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# Titters and Jitters in the Atomic Cafe

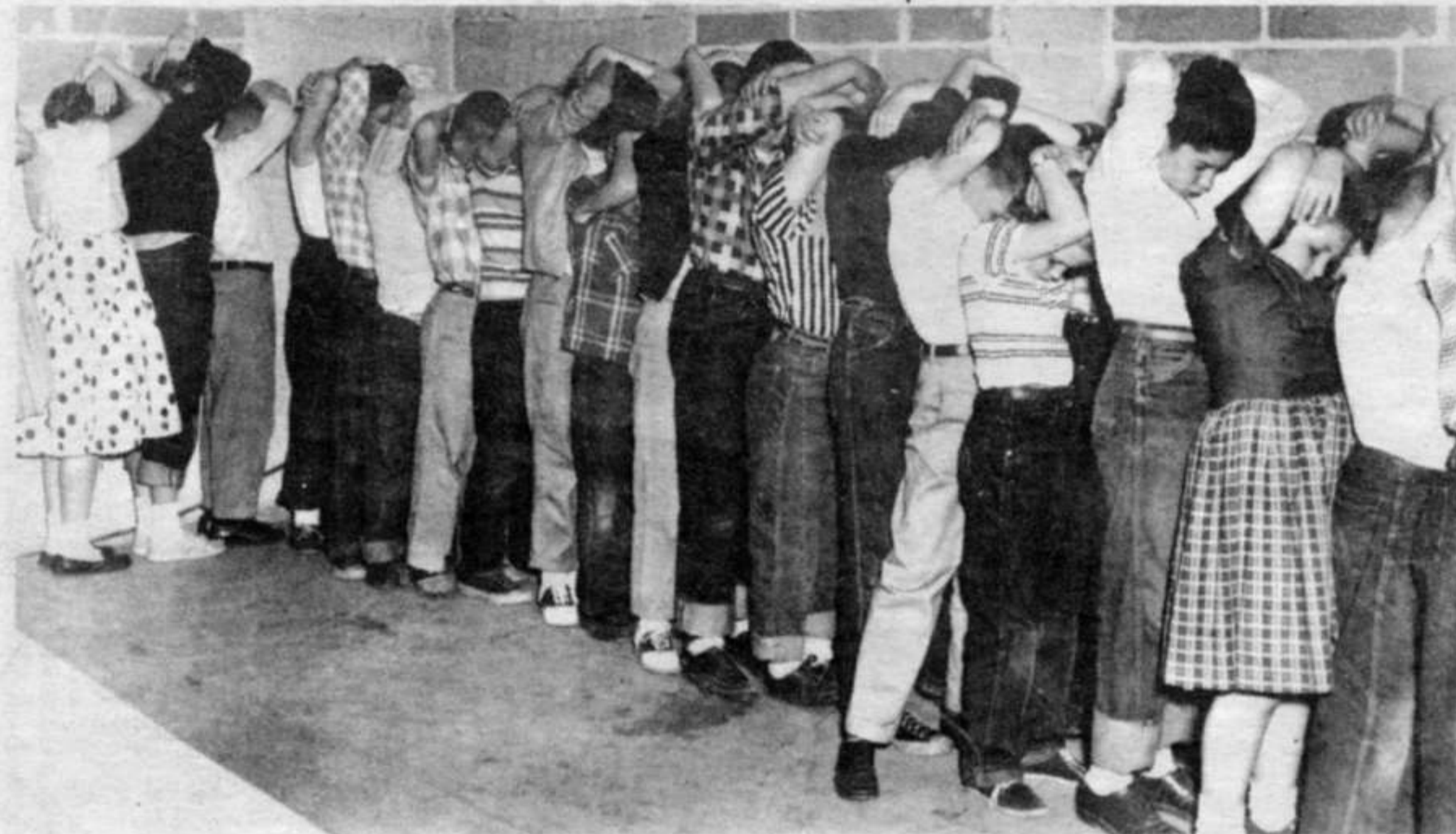
**THE ATOMIC CAFE.** Produced and directed by Kevin Rafferty, Jayne Loader and Pierce Rafferty. Edited by Kevin Rafferty and Jayne Loader. At the Northside.

By Kelly Vance

*The Atomic Cafe* gives us a crash course in American pop sociology of the '50s. From the "Trinity" test, shot in grim grainy color in 1945, to the deluded Civil Defense efforts to convince the folks at home that they could survive a nuclear blast, a marvelous, half-forgotten, and almost exotic idiom is dredged up. Cold War spoken here.

