

THE BEATLES

A Retrospective



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By Jeffrey D. Breshears

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THE BEATLES

A Retrospective

by Jeffrey D. Breshears

If Bob Dylan was the most prolific popular songwriter of the 20th century, the Beatles were its premier performers. They probably had the most profound impact on popular music and culture than anyone else and



were, along with Dylan, the primary agents responsible for transforming rock 'n' roll from a banal opiate of the adolescent masses into a sophisticated art form. From their clothes and hairstyles to their general world view, they defined the issues and concerns of an entire generation of youth in the 1960s. If they were not, as one enthusiastic English music critic gushed in 1964, "the greatest composers since Beethoven," neither could they be dismissed as "just a band that made it very, very big," as a burned-out and cynical John Lennon would later describe them.

The Fab Four

There certainly has never been a music group as charismatic or prolific as the Beatles. From the time their manager **Brian Epstein** cleaned up their scruffy image and dressed them in matching suits, the Beatles set the style for the youth culture of the sixties. As songwriters, **John Lennon** and **Paul McCartney** produced an amazing volume of songs – over a seven year period they recorded more than 200 of their own compositions in addition to writing several hits for other recording artists. From the start, Lennon and McCartney agreed to publish their material together, although few of their songs were actual collaborations. Usually, whoever wrote the song sang the lead vocals, and since both vied for the spotlight, the arrangement inspired a creative and (mostly) friendly competition as each one tried to outdo the other. Feeding off each other's energy, they wrote fresh, stylistic tunes that usually avoided the insipid sentimentality of most Tin Pan Alley music and created an artful, commercially popular synthesis of white and black pop music.

As pop/rock vocalists, their voices were perfectly suited to the genre – McCartney's a bit sweeter and more melodic, Lennon's more aggressive and expressive. As rock musicians, though no virtuosos, they handled a variety of instruments deftly, including

electric, acoustic and bass guitars and keyboards.

George Harrison, the youngest member in the group, often was overshadowed in the early years by his two superstar mentors, but through perseverance he developed into an accomplished lead guitarist and, eventually, a songwriter and singer of note. Drummer **Ringo Starr's** role in the band was to keep time, provide some comic relief, and otherwise stay out of the others' way. He was a competent if unimaginative drummer whose musicianship developed over time. In live performances the unique chemistry of the individual parts came together to produce an exuberant and energetic sound that ignited the passions of millions of Beatlemania worldwide. The Beatles were a pop music phenomenon, as stylistic and photogenic as they were musically talented, augmented by their charismatic personas.

The Beatles emerged at an opportune time in the history of pop/rock – pretty much at the mid-point in the 20-year maturation of the music from the simple rock'n'roll of Bill Haley & the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" in 1954 to the apex of progressive rock – the release of Boston's first album in 1975. In the early years of rock 'n' roll Elvis Presley was the dominant figure, only to be eclipsed in the early sixties by the Beach Boys. But with the debut of the Beatles on *The*

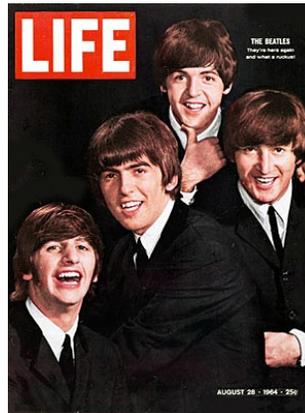
Ed Sullivan Show in February 1964, they propelled the music to a whole new level. Fortunately for them, recording technology had advanced by then to the point that they could record in stereo for a fuller, more three-dimensional sound, and from the outset their recordings were infused with a fresh and vibrant sound.

All four members of the band hailed from working-class and middle-class families in Liverpool, England. Lennon, born in 1940 on the night of the heaviest German bombing raid of the war, was given up by his mother to be raised by his aunt. As for his father, he never knew him; Freddie Lennon abandoned his wife and son and sailed off to sea shortly after John's birth, only to reappear one afternoon in 1967 on John's doorstep in London. He had come, he announced, to meet his world-famous son and establish a relationship with him, but his world-famous son was less than impressed and not even remotely interested. As a youth Lennon apparently adored his carefree, uninhibited mother, cherished their time together, and was left shocked and embittered when she was accidentally killed while crossing a Liverpool street, struck by a car driven by a drunk off-duty policeman. Not surprisingly, Lennon grew increasingly sullen and anti-social, expressing his discontent and rage through his art and music.

