Special Memories
We Call the '70's

This decade's nostalgia is reflected in clothes, culture conservatism and youthful sexual 'scoring'

by Amitai Etzioni

Slow dance and touching. Big bands and dressing up—for tea parties, yet. A return to fraternities and sororities. The films Grease and American Graffiti. These are just some of the popular-culture signposts of the '70's. A long way from the "Rebellious '60's," much closer to the "Silent '50's."—the epitaph for the current era might be the "Rehashing '70's," a decade preoccupied with the past, a revival of the tunes, themes and togas of yesteryear. And not a simple return, like resetting the clock once spring and summer have passed by; the earmark of the '70's is a prettied-up, nostalgic turning back to selected attractions of past decades. Grease and American Graffiti, and TV's Happy Days and Laverne & Shirley, are prime exhibits. High school boys compulsively preoccupied with "scoring" and with cars (no one anxious to succeed in business or worrying about college entrance exams in this bunch); girls obsessed with curlers, catching a mate, and the boys' cars (no women athletes, potential scientists or executives in the lot). Greased hair, in another era, was viewed as plain uncouth. But in these highly popular movies and shows, and in their hit songs, that slice of America's past is served up with glowing affection and merriment: "What a super way of life we let slip away...."

The catchword is revival. The death of Elvis Presley, some might suggest, helped the revival of rock 'n' roll. But the Beatles did not die; they just disbanded. The '70's, to bring back their music, created Beatlemania, featuring a substitute band playing the old tunes with the old sound—but without the vigor of the original cast. Modern music is turning away from electronic sounds to older, more melodious and less dissonant tunes.

An affectionate account of Jewish New York in earlier decades, Irving Howe's The World of Our Fathers, was a best-seller. And the greatest TV audience of the decade followed an historical tale about American blacks—and unleashed what might be considered the most symptomatic cultural movement of the '70's: the search for roots, for family chronicles. Archives have since been flooded with Americans of all races digging up their pasts; a spate of how-to-find-your-roots guidebooks has inundated the market; and, of course, there was TV's Roots if the quest is not so much for historical accuracy as it is for a positive self-definition and identity, derived from selectively calling up the past. "My forefather fought in the Civil War.... was the mayor of our town," or whatever) rather than from a rosy vision of the future. "We will be free, equal and affluent." Such a trend, as this sociologist sees it, fits in well with the society of the '70's, which is less interested in achievement, progress and "making it," and more preoccupied with rediscovering a compelling sense of value. The comedy of the '70's is represented by Steve Martin: "You know, I'm a wild and crazy guy.... the kind of guy who might like to do ammething.... at anytime... to drink champagne at 3 a.m., or maybe.... at 4 a.m., eat a live chipmunk.... or maybe even.... WEAR TWO SOCKS ON ONE FOOT." In the '60's, no one would ever have brought the house down with such clean, "white" humor. No alienation or need to be relevant. No political bite of a Mort Sahl or a Dick Gregory. No daredevil, penetrating abuses of a Lenny Bruce. Instead, it's a throwback to vaudeville, slapstick and the sheer fun of a Bob Hope or Jerry Lewis.

The turnback of the '70's reflects a sentimental longing for days gone by, a feeling which finds its most visible expression in television shows set in the 1950's, revival of old Broadway musicals, a rage for the cheap oak furniture mass-produced in the early 1900's, clothing styles that veer back to the 1920's or 1930's. A run on Mickey Mouse watches.... "observed Anthony Brandt in The Atlantic Monthly.

The "retread culture" of the '70's was attacked as "a form of parasitism... a throwback to vaudeville..... a run on Mickey Mouse.. . ," by Robert Blustein, director of Harvard's Loeb Drama Center, who sees it as a reflection of the current conservative mood. "A nation which always looked forward is now in the process of looking backward, with considerable longing for the real or imagined comforts of the past." Instead of venturing into new forms and themes, he laments, audiences of the '70's seek the coziness of the familiar. "as if they wished to escape from contemporary difficulties into the more reassuring territory of the habitual and the known...." continued