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## THERE'S LIFE BEYOND THE SONIC: GROWING UP CRUISING

by Charlie McCormick



On Friday and Saturday nights in Snyder, Texas, my high school friends and I cruised the strip—what we called making the drag. We bought gas with dollar bills and change so that we could drive our chromed trucks and dirt-caked cars around the strip's mile-long, imperfect loop. We turned around at the Sonic Drive-In on one end of the strip and in the Bar-H-Bar Western Wear parking lot on the other. In between, we passed our classmates, potential dates, and occasional fights. We played our music too loud. We drank Pearl Light and Lone Star beer from cans as our cars entered the shadows between the street lamps, hoping that the cops wouldn't see us and that our friends would. The drag, at least for those few hours after dark, belonged to us. The next morning, it would belong to our parents, our bosses, and our teachers, and we would drive down it again as we ran errands or went to school or work. But not on Friday and Saturday nights. At night we had our own reasons for cruising the strip. And driving around our imperfect loop—twenty, maybe thirty times in a row—we knew that, despite the fact that we were going nowhere, we were on our way.

Our enthusiasm notwithstanding, teenage drivers in Snyder were hardly cruising's initial pioneers or greatest proponents. In its glory days in the 1960s, cruising could be found on commercial strips throughout the country: on Woodward Avenue in Detroit, on Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena, and on the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles. In recent years, cruising has remained the recreational activity of choice for many adolescents around the nation: from Salt Lake City's State Street to Kansas City's Prospect Avenue, and from Denver's Federal Boulevard to Atlanta's Stone Mountain Park. Though the street names are different in each locale, the performance of cruising has remained basically the

same. It continues to involve groups of adolescents driving in automobiles around a predetermined route on Friday and Saturday nights, occasionally parking in a lot or stopping for food, and attempting to see and be seen by their peers as they figure out who they are and who they might be.

In the 1990s, I studied cruising in Abilene, Texas. What I saw there was what I had seen in Snyder a decade before. For example, as in Snyder, Abilene's adolescents knew there was a "cool" side (read as: "teenager's side") to park on and an "uncool" side (read as: "adult side"), even when it really gets crowded on Friday and Saturday nights. I knew which side to park my car on as I conducted my fieldwork. But I did not mind the "uncool" side of the Sonic because it afforded me a better view of what was happening with the adolescents across the way.

I saw that some of the teens laughed openly and often, fully enjoying their time "out." Some adolescents were more cautious with their displays, wanting to be noticed but not so badly that they would run the risk of actually being noticed and therefore subject to the possibility of jokes, humiliation, or disinterest. Others—usually males—maintained a steely gaze, glaring at anyone who dared to meet their stare. Almost everyone on the "cool" side had busy eyes—eyes always on the lookout for someone to "hook up" with, eyes always aware of who else was there and what was happening. Occasionally, all eyes focused on the same spot—the hollered threat ("What the hell are young looking at!?!"), an engine revving, or the car peeling out of the Sonic, kicking gravel up and out behind it, reaching the posted speed limit on North 1st (40 mph) in seconds.

During my fieldwork, a uniformed officer patrolled the Sonic. Rarely did teen eyes focus on him. When a parking place on the "cool" side opened up, it was immediately filled with a car or truck loaded with multiple teens. Adolescents ordered cokes and occasionally hamburgers, French fries, slushes, tater tots, or foot long coneys smothered in chili and cheese. They drove wrecks and vehicles that easily cost over \$40,000. Some were modified (lowered Caminos or jacked-up F-150s), and some belonged to their par-

ents. All of their automobiles, for a few hours at least, were sites of possibility.

What I learned about adolescent cruising from my research in Abilene is—at least in part—what I knew. Kids cruised North 1st because it was part of their traditional repertoire. They cruised because they had grown up seeing their teen-elders do it. They cruised because they had heard their parents talk about cruising “back when.” They cruised because they could get a little crazy when they did it, because it was fun.

Back in Snyder, when I was in high school, our parents tolerated our weekend ritual of cruising, finding it a better alternative than lots of other things we could be doing, and seeing in it distant memories of their own youth. Tolerate it though they did, they were not above the occasional jibe at our expense. A smirk at the outfits we had so carefully donned before we left the house to go “out.” Rolling eyes every time they saw where a scratch-mark had been left on the road by the too-fast acceleration of a teenager’s car. And occasionally—I’m not old enough yet to concede too much to the adults of my youth—a flash of real wit. Take, for instance, Patsey Massey’s admonition to her teenage daughter—a phrase so pithy it became the mantra for a whole generation of parents in this small corner of the world: “There’s life beyond the Sonic.” We teenagers were not so dense as to miss the joke. She meant that we were wasting our time on something more or less irrelevant, that we should quit attributing so much significance to cruising and get on with the business of living. I doubt, though, that she meant to suggest the phrase’s other meaning which my friends and I seemed to assume was a better interpretation: cruising—for which the Sonic was emblematic in Snyder—was the necessary first step, a drive-through threshold, beyond which we entered the mysterious and promising realm of *Life*, where there were no more curfews, homework, or adolescent restrictions. Of course, we were all correct. She was right for the obvious reasons, and we were right, too.

