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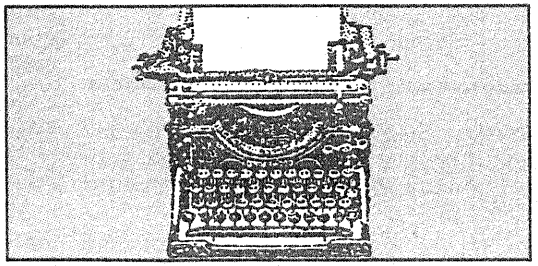
From Abbie Hoffman in '60s to Joe Isuzu in '80s



My Word

PAUL JEROME CROCE

No one expected the news last week: Abbie Hoffman died. More surprising was his age. It was hard even to imagine the founder of the yippies and the prankster of the counterculture in middle age. Unlike James Dean at 24, Hoffman at 53 seemed too old to die. Although he continued to be an advocate for radical causes, he had outlived the era that suited him best.

The 1960s counterculture had many faces. Those who defied "the establishment" included liberated flower children, committed activists-organizers, brooding middle-class dropouts and advocates of equality for women and blacks.

Hoffman had some of the most centrally characteristic features of the youth culture: He was the defiant mocker, playfully challenging convention and authority in the name of leftist politics. As the most brash leader of the demand to turn the United States away from its capitalist ways and military interventions, Hoffman used such theatrical stunts as starting a riot on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange by throwing dollar bills amidst the scrambling brokers.

For all his playfulness, Hoffman had no qualms about being criminal or even violent, as his part in disruption of the 1968 Democratic convention made clear; but in his civil and often uncivil disobedience, Hoffman harbored powerful convictions beneath his image of being the disobedient, wild and uncontrollable kid who loved being naughty. With his long hair, mocking grin and radical politics, he seemed barbaric to an older generation confused by the rage and alienation of its children.

Media tributes to Hoffman last weekend reminded viewers that there was once a time when most young people were liberal almost by definition and nearly all of them held defiant and vocal convictions.

Yet the reminiscences of Hoffman had something eerily familiar about them. I knew his politics were out of date, but I had seen that style somewhere more recently than in a protest against the Vietnam War. That cynical pose, the mocking smile and the playful defiance of authority have found another less challenging place in the leering demeanor of Joe Isuzu. But while Hoffman's mocking had deep political convictions behind it, Joe Isuzu's goes no deeper than the advertiser's latest pitch.

The slick character of Joe Isuzu appeals because he ridicules the claims of other advertisers. His superinflated promises bear the telling caption, "He's lying." In a parody of sleaziness, he seems to be challenging his laughing viewers to doubt the claims of all advertisers. Joe Isuzu is a very popular character because he addresses the cynic in us who doubts the truth of all public displays of authenticity and the value of any claim that can't be backed up with material wealth or physical strength.

The survival and transformation of Hoffman's style reveals a major bass note of people who have come of age in the 1980s: The mainstream of this generation is cynical about large plans and hopes for improvement, and its members tend to put their faith only in the powerful. Hoffman's mocking style comes naturally to them, but because they have different motives, they also take it in different directions. The defiance of today's young people is a challenge to those in authority to make their plans strong and workable. All else, as Joe Isuzu might say in his more serious moments, is just phony.

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