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A LOVE
STORY

CRASH!
THE ART MARKET
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FALL

**JOHNNY
DAMON,**
SITTING AROUND
NAKED

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BY ADAM
STERNBERGH

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APRIL 3,
2006

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Forever Youngish

He owns *eleven pairs of sneakers*, hasn't worn anything but *jeans* in a year, and won't shut up about *the latest Death Cab for Cutie CD*. But he is no kid. He is among the ascendant breed of grown-up who has *redefined adulthood* as we once knew it and *killed off the generation gap*.

Up With Grups*

BY ADAM STERNBERGH

Photographs by Ari Versluis & Ellie Uyttenbroek

Also known as **yupster** (yuppie + hipster), **yindie** (yuppie + indie), and **alterna-yuppie**. Our preferred term, **grup**, is taken from an episode of *Star Trek* (keep reading) in which Captain Kirk et al. land on a planet of children who rule the world, with no adults in sight. The kids call Kirk and the crew "**grups**," which they eventually figure out is a contraction of "**grown-ups**." It turns out that all the grown-ups had died from a virus that greatly slows the aging process and kills anybody who grows up.





ET'S START with a question. A few questions, actually:

When did it become normal for your average 35-year-old New Yorker to (a) walk around with an iPod plugged into his ears at all times, listening to the latest from Bloc Party; (b) regularly buy his

clothes at Urban Outfitters; (c) take her toddler to a Mommy's Happy Hour at a Brooklyn bar; (d) stay out till 4 A.M. because he just can't miss the latest New Pornographers show, because who knows when Neko Case will decide to stop touring with them, and *everyone knows she's the heart of the band*; (e) spend \$250 on a pair of jeans that are artfully shredded to look like they just fell through a wheat thresher and are designed, eventually, to artfully fall totally apart; (f) decide that Sufjan Stevens is the perfect music to play for her 2-year-old, because, let's face it, 2-year-olds have lousy taste in music, and *we will not listen to the Wiggles in this house*; (g) wear sneakers as a fashion statement; (h) wear the same vintage New Balance sneakers that he wore on his first day of school in the seventh grade as a fashion statement; (i) wear said sneakers to the office; (j) quit the office job because—you know what?—screw the office and screw jockeying for that promotion to VP, because isn't *promotion* just another word for "slavery"?; (k) and besides, now that she's a freelancer, working on her own projects, on her own terms, it's that much easier to kick off in the middle of the week for a quick snowboarding trip to Sugarbush, because she's got to have some balance, right? And she can write it off, too, because who knows? She might bump into Spike Jonze on the slopes; (l) wear a Misfits T-shirt; (m) make his 2-year-old wear a Misfits T-shirt; (n) never shave; (o) take pride in never shaving; (p) take pride in never shaving while spending \$200 on a bed-head haircut and \$600 on a messenger bag, because, seriously, only his grandfather or some frat-boy Wall Street flunky still carries a briefcase; or (q) all of the above?

This is an obituary for the generation gap. It is a story about 40-year-old men and women who look, talk, act, and dress like people who are 22 years old. It's not about a fad but about a phenomenon that looks to be permanent. It's about the hedge-fund guy in Park Slope with the chunky square glasses, brown rock T-shirt, slight paunch, expensive jeans, Puma sneakers, and shoulder-slung messenger bag, with two kids squirming over his lap like itchy chimps at the Tea Lounge on Sunday morning. It's about the mom in the low-slung Sevens and ankle boots and vaguely Berlin-art-scene blouse with the \$800 stroller and the TV-screen-size Olsen-twins sunglasses perched on her head walking through Bryant Park listening to Death Cab for Cutie on her Nano.

And because this phenomenon wears itself so clearly as the convergence of downtown cool and easy, abundant money, it is also, of course, about *stuff*—though that's not all it's about. It's more interesting as evidence of the slow erosion of the long-held idea that in some fundamental way, you cross through a portal when you become an adult, a portal inscribed with the biblical imperative "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as

a child, I thought as a child: But when I became a man, I put away childish things." This cohort is not interested in putting away childish things. They are a generation or two of affluent, urban adults who are now happily sailing through their thirties and forties, and even *fifties*, clad in beat-up sneakers and cashmere hoodies, content that they can enjoy all the good parts of being a grown-up (a real paycheck, a family, the warm touch of cashmere) with none of the bad parts (Dockers, management seminars, indentured servitude at the local Gymboree). It's about a brave new world whose citizens are radically rethinking what it means to be a grown-up and whether being a grown-up still requires, you know, actually growing up.

