



CHAPTER 1

The Birth of the Cool—A 101 Primer

For anything or anyone to be thought of as *cool*, they have to have two things going for them: first, they have to be imbued with the rebel spirit, and second, they have to be unique when compared with the norm of the day. They then, of course, must be exposed to the widest possible audience, who will publicly or secretly aspire to be like them, or who want to be associated with them. As Richard McDonald, FMIC's senior vice president of marketing, instills in us, everyone is an individual—so the first thing we do to express that individuality is to find others who share the same interests as us. A paradox? Not at all, because in that group will be the born leaders who will show us the way to individual expression. In other words, their guidance bestows upon us something to emulate or to associate with. People, places, and things can have a powerful influence on our lifestyles and buying habits, so brands associated with them can also be perceived as having the *Cool Factor*. Simply put, coolness by association.



According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*,¹ we find the origin of the word from the Middle English *cole*, from the Old English *cōl*. It typically appears as an adjective: *What a cool ride*. But it can also be an adverb: *Play it cool*; a transitive verb: *Cool your jets*; an intransitive verb: *Take a break and cool off*; and a noun: *Keep your cool*.

Even though jazz music in the mid-1940s used the word to describe the notion that cool jazz was an emotional detachment (as opposed to the hot jazz of the preceding era), it probably first appeared as a title in Charlie Parker's *Cool Blues*,² released in 1947. I would like to mark the launch of the word in popular vernacular with the 1949–1950 recording of the landmark Miles Davis recording *Birth of the Cool*³ (on which Charlie Parker appeared as well). That was Miles's statement on cementing a new direction in his music and it gives us—for the sake of argument—a perfect starting point. Even though it also appeared in Leonard Bernstein's musical *West Side Story*, its popularity as an often-used slang expression didn't come into its own until the 1960s.⁴

There were many other slang words that were just as popular in their respective eras: the 1940s gave us *crazy*; and, in addition to *cool*, the 1950s also gave us *neat*. The 1960s were well, *groovy*, and the 1970s were *rad*. In the 1980s, your street cred showed when you used *bad* to mean *good*, and in the 1990s everything cool was *def*. For better or worse, those decades also created *hot*, *fab*, *far out*, *snazzy*, *slick*, *totally tubular*, *tight*, *sweet*, *awesome*, *hip*, and *hep*. I have been trying to find a similar word to mark this decade but so far all I can come up with is *cool*. We have come full circle from The Bird and Miles when rapper Lupe Fiasco, known for his cutting-edge fashion to go along with his music, released his late 2007 CD, *The Cool*.⁵ Use any of the other slang expressions and you would painfully date yourself. Think of the embarrassment that would ensue if your marketing director said

at a top-level meeting, “Gee, your marketing campaign is *groovy!* Let’s get the boys in the art department to come up with some *neat* graphics and we’ll get ready for launch.” Simply substitute the word *cool* for *groovy* and *neat* and your marketing director becomes suddenly, well, very cool. I have been at high-level entertainment meetings where the word *cool* is bandied back and forth as everyone nods assurances.



I am not a professor of linguistics, but even if I were, I don’t think I could find a suitable explanation for why this word has remained in our everyday lingo for more than 50 years without anyone having tired of it. In fact, instead of dating us, using *cool* makes us appear extremely contemporary as we demonstrated in the preceding marketing director’s language example. Even dating back to its usage in Black English, it has had a positive connotation. If I had to guess, I would say that it’s a one-size-fits-all word that can be used anytime someone wants to convey positivity so that the person using it knows that the listener knows exactly what the speaker means.

Okay, better to use examples. On New Year’s Day, the TV commentator on the Rose Bowl Parade telecast kept saying, “Now, here’s a cool float.” Later that day, the anchor on the evening news gave us “a cool new way to ring in the New Year,” and after that segment, his co-anchor added, “Cool.” The *Los Angeles Times* described the difference in Radiohead’s “In Rainbows”⁶ release on the Internet as a pay-what-you-want download, and the retail store release as having the bonus content, which consisted of little more than “some cool stickers.”⁷ You can do your own unscientific research like I did if you’d like, but I think you get the point.

So how about this concept? We need to rein in the usage of the word for the purpose of this book or we may get to the

point of referring to everything as cool, which we know by definition cannot be so. If something or someone who we can all agree is cool, however, the main point is figuring out how that factor can be transferred to something or someone else. For example, most agree that Steve McQueen is the quintessential cool guy. In fact, his motorcycle-riding, Nazi-antagonizing character Captain Hilts in the movie, *The Great Escape*,⁸ was nicknamed “The Cooler King”—pun definitely intended. From his first starring role in a TV series, *Wanted Dead or Alive*,⁹ throughout the rest of his career, Steve continued to reestablish his credentials as one of the kings of cool through well-chosen roles like Bullitt¹⁰ in the film of the same name, which featured one of the greatest car chases in film history with Steve barreling up and down the streets of San Francisco in a hot-rodded Mustang. McQueen still transfers that image today to products like the Swiss watchmaker Tag Hauer with its “Steve McQueen Monaco Edition”¹¹ even though he died almost 30 years ago. Even in rock music, Sheryl Crow wrote a tribute song to him titled, what else, “Steve McQueen.”¹² The song’s music video featured scenes from his best-known movies and went on to become a theme song for NASCAR.¹³ So transferring the equity of a star like Steve McQueen to a product does work, but we can’t just limit ourselves to rebel-type action stars.



