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1970s

The Me Decade

When journalist Tom Wolfe (1931–) surveyed the changes that had swept America in the past few years, he gave the decade a label that has stuck: "The Me Decade." Wolfe and others noticed that the dominant concerns of most people had shifted from issues of social and political justice that were so important in the 1960s to a more selfish focus on individual well-being. What was behind this sudden change in the American mood?

Economic and political shifts help to explain much of the change. From the end of the World War II (1939–45) until the end of the 1960s, the American economy had enjoyed one of its longest extended periods of growth. That growth came screeching to a halt in the 1970s, and matters got worse as the decade continued. An Arab oil embargo halted shipments of oil to the United States, forcing gas prices to raise dramatically and forcing rationing. Another oil crisis in 1979 continued the economic shock. The automobile industry was hit hard by the oil crises and by competition from carmakers in Japan. To make economic matters worse, inflation was rising, which meant that the relative prices of goods were climbing faster than wages were. Many Americans turned inward and focused their attention on their economic problems rather than on problems of politics or social justice.

Politics in the 1970s were very different from in the 1960s as well. Presidents John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) and Lyndon B.

1970s At a Glance

What We Said:

Bogue: Disgusting or distasteful.

"Don't leave home without it": An advertising line used by American Express to remind its customers that they could use their cards nearly anywhere. Advertising-saturated Americans began using this slogan in everyday speech.

Dweeb: A loser or social outcast.

"Get a clue!": A warning that one should figure out what is going on.

Gnarly: Very cool or good.

Groupies: Fans—usually women—who followed rock stars from concert to concert, sometimes offering sexual favors.

"Like": An interjection used by teenagers to interrupt and add emphasis to their speech, as in "She was, like, so bogue." When combined with "totally," it could be used to express real approval: "Like, totally!"

Male chauvinist pig: A man who thinks women are inferior. This label was used by feminists in the women's liberation movement to blast those men who resisted their efforts to gain equal rights. Archie Bunker of TV's *All in the Family* was often called a male chauvinist pig.

Me Generation: A term used to describe people who left behind the social activism of the 1960s and focused on improving their own souls through a variety of self-help methods.

"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is" (1977): Part of a popular advertising jingle for Alka-Seltzer, this catchy phrase was used to describe anything that brought relief.

"Yo!": Similar to "Hi" or "Hey," this greeting was popularized by Sylvester Stallone in the movie *Rocky* (1976).

What We Read:

***Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970):** This important history of the effect of white settlement on Native Americans, written by Dee Brown, was the rare historical work to become a best-seller.

***Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1970):** Though the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s brought renewed sexual experimentation to the country, people still had questions about sexuality. This book, by Dr. David Reuben, answered them in a lighthearted way and stayed near the top of the nonfiction best-seller lists for nearly a year.

***Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (1970):** This parable by Richard Bach told the story of an outcast seagull who seeks perfection. Its quasi-spiritual tone appealed to readers of every religion, and it remains in print into the twenty-first century.

***Love Story* (1970):** Erich Segal's story of the love between a talented Harvard athlete and his dying girlfriend was the publishing sensation of the year, with 21 hardcover printings and an initial paperback print run of 4,350,000. It was quickly made into a movie starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw.

***The Exorcist* (1971):** William Peter Blatty's fifth novel was the first horror story to make it to the

Johnson (1908–1972) had led popular crusades to use the government for public good. President Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994) became a symbol of the public's mistrust of politicians. He was forced from office in 1974 after the public learned of his involvement in the coverup of a break-in at the Watergate office complex. The Watergate scandal revealed the Nixon administration to be devious and corrupt. In the 1976 election,

1970s At a Glance (continued)

top of the *New York Times* best-seller list. The tale of a priest exorcising the demons from a young girl was made into a classic horror film in 1973.

***Ms.* (1972–):** This magazine of the women's liberation movement was founded by prominent feminists Gloria Steinem and Patricia Carbine.

***The Joy of Sex: A Cordon Bleu Guide to Lovemaking* (1972):** This illustrated guide to lovemaking techniques by author Alex Comfort offered help to many seeking sexual advice—and shocked others. Helpful or shocking, the book was in the top five on the best-seller list for nearly a year.

***Watership Down* (1972; 1974 in the United States):** This exciting tale of a group forced to flee its home because it is being threatened by a developer had an interesting twist: the protagonists were rabbits. The publishers could not decide whether Richard Adams's story was for adults or children, but one thing was sure: everybody was reading it.

