20th Century Revisited

The 50’s - The Changing Decade

The 20th century was the time when the world changed the most. First of all, no century has ever seen such a huge increase in the world’s population thanks to the Baby Boom of the second half of it. It was also an era of war, not only the First and the Second World War, but also the Cold war and the Vietnam War. These wars made millions of casualties but they were also the cause of serious innovation in everyone’s lives. These wars pushed the invention of the radio and the radar, forced the car modernization, the plane and a lot of medical treatments were invented. On the other hand, when there weren’t any wars to be fought, people’s habits began to change for example the women’s big wardrobe change in the 1920’s which shaped the word “fashion”. People started dressing in comfortable ways and it became socially acceptable. None of this had actually happened before. Science and research also exploded with innumerable amounts of scientific breakthroughs answering many questions about the universe.

In this special edition we selected the 50’s as a first stop in our journey through the 20th century.
A Glimpse into the 20th Century

The 20th century might be the most revolutionary century. We can safely say that the world truly changed within its 10 decades. This century reflected all the extremes of human nature. It was scarred by some of history’s most horrific examples of brutality and violence. More than 150 million people perished in war, in concentration and reeducation camps, in government induced famines, or in genocides. But it also demonstrated humanity’s idealism, inventiveness, and humanitarianism. It witnessed unparalleled growth in knowledge, wealth, nutrition, and health. It was a century of mass production, mass consumption, mass media, and mass entertainment, but also of mass murder.

Whether it was because of the scientifically and technological discoveries or because of the psychological heritage originated then (the ideas, the movements), so much was achieved and will be forever remembered about it.

The 21st century generation may not be so familiar with the exact history of the previous century but one thing is for sure, we are currently surrounded by it and what was left of it for the generations to come. That’s us.

The 50’s

This decade was a rather calm decade compared to its predecessor and its follower. In the last decade there was the World War II, the beginning of the Cold War and the dawn of the atomic age; in the following decade there was the disaster in Vietnam.

Beginning with music culture in the 50s, we can say it was a Big beginning. In this decade Rock’n’Roll was invented, bringing with it many of the attitudes of teenage rebellion that remain so familiar even today. The first musical synthesizer was invented by RCA in 1953.

Music in the 50s changed society and the way people thought. It was a decade of prosperity for economic and social issues. For example in the fifties lots of people believed that white people stole some music from African people which is a way of discrimination.

At an economical level, the fifties were a decade where economy was booming: new cars were being built- in the 1950’s the number of cars in the US almost doubled from 39 million to 74 million, new residential areas were built on the outskirts of large cities and a society based on consumerism was born.

In short the 1950s changed everyone and everywhere.
In the 1950s there was a massive evolution in science and technology. New creations and discoveries changed the world we live in quite significantly, and we, usually, know very little about them and how or when they happened. Science and technology developed in the most various areas, such as biology, computing, physics and more.

In the 1950s, the microchip was created. We usually don’t think about it, but it is present in our everyday life: we can find them in our cell phones, our computers and most of the electronic devices we use. It, obviously, wasn’t created as it is today, but it was seen for the first time in this decade and it changed the world.

The first satellite was launched in this decade as well, which was a really big step to the understanding of many other things mostly related to physics, the solar system, planet Earth and we got to know, thanks to that evolution, a little bit more about the universe we inhabit.

I say little, but that is because we know that we know so little, that we don’t even know how much we actually know. But this small portion of knowledge we acquired, allowed us to go further. We only have the GPS because of the artificial satellites, we can only predict tomorrow’s weather thanks to the artificial satellites, and a lot more changes happen nowadays that couldn’t be done or have been done without satellites.

There were many other scientific and technological discoveries and achievements in this decade of the 20th century: such as the discovery of the shape of the DNA, the discovery that smoking is harmful, the first detection of the neutrino, and the making of the first color televisions and the first credit cards. All of these had great impact on our lives, and we don’t give them as much value as they deserve. We are dependent on so many things that we can hardly give credit to most of them and to know when or how they were created. The 20th century was one of technological and scientific boom and the 1950s only confirms it.
The style in the 50’s made itself felt especially in the United States. The 1950’s marked the beginning of one of the biggest economic booms in U.S. history and consumerism began to grow. Fashion became an important part of culture in this decade, becoming the way to express conformity and individual identity. Style was used to set the common standard of look which means not many choices of different styles were available throughout the decade.