And it's been a long time coming. It showed up in the early eighties as "the Peter Pan Syndrome," then mutated to the *yuppie*, which, let's face it, has had a pretty good run. Later, it took the form that David Brooks called "bourgeois bohemians," or *bobos* (as in *Bobos in Paradise*). Over in England, they're now calling them *yindies* (that's *yuppie* plus *indie*), and here, the term *yupster* (you can figure that out) has been gaining some traction of late. And as this movement evolves, something pivotal is happening. This cascade of pioneering immaturity is no longer a case of a generation's being stuck in its own youth. This generation is now, if you happen to be under 25, more interested in being stuck in *your* youth.

This article being what it is, I wanted to come up with my own term to describe them. But what? Dadsters? Sceniors? Dorian Graybeards? Over the course of my investigation, I started calling them *Grups*. It's not the most elegant term, but it passes the field test of real-world utility. (*Here a Grup, there a Grup, everywhere a Grup-Grup.*) "Grups" is a nerdy reference to an old *Star Trek* episode in which Kirk and crew land on a planet run entirely by kids, who call grown-ups "grups." All the adults have been killed off by a terrible virus, which also slows the natural aging process, so the kids are trapped in a state of extended prepubescence. They will never grow up. And they are running the show.

Oh, and there's one more thing I learned, in answer to my opening questions: If being a Grup means being 35, and having a job, and using a messenger bag instead of a briefcase, and staying out too late too often, and owning more pairs of sneakers (eleven) than suits (one), and downloading a Hot Hot Heat song from iTunes because it was on a playlist titled "Saturday Errands," and generally being uneasy and slightly confused about just what it means to be an adult in these modern times—in short, if it means living your life in fundamentally the same way that you did when you were, say, 22—then, let's face it, I'm a Grup. The people in the pictures accompanying this story? Grups. In fact, take a minute and look up from the magazine—if you're in public, you'll see them everywhere. If you're in front of a mirror, you might see one there too.

The Grup Music, or the Brand-new Sound of Twenty Years Ago

ONCE UPON A TIME, pop culture, and in particular pop music, followed a certain reliable pattern: People listened to bands, like the Doobie Brothers or Cream or Steely Dan, that their Frank Sinatra-loving parents absolutely despised. Then these people had kids, and their kids became teens, and they started listening to bands, like the Clash or Elvis Costello or Joy Division, that their Cream-loving parents absolutely despised. And, lo, the Lord looked down and saw that it was good, and on the eighth day, He created the generation gap.

And then these Clash-listening kids grew up and had kids of their own, and the next generation of kids started listening to music, like Franz Ferdinand and Interpol and Bloc Party, that you might assume their parents would absolutely despise. Except it

*"Even if you just bought a great new CD, and you really want to **LISTEN TO IT WITH YOUR KIDS**, sometimes it's their bedtime. You just learn. You can't always **PLAY GUITAR** with them."*



*Andy Chase, 39,
and Dominique
Durand, 38,
with their children
Justine, 6,
and Julien, 3.*

The Four Stages



1 PRE-GRUP

HANGS OUT AT Jake's Dilemma and Bourbon Street on Amsterdam Avenue, Butterfield 8 in Murray Hill.



CURRENTLY READING *Dog Days*, by Ana Marie Cox.

LISTENS TO Coldplay; Jack Johnson.

TYPICAL WARDROBE Off-the-rack Nike Shox; relaxed-fit Levi's 501s.

ASPIRES TO BE Jake Gyllenhaal; Kirsten Dunst.

SECRET SHAME Saw ARCADE FIRE on the cover of *Spin*; not sure what it referred to.



2 BEGINNER GRUP

HANGS OUT AT Mo Pitkin's on Avenue A, hoping for a David Cross sighting.

CURRENTLY READING *Indecision*, by Benjamin Kunkel.

LISTENS TO Echo and the

Bunnymen; anything found on the "Listeners Also Bought" list for the Killers' "Hot Fuss" on iTunes.



TYPICAL WARDROBE Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars, MORE COWBELL T-shirt from Urban Outfitters; torn jeans from Abercrombie & Fitch.



ASPIRES TO BE Skateboard mogul Tony Hawk; Natalie Portman in *Garden State*.

SECRET SHAME Has Kelly Clarkson on his iPod. The whole album.

doesn't really work that way anymore. In part, because how can their parents hate Interpol when they sound *exactly like Joy Division*? And in part, because how can their parents hate Bloc Party when their parents just downloaded Bloc Party and think it's *awesome and totally better than the Bravery*?

This, of course, is a seismic shift in intergenerational relationships. It means there is no fundamental generation gap anymore. This is unprecedented in human history. And it's kind of weird.

Take the case of Andy Chase and Dominique Durand, a married couple, both well into their thirties and now with kids of their own, who play in a successful rock band called Ivy. "Most of our fans are in their twenties or even teenagers," says Chase. "And that keeps you young. Because you're friends with people who are much younger than you. Our keyboard player is 21 years old. And we dress the same—"

"Our interests are the same," adds Durand. "The passion is the same. There's a real connection."

Andy interjects, "Well, let's talk to the keyboard player and see if he says the same thing."

Or take Michael Rauch, the creator of the recently canceled CBS show *Love Monkey*, which chronicled the life of a late-thirties single A&R guy in New York who frets openly about being a "suit" while working at the plucky indie label he joined after leaving his evil corporate record company, because for him, it was *all about the music*. Isn't a guy like that—late thirties, still single, still bar-hopping, still chasing the latest hot rock band, his whole life, in

fact, still defined by the word *still*—kind of, I don't know, pathetic? "If this show existed ten years ago, the answer would be yes," says Rauch. "But now, absolutely not. Now it's less the exception than the rule. Especially in New York." Rauch himself is 38. "I spoke to an undergrad class at NYU recently. And it was terrifying how much we had in common. I'm looking at these kids who look about 12, and we're all going to the same movies and watching the same TV shows and listening to the same music. I don't know if it's scarier for them or scarier for me."

Think of it this way: For Gen-X, just fifteen years ago, the big complaint was that boomers, with their lingering sixties-era musical attachments and smug sense of cultural centrality, refused to pass the torch and get the hell out of the way. In a 1997 sociology essay titled "Generation X: Who Are They? What Do They Want?," one twentysomething student lamented, "We still are bombarded with 'Classic Rock' and moldy oldies. Bands like the Eagles, Rolling Stones, and Aerosmith need to back off so we can define our own music, lifestyle." It's ironic, then, that those self-same slackers—the twentysomethings of the early nineties (and, hey, I was right there, too: Rock on, Screaming Trees)—aren't standing in the way of the next generation. Rather, they're joining right in at the front of the crowd at the sold-out Decemberists show. *Hey, kids, you can define your own music, lifestyle—that's our music and lifestyle, too!*

"All of the really good music right now has absolutely precise parallels to the best music of the eighties, from Franz Ferdinand

of Grupitude

3 ADVANCED GRUP

HANGS OUT AT Heathers in the East Village, and Baked in Red Hook and Royal Oak in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

CURRENTLY READING

Jessica Abel's graphic novel, *La Perdida*.



LISTENS TO Anything rated over 8.0 on Pitchforkmedia.com (recently, the Liars and Japanese minimalist Chihei Hatakeyama).

TYPICAL WARDROBE Built-to-fray Rogan jeans and gold L.A.M.B. Love sneakers.

ASPIRES TO BE Sarah Silverman; Stephen Malkmus.

SECRET SHAME Doesn't get *Vice* magazine. Finds it kind of offensive, actually.



4 MASTER GRUP

HANGS OUT AT Unmarked bars that would close immediately if we published their addresses.

CURRENTLY READING *In Pursuit of Valis: Selections From the Exegesis*, by Philip K. Dick.

LISTENS TO Seminal bands

you've never heard of (Montreal's the Nils; Bronx rappers **Diamond & the Psychotic Neurotics**).

TYPICAL WARDROBE Personally reconstructed Levi's from high school and dead-stock 1981 Diadora sneakers.

ASPIRES TO BE Outsider artist-songwriter Daniel Johnston; rediscovered freak-folk icon Vashti Bunyan.