***All the President's Men* (1974):** Written by *Washington Post* reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, this exposé revealed how the authors discovered the Watergate cover-up that led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.

***People* (1974–):** The respectable version of a supermarket tabloid, *People* magazine provided insider gossip and lots of photos of celebrities, politicians, and other stars. It remains the country's leading "personality" magazine.

***Roots* (1976):** Alex Haley's historical saga about his family began with Kunta Kinte, a native of Gambia who is sold into slavery in the New World. Haley's tale followed the family's difficult journey from slavery up to the present day and in 1977 was made into a television miniseries that is considered one of the best of its kind.

***Your Erroneous Zones* (1977):** One of the key books of the 1970s self-help movement, this book by Wayne Dyer offered to make psychology simple enough for everybody and to help people lead happier lives. Dyer's book sold millions of copies and he remained a popular motivational speaker in the twenty-first century.

***The Complete Book of Running* (1978):** James Fixx's book on running came right at the peak of the jogging craze in America, and the popularity of the book made the author a rich man before his untimely death in 1984.

What We Watched:

***Marcus Welby, M.D.* (1969–76):** Robert Young played the title role of a concerned general practitioner.

***All in the Family* (1971–79):** This sitcom brought realistic situations, frank language, and controversy to American television. The show centered around the blue collar lives of Archie Bunker and his wife, daughter and son-in-law.

***The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–74):** This variety show hosted by African American comedian Flip Wilson featured skits, music, and appearances of the hilarious "Geraldine" (Wilson in drag).

***Sanford and Son* (1972–77):** This show about a grumpy widower and his son was the first sitcom to feature a nearly all-black cast since *Amos 'n' Andy* nearly twenty years earlier. Redd Foxx, who

voters elected former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter (1924–) as president, largely because he had avoided Washington politics and seemed to be an honest man. In the opinion of many citizens, however, Carter's stint as president was ineffective. His unsuccessful term in office further eroded Americans' faith in what the government could accomplish.

1970s At a Glance (continued)

played Sanford, would make people laugh as he threatened to join his dead wife by grabbing his chest and pretending to have a heart attack, yelling "I'm coming to join you, Elizabeth!" in nearly every episode.

***M*A*S*H* (1972–83):** This long-running sitcom was set in a hospital camp during the Korean War and came to be one of TV's finest examples of intelligent, socially relevant programming. The final episode, aired on February 29, 1983, was seen by over 50 million viewers worldwide.

***Happy Days* (1974–84):** Suburban life in the 1950s was romanticized in this TV comedy show, which highlighted drive-ins, leather jackets, muscle cars, and solid family life in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The show centered around the everyday life of the Cunningham family and the character Fonzie, a single young man who epitomized coolness.

***Laverne & Shirley* (1976–1983):** A spinoff of *Happy Days,* this sitcom, set in the 1950s, featured the misadventures of two single Milwaukee women, who shared an apartment and worked at a local brewery.

***The Godfather* (1972):** The most influential gangster film of American cinema and the first of Francis Ford Coppola's trilogy about the Mafia.

***The Exorcist* (1973):** The first blockbuster horror film, released after one of the most extensive preview hype campaigns. Reporting about the film's ill-effects on people even overshadowed the Watergate scandal for a short time, and its graphic violence led to new film industry regulations.

Watergate hearings (1973–74): America and the world turned on their TV sets to watch Nixon administration figures testify about the Watergate break-in and cover-up. The scandal eventually led to the first resignation of an American president, Richard Nixon.

***Jaws* (1975):** Steven Spielberg's first major film became the first film to make more than $100 million on it initial release. With a mix of adventure, horror, and fun, the movie centered on a series of shark attacks and made audiences around the world more than a little nervous about swimming in the ocean.

***Star Wars* (1977):** The first of George Lucas's space fantasy movies quickly established itself as a groundbreaker due to its special effects and film-related merchandise.

What We Listened To:

KISS: The flamboyant rock band was wildly popular with teenagers mostly due to members' far-out costumes and high-energy concerts that featured smoke bombs, spit blood, and breathed fire.

Elton John: The most popular pop singer/songwriter of the 1970s. Of his nineteen albums during the decade, fifteen went gold or platinum, and he continued to produce songs that ranked in the Top Forty into the 1990s.

***All Things Considered*:** This cultural affairs and news show debuted on National Public Radio (NPR) in 1971.

The changing social structure of the 1970s can also be explained by the aging of the population. More and more of the baby boomers (those born in the decade after World War II) were leaving college and settling down with families of their own. They did not have time for marches against the war, and besides, the war in Vietnam was already winding down. More and more Americans turned inward, seeking comfort in

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The Jackson 5: The five Jackson brothers had six top five singles by 1971. The group's littlest brother, Michael Jackson, had turned 12 in 1970 and would soon become a superstar on his own. Some of their most popular songs were "I Want You Back," "ABC," "The Love You Save," and "I'll Be There."

Rod Stewart: This British singer became popular as a solo artist with his hit song "Maggie May" in 1971.

Marvin Gaye: The successful Motown singer of the 1960s reached new heights when he released soul music that expressed both political and very personal issues. Hits included "What's Going On," "Mercy Mercy Me," and "Let's Get It On."

Kool & the Gang: This group laid the ground work for funk music with the hits "Jungle Boogie" and "Hollywood Swinging" in 1974.

Donna Summer: The queen of disco music scored big with such hits as "Love to Love you Baby" and "Last Dance."

Peter Frampton: In 1976, *Frampton Comes Alive* became the biggest selling live rock album at the time, selling more than six million copies and catapulting the former Humble Pie guitarist into brief superstardom.

The Carpenters: The brother and sister team of Richard and Karen Carpenter, sang sweet, innocent lyrics to light, pleasant melodies, hitting the Top Ten twelve times during the decade.

Rolling Stones: The rock and roll tunes of Mick Jagger and the boys remained popular throughout the 1970s; the Stones also toured the United States in 1975.

Who We Knew:

Woody Allen (1935–): Known for his quirky looks and comedic timing, Allen has become known as one of the most creative American film makers. During the 1970s, *Annie Hall* (1977), his semi-autobiographical movie about life and living in Manhattan, won him critical praise and was his most popular film.

Louise Joy Brown (1978–): The first "test-tube" baby. Born in England in 1978 by a process now known as in vitro fertilization, the little girl's birth caused many to wonder in awe and fear of the possibilities of science. The process used to create Brown is now used commonly by many couples with infertility problems.

Jane Fonda (1937–): The daughter of movie star Henry Fonda, this beautiful actress became a tremendously popular (and sometimes hated) public figure as she pursued her political agenda, led millions to better health as an ambassador for aerobic exercise, and became the wife to three powerful and wealthy men (film director Roger Vadim, 1965; politician Tom Hayden, 1973; and billionaire Ted Turner, 1991).

A. J. Foyt (1935–): The first racecar driver to win four Indianapolis (Indy) 500 races.

Jimmy Hoffa (1913–1975): The powerful Teamsters union figure led the union as vice-president in 1952 and as president in 1957 but was imprisoned

spiritual renewal or seeking insight by visiting therapists, reading self-help books, or exercising. Many people gave up trying to perfect the world and tried instead to perfect themselves. The exception to this trend was the growing importance of the feminist movement, which worked hard in the decade to gain equality for women in education and employment, and the environmental movement, which tried to

1970s At a Glance (continued)

in 1967 due to corruption charges. President Nixon agreed to commute his sentence in 1971 if Hoffa resigned as the Teamsters president. Hoffa disappeared in Bloomfield Township, Michigan, in 1975; never seen since, he is thought to have been murdered.

Billie Jean King (1943–): The winner of twenty Wimbledon titles and four Grand Slam tournaments, this women's tennis champion beat former Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" tennis match in 1973. Riggs had hoped to prove that men were better athletes than women, but King proved him wrong in front of fifty million TV viewers and thirty thousand live fans.

Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994): The 37th U.S. president was the first chief executive to visit China and the first to resign under threat of impeachment. He was pardoned in September 1974 by his successor, Gerald Ford.

Richard Pryor (1940–): This African American comedian entertained audiences with hilarious jokes and stories about everyday black culture experiences. His performances were based on his personal and sometimes tragic social circumstances. His struggles with drug and alcohol abuse, a heart attack, a suicide attempt, and the onset of multiple sclerosis disrupted his very popular work.

Mark Spitz (1950–): This U.S. swimmer was the first Olympian to win seven gold medals at one Olympics (Munich, 1972). He had already won four Olympic medals in 1968. After his Olympic successes, he became the first athlete to earn millions of dollars by endorsing products.

Gloria Steinem (1934–): This political activist for women's rights cofounded the Women's Action Alliance in 1970 and the feminist magazine *Ms.*

step up government regulations on pollution and to protect the wilderness.

