

## THE OBSERVER

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 SAINT MARY'S OFFICE: 309 Haggar, Notre Dame, IN 46556 (219) 284-5365

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General Information	631-7471	Ad E-Mail	observer@darwin.cc.nd.edu



### ■ AND IN THIS CORNER...

## Generation X: The culture that lacks a brain

About six or seven years ago, a Vancouver native published a little book called *Generation X*. Basically, this guy interviewed friends of his from around the Seattle-Vancouver area who had grown up in middle-class families, graduated from college and begun successful careers, only to discover they had no idea what to do with their lives.

### Matthew Apple

This happened to coincide with the birth of the "Seattle Sound," or "grunge," or whatever flashy name the music industry preferred any given week to call its invention. Within two or three years, the music industry had already dumped Seattle in favor of Los Angeles and New York, but, by then, "alternative" music, which previously could not fit into any given genre, had become a genre all its own. The media picked up on this concept, and, voila, the "MTV" or "Nintendo" generation had yet another name.

The idea behind "Generation X" was originally the same behind the "Existentialist" label: a name for a group of people who have nothing in common, and that is what they have in common. Needless to say, this is contradictory and somewhat stupid. For example, those described in the book *Generation X* were 22 to 25 years old in 1990, making them 28 to 31 today. I am 24. My younger brother, who just began his college career, turns 18 this November. According to the media, these ages—31, 24, 18—constitute a "generation." I've never heard a bigger crock.

Now, the title "Generation-X" has been applied, like "alternative music," to nearly everything that is not related to the Baby Boomers. The label appears in every printed and electronic media available almost daily; it is repeated like a mantra, or like a condemnation, or reminder, as if to say, "You are Generation X. You are named."

To back up this cock-eyed labeling, the media compared Generation X to the "Lost Generation," the high society of the Roaring Twenties with their flappers and their speakeasies, their young New Yorker and their Al Capone. The Lost Generation essentially partied their way into the Great Depression because it refused to do anything constructive or worthwhile. One could say that this current generation similarly has no focus—except that there is no single, current generation.

Generations are created by cycles of war and peace. The World War II generation's males went away en masse, and when those who survived returned at the same time, they created the Baby Boomers. In turn, the Baby Boomers fought Vietnam, but not enough of them left and returned at the same time; because the Vietnam War was an unconventional war as wars go, the Baby Boomers didn't create a generation. Instead, they spread their children out over two decades. Some claim that Generation X came to be because there is no war, no "big" concept which unites today's youth, while others claim that Generation X is a backlash of sorts against the Sixties, against their parents' ideals. I claim that there are in fact a large number of smaller "generations" which comprise what the Boomers call Generation X, which is perhaps the initial reason for the pseudo-existentialist label.

An interesting analogy to the attitudes of the Nineties might be those of the "Korean War" generation and of the "Dazed and Confused" generation. Both are "forgotten" generations. Nobody

cares about the early Fifties and Harry S Truman any more; no one wants to remember the mid to late Seventies (out of mass cultural embarrassment, if nothing else). Both periods can be characterized as transitional, exemplifying the awkward and uncertain feeling that comes with the nostalgia of lost ideals and the reluctant realization of a new societal order.

**'Sak's Fifth Avenue sells "grunge" clothing, torn-up, faded blue jeans and plaid shirts, and people actually buy it. Students wear baseball caps backwards and rings on their ears, noses, and various other body parts, in an attempt to look different; and as a result everyone winds up looking the same.'**

One look at the self-appointed voice of this "generation," MTV, will tell you the current social order: boredom. On MTV's "Beach House," California teenagers with too much time on their hands wear sequined dresses and bicycle helmets while a crowd pelts them with a few hundred plastic floor hockey balls.

On "Singled Out," faithfully reproduced here at Notre Dame last spring, a shallow "Generation X-er" can find his or her appropriately shallow "mate" by eliminating those contestants who don't have large breasts or small noses and then asking them to shriek as loud as possible into a microphone. On "Road Rules" and "The Real World," evidently the goal is to make a group of trendy spoiled brats live together for a short amount of time and take turns screwing

and squabbling with each other on television.

What has happened—the section of American society which formerly resisted the label "Generation X" has now gleefully accepted it. Generation X has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the media can pat itself on the back for once again being allowed to resort to hackneyed cliches instead of providing real communication between age groups. And the Generation X-ers love it. They love having a collective name, because it gives them a group identity. Having a name gives them a sense of purpose, contrived and pointless though it may be. Having a name means they no longer have to worry about being individuals any more.

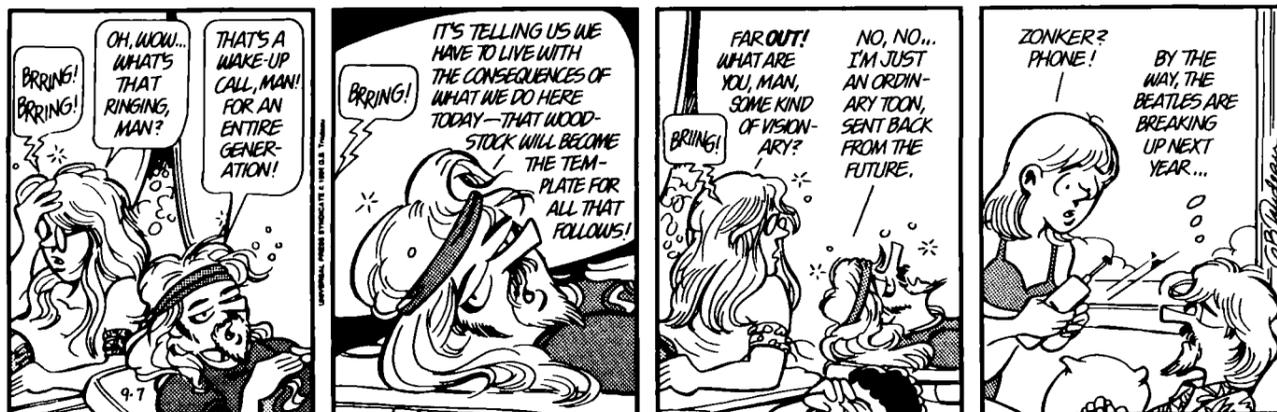
And so, to quote Ed Brubaker, "Once again, the mainstream media has stolen youth rebellion and sold us back a blander version at a higher price. By portraying today's youth as 'slackers,' they've given us permission to be lazy and stupid."

Upper-middle-class bored Californians think they're punk rockers because they dye their hair pink and complain that their rich parents haven't died yet. Sak's Fifth Avenue sells "grunge" clothing, torn-up, faded blue jeans and plaid shirts, and people actually buy it. Students wear baseball caps backwards and rings on their ears, noses, and various other body parts, in an attempt to look different; and as a result everyone winds up looking the same.

It's the new and improved James Dean story: *Rebels Without A Brain*. Except, now, the counterculture has become the establishment, and the establishment's laughing all the way to the bank.

*Matthew Apple is an MFA candidate in Creative Writing at Notre Dame. He can be reached at matthew.t.apple.1@nd.edu or at http://www.nd.edu:80/~mapple.*

### ■ DOONESBURY



GARRY TRUDEAU

### ■ QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I think, therefore I think I am."

—Ambrose Bierce