SECRET SHAME H&M.



to Interpol to Death Cab—anything you can name," says Michael Hirschorn, the 42-year-old executive vice-president of original programming and production at VH1. "Plus, the 20-year-olds are all listening to the Cure and New Order anyway. It's created a kind of mass confusion. I was at the Coachella festival last year, and the groups people were most stoked about were Gang of Four and New Order." No wonder Grups like today's indie music: It sounds exactly like the indie music of their youth. Which, as it happens, is what kids today like, too, which is why today's new music all sounds like it's twenty years old. And thus the culture grinds to a halt, in a screech of guitar feedback.

As a result, says Hirschorn, "some of the older parents I know who have teenagers claim that there's no generation gap anymore. They say they get along perfectly with their kids. They listen to the same music. To me, that seems somewhat laughable. But I do remember when I was young, trying to explain the Beatles to my dad, and he didn't even know who they were. I don't think that's possible today."

And it's not just music that's collapsed on itself in this way. During Hirschorn's tenure at VH1, the channel was cunningly transformed from the frumpy, easy-listening older sibling of MTV to a retro-culture-celebrating mother ship for Grups. Trademark shows such as *I Love the 80s* feature a parade of thirtysomething comedians making funny comments about music and fashions and TV shows that were popular back when they were teens. The canny success of this concept rests on the fact that it appeals both to the

thirtysomethings who lived through Mr. T and Kajagoogoo the first time around and twentysomethings who are fascinated with semi-ironically recycling cultural trends. In a prescient essay in 1994 titled "The Nostalgia Gap," Tom Vanderbilt jokingly predicted that thanks to an ever-quicken cultural churn, we'd soon see manufactured nostalgia for trends of two weeks ago. He was off by a week. VH1's *Best Week Ever* consists of comedians looking back with fond, ironic eyes on the events of the last seven days.

"The embarrassing thing for me," says Hirschorn, "is seeing the actual culture of my youth recycled as a kind of ironic hipster kitsch. What's my access point into that? If I still have the clothes from the first time around, does that mean I get to wear them again?" In other words, if you're 35 and wearing the same Converse All-Stars to work that you wore to junior high, are you an old guy sadly aping the Strokes? Or are the young guys simply copying you? Wait, how old are the Strokes, anyway?

The Grup Look, or I Swear These Jeans Were Here a Minute Ago

MY FATHER did not wear T-shirts. He did not own sneakers. He may have had one pair of jeans, crisp and stiff and store-bought blue, to wear on the weekends when we'd do things like go apple-picking. At all other times, he wore suits.

So I wonder what he would make of the offices of Rogan, a very



hot, very hip fashion label that operates out of the third floor of a building just off Broadway, north of Canal. The office is cluttered with large cardboard boxes and long tables, where twentysomething staffers fulfill orders by hand, among rolling racks of carefully crafted vintage-style shirts and down ski vests. Paper patterns for future clothes hang from a bar overhead like thought bubbles suspended in midair.

Rogan is run by Rogan Gregory, a 33-year-old designer who, when I meet him, is wearing a faded pink vintage surf-shop T-shirt, dirty white Vans slip-ons with seagull silhouettes, and a pair of his famous jeans. Famous, at least, within certain circles: namely, denim hounds who will pay \$450 for a pair of jeans that are so distressed—so tattered, so frayed, so worked over and beaten down—that they will likely fall apart within two years.

Rogan is tall and slim, with a trim beard and jaw-length hair that's tucked back behind one ear. He specializes in clothes that are handcrafted to look like you exhumed them from a rack at the back of a dusty vintage store when, in fact, you bought them at Barneys for several hundred dollars each. He understands that this market did not always exist. "I've been wearing the same thing my entire life," he says. "But ten years ago, people gave me a hard time. If I was checking into a hotel, they wouldn't believe that I was actually staying there. Now it's accepted that just because that dude doesn't look like some fancy-pants—well, you never know."

Rogan sees this as a good thing, and not just for the obvious business reasons. It used to be, he explains, that each stage of life had its uniform, from kid to teenager to fancy-pants. Now, though, that fashion progression has flattened out, and everyone just wears the uniform of his choice. "It's absolutely not a hierarchical thing," he says. "It's a look thing. They're all spending about the same amount of money on their wardrobes. It's just about how you like to be perceived."

