

'American Cool' on display in Smithsonian exhibit

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newwave@tulane.edu



Musician Jimi Hendrix exemplifies “coolness.” Hendrix is among 100 iconic figures in American culture featured in the “American Cool” exhibit at the Smithsonian.

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Who is cool? What exactly is *cool*? From Feb. 7 through Sept. 7 at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, D.C., [“American Cool”](#) ? an exhibit co-curated by [Joel Dinerstein](#), an associate professor of English at Tulane University ? explores our notions of cool.

Dinerstein knows cool: He teaches a course at Tulane on the history of cool, and he has been writing and lecturing on the subject for 15 years. Dinerstein holds the James H. Clark Endowed Chair of American Civilization and is the director of the [New Orleans Center for the Gulf South](#) at Tulane.

“The exhibit and course are an inquiry into one question: What do we mean when we say *someone*, not *something*, is cool? The short definition? Cool means rebellious self-expression,” Dinerstein says. “The 100 icons of cool in the exhibit constitute the

successful cultural rebels of American culture.”

These 100 icons were selected by Dinerstein and Frank Goodyear III. The exhibit features fine art photography from luminaries such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Annie Leibovitz, along with films and music clips. Dinerstein is the primary author of the museum catalogue, entitled *American Cool*.

According to Dinerstein, the cool figures met at least three of the following criteria: “An original artistic vision carried off with a signature style; the embodiment of cultural rebellion or transgression for a given generation; iconic power or instant visual recognition; and a recognized cultural legacy.”

Musicians, filmmakers, actors, artists, writers, athletes and political figures, they are iconoclasts, rebels and visionaries, exuding a sublime self-confidence.

It's been that way since the 1940s, when jazz saxophonist Lester Young brought the word and concept of “cool” into the American vernacular. To quote another Lester Young saying, “You dig?”

An interview with Dinerstein and scenes from his class are scheduled to air on [“CBS This Morning”](#) on Thursday (Feb. 6).

Michael Luke is a freelance writer living in New Orleans. He graduated from Tulane University in 2004 with a BA in English.