

(RECKONING)

Comes a time in every man's life when he realizes that wearing ironic T-shirts, sporting asymmetrical haircuts, and listening to noise rock is no longer appropriate (or enjoyable). Dan Kennedy has reached that point—and he couldn't be happier



* WHY I'M COOL (WITH BEING UNCOOL)

I OFFICIALLY GIVE UP. For the past twenty or so years, I have spent far too much time and money doing things that I thought made me cool. I read vaguely liberal weeklies in cafés, looking like I wanted to be left alone. I listened to ska for a while, insisting that so-called pop music bored me. I purchased several \$375 shirts from British boutiques. I even highlighted my hair, hoping to look a little more rock 'n' roll. After all this, I've come to only one conclusion: I'm tired. I'm folding, or whatever they say in poker, which I never learned how to play >>>

and which has gotten very cool lately. Does folding mean quitting?

I'm not going to lie—all those years spent aligning myself with hipster culture did win me the company of a few attractive women. The girls I met were usually cute, charismatic community-college narcissists who subsisted on plain yogurt and pots of brown rice and beans. They lived like pretty hobos who had developed seductive traits like stubbing out their Camel Lights at the halfway point in an attempt to ration them. When I wasn't busy courting these women, I spent my time drinking beer in local clubs where I knew the doormen or standing around at small house parties, bashfully reaching into some friend of a friend's fridge for cans of beer, summoning the confidence to seem unaware of the fact that I'd brought none with me. Slower nights consisted of renting movies and staying in. And here's where the effort really started to kick in. There was nothing more secretly heartbreaking and difficult to pull off than acting excited to be walking out of the local video store with Fellini's *8½* or a Noam Chomsky documentary while leaving behind a copy of the evidently less hip *Beverly Hills Cop* or *Stripes* on the comedy shelf.

When I'd get home, I'd usually watch intently at first, trying to feel brilliant and, above all, very interested and very clear on just how compelling the film was. But within fifteen minutes, I'd inevitably be thinking, *Damn it. There's something about this that I'm just not getting. Watch harder! Come on, let's do this!* Another fifteen minutes and all I could think was, *Jesus, Noam Chomsky, we get it: You feel that the profit-and-loss economics of mass media drives a biased agenda. Would it kill you to incorporate a hilarious detective from Detroit acting like a flamboyant gay man in order to get into a fancy Beverly Hills restaurant, genius?*

Fact is, with the exception of Rollerblading and college, I've tried just about every cultural movement of my generation on for size, but they never really fit. I tried to rock a more punk look and had a three-quarter-length black leather jacket that, for reasons I can't explain, I always wore with a white V-neck T-shirt and a black beanie. I sort of looked like Joe Pesci when he breaks into Macaulay Culkin's house in *Home Alone*. I tried to hang with that whole grunge scene, but somehow, when I rocked the flannel shirt and boots, I wound up looking like a handyman with a steady gig at a cozy bed-and-breakfast.

Right around the time the Seattle scene was on its way down, I got the first inkling that I didn't have many shots at being cool left in me—I wasn't going to get up, dust myself off, and try much more. One night I was standing in a club, pretending to look like I "get it" as Thurston Moore from Sonic Youth played a solo gig by rubbing his guitar back and forth on a metal folding chair. In

Being the hippest adult on the block is a long road paved with 40-year-old guys who talk about this month's band and **dads who still get high.**

the middle of this perfect storm of screeching, I realized I wanted my \$20 back. Not that I was counting, but it was probably the 2,408th time I'd been standing somewhere like this, attempting to convince myself and a stranger in my peripheral vision that I was really into what was going on. It was also suddenly pretty hard to ignore that I had arrived at an age where the 21- and 22-year-olds at the show were, well, way younger than I was. Instead of pretending to understand what Thurston was doing onstage, my attention shifted to how much my feet hurt. My back was just on fire. Putting on a good show for well over a decade had taken its toll. Going out to gigs like this one; ironically drinking cheap canned beer in well-worn dives with people who brag about not having televisions; acting interested in really broad discussions about foreign policy with stoned record-store clerks; making a point of ignoring cute girls in hopes of getting their attention while trying to convey the vibe that I was more intense than their boyfriend—it got to be a full-time job. It started to feel a lot like punching the clock. And was this job ever going to get any easier?

Now, this isn't the sort of message I'd ever deliver to the kids out there, and saying what I'm about to say won't get me a lot of spoken-word gigs at South by Southwest or Sundance, but here goes: Being driven by pop culture is painful past age 30...for everybody. And by everybody, I mean you, me, and the loved ones, coworkers, passersby—all who bear witness to one's aging and belabored bid to remain on the so-called cutting edge.

Mustering the determination to be the hippest adult on the block is a long road paved with dads and uncles who still get high and 40-year-old guys who talk about this month's band with conviction instead of a simple note of interest. Riding that road for too long brings to mind a saying about being a motorcycle rider: There are two kinds of riders, one who has crashed, and one who hasn't yet. I rode a motorcycle for a summer when I was 28 and have always felt lucky to have sold it before ever having crashed. But Christ, I'm 39 now, and I've officially hit a wall.



GETTING OUT wasn't easy. If you've been buying the myth of cool as long as I have, you're not going to spend twenty years pursuing it and then get out clean overnight. It required patience. Each day was punctuated by a thousand tiny decisions that



*SIX THINGS I'M TOTALLY (UN)COOL WITH

I used to pretend to hate these things. Now I love them without shame.

JACKSON BROWNE'S *HOLD OUT*. The one album that even actual Jackson Browne fans seem to steer clear of.

"PHOTOGRAPH," BY DEF LEPPARD. If you can listen to the *Pyromania* album without getting chills, you might as well be doing contract hits for the Mob, because you are incapable of feeling.