The women’s clothing evolved so women could satisfy their husbands, or to find one. In addition to these women were expected to look in a certain way and correspond to a particular type of body, considered the standard of beauty that would best fit the latest fashions. The ideal type of body in the 50’s was: thin waist with defined hip and a larger but very defined and shapely bust. These ideas caused a lot of pressure in women. Despite the clothing being similar in shape and silhouette, it was varied in colour, pattern or type of fabric.

Fashion in the 50’s helped defining women’s role in society, especially wives, who could now use clothes for domestic tasks, for business, as well as maternity clothes and casual clothes. These different styles were, once again, meant to impress and please others including husbands, neighbours, friends and employers.

For men, fashion changed very little throughout the decade. Choices were suits, sport coats, slacks, sweaters, or casual wear all in similar fabrics and styles. Occasionally bolder patterns might emerge for casual wear, but business clothing remained largely unchanged during the 50’s.

Teens started to get available income from parents and part-time jobs, they also started to have more leisure time and that combination meant more shopping. At this point, teenage culture and clothing also became the focus of television, movies and music.

At the end of the 1950’s, less conservative styles appeared. Sexier silhouettes with tighter skirts, shirts and dresses started to show up for women. Rebellious looks for men also emerged with leather motorcycle jackets, studded boots, and bolder patterned shirts and sweaters becoming popular. Girls and women had more clothing options in terms of pants and shorts with pedal pushers, bermuda shorts, and tapered leggings featuring prominently in style trends.

Nowadays some of the trends of the 50’s are still used and can even be considered within the current trends. Beyond the clothing style, also some ideals and values like beauty having regarding to a certain body shape, are still considered today.
The new silhouette demanded a new figure and undergarments filled the lingerie departments.

There were two distinct shapes: the figure epitomized in movies by Audrey Hepburn and the more womanly hourglass figure represented by Grace Kelly, with tiny waists, padded hips and circle skirts.

No matter what skirt you wore, the silhouette was to emphasize the curves, large bust and hips and small waist;

Foundation wear was never more popular: with girdles, pantie girdles, corsets and corselettes flying off the shelves. Their mission – to give women as streamlined a figure as was possible.
According to the dictionary, feminism is defined as the theory of the political, economic, and the social equality of the sexes. The feminist movement, also known as the Women’s Liberation Movement has been an ongoing battle for the last 100 years. The world in the XX century was different, in many ways, from today. Marriages were once arranged and women were expected to be obedient to their husbands. They didn’t do typical work outside of the home and were expected to raise children.

During the 50’s women’s roles were changed because, during World War II, women had been taking men’s jobs while they were away. After the war, many of them wanted to keep their jobs but they were obligated to became wives and mothers again as the men came back from war. In 1957, 70% of working women held clerical positions, assembly lines or service jobs. 12% held a profession and 6% held management positions. Those that held professional jobs worked as nurses and teachers. They found themselves taking care of the house and their children at the same time.

Some people became worried about those changes because women weren’t at home all the time and the children might be being deprived of a parent. These changes in typical homes may not have been considered generally positive, but they were for the women. They really progressed in finding new job opportunities and finding their place in society. Not necessarily the role of a happy and obliging housewife but a role of a woman who has helped out in the war and who has risen above society’s standards. After the war, women were able to maintain her role in society and her courage to face a new era.

British suffragists were called suffragettes. But calling an American suffragist a suffragette would be an insult. Led by the Women’s Social and Political Union, British suffragettes had a more radical reputation than Americans. The women demonstrated in public, sometimes destroying property in the process.
Homofobia in the 50’s

During the war, a lot of homosexual individuals left their small towns and farming communities and entered the military where for the first time they met a big number of people with the same sexual orientation.

“You see, the Army is an utterly simplified existence for me. I have no one to answer to as long as I behave during the week and stay out of the way of the MPs [military police] on weekends. If I go home, how can I stay out all night or promote any serious affair? My parents would simply consider me something perverted and keep me in the house.”

