

By the photographers of  
REDUX PICTURES

# ★ AMERICAN ★ ★ YOUTH ★



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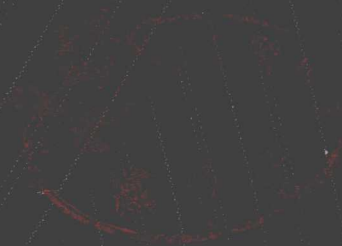


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# AMERICAN YOUTH



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This book was designed by  
The Office of Gilbert Li

Produced by  
Jasmine DeFoore

Co-Produced by  
Myles Ashby

Text edited by  
Michael Massmann and Joey Meyer

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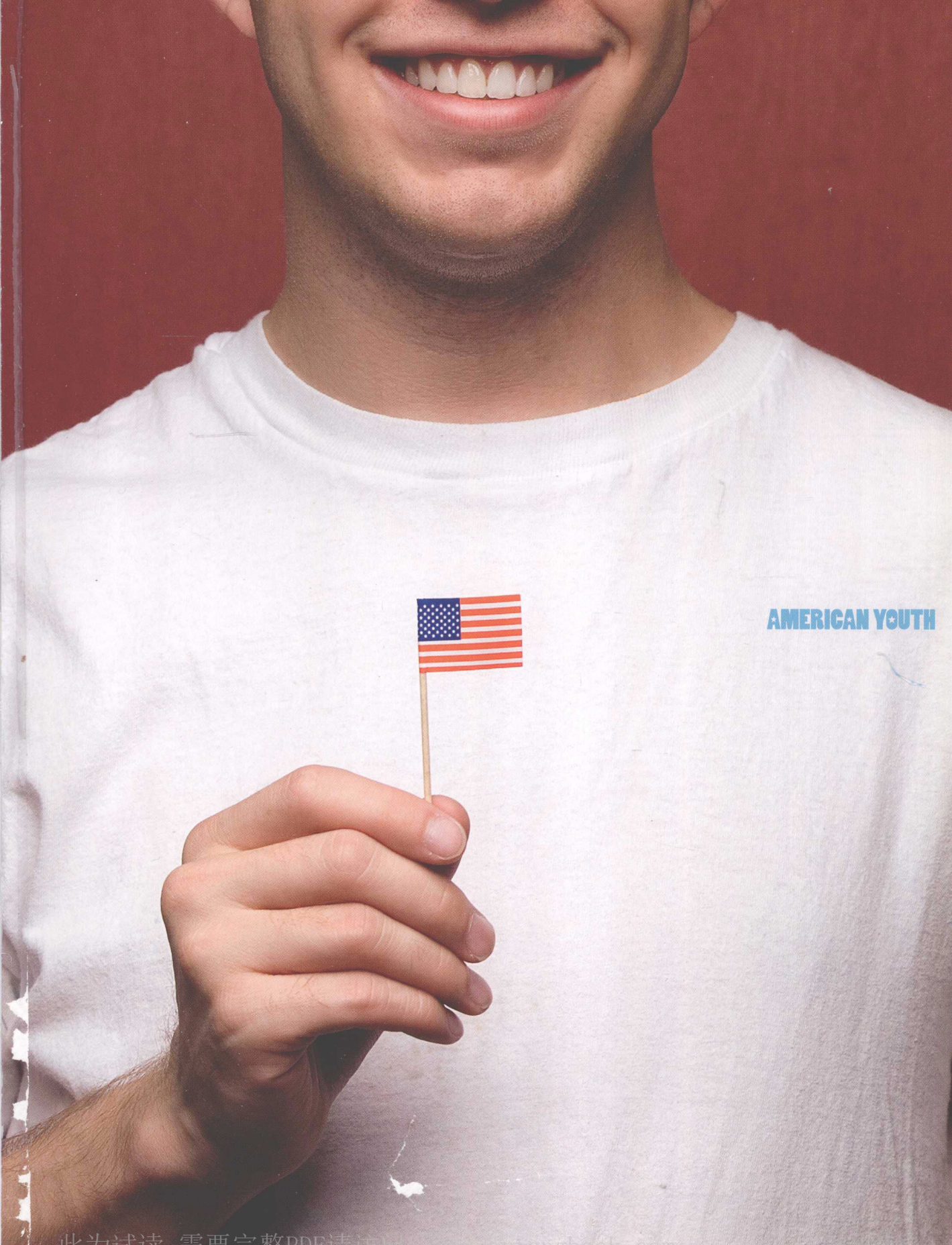
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AMERICAN YOUTH