A number of trends have nudged us in this direction, from the increasingly casual dress codes at work to the persistent marketing of counterculture "rebellion" as an easily attainable, catchall symbol for cool. During the dot-com boom, businesses not only allowed people to come to work in clothes they might usually wear to clean out the attic but encouraged this as a celebration of youthful vivacity and an upheaval of the fusty corporate order. Suits were thought to be the provenance of, well, suits. The dot-com bubble burst, but the aesthetic remained, as part of the ongoing rock star-ification of America. Three-day stubble and shredded jeans are the now-familiar symbols of the most desirable kind of affluence and freedom. So why would anyone dress up anymore? A suit says, *My mother made me wear this to go to a bar mitzvah*. The Grup outfit says, *I'm so cool, and so damned good at what I do, I can wear whatever the hell I want. At least when I go out to brunch*.

So now, for many people—many grown-up people—the uniform of choice is rock tees and sneakers and artfully destroyed denim. Of course, when you're 40, with a regular paycheck, yet still want

to resemble a rock star who resembles a garage mechanic, well, what's a guy to do? Status symbols still have their uses, especially in the world of clothes. And this is where the \$200 ripped jeans come in. Or \$450. Or \$600. You want the tattered jeans, but you also want the world to know, *I can afford the very best in tattered jeans*.

"One thing happened that I thought was funny," says Rogan. "I made a run of a hundred jeans, and I made them as perfectly as I could. Which for me means essentially destroying the fabric, to the point where if you wear them for a month, they'll disintegrate. And I literally sold them out in a week. And they'll completely disintegrate. You wear them for a couple of weeks and go out one night and there'll be a giant tear. I mean, it's embarrass-

For a Grup, professional success is measured not by HOW MANY EMPLOYEES you have but by how much freedom you have to walk, OR BOOGIE-BOARD, away.

ing. I was surprised that people would pay that amount of money for something that literally falls apart."

At one point, I spoke to a 39-year-old musician who had lived briefly in Park Slope and then fled, largely because of the prevalence of exactly the kind of person who would buy jeans designed to fall apart in a month. This musician is old school in his fashion tastes—which is to say, one day he came to a point where he pulled that old concert T-shirt from his dresser and thought, *Yeah, I just can't pull this off anymore*. (For me, this moment came with a thrift-store T-shirt with QUALITY PLASTIC SUPPLIES decaled across the chest.) These days, though, especially in New York, there just aren't many people saying *I just can't pull this off anymore*.

"If really hard-pressed, I would admit that I actually own a Clash T-shirt that I got from that last Clash tour," the musician told me. "But I don't wear it! And I'm certainly not going to wear it under an Armani black blazer. I even remember meeting this guy who was around my age, who was wearing an expensive blazer, and on the lapel was a *London Calling* button. Who the fuck wears that? That's what I wore when I was 18 in art school! And you're the same age as me? And you're wearing it again?" He pauses, then adds, "And you know what? Giving your kid a mohawk is fucked up, too."

The Grup Children, or Daddy, Please Turn That Music Down

HERE'S THE BAD news about kids: They're not cool. Especially little kids. Like, 2-year-olds? Forget it. Left to their own devices, they don't dress well, they have no sense of style, and frankly, their musical taste sucks.

Here's the good news about kids: They're defenseless. So if you want to put a Ramones T-shirt on your 2-year-old, you don't need his permission. All you need is for someone to have the great idea to make a 2-year-old-size Ramones T-shirt. (And trust me—someone's had that idea.) And if you want to play the Strokes for your 4-year-old son, what's he going to do? I'll tell you what—he's going to learn to love the Strokes. (Continued on page 130)

Rotterdam-based photographer Ari Versluis and stylist Ellie Uyttenbroek have collaborated since 1998 on a series they call "Exactitudes," inspired by a shared interest in the dress codes of various social groups. The subjects are real people, dressed in their own clothes. The pictures on the cover and at left represent their first "Exactitudes" project in New York.

"My son seems to like the Hives a lot," says Neal Pollack, the author of the forthcoming memoir *Alternadad: The True Story of One Family's Struggle to Raise a Cool Kid in America*, of his 3-year-old son, Elijah, and the raucous Swedish fivesome the Hives. "I mean, he doesn't know who they are. He calls it 'thunder music' when I put it on. He gets very excited by that. That makes me sort of proud."

