

How Cool Works in America Today

If you grew up in the 20th century, there's a decent chance you wanted to be like Miles Davis, Billie Holiday, Humphrey Bogart, Albert Camus, Audrey Hepburn, James Dean or Jimi Hendrix. In their own ways, these people defined cool.

The cool person is stoical, emotionally controlled, never eager or needy, but instead mysterious, detached and self-possessed. The cool person is gracefully competent at something, but doesn't need the world's applause to know his worth. That's because the cool person has found his or her own unique and authentic way of living with nonchalant intensity.

In his entertaining book "[The Origins of Cool in Postwar America](#)," Tulane historian Joel Dinerstein traces the diverse sources of this style — from the West African concept of "itutu," which means mystic coolness, to the British stiff upper lip mentality. Jazz musicians, especially people like Lester Young, brought these influences together into what we now call the cool style. Jazz influenced the film noir directors, and then carried cool over to France, where it was embraced by existentialists like Camus.

Dinerstein shows that cool isn't just a style, it's an "embodied philosophy" that is anchored in a specific generational circumstance. Cool was first of all a form of resistance and rebellion, a rejection of the innocence, optimism and consumer cheeriness that marked the mainstream postwar experience.

It emerged specifically within African-American culture, among people who had to withstand the humiliations of racism without losing their temper, and who didn't see any way to change their political situation. Cool culture in that context said, you can beat me but I am not beaten, you can oppress me but you can't own me. It became a way of indicting society even if you were powerless, a way of showing your untrammelled dignity. It was then embraced by all those who felt powerless, whether they were dissident intellectuals or random teenagers.

Cool had other social meanings. It was a way of showing you weren't playing the whole Horatio Alger game; you weren't a smarmy career climber. It was Cool had other social meanings. It was a way of showing you weren't playing the whole Horatio Alger game; you weren't a smarmy career climber. It was a way to assert the value of the individual in response to failed collectivism — to communism and fascism, to organized religion. The cool person is guided by his or her own autonomous values, often on the outskirts of society.

To be cool was to be a moral realist. The cruelties of the wars had exposed the simplistic wholesomeness of good and evil middle-class morality. A character like Rick Blaine in "Casablanca" is trying to live by his own honor code in an absurd moral world.

In an interview, I asked Dinerstein if cool was dead. He said that cool may not be dead, but it is rare. You can see cool figures like Kendrick Lamar and Lorde, but it's hard to think of any contemporary cool movie icons in the manner of Bogart and Dean. Perhaps Robert Downey Jr. could have become one, Dinerstein said, but these days Hollywood pushes actors into the

blockbuster mainstream. The big difference, he continued, is technological. Fans viewed Miles Davis from afar. He was mysterious. Today because of social media, everybody is close up, present 24/7, familiar and un-iconic. That makes a huge difference in how public personalities are received.

I started to look around to see if there might be another contemporary ethos that has replaced the cool ethos. You could say the hipster ethos you find in, say, Brooklyn qualifies. But that strikes me as less of a cultural movement and more of a consumer aesthetic.

A better candidate is the “woke” ethos. The modern concept of woke began, as far as anybody can tell, with a [2008 song](#) by Erykah Badu. The woke mentality became prominent in 2012 and 2013 with the Trayvon Martin case and the rise of Black Lives Matter. Embrace it or not, B.L.M. is the most complete social movement in America today, as a communal, intellectual, moral and political force.

The woke mentality has since been embraced on the populist right, by the conservative “normals” who are disgusted with what they see as the thorough corruption of the Republican and Democratic establishments. See Kurt Schlichter’s Townhall essay “[We Must Elect Senator Kid Rock](#)” as an example of right-wing wokedness.

To be woke is to be radically aware and justifiably paranoid. It is to be cognizant of the rot pervading the power structures. The woke manner shares cool’s rebel posture, but it is the opposite of cool in certain respects.

Cool was politically detached, but being a social activist is required for being woke. Cool was individualistic, but woke is nationalistic and collectivist. Cool was emotionally reserved; woke is angry, passionate and indignant. Cool was morally ambiguous; woke seeks to establish a clear marker for what is unacceptable.

Culture is the collective response to the core problems of the times. Today’s general disgust with institutions is producing a new style of collective action. It remains to be seen how substantive, rigorous and effective this new collective action will be.