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Daily Life in the 1960s Counterculture

THE FREE SPEECH MOVEMENT

If there was a single movement that served as the ignition for what would become known as the counterculture decade, especially for young people, it was the FSM, ushered in at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. That was a significant year in many ways because it was the year the Civil Rights Act passed Congress, was the threshold year for the coming Voting Rights Act of 1965, and was the first year that America's military footprint in Vietnam grew unmistakably large and committed. By the end of the year, some 23,000 American troops were on the ground there and, within the next 12 months, there would be more than 184,000. Protest was growing among Mexican American farm laborers in California and elsewhere that would soon erupt into the farm labor movement. All the pieces for protest were in place, voices were growing louder, and the students at Berkeley, Michigan, Wisconsin, and other campuses didn't like it when those protest voices were silenced by administrators or the government. At Berkeley, students abhorred the idea of censorship and took it on themselves to make a stand in December 1964. Therefore, on that one evening, some 1,000 students marched into the campus administration building, Sproul Hall, took a seat wherever they could find a vacant spot on the floor, and refused to leave until their demands were met by administrators. Chief among those demands was that the university cease its practice of banning speakers on campus because of their political views, no matter how radical those views might seem. The FSM was born.

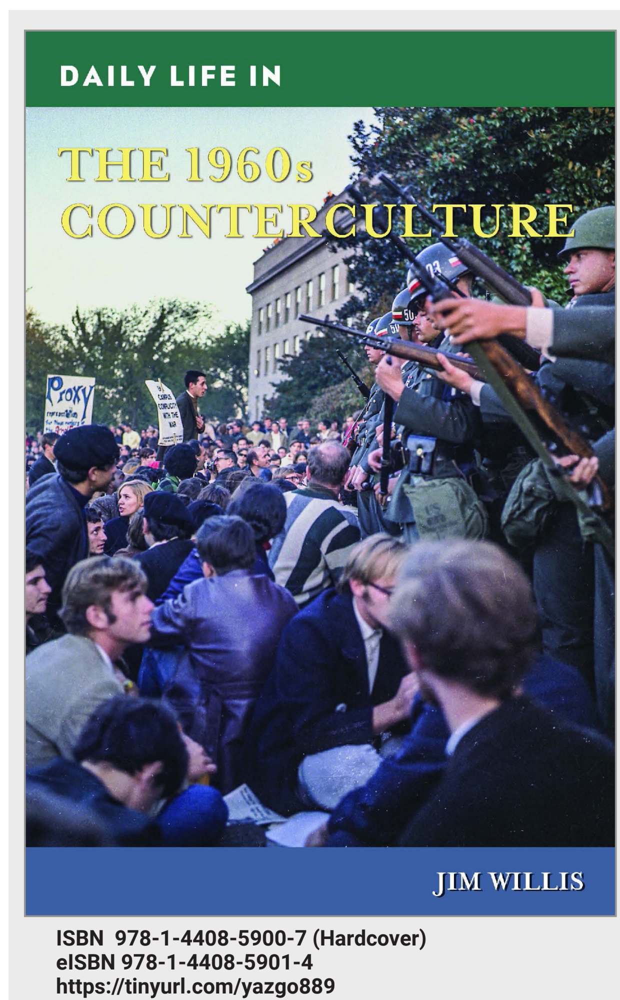
At that sit-in, Berkeley students would sing, discuss the objects of their protest, plan how to make their statements, and even do a little studying for class until after 3:00 a.m. when the university chancellor issued a demand for them to vacate Sproul Hall. When most of them refused to leave, police were called in to clear them out, and violent confrontations ensued.

The Associated Press reported that "an army of law enforcement officers broke up a massive sit-in occupation" and described the student protestors as "limply defiant" as they were "dragged" down the stairs on their backs and shoved into police vans. "Cries of police brutality rose from demonstration supporters watching outside" (Cox, 2017). Undeterred, Berkeley president Clark Kerr refused to end the police action and said the FSM had become "an instrument of anarchy." When it was all over later in the morning, police had arrested nearly 800 students for their part in the sit-in.

In the coming weeks, University of California, Berkeley, administrators decided to give in to public pressure and ease restrictions on campus speech and political activity. Sproul Hall—and especially its steps outside—would become a center for protest speeches in the months and years to follow. The FSM quickly grew beyond Berkeley and onto other campuses nationwide, and the Sproul Hall sit-in would be one of several such demonstrations between 1964 and 1965 across the country.

STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

In the spring of 1965, Jim McCorkel Jr., a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC), was upset about the way things were going in America, and he felt the time was right for saying so. He and other students and faculty were moved by the FSM under way on West Coast schools like the University of California at Berkeley and felt campus administrations were too reluctant to invite speakers from the "new left" to campus. Therefore, McCorkel submitted an application to UNC to have a chapter of a student organization called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) to be officially recognized by the



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administration. That application was accepted and approved, and a new avenue of protest was opened at this venerable university, often called one of the "public Ivies."

As for SDS, it had been in existence for five years since its founding at the University of Michigan in 1960.

The SDS was probably the most recognizable student protest group of the 1960s. The constitution of this North Carolina chapter indicates that free speech was a central motivator in getting this chapter started. Debates had been occurring on campus about banning controversial speakers, and many students and faculty felt the controversial issues needed to be addressed as openly as possible. The UNC chapter's constitution noted: "We maintain a vision of a democratic society where, at all levels, people have control of the decisions which affect them and the resources on which they are dependent" (Students for a Democratic Society, n.d.).

As an official student organization, the UNC chapter of SDS needed faculty advisors, so two stepped forward in the form of physics professor Joe Straley and campus YMCA co-director Norm Gustaveson. On the student leadership side, McCorkel and his friends Gary Waller, Jerry Carr, and Stuart Matthews took the initiative to invite activists like Fran Wilkinson, who had been an outspoken proponent of the First Amendment and just as outspoken in his criticism of Sen. Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s and of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's illegal wiretapping of government critics. The SDS chapter also invited Herbert Aptheker, a noted Marxist historian and political activist. But, as was the case on other campuses around the country with SDS chapters, the members of the UNC chapter were the object of scrutiny by the FBI as well as campus police and administrators. According to exhibits at UNC, the chief of campus police made little attempt to hide the fact he was trying to get as much information as he could on people who frequented the SDS meetings, going so far as to attend meetings himself and jotting down who was there. The SDS was a relatively new organization, and university administrators did not know what exactly they had with the group, whether they were trouble or posed a danger to the campus. In the case of UNC, the dean of student affairs wrote to both Hoover and the head of the House on Un-American Activities (HUAC), Edwin Willis, for guidance in what to make of SDS or how to treat it. To the dean's query, Willis responded, "[SDS] has not been cited as subversive by this Committee. . . . This, however, should not be construed as either a clearance or an unfavorable finding of this Committee regarding the organization." In many ways, this response shows the paranoia still gripping what had been an extremely controversial congressional committee in the 1950s, responsible for ruining the reputations of many innocent Americans, especially around the time of McCarthyism. But many conservatives in the country still put stock in the HUAC. Clearly, however, Hoover and Willis's response to the UNC dean's request left the administration with no guidance from Washington on what to do with its SDS chapter (Students for a Democratic Society, n.d.).

THE UNIQUENESS OF 1960s MUSIC

Arguably, no other decade was so affected by new musical styles than was the 1960s. Teens and 20-somethings weren't just another generation making a statement that they were different as previous generations had. They were facing situations that could genuinely be life threatening, and their peers were facing the same threats. If you were African American, you were confronting racism, bigotry, and—still—the possibility of being killed just because you were black. Even after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1963, it would take a long time for blacks to feel safe in certain parts of the country. And, if you were black or white, you faced the possibility—probability for many young men—of going to fight in a war you didn't understand in a place called Vietnam where American casualties reached staggering numbers in the mid- to late 1960s and into the early 1970s.

CHANGING TIMES

These two threats alone were enough to cause the 1960s to be known as the protest era, and music was a favored way of articulating outrage over a government and culture that willingly allowed bigotry and discrimination while putting all eligible young men in harm's way just as these people were trying to start their adult lives. In 1964 when eventual-Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan sang "The Times They Are-A Changin'," he wasn't just talking about a new crop of high school graduates bursting into a world they hoped to change; he was describing the onset of an era that would prove extremely dangerous for those young people.

…

Dylan seemed to be predicting changes that were afoot in America as the younger generation was questioning the authority and validity of traditional values. In their place, he foresaw a society where the new generation would create more tolerance and equality. Power would go to the people. His message about the need for societal change has been relevant to every generation since it became popular in the early 1960s. Change is a constant in America, and some generations feel it is needed more than others. The song is still sung at rallies today where people are protesting policies and values in society that they want to see changed.

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