McCartney (b.1942) and Harrison (b.1943) enjoyed more conventional home lives, but each adopted some variation on the obligatory juvenile delinquent persona theme that was more or less *de rigueur* for kids caught up in the rock 'n' roll subculture. Together, Lennon, McCartney and Harrison began playing regularly as a group in 1959, first as Johnny & the Moondogs and then as the Silver Beatles. They went through several drummers before the handsome **Pete Best** settled in as their regular. The group's early lineup usually consisted of five members, but after bassist **Stu Sutcliffe** (an art school friend of Lennon's) dropped out late in '61 they played as a quartet. The band eventually developed a large cadre of fanatical followers around Liverpool and northern England, and in 1962 local record merchant Brian Epstein became their manager. Epstein, though obviously a rock 'n' roll novice, possessed some innate showbiz savvy, and much of the Beatles' early commercial success was due to his P. R. efforts. Not only did he sanitize their image and market them as a wholesome, clean-cut pop combo, but he also succeeded in securing a recording contract with EMI, Britain's largest record company, on its Parlophone label. As personally ambitious as he was emotionally fragile, Epstein managed to exploit his connection with the Beatles to sign other popular recording artists including Billy J. Kramer & the Dakotas and Gerry & the Pacemakers.

Beatlemania

As the Beatles prepared to record their first songs in September 1962, producer **George Martin** insisted on a more accomplished drummer than Pete Best. Since relations between Best and the other three were already somewhat strained (he had a sizable following of his own and was out of synch with his bandmates, even reportedly forswearing drugs), they dumped him unceremoniously and brought in Ringo Starr (b.1940) on the eve of their big breakthrough. With the release of their first LP, *Please Please Me* (1963), the Beatles burst upon Britain's music scene amid unprecedented fanfare and hardly missed a beat for the next four years. Off their first album came six hit songs, and their follow-up LP, *With the Beatles* ('63), contained



three more. *A Hard Day's Night* ('64), their third UK release, included six Top Twenty hits – and so it went, album-after-album, as the Beatles racked up astonishing record sales. In five years they placed over 60 songs on the charts, more than half of which were Top Ten hits. Twenty of their tunes reached number one. The top-selling single

of the decade was “I Want To Hold Your Hand,” their first hit in the U.S. Most of their albums held the number one spot on the LP charts, and eight of the top twenty best-selling albums of the sixties were theirs. In America their debut album, *Meet the Beatles*, out-sold every other album in music history to that time.

Many of their songs became pop music classics, including “Please Please Me,” “P.S. I Love You,” “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “I Saw Her Standing There,” “All My Loving,” “She Loves You,” “A Hard Day's Night,” “If I Fell,” “And I Love Her,” “Help,” “Yesterday,” “Ticket To Ride,” “Michelle,” “In My Life,” “Nowhere Man,” “We Can Work It Out,” “Day Tripper,” “I've Just Seen a Face,” “Norwegian Wood,” “Eleanor Rigby,” “Good Day Sunshine,” “Here, There and Everywhere,” “For No One,” “Yellow Submarine,” “A Day in the Life,” “All You Need Is Love,” “Penny Lane,” “Strawberry Fields Forever,” “Hello Goodbye,” “Hey Jude,” “Revolution,” “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” “Something,” “Here Comes the Sun,” “Let It Be,” and “The Long and Winding Road.” A rather impressive collection by anyone's standards, and as of 2013 the Beatles had reportedly sold over 2.2 billion records and CD's worldwide.

All the group's albums were certified Gold, and all reached #1 or #2 on the U.S. record charts. Several in particular were artistic triumphs, with *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* ('66) generally considered to be the first art/rock albums in music history. In the past LPs functioned primarily as repositories for a hit song or two, surrounded by mostly filler material, packaged and marketed to generate some additional revenue for the record company. But *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* inspired a movement by serious rock 'n' roll bands away from strictly banal commerciality toward a more artsy orientation.



Although much of their early music sounds simplistic and naive today, one should keep in mind that this was all cutting-edge pop music in the mid-sixties. But as Dylan wrote, the times were a-changin', and much of the innocence of the mid-sixties evaporated by 1967 amid all the social and cultural chaos of the sixties. Rock music became increasingly sophisticated (if also more erratic, drug-inspired and cynical), just as American society and culture were becoming more discordant under the strains of ongoing racial conflicts, ghetto riots, the divisive Vietnam War, and the emergence of a huge anarchistic youth counterculture movement. Through all the change and chaos the Beatles, as a group and individually, exemplified the spirit of the times – which is why their music stands as the representative soundtrack of the era.

