

Old-cool

Nine ways older people are cooler than the young



Auberon Waugh: the epitome of cool

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Wandering past Westminster Abbey, the journalist Auberon Waugh once spied a sign forbidding visitors from eating ice creams. “Fascists!” he muttered on reflex.

Anti-authoritarian, as well as extremely funny, Bron was without exception the coolest man I ever knew – a distinction he achieved despite being bald, pot-bellied, knock-kneed... and old.

When I worked for him at the Literary Review (and, in 2000, lodged with him at his London flat), old was what he was. Old and cool. A rare combination, you might hazard.

But ask yourself who’s likely to be cooler: the old, fouled-up dude at the end of the bar, or the young punk holding forth to his fans at the corner table? The old dude doesn’t care so much. He has had longer to practise. And he has learned to distinguish between the really-cool and the seems-cool-but-really-isn’t.

While writing my book, *How to be Cool*, I realised that it wasn’t only Bron. Coolness in general is actually more, not less, likely to be possessed by people of a certain age.

There’s a seasoned historical reason for this. Having been cooked up in the jazz clubs of the 1930s and 1940s, coolness peaked after the Second World War, when a hard-bitten, post-traumatic nihilism collided with American prosperity and British privation, and took exception to both.

It was in the 1950s and 1960s, then, that the oppositional stance perfected its form. So it makes sense that it should now be best personified by people who experienced those decades first-hand.

My gambit for the book was to pick the 75 “idols” who contributed most to our idea of what “cool” means, and then scan for common factors. Nine defining qualities emerged. And it turns out that, in nearly every case, they are inherently more likely to be found in the old than in the young.

1. Style

Some are born stylish, but let’s be honest: not many. You usually have to spend a few years learning the ropes. The saturnine singer Bryan Ferry, 71, served his apprenticeship in his teens, when he worked in a tailor’s in Newcastle. His snappy dress sense subsequently survived the sartorial dark ages of the 1970s and 1980s, since when, like a single-malt, he has just got smoother. When Ferry wears a suit, it stays worn.



Bryan Ferry with a 1950s Studebaker

For an example of a stylish older woman who outclasses her juniors – without resorting to the tacky, bare-all tactics of the Kims and Mileys of this world – there’s always Björk. When Lady Gaga was still an incubating teen, the Icelandic diva, who turns 51 next month, was shocking the world by appearing at the Oscars wearing what looked a lot like a dead swan. It has since been voted one of the most iconic red-carpet dresses of all time.

2. Rebellion

The reason “angry young man” is even a phrase is because it’s not often seen. It’s the old who are angry, and understandably so, given that the ageing process is a tiresome practical joke God just won’t stop making. The consolation is knowing that you’re right, and being perfectly willing to admit it. That, and the fact that you’re free of the single worst curse of youth: the pathological desire to fit in.

Step forward the 75-year-old designer Vivienne Westwood, who won her rebellious spurs in the 1970s when she turned the fashion world on its head by inventing punk style. She also, by her own account, suggested to the Sex Pistols the title of their best-known song, Anarchy in the UK (a claim disputed by John Lydon, who has referred to it as “audacity of the highest order”). More recently, Westwood cemented her coolly countercultural status by describing Hillary Clinton as “evil”.

Another who dares to question the powers-that-be is the novelist Hilary Mantel. In the wake of her second Booker Prize win, the 64-year-old fired the ire of traditionalists by taking pot shots at the Royal Family, likening the Duchess of Cambridge to a “shop-window mannequin”.

3. Rootlessness

The four pillars of the conventional life are work, marriage, health and home. Each finds its opposite number among the defining qualities of cool, and in the case of “home”, this means rootlessness – the prioritisation of a nomadic lifestyle over the aspiration of so many youngsters these days, which is to fling themselves at the property ladder and cling to its lower rungs. They may later come to wonder why they bothered.

According to Hindu teaching, the third stage of life, Vanaprastha, which occurs in one’s 50s and 60s, will be characterised by a withdrawal from social and familial responsibilities. The final phase, Sannyasa, involves ascetic wandering. How else to explain the so-called Never-Ending Tour of Bob Dylan, the 75-year-old singer and now Nobel Prize recipient who, for the best part of three decades, has performed a concert on average every three days?