American popular culture continued to thrive in the 1970s, driven forward by the most popular form of entertainment, the television. By the 1970s, virtually every American had access to a color TV, and programming expanded to include both UHF and VHF broadcasts. By mid-decade, Americans in some cities could access cable TV, which offered even more channels. The quality of TV programming increased in the 1970s, and not just on PBS. In fact, the networks offered a number of intelligent, socially relevant shows. Still, most Americans preferred situation comedies (sitcoms) and detective shows. Sports also remained a popular preoccupation, especially for men, who could watch pro sports on TV all year long.

Music went through some exciting changes in the decade. Rock and roll continued to evolve, producing new variations such as punk rock, new wave, and heavy metal. Funk emerged as a uniquely African American musical form, and disco stole elements of funk and rock to create a popular music and dance craze.

The 1970s was in many ways a decade of fads and crazes. Whether in fashion (with bell-bottoms, hot pants, and mood rings), exercise (jogging, aerobics), play (pet rocks, video games), or dance (disco), Americans picked up new activities and products with abandon, and dropped them soon after.

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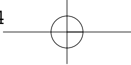

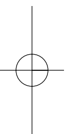

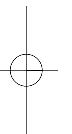

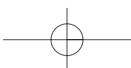

1970s

Fashion

Despite the bell-bottom and platform-shoe revival of the early 2000s, it is unlikely that anyone will remember the 1970s for the quality of its innovations in fashion. In fact, many of the favorite fashions of the 1970s are now remembered with humor. Hot pants, polyester leisure suits, and mood rings—what were they thinking?

The fashion excesses of the 1970s can be partially blamed on the widespread use of polyester. Clothing designers latched onto this fabric and offered Americans brightly colored knit shirts with a silky sheen, "wild" hot pants and miniskirts in an array of chemically enhanced colors, and comfortable leisure suits for wearing to the disco. The sheer novelty of the styles and colors drew people to the clothes, but it was not until the late 1970s that many realized just how ugly those clothes had become.

Novelty also explained the popularity of the mood ring. This ring, which registered the wearer's emotional state in the changing colors of the stone, became a jewelry fad in the 1970s. The 1970s did produce several important American designers, however. Both Calvin Klein (born Richard Klein, 1942–) and Ralph Lauren (born Ralph Lipschitz, 1939–) built their fashion empires in the polyester decade.

Hot Pants

Part of the flamboyant, sexually open style of fashion that produced the **miniskirt** (see entry under 1960s—Fashion in volume 4) in the 1960s, hot pants were dressy, ultra-short women's shorts made of a variety of fabrics from velvet to leather. The design of hot pants allowed them to be worn shorter than the shortest micro-miniskirt and still provide some degree of modesty.

Hot pants had been seen before, but they had been considered naughty and even a bit indecent, as they had mainly been worn by prostitutes and female nightclub performers. However, in the extravagantly flashy climate of the 1970s, many young

women wore the new fashion. Allegheny Airlines even made them part of its official flight attendants' uniform. Hot pants soon went out of style and are largely considered an embarrassing reminder of 1970s excess.

—Tina Gianoulis

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Ralph Lauren (1939–)

Ralph Lauren's fashion empire has sold an old-fashioned Anglo American style of clothing to an adoring public since 1967. In fact, the flagship store on Madison Avenue in New York City sells far more than just clothes. The "Polo" brand offers its devotees the dream of an upper middle-class past. The tweeds, tartans, polo shirts, and boat shoes that feature the brand name all belong to a more comfortable, leisured life than most Americans can afford. Fittingly, the peak of Lauren's fame came when he designed the wardrobe for Robert Redford (1937–) in the role of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (1974).

To make his enduring American style, Lauren (born Ralph Lipschitz) combines images of "new-world" adventure with "old-world" aristocracy. He is revered and sometimes mocked for his conservative designs, but Lauren has proved adept at creating clothes that express America's fantasies about itself. He also showed he could take a joke when he appeared as himself on ***Friends*** (see entry under 1990s—TV and Radio in volume 5) in 1999.

—Chris Routledge

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Leisure Suit

Fashionable during the 1970s, the leisure suit for men was a mainstream response to the casual dress style of the **hippie** (see

entry under 1960s—The Way We Lived in volume 4) movement. Made of **polyester** (see entry under 1970s—Fashion in volume 4) fabric, often in bright colors and plaids, the leisure suit consisted of pants and a matching jacket, styled with an open collared. The suits helped make men's fashion less conservative. The suits also were a forerunner of modern casual Fridays, when less formal clothes may be worn to the office.