Phase II

The Beatles career can be divided into two phases. In the early years, from their initial breakout in Britain in 1963 through 1966, they toured extensively as the world's premier pop/rock band and recorded seven albums, culminating in *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*. But the Beatles stopped performing together following a concert tour of the U.S. in August of 1966. Lennon in particular was burned out from all the tension and pressure of the preceding four years, and for a brief interval the others seemed to welcome the respite. At first, they were as productive as ever, working on an ambitious studio recording that McCartney had conceived that eventually became *St. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, followed later in 1967 by an equally audacious project that produced the *Magical Mystery Tour* album and movie. But in retrospect 1967 proved to be a transitional year, and once the touring ended and their manic schedule eased, they found it hard to recapture the dynamism and the cohesive comradery of previous years.

Until then they had been best friends, partners and collaborators – although never to the extent as

portrayed in the motion pictures *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* But strains in their relationships soon surfaced as they began to drift apart, each one involved in his own particular projects. Following the death of Brian Epstein in August of '67, McCartney tried to assume *de facto* management of the group, but he only succeeded in annoying and alienating his bandmates. Lennon had always been the acknowledged leader of the group, but now he was often withdrawn and incapacitated by drugs. So McCartney attempted to fill the void, but in the process he met stiff resistance. Rightly or wrongly, his colleagues suspected that he was trying to take over and reduce them to the role of sidemen. For the first time in their years together, the Beatles were directionless and leaderless, and the latent anarchistic tendencies within each of them eventually fragmented their cohesion.

In this second phase of their career, beginning in early 1967 with the recording of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and ending in 1970 with the release of their final LP, *Let It Be*, their music became increasingly experimental and eclectic. Unfortunately, it also became increasingly eccentric and erratic, with very mixed results. Their most heralded album was *Sgt. Pepper's*, the first "concept" album in rock history. Thematically, the album was conceived as a hip rock 'n' roll vaudeville show, but in reality it was an overblown and pretentious techno-contrivance full of mostly novelty songs. As a concept album *Sgt. Pepper's* worked to an extent, although in fact it featured only one substantial song that could stand on its own, "A Day in the Life," which was itself a composite of two song fragments by Lennon and McCartney. The album was a strange and curious mix of disparate styles and a radical departure from their rock 'n' roll roots, but for better or worse it was enormously popular and influential.

After *Sgt. Pepper's* the band never really functioned as a cohesive unit, and their albums were no longer collaborative efforts as in previous years. From this point on, each wrote and sang his own material with the others filling in essentially as session musicians (or in the case of Harrison's sole contribution to the *Sgt. Pepper's* album, "Within You Without You," he played sitar and tambura on the track backed only by musicians from the London Asian Music Circle). For a time they contented themselves with diverse artistic projects and their status as Swinging London's top celebrities and Western Civilization's most affluent and influential pop culture aristocrats. They were, in the words of *Rolling Stone's* Jann Wenner, "the first citizens of [Marshall McLuhan's] global village," enormously wealthy and successful international jet-setters, and increasingly independent of one another.

Nonetheless, they were still capable of producing some amazing music, and as the sixties progressed their music evolved and became more sophisticated if not necessarily more satisfying. Their subsequent albums – *Magical Mystery Tour*, *The Beatles* (a.k.a. *The*

White Album), *Let It Be* and *Abbey Road* – certainly featured some impressive songs, but there was also a lot of wasted vinyl taken up with silly ditties, inconsequential song fragments and self-indulgent rants apparently intended to distance themselves as much as possible from their past. The Beatles had been a great pop/rock band, but after 1966 they often came across as too self-consciously artsy to the point of pretentiousness.

Regardless, the Beatles dominated their decade as no other popular recording artist or group ever has, and their impact far exceeded just the records they made. Both stylistically and substantively, they set the standards by which all other pop and rock recording artists were measured. Even high-brow academic musicologists lauded their creative brilliance, with only Bob Dylan being accorded similar respect. Actively experimental in the recording studio, they pioneered many innovations in recording technology, and in an era of accelerated musical and social change, the Beatles were the pied pipers who led the parade.



The Dream Is Over

The initial spark that eventually led to the dissolution of the band came in '68 when Lennon took up with Yoko Ono, an obscure and exceedingly weird Japanese avant-garde "artiste," and subsequently divorced his Liverpudlian wife, Cynthia. At this point long-simmering personal and artistic tensions within the group not only strained their relations but often thwarted their efforts in the studio. During the *White Album* recording sessions Starr, increasingly irritated by McCartney's domineering personality and perfectionistic tendencies, Lennon's passive-aggressive behavior, and Yoko's ubiquitous (or iniquitous?) presence in the studio, announced he was quitting the group. Two weeks later he returned, but over the next year both Harrison and Lennon also made feints toward the exit door. Amid continuous bickering, Lennon told the others in September 1969 that he was leaving, but for business and legal reasons it was kept confidential. However, a few months later in April of 1970 McCartney publicly announced that he had quit the group, and the Beatles officially dissolved amid a barrage of petty accusations, lawsuits and counter-suits (ref. Harrison's "Sue Me, Sue You Blues" on his 1973 album, *Living In the Material World*.)

Aftermath

Following their breakup, none of the Beatles came close to recapturing as solo artists the phenomenal success they had achieved together. Their creative bubble may not have totally burst, but it was seriously deflated. Displaying only occasional flashes of their former brilliance, the ex-Beatles proved to be disappointingly human.

For John Lennon, the seventies was a manic/depressive period in which he was often incapacitated by drug abuse and mental disorders (at one point he spent 2-1/2 days weekly over a 4-month period in primal therapy sessions). Worse still, he was dominated and manipulated by a demonic wife. Therefore, his musical output was understandably



both erratic and sporadic, but somehow in the mist of it all he managed to write and record some remarkable songs. Contrary to his image as a wild-ass rock 'n' roller (which certainly was an integral part of his complex psyche), he was capable of writing some poignant and introspective ballads such as "Love Is," "Jealous Guy," "#9 Dream" and "Mind Games." Also noteworthy were three exquisite songs that he wrote for his last recorded album, "Just Like Starting Over," "Watching the Wheels" and "Woman."

Lennon's best-known song, of course, was his 1971 composition, "Imagine." Featuring a serene and captivating melody and sung with great sensitivity and grace, the song conveyed a very toxic message. For years he had operated on the fringes of the radical New Left, and "Imagine" was essentially an anthem for a utopian socialist New World Order. Given its melodic qualities, "Imagine" was first-rate propaganda and perhaps the most subversive popular song ever written. As Lennon commented, "'Imagine,' which says: 'Imagine there is no more religion, no more countries, no more politics,' is virtually the Communist manifesto, even though I'm not particularly a Communist and I do not belong to any movement." His ideal, he explained, was a one-world secular/socialist society. Without apology, he described the message of the song as expressly "anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, and anti-capitalistic." It was not, however, anti-commercial, and it became the biggest-selling song of his solo career.

Not surprisingly, given its sanctimonious and strident theme, "Imagine" sparked plenty of criticism. Author Chris Ingham pointed out the obvious hypocrisy of Lennon, the millionaire rock star who owned several mansions, encouraging listeners to imagine a world with "no possessions," while John Blaney observed that the song was "riddled with contradictions: its hymn-like setting sits uncomfortably

alongside its author's plea for us to envision a world without religion."

At the end of his life, after years of over-indulgence, reckless self-destructive behavior and fractured relationships, Lennon appeared to be entering a new phase of self-awareness and domestic tranquility when he was suddenly shot to death outside his condo in Manhattan on December 8, 1980.



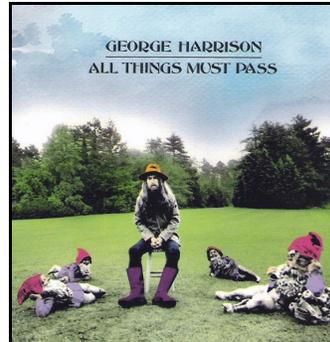
Probably more was expected from Paul McCartney than any other ex-Beatle. In contrast to the psychologically-impaired Lennon, McCartney seemed quite well-adjusted – at least by worldly

standards. He was every bit as talented as Lennon and considerably more stable in his personal life. So after the Beatles disbanded, rock music aficionados were confident that as a solo artist, McCartney would continue producing exquisite compositions along the lines of "Yesterday," "Eleanor Rigby" and "Let It Be." But unfortunately, his post-Beatles career turned out to be one of the biggest busts in pop music history – artistically if not commercially. Despite his innate genius, the man apparently had absolutely nothing interesting to write about. As a songwriter, and more significantly even as a person, McCartney never seemed to mature. Unlike Lennon, he held no passionate social or political ideals, and unlike Harrison he had no discernible spiritual or humanitarian impulses that inspired him. Quite content in his new life and having settled comfortably into bourgeois tranquility with his wife Linda and family, he was insulated from the intense emotional angst that served as a source of artistic expression for the conflicted Lennon.