Björk: "When Lady Gaga was still an incubating teen, the Icelandic diva was shocking the world with her style"

4. Recklessness

In a television documentary this summer, *Vogue*'s fashion director Lucinda Chambers lamented that life at the magazine is now clean and efficient, whereas in the cool old days it was all "Gitanes and hangovers".

Statistics suggest this may be a general trend: young people today, apparently, barely touch alcohol and rarely dare to sleep around (teen pregnancies in England and Wales are down 45 per cent since 2007). Ah, where are the boozy brunches and filthy stopovers of yesteryear?

But I have to say, I have my doubts about these findings. Who, exactly, were these miniature monks (or bare-faced liars) who took part in this survey? Yet if it's true, it makes our point for us, demonstrating that young people nowadays prefer to play it safe.

Unlike Irene O'Shea, a reckless Australian who recently celebrated her 100th birthday by going sky-diving.

5. Self-expression

Evelyn Waugh (who wasn't cool) once remarked that, in later life, a writer must become either a prophet or a prose stylist. He himself, like his son, opted for the latter, which is probably the cooler choice — and one that is proportionately more available to the old, since they've had time to rack up the thousands of hours' practice necessary to achieve high-definition delivery.

There aren't many prose stylists around, but one is the unstoppable Tom Stoppard.



Now 79, the playwright first soared to glory in 1967 with the modishly postmodern *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. (Asked what it was “about”, he replied, “It’s about to make me very rich.”) Since then, he has kept getting cooler. His 1970s masterpiece *Travesties* is currently being revived at London’s Menier Chocolate Factory. But arguably his coolest work is 2006’s *Rock ‘n’ Roll*, which makes the case that rock music by bands such as the Rolling Stones was partly responsible for the collapse of the Soviet Union. How so? Because it became clear that life in the West, in the end, was simply cooler.

6. Promiscuity/Celibacy

This is the first of three “twinned” qualities, where either of two alternatives will do. With promiscuity/celibacy, the point is that “cool” people just aren’t into the whole monogamous commitment thing. Two who have steadfastly refused to succumb to matrimony - and not, presumably, for want of opportunity - are the actors Diane Keaton, 70, and Al Pacino, 76. They went out with each other for a while back in the day, but have stubbornly resisted tying the knot — with each other, or anyone else for that matter. Really to qualify in this category you have to keep at it for decades on end. Now that takes commitment.

7. Flamboyance/Austerity

Dick Cavett, who turns 80 next month, is a rare example of someone who manages to embody both of these qualities. In his heyday, the slender American talkshow host had a peacock personal style, with his groovy wardrobe and California tan. But his formidable intelligence meant he wasn’t a man to be messed with — as the pugnacious novelist Norman Mailer discovered to his cost.

When, during a contretemps on air, Mailer ordered Cavett scathingly to “look at your question sheet and ask a question”, Cavett slapped him down, suggesting he might like to “fold it five ways and put it where the moon don’t shine”. Did you think that up beforehand, Mailer demanded.

“I have to tell you a quote from Tolstoy...?” Cavett shot back.

8. Eloquence/Taciturnity

There’s an old story about the notoriously silent US president Calvin Coolidge. A woman seated next to him at dinner confided that she’d made a bet with a friend that she could get him to say more than two words. “You lose,” Coolidge replied succinctly, and then refused to speak again.

A modern-day Coolidge is the 73-year-old actor Robert De Niro, who is famously reluctant to say almost anything in interviews. Having said that, get him going on the subject of Donald Trump, and it’s hard to stem the flow. De Niro, then, is a rare example of a man who qualifies as eloquent and taciturn.

9. Emotional self-control

The actor Mark Rylance, 56, has a quality in performance that I think is unique. It's a knack of calmness, a lack of bombast, that makes you lean in to listen. One director summed it up when he said: "Mark seems to have more time than anyone else."

This nicely captures a particular trick of coolness, which belongs exclusively to the old. It's a slow way of playing things, so that, although you know that they actually have less time, they somehow seem to have more.

THE COOL TEST

How cool are you? Learn the truth by taking this swift multiple-choice quiz. Simply pick the statements that most accurately describe you or your beliefs.

Style

- a) You have a natural physical grace and an instinctive flair for clothes. It's not wholly absurd to think that you might one day start your own fashion line.
- b) You favour the neutral look: aka the Everyman style. You feel that clothes are not that interesting and not that important. It's what's inside that counts.
- c) Style may not be your strong suit. People assume your wardrobe choices are ironic. Occasionally, someone asks, 'Are you really planning to go out like that?'

