

Rubin vs. Ochs

Perhaps not Untypical

Phil Ochs
Jerry Rubin

1968

In the aftermath of L.B.J.'s sudden shocker,* a heated dialogue between Phil Ochs, folksinger, and Jerry Rubin, Yippie organizer, took place on the subject of America, Johnson, Kennedy and the movement. Perhaps it was not untypical...

RUBIN: The six-gun has surrendered; the machine will now move back into control of America's banks. Rationality will replace the sloppy hand. Kennedy, the mechanical consumer product, will replace Johnson, the existential gambler. And things won't be as interesting up there.

OCHS: The machine has never relinquished control; the six-gun is now fully automated. The yippie is a political child reacting emotionally, like an artist, armed with intuition and numbers, and therefore effective in the current madness. Perhaps the politics of acid. The yippie is the child and creation of the insane technological society.

RUBIN: Only an emotional child could react properly to this world. What can a grown-up Harvard professor say about napalmed babies? What can a rich man know about black poverty? I try to react to America like an emotional child. I am also angry. I am angry with the machine that does not ask why, that smiles, that shakes your hand, that feels no emotion. The battle in America is not between Johnson and Kennedy, or Democrats and Republicans, but between children and the machine. Kennedy represents the basic evil of America, not Johnson. Johnson was just doing all he could in his own way to live up to J. Kennedy's memory. I hate all rich bastards.

OCHS: You radicals are all alike, lashing out at the approaching armed tractor with yo-yo s. I agree with an essential part of what you're saying, but I also sense the machine is developing a rather apparent emotion, that of survival. The system is in a state of crisis and I feel there may be a surprising number of radicalized establishment figures ("rich bastards") who are responding to the lunacy of the times as deeply as we are. Many people are very mad, many are in a drugged stupor, and being a semi-yippie I'm hysterical.

RUBIN: OK, that draws the issue clearly. I do not want this system to survive. You do. I want to help destroy America's military domination of the world, and her cultural imperialism. To me the essence of America is viewing man as a material, not a spiritual, object. In other words, the Death society. America at her essence is irrational to man's freedom. Kennedy would rationally protect this irrationality. Kennedy is the enemy of the South American peasant and the Detroit black, and the dropped — out Long Island white teenager.

OCHS: Once again I essentially agree with you but I see a different pattern for the change. America must change the direction of its foreign policy and the character of its soul if it is to survive. The world at its essence has been historically irrational to man's freedom and we're just the new generation of actor-comedian-revolutionaries who get to face the impossible, but only worthwhile battle. I'm just as unpatriotic as the next guy, but I realize the revolution requires timing as well as militancy. Look before you leap and consider who else might be dominating.

RUBIN: Fuck your timing. Johnson quit because like you, he understands that the counter-revolution also requires timing as well as militancy.

OCHS: Johnson pulling back is either the noblest or the craftiest move he ever made. The advancing armies, panting on the verge of a major kill, pause and lift their visors to discover to their outrage that their helpless enemy has disappeared and joined their ranks through the night. Come back Lyndon, we need you.

RUBIN: Johnson hates Kennedy more than he hates Ho Chi Minh. He has robbed Kennedy of a Kennedy crusade. Johnson can now sit on the sidelines, amused. Both men have so confused their images with their heads that all they see is their images colliding in the media. And the whole charade is a technicolor movie distracting us, the yippies, from doing our thing.

OCHS: Yes, but it's a great movie, and I suspect we're all part of it, without our choice. In fact, we are probably creations of it. We're trying to kill daddy by our underground films, forgetting that Warner Bros. can still come up with Bonnie and Clyde. Yes, that Warner Bros. can still come up with Bonnie and Clyde. Yes, one hand on the creation of the new society, but perhaps another trying to keep horseshoes away from the cossacks.

RUBIN: The change in the faces of royalty have no effect on Yippie. Chicago will still be a theatrical stage, and we actors. The Democratic Convention still smells of Death. Yippie and black power are the only ideas left to believe in in America.

OCHS: The change in the faces of the party will in fact diminish some of the natural organizing power of yippie. Johnson is the great theatrical enemy to have; it is much easier to get people to freak out over him than the memory of John Kennedy.

RUBIN: But in four months Bobby as the establishment candidate will reveal his fanged teeth; he will oppose revolution in South Vietnam; he will salute the flag; he will attack crime in the streets; he will embrace Lyndon B. Johnson; he will condemn extremism; he will court the South; he will have you arrested for pot; he will joke on camera. Bobby is the polar opposite to our alternative consciousness, alternative culture. In Chicago the freaky, emotional, communal underculture will expose itself to Bobby's refrigerated mind.

OCHS: All presidential candidates are required to recite the defensive slogans of the corporation cold war; the question is what they actually do when in office. John Kennedy followed the natural political course, which was middle; Robert Kennedy will follow today's natural political course, which is moderate left. I'm not proposing to blindly follow the man. I'm leaving open the possibility that he is hip enough, and charismatic enough, and powerful enough to make a major attempt to reform an unworkable system. If he really has no intention of making a change, he will fall like any nearsighted bureaucrat.

RUBIN: Phil, please take your thumb out of your mouth! Don't swoon so soon! Bobby Kennedy believes in the corporate cold war with all his sawed-off soul. Bobby Kennedy has won your heart and stolen your head. Kennedy stands for the maintenance of property; we stand for the destruction of property and the establishment of community—never the two shall meet. The youth are building a real thing, and Kennedy is irrelevant to it. I suggest a five-month ban on the mention of Kennedy's name.

OCHS: Jerry, take the joint away from your thumb. The day community stops meeting property is the day Kennedy loses his ambition. I believe the youth movement should define its separation from Establishment leaders so as not to have anything approaching the Stevenson disillusionment. But while we're hacking our way out of the jungle, let's not forget that we're not the only tribe and we must carve our future out of our past, however corrupt. Kennedy doesn't own me; I visualize him arm-wrestling in the wings with Che Guevara, and morally I lean toward Che's side. I admit I'm confused about the current situation. I am blinded by movie star reform, and movie star revolution. But I can see reform on the way to youthopia.

RUBIN: Kennedy? Who is that?

OCHS: He doesn't exist; neither do the yippies.

RUBIN: The yippies are a social movement, a dynamic youth energy force. International. Young people too alienated to become spare parts in somebody's junk car. Young people ecstatic with the "now!" Demonstrations are becoming a way of life, a life style—a celebration of the future—without specific political demands—our politics exist in the very way we live our lives. We cannot be co-opted because we want everything. We do not accept the assumptions of America. Electoral politics is a trick-bag which has little to do with the way America works; America's power lies in her cultural and economic institutions; and we are at war with them. The Vietnam war has taught us how to stand on our two feet. Once standing, we shall never kneel again. See you in Chicago.

OCHS: The energy of the youth social movement is there without the yippies, and the yippies are becoming the natural embodiment of that force. I'm a part of that force; I celebrate life; I also have specific demands, like the legalization of marijuana, the curtailment of the police, the end of an imperialist foreign policy. I am not kneeling, but my feet aren't completely off the ground either. America is the beautiful shipwreck; we are the orphans of technology, and "now" is an illusion just as sure as my name is Eugene McCarthy. Keep flippy for yippee; see you in Chicago!

* *Note to Web edition:* On March 31, 1968, in a move that surprised most, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced he would not run for re-election in 1968.

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