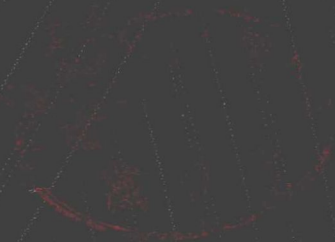


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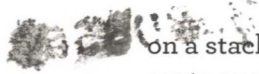
# FIRST STEPS OF THE iGENERATION

By Steve Appleford

**IT IS EARLY FOR A WEDDING.** But Angie had her reasons. Her boyfriend of five years had joined the Army. And now his military career was laid out in front of him, with life and work at Fort Bragg, outside Fayetteville, North Carolina, and then a trickier year-long deployment to Iraq. So it was either break up or get married, the only way Angie could stay with him until he left for Baghdad. Her parents knew she'd just do it the moment she turned 18. So they let Angie go, watched her walk down the aisle with Rob Santo in his Class A uniform; a couple of grown-up teenagers ready to make a home, until he was sent off to war.

Rob was deployed at the end of 2008, just in time to miss Christmas. He was an electronics specialist with the 82nd Airborne, helping to dismantle another base, one more step in America's slow exit from Iraq. Angie (née Chastain) was back home in Maryland with her parents, preparing to start nursing school, waiting and worried. It's a story that's centuries old: the wife and soldier separated by time and war. Except that Angie still talks to Rob every day, which is one benefit of coming of age in a new high-tech century. Each morning, she plugs into her webcam and Yahoo instant messaging for a 90-minute chat. Seeing his face from so many thousands of miles away, only makes the war more present in her life. "It kind of puts me in shock," Angie says of their conversations, still in the first months of her husband's overseas mission. The news is not always good. "I kind of go back and forth—*Don't tell me*, I don't want to hear about it. Then I flip-flop—*Do tell me*, I want to know what's going on. It's really scary." She hears about the bombs and destruction, the stories of American soldiers killed or wounded. "It makes me think, tomorrow it could be him. It just makes me cherish every day that I do have him and can talk to him."

There's a photograph of the young couple taken by Erika Larsen weeks before Rob left, and it captures them at a moment of calm amid the shady woods of Fort Bragg. By now, Angie is 18, blonde and gazing into the distance, and Rob is 19, handsome and contemplative in a dark red beret and green combat fatigues, sitting



on a stack of empty ammo boxes. Their story of young love during wartime represents one moment in history, as another generation steps forcefully into adulthood. That's the subject of this book of photographs: *American Youth*, created by the members of the Redux Pictures agency, headed by founder Marcel Saba.

The book's mission is to examine this newest generation of adults in detail, to observe young couples and Mormon missionaries, debutante balls and drunken tailgate stupors, war widows and B-boys, street kids and lobstermen. How are they different, and how are they exactly the same as the generations that came before? On these pages are Christian rock fans, lesbian gangstas and Obama volunteers. There are would-be pop stars waiting for a shot on *American Idol*, organic farmers living the hippie dream, and tattooed Cobra gang members brooding in the Window Rock jail on the Navajo Reservation. Another series of photographs asks young New Yorkers to think big: *If you had the chance, what question would you ask God?*

This is American youth in all its vivid detail and contradictions. At the macro level, is a series of portraits by photographer Ben Baker. They are organized into epic grids, each one lining up 40 young faces, representing either the surprising American demographics of today, or a projection of the future. Baker calls the grids "a sociological study," a graphic of a changing America, based on a study by the Pew Research Center. His first grid represents an exact breakdown of the current ethnicity of young Americans, each face photographed against a simple white backdrop. The second grid's collection of faces and ethnicities is a projection of where America will be in 2050, with far fewer Caucasians and a significant increase in Asians and Hispanics. "It really gives a sense of the country," says Baker, who collected the images during two weekends in multicultural Manhattan, setting up a photo booth in Washington Square Park, and another in Union Square. Virtually all of the young people he asked to photograph were happy to talk and sit for his camera, helping construct this roadmap of an era. "It's where we are now and where we're headed."



**EVERY GENERATION IN AMERICA GETS A LABEL.** some catchy name to call its own. The top prize is already taken (thanks to author Tom Brokaw), the very words "Greatest Generation" suggesting all kinds of heroic deeds and survival skills put to good use in the last century, the so-called "American Century," no less. They vanquished Hitler, survived the Depression and won the Cold War. What could follow that? But from this crowd emerged the Baby Boomers, a tidal wave of youth that came of age in the years after Camelot and in the time of Vietnam and rock & roll, eventually taking power in the form of Presidents Clinton and Bush. They were followed by the infamous Generation X, which hit early adulthood in the '90s, just in time to be the first to conquer the Internet and be identified with "heroin chic," grunge and a *Titanic* movie in equal measure.



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What came after is harder to explain. After flirting with the unmemorable designation “Generation Y,” the consensus of our most trusted thinkers and cultural critics is that the first to come of age in the new century shall be known simply as the Millennials. It’s a label coined by authors Neil Howe and William Strauss in their 1992 book *Generations: The History of America’s Future*, and generally refers to Americans born in the ’80s and ’90s. It’s an epic phrase for an epic time of change and turmoil, of new possibility and lowered expectations.

This book is concerned with what could be called first-wave Millennials, in 2009 aged roughly between 18 and 24 years. They are still in early adulthood, and already they have been smeared by their elders as a super-race of spoiled cry-babies and fashionable zombies, plugged into the virtual unreality of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, BlackBerry, Blu-Ray, Bluetooth, PlayStation 2, Wii, Xbox 360, the iPod, iPhone, iBook, etc., etc. We are told they are too impatient to follow traditional career paths, trained by indulgent Boomer parents to expect easy rewards and a stress-free rise to the top ASAP. That is the cliché. As always, the truth is far more complex and fascinating, and as varied as any generation of Americans, some as rooted in old customs as they are in the sci-fi here and now. They are just the latest generation to be misunderstood by their elders.

They are also the largest generation in history, twice the number of Generation X, more racially mixed and uncompromising in regards to their own needs and ambitions. A 2005 Gallop Poll reports that about 60 percent have dated someone of another race. They multitask on an expanding global online playground, on the cell or the Instant Messenger, speed-texting with their thumbs endlessly and as effortlessly as if in their sleep, attaching digital snapshots of their pets, their friends or maybe themselves in wonderfully compromised positions. More enroll in college, with the 17.3 million undergraduates in 2004 nearly double that of 1970, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. And they just helped elect the new President of these United States, turning out in record numbers for Barack Obama.

One investment firm calculates that every year they spend \$200 billion (some of it their parents’ money), so there are many seminars and Web sites designed to ease the stress of marketing to this confounding iGeneration. Even so, they will face worse economic times than their parents or grandparents, and many move back home, “boomerang kids” unashamed to be back with mom and dad. They face many of the same struggles as their parents, their idealism colliding with lowered expectations. Some will land in the military, others will be teen mothers, debutantes, surfers, activists, farmers. More than a few will get drunk or loaded, and stay that way.

Most will remain plugged in, wherever they land, as Erika Larsen has found during her volunteer work at a homeless shelter in New York City. “Truly, truly homeless and everything they’ve gone through—maybe they’re prostitutes or whatever, but they have their iPods,” says the photographer, herself still in her



early 30s. “And even though they’re staying at the shelter, they have to pick the cooler clothes to wear. It says something about being homeless in the United States. It’s about different survival skills than maybe being homeless in India or Africa. It’s a totally different thing. They have cell phones. Their values have shocked me. What’s going on here? *I don’t have an iPod.*”



**RAMI MIKATI WAS LIKE ANY OTHER AMERICAN KID**, born and raised in Northern Ohio, the second son of Lebanese immigrants. Being a Muslim was never an issue. He grew up mostly around white non-Muslims, went to public school, played soccer. That changed on the morning of September 11, 2001, as terrorist hijackers sent passenger jets crashing into New York and Washington, D.C., killing thousands and introducing radical Islam as America’s newest enemy. Mikati was a freshman in high school as he watched it on TV with his geometry class. Everything stopped. Even sports activities were called off. “Thanks, Rami,” one kid joked, “you cancelled our soccer practice.”

Things only got worse after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. While still in high school, Mikati was driving home one night when he noticed he was being tailed and followed. Back then, he still dressed like any other adolescent kid, and he didn’t even have facial hair. He finally stopped at a light and looked back at the car behind him, pleading “What did I do?” The driver was older, a little rough around the edges, the kind of guy who probably yells at his TV. He shouted back at the teenager: “Are you *Arab*? Are you *Iraqi*?” Mikati couldn’t believe what he was hearing, and when he soon drove past a police station, his stalker sped off. “That really hit home,” Mikati says. “That was a pretty blatant, personal, direct form of racism.”

He’s 21 now, and studying economics at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, with plans to attend dental school. Mikati is also politically active, leading an advocacy group on campus called Students for Justice in Palestine. He often wears a black and white keffiyeh scarf around his neck, as well as a T-shirt with Arabic writing across his chest, right above the English translation: WE WILL NOT BE SILENT.

Coming of age as a Muslim-American in the time of post-Millennial conflict has been a lesson in dueling identities. His parents left Lebanon during the civil war there in 1986, a year before Rami was born. They sent him to local schools, but at home taught him about Islam and how to speak and read Arabic. “Here in Ohio, I’m seen as the Arab. And in Lebanon I’m seen as the American,” he says. “I’m never seen as both.” His occasional family visits there began during his childhood. “Before September 11, it was the coolest thing to be American. Everyone would try to speak English to you, and all the girls thought it was the cutest thing. All you had to do was say you’re American and you’d be treated like a king. Then, after 9/11, no way. The resentment with our American foreign policy



لن نصمت

WE WILL NOT BE SILENT







overcame that. You don't really want to boast and say *I'm American*. They'll go 'Fuck you!' Before that, it was cool."

In a portrait by photographer Greg Ruffing, Mikati is in his dorm room, kneeling on a green prayer rug beside his bed. On the wall are a Lebanese flag and a poster of Malcolm X. "I'm pretty confident in myself, and my identity is not as a Muslim but as an American," he insists. Mikati is like the young man playing guitar in another picture, Ahmed Aldoori, 20, who was born in Iraq and loves Metallica and Middle Eastern music equally; or the Arab-Americans quietly praying in their local mosque. The photographer found a small but vibrant community of Muslims in Ohio, as Sunni and Shiite share neighborhoods and mosques. In the pictures, they are living the quintessential suburban life, with backyard birthday parties, balloons, swing sets, and teenage girls who happen to wear the traditional hijab headscarf. But there is something else beneath the surface, a burden not shared by their neighbors, says Ruffing: "Something that came up with a couple of people was that, before 9/11, they just felt ignored, and they wished they could go back to being ignored. They wanted to go on with their lives and have nobody pay attention to them, and put their heads down and humbly pursue their lives and careers."



**SIMON AND SIMEON MET AT THE BRONX ZOO.** They had each arrived there alone one day early in 2008, then noticed one another wandering around, and finally started chatting and flirting on the subway back to Manhattan. True love. A year later, they are happily cohabitating as a gay couple in a Williamsburg, Brooklyn apartment, a pair of 23-year-olds beginning their adult lives in the city together.

Their emotional link runs deep, but anyone looking at their portrait in this book can see the connections. They look like twins, two short-haired young men in blue plaid shirts, embracing in the fading afternoon light on the roof of their building. "We were kind of intense from the minute we met," says Simeon, who works at a high-end cosmetics boutique on Madison Avenue. Simon is a student of fashion at the Parsons School of Design. "We were talking about marriage and homes, and we do talk about those things and the future. But especially now that we've moved in, we try to keep it in the present. This is my longest relationship, and I've just noticed that maybe when you put too much emphasis on the future, you also put too much emphasis on doubt. So we try to stay in the present tense and whatever happens happens. We're very young. But we have a lot of hopes and desires to make this a long-term functioning relationship."

When invited to participate in the *American Youth* project, with its focus entirely on men and women between 18 and 24, photographer Mark Peterson gravitated to the youngest adults, choosing among his subjects the formal settings of a New York debutante ball, and high school JROTC students going to their prom in Norfolk, Virginia. He recognized something profound in that moment of life and transition.