Rebellion

- a) To arms! The world has gone to hell. The rich are loathsome and the poor are powerless. The whole system stinks and what's needed is a revolution.
- b) Rules are usually there for a reason. You avoid rocking the boat unless you have to. If something annoys you, you complain through the proper channels.
- c) Nothing commands your automatic respect. You judge each case on its merits and decide whether to play ball or follow a course of quiet defiance.

Rootlessness

- a) You own your own home or hope to. You may trade it in for a bigger home if finances allow. The ideal is a secure and spacious single place in which to raise a healthy family.
- b) Wherever you lay your hat, that's your home. You get itchy feet if you stay in the same place for more than a few months. Movement is freedom.
- c) Your work requires or allows regular travel. Each time you set out for the airport, you thrill to life's myriad possibilities. You're interested in foreign property prices.

Recklessness

- a) Anyone who smokes is clearly an idiot. Not to mention irresponsible in terms of the burden they place on the health service. The occasional drink is all right.
- b) You might be hit by a car tomorrow so you may as well enjoy life. Skiing? Definitely. Sky diving? Why not? Base jumping? Sounds interesting. It's all about the rush.
- c) You like to drink – a lot, sometimes. You have the odd cheeky cigarette at parties. It kind of annoys you to be told to wear a seat belt in the back of a car.

Promiscuity/Celibacy

- a) Love means sex in your twenties and marriage in your thirties. You'd be furious if your partner cheated, but you might cheat, if fairly sure of not being found out.
- b) Love is the greatest thing that can happen to anyone. It leads naturally to a commitment that lasts, and with luck, is the foundation stone for building a family.
- c) Love – in the sense of boy meets girl and both live happily ever after – was invented by Hollywood. You do what's right for you and don't care how you're judged.

Self-Expression

- a) You are an artist/musician/writer (basically you're a creative type) and good at what you do. Alternatively or in addition, you regard your life as a work of art.
- b) You work in one of the professions. You prefer non-fiction books to novels and would take a good blockbuster over some arthouse nonsense. You think poetry is boring.
- c) You don't write novels but you love to read them. You dabble in photography. You feel you have a strong creative side but have never found the right outlet for it.

Flamboyance/Austerity

- a) You're a natural showman – some would say a show-off. If you're gay, no one's in any doubt about it. If you're straight, some have suspected otherwise.
- b) You acted a bit at school but suffer from a mild form of stage fright. Still, you can make a reasonable enough speech when you absolutely have to.
- c) Solitude appeals. The simple life. A hut on a mountainside. A houseboat, perhaps. Sometimes pretty much everything most people care about seems ridiculous.

Taciturnity/Eloquence

- a) Chatting on the phone isn't really your thing. That said, after a few drinks, it's sometimes hard to get you to shut up.
- b) Words are your friends, the tools, perhaps, of your trade. Sometimes in conversation, you feel like a jazz musician improvising a solo.
- c) 'They don't say much. But you know that when they do, they really mean it' – a comment you could imagine being made about you.

Emotional Self-Control

- a) You cry a lot. Or if you're not a crier, you're prone to lose your temper. You don't see what's wrong with this. Emotions shouldn't be bottled up.
- b) No one could call you a psychopath but you get annoyed when you're treated unfairly. You're more likely to cry in a movie than at a funeral.
- c) If someone hit you, you'd just feel bad for them. You almost never lose your cool, and indeed rarely feel strongly about anything. You're basically super-chilled.

Scoring system:

- 1. a) 2 b)1 c)0
- 2. a) 1 b)0 c)2
- 3. a) 0 b)2 c)1
- 4. a) 0 b)2 c)1
- 5. a) 0 b)1 c)2
- 6. a) 2 b)0 c)1
- 7. a) 1 b)0 c)2
- 8. a) 0 b)1 c)2
- 9. a) 0 b)1 c)2

What your total score means:

0–6 WTF? Coolness clearly isn't a big priority for you. Or if it is, you should probably rethink your approach.

7–12 AVERAGELY COOL. You're unlikely to found your own religion but you're reasonably cool. You have your moments.

13–18 OH MAN, THAT'S IMPRESSIVE. When it comes to cool, you don't need any lessons. If anything, you should be giving the lessons.

How To Be Cool, by Thomas W Hodgkinson, is published by Icon Books (£12.99). To order your copy for £10.99 plus p&p, call 0844 871 1514 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk