

'Millennial' generation spurns grunge and gloom

BY FRANK GREGORSKY
Special to The Times

THE U.S. is heading for a new type of young adult: upbeat, colorful, civic-minded. A recent Wall Street Journal series called them Generation Y, but I prefer the term "Millennials" — because this is the age cohort that will start graduating from high school seven months before the new century commences. And these "kids" are already sending us clear signals.

ITEM: A January survey by CBS News of high-school freshmen — i.e., the high-school graduates of Year 2000 — found a picture completely at variance with last fall's campaign gloom. Even while conceding that it's harder growing up today than it was 30 years ago, a striking 56 percent of these ninth-graders expect their future lives to be better than their parents' lives are now. In this, said the CBS summary, "they are much more optimistic than today's adults." The same survey revealed that two-thirds believe their parents are "in touch with what life is like for people our age."

ITEM: The Feb. 3 cover story of *Baron's* weekly financial newspaper proclaimed "Goodbye Grunge." "Generation-Y girls," reported Lauren Rublin, "have had it up to their finely plucked eyebrows with flannel shirts and grubby jeans." They are also substituting bright colors for the X-Generations's trademark black and grey. Buy why would adolescent females make a dash for bright colors, particularly when it was their baby-boom parents who went color-crazy 25 or 30 years ago? One answer is too obvious to be accepted: Because they are less resentful and more optimistic than their X-Generation elders.

ITEM: U.S. purchases of musical CDs have now had two flat years, the first such dry spell since 1979. "The business is in one of the most perplexing crises it has faced in decades," declared a New York Times reporter in December — sales have gone sour "and people in the business can't agree on why." Even stranger: The souring sales trend has hit despite (a) teenage unemployment falling to a 1990s low and (b) bargain prices for CDs as the "superstores" (Best Buy, Circuit City) drive out the smaller and more traditional music distributors (Cameo, Musicland).

Writing in this newspaper the day after

No Royko

Mike Royko is recovering from a stroke. His column is expected to resume later this month.

Christmas, Patrick MacDonald dubbed it the "first slump of the CD Era," and then asked: "Could (the problem be) a lack of listenable new music?" People in the industry have a more reassuring notion: The boomers have finally replaced all their old LPs. MacDonald is closer to the truth, but even his question begs the follow-up: Who is defining "listenable"? Not just overall music sales are flat, but top-group follow-up albums are coming in way below expectations. Why would both occur at a time of teen prosperity and price wars? Probably because mid-'90s idols are suddenly having trouble attracting the youngest purchasers of music.

At most points in a society's history, a middle teen is still trying to imitate older siblings, not go off in a new direction. Suddenly we see the latter. When imitation gives way to innovation, the "new kids on the block" are telling us they intend to remodel the block. But why? Why would a 15-year-old in 1997 display a more positive, less alienated frame of mind than a youth of like age did 5, 10 or 15 years ago?

To begin to find the answer, turn back the clock — 15 years. That's when, according to Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of three books on generational patterns, this society's attitude toward its youngest arrivals became far more protective and committed. After tripling during the previous dozen years, the divorce rate leveled off. Hysteria about the so-called population explosion vanished and, by the mid-'80s, celebrities of all shades began to celebrate motherhood. Heroic stories of adoption and child-rescue became common. By 1992, the top people in both political parties were competing to defend "family values." In a word, "These new arrivals are wanted," conclude Howe and Strauss.

Their 1991 book "Generations" also conveyed the cultural shift in a paragraph of exquisite irony: "At dinner tables around the nation, 40-year-old parents warn small children to beware of drugs, alcohol, AIDS,

teen pregnancy, profanity, TV ads, unchaperoned gatherings, and socially aggressive dress or manners. Indeed, fortysomething Boomers — as parents, teachers and prosecutors — now protect children from the social, intellectual and chemical (recklessness) they themselves proclaimed during the age of protest marches, Woodstock and 'free love!'"

One major amendment is in order: It is hard to make the case that children in the central cities have benefited from any renaissance of care or safety. Even in the suburbs, it will take decades to return most high schools to the stability and warmth of "Leave It To Beaver." So I am not forecasting a restoration of the 1950s. I am saying that middle-class parents, from 1981 on, learned from the mistakes of the prior 20 years — and the benefits of their learning are now becoming visible.

From these rising Millennials, we should also look for an entirely new brand of pop culture — first, because of their more positive attitude; second, because of multimedia technology. Within five years, full-motion digital video will be workable by a single teenager on a \$500 laptop, with images being traded over high-bandwidth networks as easily as teens used to swap baseball cards.

The last time music sales collapsed — 1979 — was also a moment of generational change. Within two years, disco was dying and MTV had burst forth — as a jagged and ragged revolt by the fast-moving Xers against the 1960s romanticism of boomers smugly proclaiming our rock to be "classic." Just like the arrival of MTV, the impending merger of Millennial teens and digital video will startle almost everyone over 20. I'd be crazy to predict what it will look or sound like, but a whole new genre of entertainment is virtually guaranteed.

All the certified experts who "know too much" are likely to miss this massive shift in attitude and values. But, if you are a plugged-in parent, you'll know. If you are a guidance counselor or a librarian or an Internet webmeister, you'll see the big change developing. Outside the central city, this rising generation stands to be more colorful, more public-spirited and far less gloomy than the Xers. Juvenile crime is on the way down, and test scores are headed up. Goodbye to alienation (and good riddance to body-piercing). Largely because of how they're being raised, America's Millennials are getting ready to give us 20 years of pleasant surprises.

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