McCartney had always been regarded as the most materialistic and status-conscious of the Beatles, and as a solo recording artist, without the creative tension of working in tandem (or in competition) with John Lennon, he contented himself with musical dabblings. Over a twenty-year span his output alternated between the passably mediocre to the embarrassingly pathetic, and his career as a solo artist can best be summarized by the title of one of his insipid seventies hits, "Silly Love Songs." In 1972, in a reference to the "Paul is dead" conspiracy theory that surfaced in the late '60s, the Christian singer/songwriter Larry Norman commented in one of his songs, "I've been listening to some of Paul's records / I think he really *is* dead!"

Near the end of the Beatles' run it appeared as though George Harrison was coming into his own as a major songwriter with contributions such as "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," "Here Comes the Sun," and "Something" – a song that Frank Sinatra hailed as "the greatest love song of the past fifty years."

Undoubtedly under pressure to prove that he deserved to be counted among his illustrious peers, and inspired in part by his new-found religious beliefs (he converted to the Krishna Consciousness sect in 1969), Harrison experienced a flush of creativity around the turn of the seventies that culminated with his *All Things Must Pass*



album, a triple-disc set released in 1971. The album was a huge commercial success and produced hit songs in "My Sweet Lord," "What Is Life" and "Isn't It a Pity."

Obviously on an artistic high, Harrison then took the initiative,

at the suggestion of his friend Ravi Shankar, to organize the first big rock benefit concert, the Concert for Bangladesh, in August of 1971. With the help of rock luminaries such as Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, Billy Preston and others, the extravaganza was an enormous success. In addition to the concert there was a film and another triple-disc LP (featuring another Harrison hit song, "Bangladesh"), and for a couple of years in the early '70s George Harrison flourished as one of the brightest stars in the rock galaxy. Then, inexplicably and disappointingly, his Muse seemingly faded into the background. Perhaps from lack of effort, lack of inspiration or lack of talent (or due to his constant consumption of alcohol and cocaine, according to his ex-wife, Patti Boyd), Harrison tailed off and never again approached the heights of artistic and commercial success he achieved in the immediate wake of the Beatles' demise.

In December of 1999 Harrison was attacked in his home by an intruder, suffering 40 stab wounds and a punctured lung. Then in May 2001 he underwent an operation to remove a cancerous growth from one of his lungs, and two months later he was being treated for a brain tumor. He died on November 29, 2001 at age 58, and his ashes were scattered in the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers near Varanasi, India. In his will he left nearly £100 million.

Ringo Starr had always been the last and the least. A talented but unexceptional rock 'n' roll drummer and a go-along-to-get-along type of guy, he had the incredible fortune to fall in with some pop music geniuses on their way to the top who were momentarily in need of someone to keep time. Relatively unpretentious and undoubtedly aware of his phenomenal good luck, Ringo fit in well with his bandmates personality-wise, and in the early years he served as the group's resident comedian. But without the others he was merely a drummer with a famous name and face, although even at that he still had some marketability as a recording artist. Throughout the seventies his many contacts in the music biz provided

fodder for an occasional album, and he picked up a hit in 1971 with “It Don’t Come Easy” and again in ‘74 with “Photograph,” a song written for him by George Harrison. But at the risk of stating the obvious, Ringo Starr never was a serious recording artist. Expectations for Ringo after the breakup of the Beatles were minimal, but unlike his three more prodigious colleagues, he actually fulfilled expectations.

God and the Beatles

From the time the Beatles arrived in America in 1964, discerning Christians sensed that they were spiritually vacuous. Although impressively talented, charming, witty and charismatic, there was a transparent superficiality behind their aura and public personas that soon became apparent. Ultra-cautious when it came to their image, Brian Epstein kept a close watch over them during their initial American tour and strictly limited their public exposure. But it was only a matter of time before the real Beatles emerged from behind the facade.