See, Grups aren't afraid of parenting. Grups don't avoid having kids. Grups love kids. In part, though, this is because Grups find kids to be perfect little Mr. Potato Head versions of themselves. Of course, there's more to Grup parenting than simply molding your kid's tastes. You must be vigilant that you don't grow up and become uncool yourself. "I recognize that changes and sacrifices are necessary. I do occasionally wake up before nine these days," says Pollack of parenthood. "But I didn't want to lose touch with the world's cultural progress. I didn't want to freeze myself in time." So instead of playdates, Pollack invites other cool dads and their kids over for playing (kids), beers (dads), and sampling new CDs (everyone). Or he packs up his toddler for the Austin City Limits Music Festival. Though that plan didn't work so well. "It was really hot and crowded," he says. "And the music sucked." His son apparently concurred.

Pollack's philosophy, when you hear him talk about it, makes a lot of sense, at least at first. "Mainstream American adulthood is so narrowly defined, it's only natural that people who have time and leisure to think about it are going to rebel against it." Yes, of course, why not? "We want to be good parents. We want to love our kid and raise our kid up properly, with decent values." Right on! "But we don't want our lives to become nothing but Mommy & Me classes." Who would? *Fuck Mommy & Me!*

"You have to have a little bit of Dora the Explorer in your life," he says. "But you can do what you can to mute its influence." Okay. "And there's no shame, when your kid's watching a show, and you don't like it, in telling him it sucks." Yeah! *There's no—wait. What?* "If you start telling him it sucks, maybe he might develop an aesthetic." Sorry, son. No more Thomas the Tank Engine for you. Thomas sucks. Stop crying. Daddy's helping you develop an aesthetic. Now Daddy's going to go put on some thunder music.

But isn't there something unsavory in the idea of your kid as a kind of tabula rasa for you to overwrite with your tastes? Less a child than a malleable Mini-Me?

"It's hard to say right now, because most of these kids are between the age of zero and 5," says Pollack. "So they're still... I

don't want to say accessories, but they're still moldable. You can still sort of play with them." Although, if you're planning to take this parental approach, you'd better make damn sure you've got good taste. "I find myself arguing with dads about the music their kids like," he says. "One guy was telling me his son was really into Wilco. And I was telling him that's lame. Because Wilco is so over."

I don't mean to be so hard on Pollack, who does seem genuinely interested in exploring a new kind of parenting—a kind that doesn't involve totally losing any sense of who you were ten minutes before your baby was born. In fact, I got a much saner version of more or less the same philosophy from Adam Levite and Francine Hermelin, a couple in their thirties (he's 38, she's 36) with three (yes, three) kids: Asa, 6; Dora, 3; and Ester, 0.5. Levite directs music videos for artists like Beck and Interpol, and Hermelin spends most of her time with the kids while also organizing events like Downtown for Democracy's mock election, in which 8-year-olds ran for president. Levite wears cool little geometric glasses and Hermelin wears slightly thinner cool little geometric glasses. The family lives in a large white envy-inducing loft apartment in Tribeca that looks like a design-magazine photo shoot. As you enter, you'll find Levite's guitar collection propped against the wall, right next to which you'll find similar, miniature versions of the same guitars for his son, Asa. "From a very young age, we've always decided to try not to, you know, vanilla the kids in the things that we present to them," says Levite. A-ha! Here we go—thunder music. "We've been listening to the Beatles since the moment they were born. They're classic pop songs, but not full of anger and angst. And we still listen to some kids' music. Music for Aardvarks is really great."

"It's really important for us to be whole people, and not feel like our kids have... look, we love our kids," says Hermelin. "The point isn't to raise cool kids. We want passionate kids. And I think that by us doing the things that we love to do, that models that passion for our kids."

Later, when I talk to Andy Chase, the dad-slash-rock star, he says almost the exact same thing. "How great for a child to see their parents loving what they're doing? It's a delicate balance to strike, but when you maintain that balance, it's a great thing to teach your children—that they can look forward to doing something they love doing."

"Of course, there have to be some priorities," says Levite. "Even if you come home and you just bought a great new CD, and you really want to listen to it with your kids, sometimes it's their bedtime. You just learn. You can't always play guitar with them."

I wonder, though, what will happen when Asa becomes a teenager. Will he still want to jam with Dad on matching guitars? Or will he find his own way to grow up? The last time teenagers weren't expected to rebel, it was because they were heading off to work in the coal mines at age 13. Can we really expect to be cool parents and also raise cool kids? Is this youth big enough for the both of us?

