

# What is a Hippie?

Guy Strait

*Guy Strait, in this 1967 essay, attempts to define what true hippies were and how their choices related to the traditional world they chose to abandon.*

It is strange and disturbing to watch the straight community's angry, sometimes violent reaction to the hippies. There are many reasons for this. The principal one is appearance. The hippies dress strangely. They dress this way because they have thrown a lot of middle-class notions out the window and with them the most sensitive middle-class dogma: the neutral appearance.

The straight world is a jungle of taboos, fears, and personality games. People in that jungle prey on each other mercilessly. Therefore to survive in any jungle requires good protective coloring: the camouflage of respectable appearance. The anonymity of middle-class dress is like a flag of truce. It means (whether true or not): "I'm not one of the predators." It is in the nature of an assurance of harmlessness. Unusual or brightly-colored clothing, then becomes an alarm, a danger signal to the fearful and their armed truce with the rest of mankind. They see it as a challenge. They are fearful, unsure of themselves, and fear sours into anger. It is but a step to thinking that the anger is "good." The oldest fallacy in the world is that anything that makes you angry must be bad.

The sin of the hippies is that they will not play the straight game of camouflage. Their non-participation, in effect, exposes them as another tribe, whose disregard of straight taboos of dress makes them seem to be capable of anything, and therefore a danger. That danger moreover is felt clear up to city hall, that shrine of Squaredom. Why else, I submit, does the Health Department of this city have such a tender solicitude about the living conditions of human beings at the Haight when they have ignored the conditions at Hunter's Point, the Mission and the Fillmore?

Many people cannot understand the hippies' rejection of everything that is commonly expected of the individual in regard to employment and life goals: steady lucrative employment, and the accumulation through the years of possessions and money, building (always building) security for the future. It is precisely this security hypochondria, *this checking of bank books rather than pulses*, this worrying over budgets instead of medicine cabinets, that drives the youth of today away. It is this frantic concern with money that also drives the young into the Haight-Ashbury. They have seen their parents slave for years, wasting away a lifetime to make sure that the house was paid off, that the kids got through school in order to get "good" jobs so that they could join the frantic scramble, later on. The parents' reward for this struggle is that they wind up old and tired, alienated from their children and just as often each parent from the other. They have thought so long in terms of money and possessions, that they have forgotten how to think in terms of people. So they think of "my son," and "my

daughter;' and talk to their children as one would speak from a great distance to a check book.

"But you've got to build a future for yourself. If you don't support yourself, no one else is going to!" The tired, lined face argues to the young. "It's a hard world." And pray tell who makes it hard, participating in the scramble for material "security?" Who makes it difficult by insisting that everyone must participate in that scramble or suffer social censure? Listen to the tone of those who lecture about the "economic realities" of life. Are they presenting impartial facts? Or do they sound like someone expounding church doctrine? It is the latter. The conventional folk of our society, the "normal" people, so called, believe in the rat race. Competition is holy. Keeping up with the Joneses is a mandate from God. The requirement of keeping up a respectable front is the principal article of faith.

It has been demonstrated over and over again throughout history by the best possible people that very little is required for happiness. It is the fight for money and possessions and the prestige they bring that sets people at odds, and *that* is what makes the world hard. We are the richest nation in the world, with the highest living standard. By our own fond illusions about prosperity we should also be the happiest. Are we? Suicides, racial violence, and the exodus of the young from comfortable homes suggest otherwise. The terrible truth is that our prosperity is the bringer of misery. We have been brainwashed by the advertising industry into being the most dissatisfied people in the world. We are told we must all be handsome or beautiful, sexually devastating, and owners of a staggering amount of recreational gadgetry or doomed to frustration. The result is that most of us are frustrated. It is exactly this that the hippie avoids like poison. He wants no part of self-defeating goals.

It is very likely that the hippie will go hungry and suffer exposure, and perhaps freak out. But he considers these far less dangerous than the kind of dehumanization society tried to wreak on him before his rebellion. He has escaped from a culture where the machine is god, and men judge each other by mechanical standards of efficiency and usefulness. He sees a madness in the constant fight to sell more washing machines, cars, toilet paper, girdles, and gadgets than the other fellow. He is equally horrified at the grim ruthlessness of the men who participate in that fight.