation of 'Hipster Politics'. Noting a blurring with the 1960s New Left, the article believed that while thirty years previous "a chicken in every pot" was a conventional campaign promise, now 'just "pot" is promise enough'.

If hipster became subsumed within a broader hippie culture of the 1960s – with connotations that provoked a later Reaganite/Thatcherite conservative backlash – then the term similarly showed little sign of regaining its former significance during the 1970s and 1980s. Punk represented more of a shared Anglo-American project than hipster, reacting to similar political crises in the post-war Keynesian/Fordist settlement, and coalescing around an assertion of working class radicalism, DIY aestheticism, and new gender identities. In the 1980s, as punk faded and New Wave, post-punk, New Romanticism, hip-hop, and goth grasped the mantle of 'alternative' culture, hipster seemed far from achieving its current prevalence.

This changed after the millennium. In 2003, Brooklyn-resident Robert Lanham published *The Hipster Handbook* (2003). Though this book cannot be credited with redefining hipster alone, it reflects the changed uses of the term today. Lanham's depiction mirrors earlier twentieth-century images of hipster in some ways – a fervent belief in one's own refined taste or self-positioning against 'mainstream' (previously, 'square') culture remain evident. New, though, is the centrality of 'post-modern' traits. Hipsters do not really believe in anything anymore (apart from perhaps themselves). Gone is the 1950s/1960s anger at established forms of authority, replaced with 'irony', the now-dominant characteristic of hipster. Old or ugly clothes and thick-rimmed glasses are worn for irony's sake, all sourced from a thrift store. Lanham throws vegetarianism in. Dropping that you have kissed a member of the same sex in conversation is also within the Handbook's remit of hipster.

Here is the problem with the current definition of hipster – its capaciousness. Is an unwillingness to eat meat really hipster? The same goes for same-sex relations, though the danger of seeing this as an ironic anti-establishment act for the sake of it are obvious. Homophobia seeps into hipster-bashing in such a way. Lanham, of course, provides only one instance of the difficulties with hipster, but he reflects the wider problem. Hipster has become a victim of its own success. It is so broad and all-encompassing that it is now completely meaningless.

Almost any aspect of alternative culture seems ripe for being labelled ‘hipster’ in a pejorative and dismissive sense. Is everyone who lives in Williamsburg or the East End of London a hipster? If so, that is millions of people, not all the evil shock-troops of gentrification either. How can hipster be the alternative and everyone at the same time? Punk, indie, and goth or emo music is regularly smothered by hipster, when the aesthetics and traditions of each are in fact distinct. The Smiths are indie – born out of, and in turn defining, a historically specific sub-culture. The DIY ethic – zines, for example – come from the anti-consumerist traditions of punk. Of course, cultural practices change over time, but to label them all hipster is lazy and problematic. We lose far more than we gain in the current imperialistic ambitions of hipster. Radically transformed from its beginnings in the jazz age, it now constitutes a tool with which to mock and belittle all alternative culture, and should be abandoned.