

Published: March 21, 2004  
Arts & Entertainment

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It's easy to pick on the decade of big hair and Kajagoogoo. Even the teenagers in the comic strip "Luann" are doing it. In a recent episode, Tiffany, the popular girl, and her allegedly good friend, Crystal, sneered at a dowdy teacher who cracked down on Tiffany's navel-baring half-shirt.

Crystal: "She's so ... so ... What's that word that means really ancient?"

Tiffany: " '80s?"

But wait.

Tiffany could pass for Madonna in her 1983 "Burning Up for Your Love" phase. And spiky-haired, big-eared Crystal? Clearly Pat Benatar. The eponymous Luann has Breck hair, and her two best friends are channeling Sarah Jessica Parker in "Square Pegs" and Halle Berry in "Living Dolls." The creator of these characters is actually an ancient man who began drawing the cartoon almost 20 years ago to understand his now-ancient teenage daughter.

Fact: The girls in the '80s also wore half-shirts, especially to show off the "Boy Toy" belts on their Jordache jeans.

More important fact: The presumably ancient 30-somethings who lived the '80s are now the middle managers of cultural imperialism, and they are soaking the millennium with a longing for leg warmers, Fresca, Simon LeBon and Jo's mullet haircut from "The Facts of Life."

The kids who were born when the '80s were half over are convinced that they missed out on a good time. They do not remember the beginning of HIV, the end of Challenger, the Boy in the Bubble, the Iranian hostage crisis or the eruption of Mount St. Helens.

They see Fraggie Rock, gauchos, Pac-Man, Cabbage Patch Kids, Andrew McCarthy, Molly Ringwald and painted women called Rio who dance on the sand. They see the cute British Wham! boys as just a couple of tanned young metrosexuals in short-shorts. And a diva-haired, lipsticked, eyeshadowed Boy George imitator wants to spin you "right round, baby, right round."

Like a record.

What a happy, deluded time.

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Lyrics reflected a carefree era

So you are a 21-year-old college student, and you did not exist when Rick Springfield wanted Jessie's Girl.

But love was all right back then. The song lyrics made everything sound so carefree. There were 99 red balloons, cherry ice cream smiles and happy girls walking on sunshine. There were no terrorists, right? No wars, no weapons of mass destruction, right?

A movie star was president. Right.

"OK, so I was watching 'Sesame Street,' not MTV, in the '80s," says Derek Rochelle, a junior at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "But I watch 'Sixteen Candles,' and it warms my heart more than any movie today."

Rochelle was drooling and eating strained pears when "Sixteen Candles" came out in 1984, but he loves the '80s. A few weeks ago, he wrote an opinion piece called "Don't stop believin' " for a campus magazine and extolled the virtues of Cyndi Lauper, even though he spelled her name "Cindy." He bought Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." cassette three times because he wore it out from playing it so much.

"When you're in your own culture, it doesn't feel defined," he says. "You don't know what it's all about. Maybe you need the definition of the past, especially someone else's past. It feels safe."

Rochelle sees the '80s so brightly. The geeks got the girl in "Weird Science," and the nice guy got the nice girl in "Better Off Dead." Robert Palmer was addicted to love, Lionel Richie was dancing on the ceiling, and Michael Jackson still looked human. This was a good time when rock stars got together and sang "We Are the World" for the children:

We are the ones who make a brighter day, just you and me.

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Fighting maturity

So you are a 30-something, a working person with perhaps a little gray in your hair. The weight of responsibility is creasing you into maturity, but you are fighting it. Your friend, who once knew all the words to "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor, says he wants to go to a club.

It's not one of those places that plays fresh music by Justin Timberlake, Beyonce and Outkast. Those clubs make you feel gray. You always sit like a matron during "Rock Your Body," even though you know Young Justin is happily getting it on with Cameron Diaz, an Ancient Babe from your generation.

See, you still crank up Men Without Hats. You bought the "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" soundtrack at Target, where you were supposed to be shopping for garbage bags, because Duran Duran's new song was on it. You own the "Xanadu" video because Olivia Newton-John once convinced you that roller-skating in leg warmers and a flowy dress would turn you into a singing goddess who hooked up with a tight-pants, Andy Gibb-resembling artist.

You want Ultravox, Haircut 100, the Weather Girls, the Fixx, Katrina and the Waves. You want to dance like an aerobics instructor.

So you go to a place you call a disco but everyone else calls an " '80s club." You and your friend are the oldest people there by at least 10 years. You hear Billy Ocean and relax. You can almost

feel the braces and pink glasses returning to your face. You can almost smell the Drakkar cologne.

You and your friend dance alone to "Ain't Nobody" by Rufus and Chaka Khan, but you do not care. You belong here. You are Jennifer Beals in "Flashdance," and he is Nicolas Cage in "Valley Girl."

The kids stare, transfixed, rebuffed. They don't know this song. The radio station didn't play it on retro night. They nasty-danced confidently to the comfortable hand-me-downs of "Strut" and "Relax" and "Oh Mickey You're So Fine You're So Fine You Blow My Mind." Now they drink. And think: Maybe Beyonce could sing this one.

But you remember the video. You remember taping the song off American Top 40, right after some long-distance dedication to a boy in Omaha. You remember crying your eyes out over that Rick Springfield-lookalike in eighth grade who told you he would never slow-dance with a short girl who wore giant pink glasses. What a jerk. If he could see you now.

Ain't Nobody Loves Me Better, Makes Me Happy, Makes Me Feel This Way.

You remember everything, and now you know all the words.

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