CAMPING. Guess what that bear over there doesn't give a shit about? Your brilliant blog.

THE FOOD NETWORK. I'll know I've made it when I get invited to a weekend barbecue at Bobby Flay's place. Mario Batali is there. I walk in and he's like, "Hey, dude, good to see you!"

CHEERS. No, not the quasi-British workplace e-mail salutation that 26-to-42-year-old males in khakis seem prone to. I'm talking about my favorite TV show, which was apparently "in" about twenty-three years ago.

BOSOM BUDDIES. The days before Tom Hanks was a box-office staple designed to make financially solvent city people weep in earnest. —D.K.

seemed simple but carried a lot of weight. For example:

Moment: Should I get those black-and-red skull Vans that the 16-year-old guy on the skateboard was wearing downtown last night?

Tiny decision: When my dad was my age, he had a mortgage, a wife, a 16-year-old daughter, and a 10-year-old son. No, I will not go for the Vans.

Some of the tiny decisions were less painful than ever before, thanks to the anonymity of online shopping. Up until music became something you got on the Internet in the privacy of your own home, buying the first Boston album meant facing the impossibly skinny record-store clerk with spiked hair. The video store was no longer

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a place where I left my favorite movies on the shelf. Instead, I simply hit up Netflix, clicked on *Elf*, clicked on *Tootsie*, clicked on *Old School*, *Stripes*, *Groundhog Day*, *Caddyshack*... Ah, the pleasure of *not* having my head X-rayed by the brainy, judgmental stare of a 23-three-year-old video-store clerk with chunky black glasses.

After a few years of daily victories like these, after years of not spending all my time and money and energy doing what I thought I was supposed to in order to be cool, I noticed that I had more time and money and energy. Dull as all the little changes were, things started to get interesting when I had the opportunity to figure out what I actually like. I enjoy writing, it turns out. I like traveling and do it constantly. I've had the same girlfriend for eight years. I have a real couch. I have a real bed. I couldn't tell you the name of one member of Clap Your Hands Say Yeah. I have no interest in trading my skis for a snowboard. And nowhere in my apartment will you find weed stashed in a sad little wooden box that I bought in Oregon when I was 26.

I also gained an important piece of insight: I've seen enough people come and go. I've watched more than enough flavors of the month melt in the sun and run off. That really hot, tattooed, devil-doll chick from the last city you lived in? The one with the penchant for fast cars and sex in public places? She finally went into rehab, got married, and now owns a house on forty acres and an inn in Vermont. Even the lead singer from that postpunk band you loved back then, the one who wrote those anthems about doing nothing with your life because it was more fun? You find out everyone in the band bought mansions after that record came out. Meanwhile, you're 39 and still renting. It's right about then that you realize it never really mattered what strangers thought of you. Personally, I realized that these strangers don't even exist—these people in my peripheral vision I'm convinced might notice anything from my nose-hair trimmer to my shame-spiral-inducing iPod playlists, these phantom judges I've been striving to impress: hip-looking strangers on sidewalks, anonymous peers at gigs in dive clubs, and girls who watched Fellini films. How much of my life so far had I lived for them? How much cumulative time was I never going to get back?

There definitely were moments in the process of becoming uncool—bumps in the road, you might say—that were a little tricky. I bought a rain jacket, for instance. This might seem small, but after thousands of rainy days spent getting thoroughly soaked in thrift-store jackets, I came in from the storm and bought a coat that—get this—*kept me from getting wet in the rain*. There is probably nothing less

hip than a \$300 Patagonia rain jacket the color of eucalyptus (um, green). And I will be perfectly honest with you and admit that, yes, I did get a little carried away and bought rain boots, too. Okay, and some black Gortex pants. A rain suit, if you will. The first time I realized that I had to walk across town in a New York City rainstorm that I was actually prepared for, this little panic of a thought raced through my head: *Jesus, am I just ten years away from being that crazy old guy riding around town in shorts and black dress socks with twenty little pinwheels and a CB radio affixed to the handlebars of a three-wheel bicycle?*

Maybe this was an embarrassing road I was headed down, even worse than the 40-year-old-wanting-to-be-young direction I was headed in. Maybe I should be worried. But man, even contemplating it for a minute became exhausting. The truth is, I stopped humoring the voice that told me to stay young and started to face a startling truth: It's not always about me. That is to say, relax—nobody notices the rain suit.



SO I'M FINALLY, confidently, ready to remove the word *guilty* from the phrase *guilty pleasure*.

Watch this.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am willing to admit publicly, right now, that currently, I sincerely, without hipster irony, love falling asleep most nights to a sweet, strong cocktail of Steely Dan, Joe Jackson, and Supertramp.

That felt pretty good. Okay, I'll do another one...

I love the Southwestern Lobster Roll appetizer at Red Lobster. I love to have it with a Diet Coke for dinner. Last night when I was at the Lob, they were playing "Africa" by Toto on the restaurant's sound system, and I was eating at the bar alone, enjoying it all. Loving it.

Yes! This feels awesome.

I think Ghostbusters, The Wedding Singer, and L.A. Story are pitch-perfect classic American comedies. And I never liked Ingmar Bergman. There. I said it.

I think I'd been carrying that last one around for a while. Okay, let's see...

While I respect your diligence in listening to and pledging your allegiance to your suddenly new favorite band, Clap Your Hands on the Supersonic Chemical Death Cab, lately I'm sticking to Rush for the fast songs and "Eyes Without a Face" by Billy Idol for the slow jam.

Okay, reader, now you! You say one!

[Long pause.]

Hey, you do one!

Okay?

Hello?



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