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Flower Power, Love-ins - and Lies

50-somethings embellish experiences in 1960s to impress children

by Martin Wainwright

History records that it was the Swinging Sixties. A decade that included the summer of love, the Beatles, hippies and outrageous drug-taking.

And if it ever seemed odd that everyone who was around at the time seemed to be indulging in all of the above, a survey today reveals why.

Fibs. Lots of them.

Parents who have been trying to impress their children have resorted to exaggeration and outright lies over what they did during the flower power decade. Claims of liberated teenage years at love-ins and being at live Beatles gigs have led to the coining of a new phrase - generational gazumping - to describe 50-somethings desperately trying to appear cool.

The number of false claims also raises wider questions about the supposed scale of drug taking in the 1960s, which emerges as almost innocuous by today's standards. Although a quarter of respondents admitted boasting that they had been "too stoned to remember the sixties", only 8% had actually taken cannabis and fewer than 1% acid or LSD.

The 60s generation also emerges as being as starstruck as any other, with large numbers pretending that they met famous figures of the decade. The favourite fantasy friends by far were the Beatles, with Paul McCartney top at 12%. The model Twiggy came next at 5%, followed by Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones two points behind.

The survey questioned 3,000 adults including control groups who were teenagers in the 1970s and 80s, and whose flair for invention was notably more controlled. They were on average a third less likely to come up with whoppers comparable to "The 1966 World Cup Final - I was there" or "Sure I was at the Isle of Wight rock concert, and I took off all my clothes."

One of the 1960s respondents, Matthew Coughland, 59, said: "I have always told my family that during the 60s I was a bit of a mover and shaker. I had told them that I was an avid music fan, attending gigs and festivals, and even seeing the Beatles live.

"But a couple of years ago my son called my bluff when he bought me a ticket for the Reading festival. Apart from being the oldest person there, I was completely unprepared for the experience. It was loud, muddy and I hated the music. I'll be sticking to classical concerts from now on."

By contrast, 1980s teenager Elizabeth Evans, now 37, admitted that she airbrushed her youth because her children's generation would find it extremely uncool. She said: "Our family were all glued to the royal wedding in the 80s but my son wouldn't be too impressed with me if he found out I shed a tear at the time. The royals don't interest him at all."

The survey was carried out for UKTV History in advance of the channel's series on The Beatles Decade, which examines the divide between real and superficial social change at the time.

Professor Sheila Whiteley, who studies rock and pop culture at Salford University, said: "The reality of growing up in the 60s for many people would seem to be more akin to Cliff Richard than Keith Richards.

"It is common for people to look back on their younger, rock'n'roll days through rose-tinted glasses."

The legendary reputation of the decade, and the continued playing of much of its popular music,

created irresistible temptations to embroider in just over a third of those surveyed. A quarter of the total admitted that their flexibility with the truth was prompted by wanting "to appear cool to my children and gain the respect of friends and family".

Chief exaggerations included supposed membership of the hippy movement - of the quarter who claimed to be hippies in the 60s, only 6% actually were - and meeting Beat Generation icons they had actually seen only on TV. A third have told their children that they shopped in London's Carnaby Street when only 5% actually did so.

The survey bore out the magic nature of the sixties, however, by finding that teenagers from the 1970s and 80s fibbed because they were ashamed rather than proud of their decades' fads. Seventies respondents privately regretted "ill-advised fashion decisions and a misguided love of indulgent prog rock". Eighties teenagers wanted to forget their dalliance with Thatcherism, shoulder pads and "an uncool fixation with the royal family".

"They clearly preferred to tone down their youthful antics, due to embarrassment at their fashion faux pas, political leanings and taste in music," said Prof Whiteley.

27% say they were hippies

20% say they experimented with soft drugs, but when questioned only 8% had tried cannabis and fewer than 1% had tried LSD

12% say they had met someone from the Beat Generation

11% knew someone who had taken part in a love-in

9% claim they saw the Beatles live

33% say they were regulars in the disco

17% wore platform shoes and boots

11% say they hated prog rock

11% said they had met someone famous

9% say they avoided orange or brown interior furnishings

35% say they didn't watch Charles and Diana's wedding on TV. Official viewing figures say 28.4 million of us did watch it

29% say they didn't wear shoulder pads

15% didn't vote Tory

11% owned a computer

2% say they attended Live Aid. This would have meant more than a million people crammed into Wembley stadium

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