As we can see from this letter, the war gave some people more freedom then they previously had. After it ended many homosexuals settled in cities that already had established gay communities, such as: New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles. As expected in the 50s homosexuality was seen as an aberration and military psychiatrists were given the job of screening for any homosexual individuals. These psychiatrists relied on stereotypes of effeminate gay men and masculine lesbians, being that strategy very ineffective. Gay men, mostly, turned to gay bars and dormitories to find sexual and romantic partners. After the cold war, the anti gay oppression movement intensified, as if someone was suspected to be homosexual, that person could be fired. During the 50s gay men were always portrayed as “perverts” and “rapists”. The 50s were a hard time for anyone who wasn’t heterosexual and even though people tried to hide it, it was still a big deal to not have the same legal rights. Due to those people in the 50s and in the following decades gay rights are nowadays being recognized in different parts of the world.

Guilherme Freitas (12º B)
Music in the 50’s

Music is seen as form of art to express ideas and different emotions. The 1950’s were a time of changes and music was an important part of the changes. Music in the fifties had its ups and downs but through it all, music had a huge impact on society.

In my opinion music in the 50’s helped to shape the way music is today and thanks to the 50’s we nowadays have some great music influenced by that time.

Music started to be light melodies and sweet lyrics like in jazz and blues and evolved to rock and roll, a fusion of African-American genres such as blues, boogie-woogie, jump blues, jazz and gospel music, together with Western swing and country music. The different music styles incorporated different lyrics that were meant for different crowds.

The different styles of music influenced the way society lived each day such as the way they dressed, acted and talked.

Rock and roll was the music style that made the biggest impact on the music industry and on people’s lives. The rock and roll was so good that it could bring opposites together and made people forget about racial problems because it was capable of bringing blacks and whites together and to break racial barriers.

At first, rock and roll had the piano or saxophone as the lead instrument, but then they were replaced by the electric guitar. Rock and roll is characterized by its pulsating drums, repetitive chord progressions, stepped up tempos, and loud guitars.

A new taste of music

Bearing in mind the topic “music”, there is a lot of information about it.

Due to Baby Boom (50’s) and the end of World War II music became a way to enjoy life and to escape from the prejudices that happen back then (before 1945).

Not only the economic development, but also the evolution of mass media (Tv, radio, the invention of Long Playing) and the desire of a new mentality and culture created a generation (specially the youngsters) that wanted to be remembered and wished, like I said before, to celebrate life.

New music styles were created like blues, jazz, classic music, folk, country music, etc. They all have a different target audience but they all have in common the “taste of music”.

Rock N’ Roll is the most famous genre of music of all. It started in the United States and was sexy, energetic and successfully accepted by the younger generation. Elvis Presley became well-known by is dancing skills and he’s behaviour (he was really provocative). He was “named” the King of Rock N’Roll. We all know the song Jailhouse Rock or Crocodile Rock, Blue Christmas, etc.

Bill Haley and Chuck Berry are other recognized “rock n’ rollers”.

Briefly, our society (21St century) is more individual and not so politically active and provocative compared to the one in the 50’s. Nowadays, music is “just to have fun in those 3 min” and not to create something or to think about the lyrics and its meanings.
Cinema in the 50’s

Cinema has suffered many changes, especially in the 50’s. The filmmakers had to develop new ways to attract more people to the cinema industry. Television became a threat as more families had a colored TV set. Television broadcasting was becoming the dominant entertainment in the USA. The morality and patriotism of Hollywood films were under attack from government, religious, and citizens’ groups.

Due to those difficulties, studios and companies tried to put audiences back in theatres by using more techniques in presenting their films through widescreen and big-approach methods. This spectacular approach, coupled with Cold War paranoia, a renewed interest in science from the atomic bomb, as well as increased interest in the mysteries of outer space, lent itself well to what this film decade is best known for science fiction. The science fiction genre began its golden age during this decade with such notable films as The Day the Earth Stood Still and The War of the Worlds.

There were also Earth-based subjects, such as 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. The decade was equally adept at both character and realistic films. The highly noted actors John Wayne, James Dean and Marilyn Monroe were at the peak of their popularity.

I think cinema had a very important role in culture development; the new innovations of that time allowed the cinema industry to grow up. It was a very reach decade because some of the greatest movies were produced and some of the greatest actors were “born” and still inspire other great actors today.