

REVIEWS

MEDIA REVIEWS

Making Sense of the Sixties. 6 hours. Six videocassettes, discussion guide. Available in Beta (as a special order) or VHS (MSIX 101 - MSIX 106). Order from PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314-1698. (800) 344-3337. \$295.00 for the series, \$59.95 for a single videocassette.

Twenty years ago, when I taught a seminar on the 1920s, the so-called Jazz Age, many of the students I interviewed for admission said the decade was their favorite one. Current undergraduates are more likely to name the 1960s. The PBS videocassette production, *Making Sense of the Sixties*, is an attempt to recreate this tumultuous period for a post-60s generation and to explain it in analytical and conceptual terms. The series generally succeeds, but does have a number of flaws and limitations.

The first videocassette, "Seeds of the Sixties," reviews the preceding era, often stereotyping and oversimplifying it. There is extensive (and warranted) coverage of the negative side of the 1950s, from segregation to cultural repression, and little mention of the decade's positive features, such as the steady rise in real income.

The second videocassette, "We Can Change the World," deals with the early 1960s, taking up the Civil Rights Movement, the impact of John Kennedy, and the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, among other subjects. The video does a good job with each individual topic, but can be confusing in places as to how they relate to each other. Precursors of the student revolt, particularly the 1960 anti-HUAC demonstrations in San Francisco are ignored.

The next three parts, "Breaking Boundaries, Testing Limits," "In a Dark Time," and "Picking Up the Pieces," cover the middle and late 1960s. These are the best segments of the series, with many excellent clips and commentaries. As in the first two parts, an off-screen narrator supplies a descriptive and analytical matrix, supplemented by statements from a wide variety of individuals: black, white, Hispanic, female, and male. Some of the comments were recorded during the 1960s, others were elicited expressly for this series. Housewives and blue collar workers get to speak, along with academics and activists.

The final part of *Making Sense of the Sixties*, "Legacies of the Sixties," consists mostly of "talking heads," with far less documentary footage than the first five parts. Provocative questions are raised, along the lines of "Why hasn't America gotten over the 1960s?," with the answers varying in effectiveness.

The strengths of this documentary include a haunting musical score, much stirring footage, and a laudable attempt at balance (with the exception of the treatment of the 1950s). The failures and costs of the 1960s are clearly presented along with the achievements. In addition, quantitative generalizations receive careful qualification so that younger viewers are unlikely to come away from the series thinking either that every twenty year old of 1968 was a political rebel or a hippie, or, conversely, that their numbers were negligible.

A serious defect is that too little of the footage is identified. This documentary seems to assume that Bull Connor, Mario Savio, Joan Baez, and the Texas Schoolbook depository are so prominent in the national visual memory that students who were born in the 1970s will generally know them on sight.

The final limitation, and the most pervasive one, is the series' failure to provide a reasonably complete basic linear history of the time. Coverage of the civil rights movement omits Birmingham and Selma, of the cultural revolt the Rolling Stones, of the Vietnam War, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, and of the political scene, Eugene McCarthy and George Wallace. Such omissions contrast with the more inclusive approach taken by WGBH's notable *Vietnam: A Television History*, and greatly restrict the usefulness of *Making Sense of the Sixties*. As a stand-alone audiovisual presentation it will not be adequate; it must be connected to a detailed historical framework, supplied either by the instructor or a textbook. Employed in this manner, *Making Sense of the Sixties*, particularly its middle segments, can be an effective classroom instrument.

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