Working with armed forces documentaries, movie newsreels, TV kinescopes, Civil Defense shorts, and other appropriately spooky library shots, the filmmakers have rediscovered everything we thought we knew about the Big Boom. They didn't miss a thing: smiling bewildered Bikini islanders and charred Nagasaki corpses; the pathetic Rosenbergs; the determined Atom Age nuclear family in their fallout shelter; passive GI guinea pigs in their desert foxholes getting mouthfuls of radioactive sand; and eerily warlike clergymen urging annihilation of the Commies. The montage is crisp and earnest. There is no narration. Period music in the swing, rock, and hillbilly veins (like Floyd Tillman's plaintive "I just can't stand another Cold War with you") is used for irony.

Three decades of distance has worked wonders for the '50s. The scariest political bogeyman like Nixon and Khrushchev are good for laughs in *The Atomic Cafe*. Lyndon Johnson's stern listing of possible target cities (Fort Worth, Dallas, San Antonio, even Johnson City!) is a particular treat. Even "nuclearosis" anxiety attacks, reduced here to cartoon form by a



Civil Defense instructional clip, are something we can all overcome if we know what to do. The tangible fear many thirtyish moviegoers today still carry around, that we could be incinerated anywhere, at any time, instantly, is personified by Burt the Turtle, an animated

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survivor who musically warns the kids to "duck and cover" when they see that blinding flash. Presumably the children of postwar Hiroshima, the ones that were well enough to attend school, didn't need comic reminders that death from the sky was a very real possibility. We see quite a few members of *homo americanus eisenhowerus*

learning to get along with this frightening new world: 4-H girls cataloging a family's ration of fallout shelter food, Southern California shopping center commercials pledging to combat the Red Menace, alert citizens sporting protective ponchos, and a lurid montage sequence of consumer overindulgence featuring aisles of supermarket products, miles of neon-lit drive-ins, and forests of gadgets and gizmos to make life easier. And always the reminder from the Pentagon: these are things we're going to have to protect. As for Eisenhower himself, he comes across here as a rather calm, matter-of-fact upper-level manager, seemingly unruffled by the threats of the Kremlin and the H-bomb, as if the Cold War wasn't all that bad after his WWII stint.

For every horror of war and potential war, *The Atomic Cafe* shows a faint counter-image

on the American scene in dizzying sequence. The Russian H-bomb scare produces not only fear but genuine goofiness at home as families batten down their shelters and kids practice flopping to the floor in school. While senators call for brinksmanship, nervous businessmen learn to cope by ordering "atomic cocktails" and teenagers do the "atomic rock." As hideously hypocritical as their leaders are, average Americans are shown to be just as capable of having fun with *anything*, trivializing the shame and suffering of the Nuclear Age's beginnings into a kind of faddish free-for-all at the Strontium Drive-In with a mushroom-cloud burger.

The most penetrating images in the film, however, are the military and government footage shot from a documentary angle—as opposed to instructional and promotional films. The slow, sinister glide of

the Enola Gay melting grainily into a right bank on the way to Japan is a vision of dread. There's a weird little haberdasher's smile on Harry Truman's face as he announces the success of the first atomic attack. The idyllic Bikini Atoll is suddenly obliterated in a boiling ocean as the bomb releases its heat. A shamefaced official haltingly describes the death of Ethel Rosenberg, who had to receive an extra jolt of electric chair current. These saddening images are held in longer takes, and the ghostly effect carries over (like all well-done propaganda) even as we laugh at the corny admonitions of the training films. It is, after all, death that we're talking about.

In a thrilling action sequence at the film's end we're shown, by means of slam-bang editing, the ultimate of ultimates—a nuclear attack on the US. (The atomic strikes on Japan and the projected raids north of the Yalu River into China were naturally justified by war aims when we had the only bomb. When the other side got its own, Americans began to actually think about the unthinkable things we had done to others.) The scale is very private, as befits the citizen-level scope of Civil Defense. We see office workers hurrying into public shelters, housewives dashing for the basement, a little boy diving under the bed, and then the flash and cloud, endlessly fascinating in themselves over and above their loaded symbolic value. *The Atomic Cafe's* advocacy is humanistic. It's a documentary warning—really no less a piece of propaganda than any of its elements—which manages a certain affection for the misguided Cold War combatants while maintaining an unblinking awareness that nuclear energy was developed, first and foremost, to kill.