Folklorists argue whether traditions develop in order to shape individuals to social and cultural norms or to liberate individuals

from those social and cultural norms. In the case of adolescents, cruising seems to serve both functions. In traditional coming-of-age and rite-of-passage experiences, adolescents are prepared both for their passage into conventional adult roles and statuses, and for the uncertainties and negotiations that accompany typical adult life. These coming-of-age and rite-of-passage experiences are difficult and dangerous rituals because they help “good” kids become “good” adults. Of course, the values and behaviors of good kids are not the values and behaviors of good adults. Good kids go to bed on time, exhibit deference and cooperation, and are far removed from sexual activity. Good adults stay up as late as necessary, competitively pursue their interests, and have healthy sex lives. Coming-of-age and rite-of-passage experiences frequently open up safe space for “good” kids to play “bad” and therefore to prepare for their future lives as “good” adults. Cruising on main streets and commercial strips is one important way that many of us could act up and act out in relatively safe spaces in order to mature.

Cruising frequently has evoked concern in local communities, but it is precisely as a result of this concern—not despite it—that cruising is established as an appropriate site for acting up and acting out. If no concern was expressed, adolescents could hardly maintain the illusion that they were acting up and acting out. Still, the mundane conclusion of almost all researchers of cruising—at least in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s—is that adolescents who cruised were not fundamentally deviants. When “good” kids played “bad” during cruising, they were only enacting the legend of cruising.

The legend of cruising is a story that is constructed locally, but it shares narrative elements with the wider cruising tradition. The narrative on which the cruising legend is based is unarticulated in its whole, but its basic themes can be reconstructed based on the patterned behaviors and artifacts of its performers and audiences across time and space. Included in these themes are various forms of rebellion (drinking, violence, smoking, and drug use), courtship (sexual behavior), and resistance to authority. However inarticulate the trans-local cruising narrative may be, though, its impact on

local performances is significant. Fred Setterberg, in an essay in *The Automobile and American Culture*, describes the significance of this narrative for the adolescents who cruised in San Leandro, California, like this: "There's not a single kid cruising up and down East 14th Street . . . who is not decidedly aware of the role he is playing and the responsibilities he has inherited. As a young American primitive whose image must be kept as finely tuned as his automobile, the Strip cruiser bears the weight of a thousand complicated notions about kids, cars, and the romance of 'just hanging out.'" He continues: "The legend [the unarticulated cruising narrative], it seems, has created its own demand—and the kids keep coming back for more."<sup>1</sup> Adolescents perform the menace of cruising—they act the way they do—not because that is fundamentally who they are or even what they want to do, but because that is how they have been taught to tell the legend or story of cruising. And local communities teach adolescents to tell this legend through the sanctioning of the coming-of-age and rite-of-passage experience by traditionalizing it.

Without experiences like cruising and cruising itself, "good" kids would have a difficult time becoming "good" adults. Ritual failure—misbehaving—is a typical failure of the rite-of-passage experience and serves the dual purpose of separating the developing adolescent from his or her former self and opening the adolescent to the possibility of life alternatives and of introducing the developing adolescents to their new capacities by showing that old competencies—children's competencies—cannot adequately address the situations one will find in life. Through an experience like cruising, acting up and acting out—a failure for "good" children—serves a developmental function, preparing adolescents for their lives as adults.

When I first told my mom about what I was studying, she said that it sounded to her like I was just trying to justify all the time I wasted during high school riding around with my friends. She echoes the refrain I heard in my youth and cannot forget even as I approach middle-age: "There's life beyond the Sonic." Her comments

warn me not to over-exaggerate the importance of cruising. But the more time I spend learning from cruising, the more I have come to believe that it deserves our attention as much as any other artistic genre, social situation, or cultural expression. To paraphrase a colleague, cruising is one more example of the human capacity for gregariousness, a capacity without which we would be merely life's spectators instead of its participants. Cruising remains today, just as it was yesterday, an example of the everyday artistry which we humans produce as we make ourselves, our futures, and our places our own. I still believe I can see Life, just beyond the Sonic.

#### ENDNOTE

1. Fred Setterberg. "Cruising with Donny on the San Leandro Strip." *The Automobile and American Culture*. David L. Lewis and Laurence Goldstein, Eds. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983. 318-19.