The popular polyester leisure suit. *Lambert/Archive Photos, Inc. Reproduced by permission.*

Although leisure suits represented somewhat of a breakthrough in men's fashions, they were considered ridiculous by many conservatives and radicals alike. Since the 1970s, leisure suits have often been used as an example of a fashion mistake. However, the suits have left their mark on modern culture. The white leisure suit John Travolta (1954–) wore in the 1977 film ***Saturday Night Fever*** (see entry under 1970s—Film and Theater in volume 4) sold at auction in the mid-1990s for $145,000. Leisure-suit conventions, where men gather for competitions such as "Most Flammable Outfit," have become popular events. A series of computer games created in the late 1990s and early 2000s features Leisure Suit Larry as the hopelessly uncool hero, in adventures with titles like "Land of the Lounge Lizards."

—Tina Gianoulis

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A mood ring, popular in the mid-1970s. *Photograph by Dan Newell. Reproduced by permission of Leitha Etheridge-Sims.*

Mood Rings

Mood rings were just that—rings that indicated the mood of the person wearing it. At least that was the promise. Mood rings were one of the many fads that briefly captured people's attentions during the mid-1970s. But more than just a fad, they were a perfect symbol for the decade, a time when people looked inward to their own lives after a decade of social turmoil in the 1960s.

Mood rings were the invention of Joshua Reynolds. In the early 1970s, Reynolds got involved in a number of projects designed to help people discover their true feelings and understand their emotions better. Among these projects were biofeedback, which used a machine to monitor brain waves, and a meditation center called Q-Tran, which used the biofeedback machines. These projects did not work out, so Reynolds hit on the idea of producing small, inexpensive, and portable "mini-biofeedback" machines, which he called mood rings. They worked like this: small crystals in the rings would react to temperature and change colors. Warm temperatures produced bright colors, indicating a bright or happy mood. Cold temperatures caused dark colors, an indication of a dark mood. When Reynolds got the Faberge cosmetic company to back him and a press agent to promote the rings, they sold like crazy in 1975. Many people bought into the idea of mood rings and overlooked the fact that they changed colors based on temperature and not mood. Some celebrities were even seen wearing them, further enhancing their appeal to the public.

By the end of 1975, mood rings, like many fads, faded in popularity. It did not help matters that crystals in the rings turned permanently black after some time. Although they were certainly silly, they reveal the desire among many Americans in the 1970s to get in touch with their inner selves. The 1970s is often called the "Me" decade for this very reason. There were all kinds of personal enrichment programs and therapies

designed to help people discover themselves. Mood rings were simply one of the crazier, if harmless, ones.

—Timothy Berg

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Polyester

Like **nylon** (see entry under 1930s—Fashion in volume 2), polyester heralded a brave new world of fabrics and fashion after World War II (1939–45). Woven in bright colors and strange textures, polyester was the defining fabric of 1960s and 1970s fashion. As a result, when polyester went out of fashion in the late 1970s, it all but disappeared from view. Throughout the 1980s, polyester was something of a joke. Memories of the convenience of "wash and wear," minimal-iron shirts, were tinged with the shame of body odor and fashion tragedy. It was only with the rise of outdoor chic that polyester, in the form of polar fleece, garnered popularity again.

Polyester was the invention of two chemists working for the Calico Printers Association in England. J. T. Dickson and J. R. Winfield worked out a way to spin plastics made from petrochemicals. The DuPont company bought the patents in 1950, and the wonder fabric was launched. As the technology advanced, polyester was blended to make fabrics that looked and felt like cotton or wool. Although these copies were never very good, none of it mattered. In the 1960s and early 1970s, polyester was the height of cool suburban fashion. Flared slacks, knit shirts, and "pantsuits" graced the barbecue party, the workplace, and **malls** (see entry under 1950s—Commerce in volume 3).

By the late 1970s, polyester was everywhere. It flooded the market in such quantities that it lost its fashionable edge. When that happened, people began to notice that polyester made them sweat. Put politely, when everybody wore polyester, the atmosphere could become unpleasant. Polyester's status as the tackiest of fabrics was confirmed in 1981 when director John Waters (1946–) called one of his bad-taste films *Polyester.* In the 1990s, re-engineered and sold under the trade name Polartec, polyester made a comeback. Its light weight, and the fact that it does not