

The Occult Revival of the 1960s

“. . . popular culture is often a source for disseminating [esoteric] ideas that mainstream ‘high’ culture considers nonsense.” ~Gary Lachman (Rock musician and writer on occult/esoteric traditions.)

In the Western world, there have been two “occult revivals” in the modern era; the first occurred in the late 19th century (basically with Theosophy and spiritualism) and the second in the mid-20th century with the Counterculture of the 1960s.

The 1960s provide one of the clearest examples of popular culture acting as a vehicle for ideas that had previously circulated only within small mystical or occult circles (such as Rosicrucian and Freemason secret societies).

Many ancient and esoteric concepts entered mainstream consciousness through music, film, television, paperback publishing, and the

Counterculture movement.

It is significant here that there's a connection between occult/esoteric traditions and political change and, therefore, a connection with the popular counterculture of the 60s and political change. The fact is that the left-wing factions of secret societies, such as the premodern Rosicrucians and Freemasons and also modern Theosophical branches (in India), called for sweeping social reform. For instance, the Rosicrucians and Freemasons envisioned egalitarian utopias of universal brotherhood. The Theosophists agitated early on for Indian independence from the rule of the British Raj.

Furthermore, this covert political dimension of secret societies became completely overt when it was instituted as one of the biggest trade unions that agitated for workers rights in the late 19th century. This was "The Knights of Labor," originally named the "Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor," which was founded as a *secret society* (based on Freemasonry). It was a

significant labor organization, operating from 1869 to 1886 and eventually becoming public. It gained a great membership when it became involved with the famous Haymarket Affair that initiated the long struggle for the rights of workers. The Knights of Labor was known for its inclusive membership, encompassing skilled, unskilled, and semi-skilled workers, as well as immigrants, African Americans, and women. (There are images of the “Knights of Labor” on the GS’ “Beltane / May Day” webpage on the Tower of Song website, along with a link to read his “Knights of Labor and Secret Societies.” See this in the section entitled “Thematic Images for International Worker’s May Day.”)

Eastern Mysticism Through Popular Music

Perhaps the most famous example is the influence of The Beatles, especially through the interests of George Harrison. Their engagement with Indian spirituality helped introduce

millions of Western listeners to concepts such as:

- Meditation
- Karma
- Reincarnation
- Hindu philosophy
- Yoga

Hindu gurus, such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, became household names through their association with popular musicians.

Occultism and Alternative Spirituality

The decade also witnessed renewed interest in Western esoteric traditions:

- Astrology
- Tarot
- Alchemy
- Hermeticism
- Gnosticism
- Ceremonial magic

These subjects had long existed on the margins of society but increasingly appeared in underground magazines, album artwork, posters, and countercultural literature.

Works by occult writers (such as Madame Blavatsky, Arthur Edward Waite, Israel Regardie, and Aleister Crowley, who popularized “Magick”), once largely obscure outside occult circles, began reaching broader audiences.

Psychedelia and Ancient Wisdom

The psychedelic movement often framed altered states of consciousness as a recovery of forgotten spiritual knowledge, or “Ancient Wisdom.”

Intellectuals such as Aldous Huxley, who wrote on “Perennial Philosophy” and psychedelic experience, and the later psychedelic guru Timothy Leary, argued that psychedelics could

reveal truths similar to those found in ancient mystical traditions.

The visual culture of psychedelic posters and album covers frequently incorporated:

- Mandalas
- Sacred geometry
- Egyptian symbolism
- Hindu iconography
- Mystical visions

Jung, Myth, and the Collective Unconscious

The ideas of the depth-psychologist C. G. Jung gained wider circulation during the 1960s.

Concepts such as:

- Archetypes
- The collective unconscious
- Mythic symbolism

moved beyond academic psychology into popular discussions of art, spirituality, and

personal growth.

Science Fiction as Esoteric Transmission

Television and science fiction also played a role. Shows such as Star Trek explored themes that resonated with esoteric traditions:

- Cosmic unity
- Higher evolution
- Expanded consciousness
- Encounters with godlike beings
- Humanity's spiritual development

Such themes often echoed ancient Gnostic, Neoplatonic, or mystical ideas while appearing in a modern technological setting.

Why Popular Culture Was Effective

"High culture" institutions—universities, churches, and mainstream intellectual circles—often regarded many of these ideas as

irrational or fringe. Popular culture, however, had fewer gatekeepers.

A rock song, a psychedelic poster, a science-fiction episode, or a mass-market paperback could carry ideas that would never have appeared in conventional academic or religious discourse. As a result, millions encountered concepts such as reincarnation, mystical consciousness, archetypes, and occult symbolism not through formal study but through entertainment.

In this sense, 1960s popular culture functioned as a kind of cultural smuggling system: ancient and esoteric ideas entered the mainstream disguised as music, sci-fi novels, movies, and youth culture. The result was a profound revival of interests that had previously been confined to occult societies, religious specialists, and intellectual subcultures.