What about the seemingly unhip occupation of politician? Today’s politicians have no problem tapping the hottest celebrities and musicians to boost their campaigns. However, I personally don’t think we have had a cool president since John F. Kennedy because today’s candidates have to be careful not to stray outside the public’s comfort zone. But for one night in June 1992, Bill Clinton was able to show some cool when he appeared on

Arsenio Hall's late-night talk show during his presidential bid, donning Blues Brothers'-style Ray-Ban shades and somewhat adequately blow sax on "Heartbreak Hotel" and "God Bless the Child." That appearance marked a major uptick in his image for younger voters and women in particular and also spiked Arsenio's ratings to 5.4 million viewers.¹⁴ That worked so well because, relatively speaking, it was quite cutting edge for a presidential candidate at the time.

It may be wrong to think that image doesn't still resonate the same today, or maybe it's due to his reputation for philandering, but in a recent *Playboy* magazine poll, 58 percent of the respondents thought Bill Clinton was the sexiest president of the past 40 years (former actor and president Ronald Reagan was second with 22 percent). It looks like women will always dig entertainers. That did not carry over, unfortunately, to former Republican governor of Arkansas and 2008 presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who had occasionally been seen strapping on an electric bass to perform at election primary rallies. One of the reasons is that unless you are a lead-singing bassist dripping with charisma like Paul McCartney or Sting, bass is just not as cool as a front man's instrument like the guitar or saxophone. Trust me, I know, because I was a professional bass player for many years and I chose the instrument because there was always someone better than me on guitar in the band.

Barack Obama was the first presidential candidate since JFK to have actually achieved the type of adulation usually reserved for rock stars. Besides possessing good looks and a great speaking voice, Obama was able to tap into an emotional and spiritual connection with his audience, not unlike so many great rock stars. The type of fervor his dramatic speeches garnered drew comparisons to the type of reactions elicited by gospel preachers. It's no surprise that many of our greatest soul singers—Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, Tina Turner, and Al Green, just to name a few—all got their start in church singing gospel praises of the Lord.

The association between rock music and cool goes back to the early pioneers in the Fifties. With their antiestablishment stances purveyed through their “jungle beats,” coupled with rebellious (“Roll over Beethoven,” “Jailhouse Rock”), sexual (“Tutti Frutti,” “Rock Me All Night Long”), and downright peculiar (“Be-Bop-a-Lula,” “You ain’t nothing but a Hound Dog,” “Don’t you step on my Blue Suede Shoes”) lyrics; and accentuated by sneers and outrageous clothes and hairstyles—you had the makings on one giant “up yours” to the placid Eisenhower postwar decade. No wonder teenagers embraced it, since we know that anything our parents warn us is dangerous is precisely what we want. David Letterman even created a catchphrase for his late night show when he wants to proclaim his coolness—“I am rock ’n’ roll.”

Speaking of 1950s clothing, the black leather motorcycle jacket worn by Marlon Brando’s character, Johnny Strabler, in *The Wild One*¹⁵ and his badass motorcycle gang, the Black Rebels Motorcycle Club¹⁶ symbolized the rebel coolness many of that era aspired to. From Gene Vincent and Elvis to the Hamburg-era Silver Beatles, donning a black leather biker jacket announced to the world that you were *bad*. When I was in school, we referred to our leather-clad schoolmates as *greasers* because of the massive amount of Brylcreem (“A Little Dab’ll Do Ya”) in their hair to get that pompadour just right. In the United Kingdom of the 1950s, they were known as Teds (short for *Teddy boys*) and in the 1960s as *rockers*. Even the parody that actor Henry Winkler created for his leather-jacketed character, Fonzie, in the retro-1950s TV sitcom “Happy Days,” was, in a word, cool, as confirmed in this dialogue from *Pulp Fiction*¹⁷ between Samuel L. Jackson’s character Jules and Amanda Plummer’s character Yolanda:

Jules: We’re all going to be like three little Fonzie’s here. And what’s Fonzie like? Come on, Yolanda, what’s Fonzie like?

Yolanda: Cool?

Jules: What?

Yolanda: Cool.

Jules: Correctamundo!

Back to the prototype outlaw motorcycle rider epitomized by Brando. Harley-Davidson couldn't have flourished selling \$25,000 motorcycles if the company sold only to the true vagabond biker. That's why the typical Harley rider today averages around 50 years old and could very well be a doctor, lawyer, or business professional. By trading their business uniform for an HD uniform (riders refer to the *HD* in Harley clothing as *hundred dollars* because that's what a typical article costs), the weekend rider can borrow a little of the rebel equity without having to actually terrorize a town as Brando's biker gang did in *The Wild One*. In fact, you don't even have to ride a bike; simply don a Harley black leather jacket with branded Harley T-shirt and the image is transferred to you. No wonder licensed apparel is reported to be up to 20 percent of Harley's gross profits.



In the same way, brands can greatly enhance their cool factor by associating with celebrities, musicians, events, and other brands that the majority of us deem to be cool.