Or perhaps we can look forward—at least if *Family Ties* can be trusted—to a new generation of buttoned-down, high-strung Alex P. Keaton-type conservative teenagers. This is something the Grups have considered. When I asked Hermelin her worst fear, she laughed and said, "Our kids are going to become Republicans."

In college, I remember a friend of mine playing Public Enemy at high volume at his mother's house, at which point she sputtered into paroxysms of clichéd parental dismay, saying, quite unironically, "Turn that off! It's nothing but noise!" Later, we tried to imagine what kind of high-decibel air-raid-siren music our teens might one day listen to, causing us to react the same way. It's a concept that Pollack, for one, seems literally incapable of processing. "I don't know if that's going to happen with this generation," he says. Besides, he explains, the alternadad's worst nightmare isn't that his kid will grow up to be something he doesn't want him to be. "The worst nightmare for a quote-unquote alternadad," he says, "is that *he'll* grow up to be something *he* doesn't want to be."

We might consider, then, the case of Chad Ruble. At age 32, with a wife who was four months pregnant with their first child, Ruble had a bright idea—he decided to take up skateboarding. "I had never noticed that there's a half-pipe at Chelsea Piers," he said. "I thought, *Too bad I'm too old to do that*. Then I thought, *I'm not too old!*" So he went to Paragon Sports in Union Square to buy some skateboarding gear (avoiding the hard-core East Village skate shops, because he found them too intimidating). "I was heartened because there was another older guy there getting a whole setup, too. I was like, *Oh, cool. I'm not the only one*," he said. "Turns out he was getting it for his kid."

Ruble need not have worried, though—once he hit the Chelsea Piers half-pipe, there were lots of thirtysomething guys skateboarding there, along with the usual kids. So he mounted his board and set out on the pipe. He hadn't skateboarded since he was 12, but it turns out he still remembered most of the moves. Until his fourth try that is, when he wiped out and dislocated his shoulder. "But I was having the time of my life," he said. "Those four times were really fun."

His tale conjures an uneasy vision of an

all-too-possible future: of a young boy, maybe 12, in a tiny suit, standing in a hospital room where his dad lies in traction after a gnarly kickflip-and-nosegrind combination gone horribly wrong. The boy comforts his father, perhaps fluffs his pillow, perhaps delivers to him a freshly laundered Cramps T-shirt brought from home. Then he replaces the earbuds of an iPod that's playing Burl Ives, straightens his bow tie, and heads out to grab the bus home.

The Grup Career, or Take This Job and Allow Me to Do It From Home, With Occasional Snowboarding Trips

MATT PECCINI is a tall, slim, 34-year-old guy with a shaved head and a dry sense of humor. He becomes immediately more interesting to me when he reveals that he once played Boo-Boo, Yogi Bear's sidekick, in an episode of *Harvey Birdman, Attorney at Law*. He earned that cameo in the Cartoon Network's cult hit during his successful career in television, first at TNT—"working my way through titles and responsibility levels"—and then as a creative director at the AMC channel in New York. "It was a big bump in pay and a big bump in responsibility and in title. I had a staff. On paper, it was a great job," he says. So after two and a half years, he did what any self-respecting Grup would do—he quit.

This is where the Grup diverges from the bobo, the yuppie, even the yupster. The Grup does not want a corner office. The Grup does not yearn for a fancy title. The Grup does not want—oh, please, do not ask the Grup to manage—a staff. "I just wanted to make fun stuff that went on TV," says Peccini. "Then all of a sudden I'm doing performance appraisals and going to management seminars."

A human-resources executive told me recently that there's a golden rule of HR: To motivate a baby boomer, offer him a bonus. To motivate a Generation-Xer, offer him a day off. The Grup, I think, would go for the day off, too. If the boomer's icon of success was an empire-building maverick magnate like Ted Turner, the Grup's model would be Spike Jonze, the 36-year-old *Jackass*-producing, skateboarding, awesome-indie-movie-directing free agent. Remember, the Grup of today is the slacker from 1990 who, fresh out of college, ran smack into the recession and maybe fiddled around with a riot-grl band, then got a job at 25 for a Web-development company where she wore jeans to work and played Ping-Pong and stayed late and covered her desk in rare Japanese action figures. Now that woman is 35, a VP at a viral-

marketing firm, still dressing down because *everyone knows that the youth market is where it's at*, yet is scared to death she's going to ossify into the same kind of corporate stooge she swore she'd never become. For a Grup, success isn't about how many employees you have but how much freedom you have to walk, or boogie-board, away.

