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## Power Children

By Mark Katz

I mean, it's like, today's teens, they just don't get it! Sure, for them, life is totally phine--er, phat. They are coming of age in an age that celebrates the coming of age. For every standard-issue adolescent yearning, there is a show that explores it on the WB. For each of life's cliched ironies encountered for the first time, there is a chat room to lament it on [TeenGripe.com](http://TeenGripe.com) For every pimply punk buying a pop CD, another kid with a good complexion has just released a debut album. Being a teenager these days is as effortless as being a Renaissance Man during the Renaissance. These kids have no idea how hard it is living in an era that has outgrown grownups. They just... I dunno. Forget it. Whatever.

It's been 20 years since I was a teenager, but if memory serves, my adolescent experience took place in an environment very different from today's. Certainly, I struggled with the same dilemmas that still define this realm: Who am I? Where will my life take me? When will I get naked with a girl? Like everyone else, I had to solve the riddle of defying my elders while conforming to my peers. Until we find a cure for puberty, there will always be young adults fixated upon these questions. What's new is an entire culture fixated upon those who fixate upon these questions.

The irony, of course, is that the affliction of adolescence is traditionally marked by a pronounced sense of isolation. At some critical moment in every proto-adult life comes a lonely, anguished, heartfelt plea: "Nobody understands me!" How can today's teens truly experience this tortured rite of passage when marketers seek them out relentlessly and programmers understand them so well? And with all those Hollywood talent scouts and Silicon Valley headhunters hunting them down and signing them up, why would they even care if their parents understand them at all? Even the lonely losers of yesteryear are no longer locked in suburban basements playing Dungeons & Dragons; they are in downtown lofts uploading Web pages and concocting e-business ventures. There's hardly anyone left in our work force to mow the lawns and flip the burgers. Today's teenagers hold such a commanding position in our economy, it's only a matter of time before antiquated child-labor laws are inverted to establish a maximum wage and minimum hours. (In fact, the better question may be, is it even fair to keep these kids stuck at home or in a classroom during their peak earning years?) These are the odd socioeconomic circumstances that place me among the first generation of Americans who strive to do better than their children.

When I came of age, teenagers were not celebrated, only tolerated, as though society said to us, "Come back to us when your skin clears up and you've shaved that cheesy mustache off your face." Out of ideas about how to deal with us, well-meaning adults herded us into "rap sessions" on the off-chance that we might console ourselves. I spent a good part of my teenage years hoping only to outlive the awkward indignities of adolescence. I prayed for the day when I'd be older--and, please God, taller--so I might assume the full status of a human being endowed by my Creator with certain unalienable rights, not least among these was staying out past 11 and entering bars at will. I endured my teenage years by placing faith in the future, only to look back and realize that I managed to miss Woodstock not once but

twice.

Maybe you can argue that teens should not be shunted aside, but I am curious to know how they've come to be worshipped instead. Now that I am fully grown, I sense two prevailing cultural obsessions that ignore me once again. In American culture, there is potential and nostalgia; we are fascinated by prodigies first and has-beens second. Stuck in the middle are millions like me, living in those awkward years between promising potential and ironic demise. And the parameters of the present keep pushing in. To the tune of discarded disco anthems, our eyes pan slowly from one Gap-clad teen to another, and for 30 seconds we cannot bring ourselves to blink. The teens stare back at us brimming with serene self-assurance, mocking anyone who ever made the mistake of turning 22 and blissfully unaware that 10 years from now, they will be 10 years older.

We've come to worship this false god of youth just as wayward, ancient Hebrews once knelt at the hooves of a golden calf. But perhaps there's a lesson there as well. Once the world's darling, that golden calf later found herself a tarnished cow, reduced to flashing her sagging udders at circus sideshows. Over time, self-loathing made her lactose-intolerant, and she died too young from an overdose of prescription-strength Dairy Ease[™]. How do I know this? I just watched the whole sad aftermath during teen-idols week on VH1's Where Are They Now?

Britney Spears: Consider yourself warned.

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