





*SIDE TWO*  
*The World Is Your Home Town*  
Sung by  
Glenn Cloos  
and  
Chorus

The  
**Up  
with  
People**  
Sound



# The Other Side of Up With People

By Jennifer L. Robinson

A

s a Generation Y'er born in the 1980s, the first things that come to my mind when someone mentions the 1960s are peace signs, long hair and "Forrest Gump." Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered a massive group of smiling, singing, clean cut kids, straight from a picture book of the 1940s, in Lee Storey's "Smile 'Til It Hurts," a documentary on the 1960s singing group Up With People. Where was the grease, the drugs, the tree-hugging?

Up With People began in 1965 as a singing, touring group of young enthusiasts determined to change the world by, in essence, being nice. As commentator P.J. O'Rourke, political satirist and journalist, put it, "Up With People seemed to be a group with what we might call a magnificent grasp of the obvious. If people were nicer, they'd be nicer people. If more people were more nice, it would be a nicer world. Well yeah. You know, I mean, OK."

Its members, nicknamed "Uppies," would tour nationally and globally, spreading their uplifting music and message wherever they went. They were an all-inclusive, diverse group in a time when racial tolerance was still a new concept. They would perform anywhere from rural Mississippi to Russia to the plains of Africa. And, by God, they were *happy*. So happy that they literally ran everywhere they went.

Despite the group's unbelievable optimism, Storey, a water rights attorney practicing in Phoenix, would not have found the group remarkable enough to enter into the world of filmmaking for the first time if it wasn't for one thing: her husband. After 15 years of marriage, her husband revealed the fact that he had once been an "Uppie." But he was not happy about it. In fact, he was reluctant to talk about his experience at all (hence the 15-year delay in communication). This alone was enough to pique Storey's interest and, before she knew it, she was embarking on a documentary journey that ended in "Smile 'Til It Hurts."

In "Smile," Storey reveals that Up With People was a cult that stemmed from the religious, reactionary group Moral Rearmament, or MRA. MRA was a spiritual movement headed by the Rev. Frank Buchman that gained momentum

in the tumultuous times leading up to World War II. At a time when the world was focused on military re-armament, MRA urged all nations to rearm morally. The movement was based on what were named the "Four Absolutes" – absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness and absolute love. When the war began, MRA members were active both on the fronts and within the wartime industry at home. The group was also active in facilitating Franco-German reconciliation after the war.

The MRA seemed to be everywhere there was political strife, preaching the idea that changing the world starts with changing oneself. As the fear of communism began to spread within our own country after the war, followed by extreme disapproval of the Vietnam War, the MRA turned its attention

to the United States, and Up With People was born. The group was a tool created by MRA to counteract the growing anger and fear of the 1960s, most obviously symbolized by the negative hippie culture.

By the time that Up With People was created, J. Blanton Belk was the head of MRA. The group was part of Belk's plan to "modernize the character and purpose of man" with "absolute moral standards as a compass in personal and national life." Belk believed that "enough God-loving men and women can be found who, by example and dedication, will provide leadership whose aim is to right what is wrong in the world."

Uppies were indoctrinated with these principles, as well as the Four Absolutes, and were heavily controlled by what was termed the "inner circle" of the group. Initially, membership was free and necessities, such as meals and a place to sleep, were provided by the group. Uppies received no compensation for their involvement. At any given time, a member would be very far from home with no money or means to eat or find lodging without the group. Uppies were extremely obedient because, if they broke the rules, they would be abandoned in Europe without a moment's notice or a dollar to their name.

Uppies' obedience was reinforced with a rigorous, daily routine of calisthenics. Members were alternatively busy and exhausted at all times, which reduced the likelihood of acting out or causing trouble. Not surprisingly, with hundreds of



# Up With People

vibrant, healthy teenagers running around, one primary type of “trouble” that the inner circle sought to prevent was sex. In furtherance of the tenet of “absolute purity,” Uppies were strictly prohibited from dating each other or having sex. Period. If two members wanted to marry, they had to get permission from the inner circle. One former member interviewed in the documentary revealed that after several years with the group, and despite being one of their best featured soloists, she was immediately kicked out of the group when the inner circle learned that she had married another highly regarded Uppie without their permission. Even married couple’s sex lives were regulated. Married couples had to sleep in separate, single beds like the rest of the group.

Being gay was not an option, either. As former Uppie Eric Roos explained, “it was Up With People, it was dancing, and it attracted every closet case. It was like the whole country got up-ended and all the boys who liked to put on tights and prance around in front of their mirror, you know, ended up in Up With People.” Despite this, “Being gay in Up With People was not possible. There was no such thing as gay . . . homosexuality did not exist . . . when in fact, you were surrounded by other gay people who you could never talk to about it.” The group promoted diversity and inclusiveness, but its ideal of “absolute love” did not extend to the gay community. Its treatment of gays was similar to the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, at best.

As Up With People gained popularity and exposure, its leaders felt the need to distance themselves at least in appearance, from MRA. Funding of and influence over the group gradually shifted from MRA to the U.S. government to corporate America. Several U.S. presidents publicly endorsed the group and invited them to perform at their various functions. In fact, it was President Eisenhower who urged Belk to “get away from that very dreary image of moral re-armament.” As a result, Belk resigned from MRA and reincorporated Up With People as a separate entity so it could be a more formidable political tool. The group was often sent as a propagandist ambassador for the U.S. to several other countries to combat communism and act as the fresh, wholesome face of America. The group primarily traveled on military planes and other government vehicles. President Nixon, like Eisenhower, expressed his approval of Up With People and booked them to perform on more than one occasion.

As Up With People both continued to grow and move away from its MRA roots, it encountered increasing financial trouble. Corporate America was more than happy to step in and keep the group afloat. Conglomerates such as Coca-Cola, Pfizer, Lilly, GE, Texaco, Coors, Exxon, Toyota and Enron poured money into the group because they saw the global phenomenon as a great way to spread their products to the

ends of the globe. On the heels of the group’s American values came the group’s American products. As one former member put it, “follow the money. Where does the money come from? And why are they financing them with literally millions of dollars? We’re talking about companies that are knocking on the doors of other countries and trying to gain admittance to their markets. Companies that are very, very eager to allay anti-American reactions maybe by the population there. Up

With People opened the door. You send in these young people, singing young people. American corporations came right behind them and established themselves.”

Most of this change in influence and funding occurred under the individual members’ radars. One of the most compelling aspects of Storey’s documentary is how well it shows the disconnect between the inner circle’s hidden agenda and the Uppies’ naive, honest desire to change the world. Uppies were shocked and upset to learn that their group had become the government’s or private corporations’ puppet. One man in the documentary even broke down in tears. “Smile ‘Til It Hurts” reveals equally the disturbing, brainwashing control of the inner circle as well as the determined effusion of hope and belief of the Uppies that the world could be transformed through

something as simple as happiness.

By 2000, Up With People had run out of money and indefinitely suspended operations, although the group reorganized in 2004 and is now also known as the WorldSmart Leadership Program. Despite the many downsides of Up With People, the group touched millions of lives and was a positive experience for many of its members. According to the group’s Web site, Up With People boasts 20,000 alumni in 89 countries. Others, however, like Storey’s husband, would rather forget. Personally, I will never think about the 1960s again without picturing this singing sea of happy faces alongside their long-haired, hippie counterparts, thanks to Storey’s willingness to uncover this fascinating historical phenomenon in “Smile ‘Til It Hurts.” ■

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