



At school dances like the Winter Whirl, students heartily enjoyed themselves and listened to popular music.

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1974.

# “When I Was Your Age...”:

## FIFTY YEARS OF TRENDS AT MILBY

By Lia Amieva Mejia

Here’s a fun fact: Teenagers have attended Charles H. Milby High School since before “teenagers” existed. Of course, people between the ages of thirteen and nineteen existed long before Milby’s founding in 1926. Even the caveman was, at one point, a cave adolescent.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the 1940s, however, that Americans – and especially U.S. advertisers – recognized that they constituted a distinct type of person and subsequently coined the term “teenager.” The change began during the Great Depression when a majority of American teenagers started attending high school rather than entering the workforce where jobs were scarce. Thus, they spent more time with peers and less time under adult supervision. Moreover, the post-World War II economic boom of the forties meant more young people could afford the latest fashions; and when rock and roll hit in the fifties, music became a permanent part of this new teen culture.<sup>2</sup>

Just as Milby High School is part of the East End’s history, teen culture is part of Milby’s history. While teen culture includes almost everything involved with “fitting in,” the focus here is on music, fashion, and gathering spots popular with Milby students between 1950 and 2000 based on a survey of thirty Milby alumni who attended between 1950 and 2014, school yearbooks, and research on national trends.<sup>3</sup>

### Music

The advent of rock and roll in the 1950s was a game changer for music. Sam Phillips, who produced records by icons like Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley, argued that the audience, not the music, made the genre innovative. Radios had become more affordable and commonplace in vehicles, giving teens access to a new world of music that their parents neither understood nor accepted.<sup>4</sup> This marked the first time teenagers had the market influence to independently sustain a musical genre, and radio DJs happily connected audiences nationwide with the upstarts leading this exciting new style.

Adults were horrified by the suggestive lyrics and exuberant styles, and fear rose that the music might bridge the gap between Black and White teens. In fact, for many it did. In 2010, *Houston History* editor Joe Pratt described how “the music of Little Richard and Chuck Berry and the amazing sound of Ray Charles” playing on Beaumont radio during his teens in the sixties encouraged him to question the alleged superiority of Whites in Jim Crow era Southeast Texas. As a result, Pratt remembered, “A division grew steadily between my parents and me.”<sup>5</sup>

In the sixties, rock and roll, shortened to rock, rebounded after a brief downturn and showed itself to be more radical than parents had feared in the 1950s. First, for many teens,



*The Beatles took the music world by storm in 1964. Here, three Milby students play the band's music for singing Valentines.*

*Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1964.*

came the British Invasion led by The Beatles, who appeared at the Sam Houston Coliseum in downtown Houston in 1965.<sup>6</sup> Teenagers became so struck with Beatlemania that the group remains a touchstone for popular music today.

In 1965, the Rolling Stones hit America with a blues-influenced sound that revived the sex, drugs, and chaos in an industry dominated by sanitized major label acts. At the tail end of the sixties, a variety of subgenres emerged, illustrated by comparing the survey responses from two Milby alumni who graduated two years apart. The 1965 alum, Sandy, listed acts like Frankie Avalon, Paul Anka, and Chubby Checker – safe, “teenybopper” artists – alongside The Beatles. The later graduate, Roger Shoffit, listed the psychedelic and hard rock supergroups Cream and Houston’s The Moving Sidewalks, two members of which founded ZZ Top. Pioneering psychedelic rock band 13<sup>th</sup> Floor Elevators emerged as a major player, based on responses from Shoffit and 1972 graduate Tom Broughton. While hard rock kept gathering steam, the biggest artists remained on the pop and soft rock side of the spectrum. Respondents mentioned James Taylor, Rod Stewart, and Elton John, alongside bands like Fleetwood Mac and Chicago.

Common in the South, country music remained popular, and a 1977 graduate fondly reminisced it played on the school cafeteria jukebox along with rock. A few years later, country music had a revival thanks to the 1980 John Travolta film *Urban Cowboy*, which was filmed in Pasadena, just east of Milby, and choreographed by Houstonian Patsy Swayze.<sup>7</sup> Another Travolta movie, 1977’s *Saturday Night Fever*, popularized disco music nationally and at Milby – so much so that Patricia Davila, who graduated that same year, recalled it being part of the disco dance scene at school.

