
The 1960s, I tell my students, began in 1963 with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The decade ended in April 1975, when Gerald R. Ford, the accidental president, acknowledged that the Vietnam War "was finished as far as the United States is concerned." Short, shattered, and unsettled, the 1970s gave up the ghost when The Gipper galloped into Georgetown.

Thomas Hine, a staff writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* from 1973-1996, doesn't see it that way. In *The Great Funk*, he claims that while the '60s was about struggle, the '70s involved acceptance. In disappointment, depression, and disaster, Americans found and forged "something deeply liberating." They felt free to experiment—on something funky. "When the forces of order are revealed to be a malign conspiracy," Hine suggests, “it's a good time for a party." In the 1970s, America fragmented without falling apart.

*The Great Funk* is a selective, idiosyncratic history, more evocative than analytical. Hine has virtually nothing to say about Watergate, the Iran Hostage Crisis, affirmative action, school busing, and the Moral Majority. His explanation of the end of the '70s ("an act of collective will, or perhaps an exercise in mass denial") is as thin as his account of its onset ("confrontation gave way to improvisation and cooperation"). Nonetheless, with deliciously detailed descriptions and almost three hundred illustrations, *The Great Funk* captures the shapes, smells, and sensibilities of the chaotic and conflicted "Me Decade."

Not surprisingly, the man *House & Garden* called "America's sharpest design critic" is at his best describing the changes in home furnishings and decorations in the '70s. Americans, Hine demonstrates, transformed their heretofore clean, cold, and uncluttered homes, into "indoor rain forests." Searching for a haven in a heartless world, they put plants in pots or on hangers in
windows. Unwilling or unable to commit to another human being, they read *The Secret Life of Plants* and fantasized about friendships with a fern, a ficus, or a pet rock.

Despite stagflation, austerity was rarely in evidence in apartments and homes. Americans accumulated lots of stuff. They selected each item, from "finds' in flea markets to domiciles designed by decorators, because it expressed the personality of the purchaser. "Muddy hues, lumpy textures, and overgrown vegetation" dominated domestic spaces. Shag carpets became popular even before the energy crisis of 1973. Shag blurred boundaries, making floors places to "sit, sprawl, or snuggle"—open, informal, and sensual. Like a full beard or an unmowed lawn, the "shag carpet was a celebration of growth—the force of life that encourages optimism even when man-made systems break down."

Along with home furnishings, the "embarrassments of the era"—polyester leisure suits, streakers, and *Jonathan Livingstone Seagull*—reveal "new kinds of consciousness struggling to be born." The flock remained willing to conform. But the rewards—economic prosperity and security—could no longer be taken for granted. Pessimism about progress, Hine emphasizes, opened the door to subjectivity, and, for better and worse, identity politics. At discos, "sex wasn't the sub-text; it was blatantly the subject." And by "putting gym-hardened bodies on display," as they danced to songs of abandon and receptivity, gays could celebrate—and flaunt—their newly unenclosed lives.

Acknowledging that nostalgia is especially inappropriate for the 1970s, which was anything but an age of innocence, Hine nonetheless concludes that the decade's disrespect was healthy, its experimentation a sign of resiliency, and the failures of its leaders an opening "for the freedom of the many." But even if baby boomers find his summary selective and sanguine,
they'll enjoy *The Great Funk*'s trip down memory lane. After all, as Hine reminds us, "the seventies table could be set with intriguingly mismatched plates."

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