

Funk Is in the Eye Of the Beholder

By Henry Allen

Funk once meant a shameful condition shunned by millions, a quality linked to aging bedclothes, depression, various low-rent odors and incapacitating fear. No longer.

Those of us who know enough about what's happening to wonder why we haven't known what's happening lately—ever since the Love Generation wandered off to the same white elephants' graveyard that hula hoops and sitars went to, since Allen Ginsberg got a shave and a haircut, since peace posters were replaced by those grinning, butter-colored faces labeled "Have A Happy Day"—can now invest all our attention in what may become the hottest cultural property since organic food: Funk.

If you're a parent, "funky" is a word your kid may use to explain what he likes about R. Crumb's underground comic books, Dracula movies and the '49 Ford flathead pickup truck he wants to buy. If you read Tom Wolfe, "funk" is one of his words that may throw you, along with "infarcted" or "nostalgie de la boue." If you were a jazz fan in the late '50s, you may recall the "funky" movement that had pianists like Les McCann or Bobby Timmons turning any handy tune into a down-home, grits-and-gravy blues as in, maybe, "Moonlight in Vermont Blues."

Not that funk is sweeping the country yet, threatening everything decent and flashing from the covers of Time or Newsweek, which are always in the market for a hot trend. (Parents cringing in the thunder of their kids' Grand Funk Railroad records may recall Time's cover story last year that "soft" music is what's happening.)

Funk is more subtle than that. Funk is more than just another way to get high, pregnant, united with God or thrown in jail. Funk is a way of life that only yesterday you no doubt considered tacky, old-fashioned, obnoxious or irrelevant. Funky is what things are before they become camp. Funk is doing what your peer group will greet with puzzled loathing. If you're William Buckley, for instance, funk might be sending out UNICEF Christmas cards. If you've got exquisite taste in rock, funk is listening to Grand Funk Railroad.

For the rest of us, funk is not only living a style of dubious taste and marginal achievement, but liking it, too.

Funk in automobiles, for instance, means choosing not a Volkswagen bus named Krishna; not a rhino-proof, tyre-on-the-bonnet

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If Republican cloth coats are funky, the Nixon Checkers speech in toto is nearly off the scale.



Nikita Khrushchev was funky. Anybody who could get that much pleasure out of visiting a U.S. turkey farm in 1959 could be nothing else.



Arthur Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, achieved instant funk at consecration.



Peanut butter is funky when in a sandwich, but eating it right out of the jar with your finger is very funky. Garbagemen can be funky just by calling themselves garbagemen. And as for oversize postcards that show poodles in drag at a toy piano . . .

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FUNK. From B1

Land Rover; not a 1937 Packard hearse or a \$23,000 Bugatti. Funk means driving the kind of '61 Falcon that rusts under strings of colored lights on used-car lots all over America.

Funk is living not in a geodesic dome on a commune in New Mexico, not in an artist's loft with wood-burning fireplace in Manhattan, not in a Scottish castle or a cave in Crete, but perhaps in an asphalt-shingled house with geraniums blooming in a white-painted truck tire in the front yard All of which you like.

Funk means sending your mother a singing telegram for her birthday, or postcards depicting pink poodles playing toy pianos. Funk is turning down a free trip to Majorca to honeymoon instead at Niagara Falls. Funk is going to New York for a vacation and spending all your money in Times Square amusement arcades. Funk is eating soul food if you're a middle-class black who grew up never eating any.

For all you intellectuals who still feel an obligation to come to terms with new lifestyles, funk is the self-conscious adoption of value systems previously considered antithetical to one's social position.

Which is where it differs from Wolfe's *nostalgie de la boue*, meaning nostalgia for the mud, or a sentimental attraction for the lower classes. Marie Antoinette may have been a lot of things when she dressed up as a peasant and went out back of the palace to play with laundered sheep, but she wasn't funky.

Like beauty, funk is in the eye of the beholder. There's nothing funky about somebody wearing his bowling shirt to work unless he's a vice president. And there's nothing funky about wearing a pinstriped blue suit to work unless you're a garbageman Garbagemen, incidentally, can be funky just by calling themselves garbagemen instead of "sanitation engineers" or "environmental technicians." As Little Richard once said, "Don't try to put a tuxedo on the funky blues."

"Funk is doing what your peer group will greet with puzzled loathing. If you're William Buckley, for instance, funk might be sending out UNICEF Christmas cards."

The new funk has its roots in squalor, but it's more than mere imitation of low-class living. Brooks Brothers, with its salesmen dressed like Yale literature professors in 1957, and the tailors with English accents, and the \$30 khakis that look just like \$10 polished chinos, is the funkiest store in New York.

Billy Graham is obviously too middle-of-the-road to be as funky as faith-healer Oral Roberts or the Archbishop of Canterbury, Nikita

Khrushchev was funky. If Norman Mailer wants to be funky, he isn't, but if he doesn't want to, he is. Depending on how you look at it, a debutante party can be as funky as a roller derby.

Richard Nixon, a bearded pacifist said recently, "would be funky if he weren't so dangerous. Agnew would be dangerous if he weren't so funky."

Since every culture-watching story has to include drugs, women's liberation and radical politics, the fol-

lowing is provided for guidance.

Marijuana, once very funky, being a habit of jazz musicians and other riff-raff, isn't anymore. Unless you're an Iowa farmer riding a tractor around the north 40, and you see a little of that old devil weed, and decide to roll some up and see what the fuss is about, and somehow plowing is never the same again.

LSD and speed never were or will be funky, and heroin is so funky there's nothing funky about it. The funkiest high around has been the Hells Angels' savagery special—reds (Seconal), wine and benzedrine—but even that isn't as funky as getting drunk on dollar-a-bottle wine you drink out of jelly jars. Or beer you drink out of the can. While sitting around the red-and-white checked kitchen table in your sleeveless undershirt, listening to the ball game. Eating not cheese and French bread, not organic walnuts, but a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, in fact, comes about as close as anything to epitomizing the new funk.

In politics, as soon as Gloria Steinem appeared on the cover of *McCall's*, women's lib got very, very funky, but not nearly as funky as the American Communist Party or the FBI. Che Guevara out-funked himself when he tried to do the old Sierra Maestre number down in Bolivia. Funk turns life into a costume party which you attend dressed just like everyone else.

It's easy, legal and fun, with no equipment needed to start yourself on a new life today. It beats watching television. (Unless watching television is what's funky for you.) Anybody who admits he's a member of Nixon's "Silent Majority" is already too funky to need any more, but all others can play. As those funky old ads in the backs of comic books used to say: "Be the first on your block..."