Teen music in the eighties was defined not by genre but by a cable channel – MTV. Music Television (MTV) launched on August 1, 1981, with the Buggles’ song “Video Killed the Radio Star,” permanently changing the music industry.<sup>8</sup> Teens could not get enough of the music videos, and their preferences also diversified – students jammed to Van Halen and Phil Collins just as happily as they did George Strait and Cyndi Lauper. Pop stars like Madonna and Michael Jackson reached new fame, while rock music got bigger and louder

thanks to the rise of glam, hair metal, and heavy metal. Hip-hop also hit the scene in the early eighties, though, as noted by Dr. Donald R. Williams who attended Milby from 1981 to 1983, the lyrics had “no cursing back in those days.”

Nineties teens rejected the excess of the eighties. A 1993 yearbook spread, entitled “What’s Hot and What’s Not” illustrates how Milby matched national trends – the “Hot” musicians included artists like Pearl Jam, Mariah Carey, and Metallica, while the “Not” list featured eighties legends Def Leopard, Vanilla Ice, and Paula Abdul. Hip-hop exploded, spawning subgenres such as Houston’s chopped and screwed. Teens also loved R&B, and part of that boom included Houston’s Destiny’s Child, which propelled Third Ward native Beyoncé to superstardom.

Tejano music had been big since the beginning of the decade, according to Dora, a 1991 alumna, thanks largely to Texas native Selena Quintanilla, who cemented her place in Houston history with her iconic performance at the Astrodome a month before her untimely death in 1995.<sup>9</sup> In Texas, and especially at Milby, teens were way ahead of the curve.

## Fashion

By the late forties, teen fashions gradually diverged from those worn by adults. Dona Fowler Hughes, class of 1950, remembers penny loafers, scarves, and pearl earrings as the height of style in her time at Milby, which is borne out by a glimpse at the yearbook. The bobby-soxer style, typified by girls wearing white ankle socks instead of “adult” stockings, was arguably the first distinctly teenage style and is visible in roughly half the club yearbook photos from 1950.<sup>10</sup> As the fifties progressed, girls based their styles on a softer version of Dior’s New Look and fitted bodices, leading to huge circle skirts ruling for much of the decade.

In the early sixties, the rise of “street style” meant teenagers had more options, and they represented a major consumer demographic that dictated which fads dominated the market.



*While country music and “kicker” fashion styles had been a mainstay in the South for some time, they gained general popularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s.*

*Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1977.*



*The male students standing in line in 1957 resemble students from the 1950s to now. But the girls' outfits mix the bobby-soxer look introduced in the forties with the Dior-inspired full-skirts of teens in the fifties.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1957.

Photographs from the 1963 yearbook show a greater variety of styles.<sup>11</sup> By the end of the 1960s, the loose, straight-cut sack dress eclipsed other styles as the most popular among Milby girls, often paired with gravity-defying bouffant hairdos. Clothing trends for boys changed slowly, but many boys started growing their hair longer until parents and school faculty, adamant about adhering to the dress code, made them cut it.

In the early 1970s, HISD relaxed its dress codes significantly. Thus the 1972 Milby yearbook depicts multiple boys – including the sophomore winner of Most Popular – with hair down to their shoulders, which a 1972 graduate explained was a distinguishing feature between clean-cut kickers and more freewheeling surfers. That same yearbook showcases many girls in pants or mid-thigh length skirts, which multiple 1970 HISD graduates remember being forbidden during their school years.<sup>12</sup>

Middle-class teens in the eighties enjoyed more spending power than ever before and flaunted their name brand clothing – one of the two trends that lasted the entire decade.<sup>13</sup> Maurelda Hernandez Elliott, a 1982 graduate, recalled that “1981-82 was very ‘preppy’”; students went wild for Izod, Polo, Bass, and Gloria Vanderbilt. Afterwards, thanks in part to MTV, students began to dress in fashions tied to their favorite styles of music. Sneakers, especially Nike Air Jordans, became a way to stay comfortable in style, while those who wanted to add an edge to their look went for Dr. Martens. Designer jeans, first introduced by Gloria Vanderbilt in 1976, were also a major trend at Milby throughout the decade.

The other consistent trend, particularly for girls, was “BIG hair, like BIG,” in the words of 1986 graduate Diana Vasquez. All the survey respondents from the decade echoed the same sentiments, and four of the twelve specifically mentioned Aquanet brand hairspray. Some boys depended on Aquanet, although their styles – which included Jheri curls, mullets,



*The dresses girls wore in 1968 are radically different than those in the 1950s. The looser straight cuts meant girls were free of petticoats, and they could choose to skip the shapewear.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1968.

rattails, and Mohawks – were usually less voluminous or relied on gel. Vasquez remembered that Madonna and Cyndi Lauper “created most fashion then,” and heavily accessorizing each outfit became an important part of matching the styles they set.