So now Peccini works as a freelancer, making TV promos and animated shorts that he sells back to the Cartoon Network. It's been tough getting set up—"I'd gotten used to a certain lifestyle," he says—and it hasn't been all unfettered freedom. He's currently alternating between animation projects and industrial films, like one about sustainability to be played for Wal-Mart employees. But for him, quitting was the best career move. As it was, too, for Nicholas Nathanson, who left his job as an Internet equity research associate at a New York investment bank in 1999—just when that field promised unlimited advancement and riches—at age 29 to start an online surfwear store called Swell. You see, it's not that Grups don't want to work; they just don't want to work for you. In a recent *Money* magazine poll about bosses, 54 percent of the respondents said they wouldn't want their boss's job no matter how much money you paid them. *Fifty-four percent.*

"If I had spent the last six years working at that job and progressed, I would have made a lot of money," Nathanson told me from San Juan Capistrano, California, where his surfwear company is based. "But honestly, there have been very few days in the past six years where I've gotten in my car to go to work and thought, *Fuck, I'm going to work*. When I was at the investment bank, that was happening 50 percent of the days. And now I can go snowboarding at Mammoth in the middle of the week if there's a good storm, rather than worrying about being at work at six in the morning. And there's another upside as well: I have a total and complete passion for this business."

There's that tricky word again: *passion*. What's with the Grups and passion? It's all anyone wants to talk about. Passionate parents, passionate workers, passionate listeners to the new album by Wolf Parade. Even Rogan lights up when he talks about touring Japanese textile factories to find the perfect denim for his jeans. And I start to realize: Under the skin of the iPods and the \$400 ripped jeans, this is the spine of the Grup ethos: passion, and the fear of losing it.

Which brings me back to my father: the one who wore suits, not jeans; the one who, when he was my age, already had

four kids; the one who logged a lifetime at exactly the kind of middle-management jobs that no one wakes up excited about going to in the morning, and who then found himself sandbagged by the late-eighties recession, laid off in what must have felt like the worst kind of double whammy. All the adult trade-offs he'd made turned out to be a brutal bait-and-switch. Is it any wonder that the Grups have looked at that brand of adulthood and said, "No thanks, you can keep your carrot and your stick." Especially once we saw just how easily that stick can be turned around to whap your ass as you're ushered out the door, suit and all. Just how easily a bona fide, by-the-book adult can be made to wonder where it all went wrong, and why you ever bothered to grow up in the first place.

The Happy Ending

AND THIS, improbably, is the happy ending to our story. (And, I admit, I'd hoped for a happy ending; for all the bed-head haircuts and Hives-peddling parents, I wanted this to end well.) Being a Grup isn't, as it turns out, all about holding on to some misguided, well-marketed idea of youth—or, at least, isn't just about that. It's also about rejecting a hand-me-down model of adulthood that asks, or even necessitates, that you let go of everything you ever felt passionate about. It's about reimagining adulthood as a period defined by promise, rather than compromise. And who can't relate to that?

Of course, that's not a real ending—even the Grups don't know how this will end. They know they're making up adulthood as they go. "My dad's worked at the same place he's worked for 30 years," says Peccini. "But when I left my job, he said to me, 'If I was your age—and if I hadn't had three kids and a mortgage—I would have done the same thing.'" When I ask Peccini what he sees himself doing in ten years, or at his dad's age, he gives the typical Grup answer. "That's a great question," he says. "I don't know. But I like my life."

Even Andy and Dominique, the startlingly cool rock-star parents, aren't quite sure where this is headed. "All I know is that the end point you give yourself keeps shifting by five years," says Andy. "When we were in our twenties, we were like, 'When we get in our mid-thirties, we'll have to call it quits, because it's too pathetic after that.' Then we got to our mid-thirties, and the timetable became the early forties. I suppose when we get there, we'll say, 'Once we hit 50...'" Then he says, with more resolve, "On our 50th birthday, it will be official. No more touring." ■