The New Wave era brought in skinny ties, oversized blazers, and neon colors, while metal fans tended to show their tastes with simple concert tees. Vickie Tamayo mentioned the trend for dancewear including off-the-shoulder sweatshirts and cited the movie *Flashdance* as an inspiration. Another alum named checkerboard Vans as a fad – the shoes taking off nationally thanks to the teen comedy *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*.<sup>14</sup>

Teens in the nineties continued to look to music videos for fashion inspiration. Grunge made the subgenre’s unofficial uniform – plaid flannel shirts and torn up jeans – popular among teens, though hip-hop really influenced them.<sup>15</sup> Oversized streetwear, such as t-shirts, sports jerseys, and jeans, were popular and often worn with Jordans and baseball caps. Later in the decade, girls pursued more feminine looks, with baby tees and slip dresses over plain t-shirts. Going into the 2000s, alumna Samantha Thrasher Briggs looks back on

*Prior to 1971, HISD required boys to keep their hair short. Once given the choice, they quickly went with the trends, as seen with this boy whose hair falls to his shoulders.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1975.





*Park Place Baptist Church often held events for Milby students over the years. Though the church has since relocated its services to Pearland, the old building continues to serve its community as a school for theological studies.*

Photo courtesy of the Florida Baptist Historical Society.

low-rise jeans and puka shell necklaces as essential accessories for students entering the new millennium.

### Places to Hang Out

In the forties, cities introduced teen canteens, inspired by military bases. These free clubs, generally attached to community centers, churches, YMCAs, or parks, kept teenagers out of trouble. They offered safe, adult-approved entertainment such as juke boxes, dancing (with restrictions to keep the dancing decent), and soft drinks.<sup>16</sup> Carol Lynn Russ Peters (1959-62) recalls the Mason Park Teen Canteen being popular with Milby students well after the war.

In the fifties and sixties, more and more teens either had cars or had friends who did. Going out to eat after school became a favorite activity. In the early days, the Ranger Drive-In was a popular choice, as were the local Dairy Queen and the Icee on Telephone Road.



*Prior to the 1971 graduating class, HISD prohibited girls wearing pants to school unless the temperatures were below freezing, nor did the district allow skirts more than an inch above the knee. By 1977, flared pants, short skirts, rope purses, and patterned shirts were in style in and out of school.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, 1977.

In the later sixties and early seventies, hippie culture trickled down from San Francisco to Milby Park on Galveston Road. A self-described “goodie two-shoes” from the class of 1972 identified the park as the place to go for students who wanted to enjoy the free concerts or perhaps experiment with LSD or marijuana – though it is important to note that most students stayed on the relatively straight and narrow. Students who wanted to stay away from that scene opted for Gulfgate Mall, Prince’s Drive-in, or Pizza Hut instead. Former Milby COED Cadettes also spoke nostalgically about after-school visits to Soundwaves, a local record shop that they recalled was always packed with students eager to buy the latest records and cassettes.<sup>17</sup>

In the eighties, Dow and Reveille Parks replaced Milby Park as the teen favorite, and Park Place Baptist Church started hosting events for any Milby student who wanted to attend, regardless of religious beliefs. Unlike the prior decades, one restaurant stood out as the clear favorite among Milby alumni – Spanky’s Pizza. Gulfgate Mall remained a mainstay, and one alum even mentioned a specific place inside Milby – an open area between a staircase and a large window called “the chill spot” that served as a warm reminder of the strong community presence both outside and inside the school’s walls.

— • —

Today, the new Milby campus blends the old and new construction, and the students who fill its halls look to the “Y2K” era for retro fashions while discussing trending TikToks. As the school looks forward to its centennial, it is worth taking a moment to remember the days when Milby girls broke new

ground in fashion by wearing ankle socks and boys scandalized parents and teachers with their love of Chuck Berry. **HH**

**Lia Amieva Mejia** is a 2024 graduate of the University of Houston with a degree in history and Spanish. She has a passion for history and translation that she is excited to continue exploring in the future.



*From 1935 until 1990, Prince’s Hamburgers drive-ins, with their signature carhops, remained a popular fixture in Houston for young people and families. It was not uncommon to drive by a location and see it filled to the brim with customers.*

Photo available on the Internet in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107.