In a 1965 *Playboy* magazine interview, in response to a question regarding the perception that they were “antireligious,” McCartney admitted, “We probably seem antireligious because of the fact that none of us believes in God” – to which quickly Lennon added, “If you say you don’t believe in God, everybody assumes you’re antireligious.... We’re not quite sure what we are, but I know that we’re more agnostic than atheistic.” McCartney agreed: “We all feel roughly the same. We’re all agnostics.” Pausing a moment, he then he added, “In America, they’re fanatical about God.”

Later that year in an interview with the *Saturday Evening Post*, Derek Taylor, the Beatles’ press agent, made the pointed comment that all four of the Beatles were “completely anti-Christ.” He continued: “I mean, I am anti-Christ as well, but they’re so anti-Christ they shock me – which isn’t an easy thing.” About a year later the American teen magazine *Datebook* printed a quote taken from interview that Lennon had conducted a few months earlier with a British journalist in which he declared that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus.” According to Lennon:

Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I’ll be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first – rock ‘n’ roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It’s them twisting it that ruins it for me.

It was never quite clear whether Lennon was simply stating what seemed to him to be an obvious fact or if his remarks were intended as a deliberate insult, but from then on there was no doubt that the Beatles were in the vanguard of the social revolution that was the sixties. Once his comment was picked up by the mainstream media, it sparked an ungodly firestorm (pardon the pun) – at least in America. The

Beatles went into damage-control mode, and in two press conferences at the start of their next American tour Lennon and Brian Epstein did their best to put a positive spin on the comments, even alleging that they were taken out of context. In one interview Lennon sought to explain his own belief in God by quoting the liberal Bishop of Woolwich, John A. T. Robinson, saying in effect that he didn’t conceive of God “as an old man in sky. I believe that what people call God is something in all of us.” He continued...

Lennon: “I suppose if I had said television was more popular than Jesus, I might have got away with it, but I just happened to be talking to a friend and I used the words ‘Beatles’ as a remote thing, not as what I think – as Beatles, as those other Beatles like other people see us. I just said ‘they’ are having more influence on kids and things than anything else, including Jesus. But I said it in that way which is the wrong way.”

Reporter: “Some teenagers have repeated your statements – ‘I like the Beatles more than Jesus Christ.’ What do you think about that?”

Lennon: “Well, originally I pointed out that fact in reference to England. That we meant more to kids than Jesus did, or religion at that time. I wasn’t knocking it or putting it down. I was just saying it as a fact, and it’s true more for England than here. I’m not saying that we’re better or greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person or God as a thing or whatever it is. I just said what I said and it was wrong. Or it was taken wrong. And now it’s all this.”

Reporter: “But are you prepared to apologize?”

Lennon: “I wasn’t saying whatever they’re saying I was saying. I’m sorry I said it really. I never meant it to be a lousy anti-religious thing. I apologize if that will make you happy. I still don’t know quite what I’ve done. I’ve tried to tell you what I did do, but if you want me to apologize, if that will make you happy, then okay, I’m sorry.”

Three years later, when asked once again about the controversy during a trip to Canada, Lennon was considerably less contrite:

I think I said that the Beatles have more influence on young people than Jesus Christ. Yes, I still think it. Kids are influenced more by us than Jesus. Christ, some ministers even stood up and agreed with it. It was another piece of truth that the fascist Christians picked on. I’m all for Christ, I’m very big on Christ. I’ve always fancied him. He was right. As he said in his book, “You’ll get knocked if you follow my ways.”

Once they started experimenting with LSD and other mind-altering substances, the Beatles began to rethink their materialistic assumptions. As Steve Turner writes in *The Gospel According to the Beatles*, “They cut down on drinking whiskey as they took up smoking pot, and read Aldous Huxley rather than Ian Fleming.” In particular, Harrison concluded that the only worthwhile pursuit was the search for the answer to the perennial questions of life: Who am I? Why am I here? and Where am I going? At the time he was

quoted as saying, “I want to find God. I’m not interested in material things, this world, [or] fame. I’m going for the real goal.” Later, he reflected back on his spiritual search at the time: “We made our money and fame, but for me that wasn’t it. It was good fun for a while, but it certainly wasn’t the answer to what life is about.”

In 1967 Harrison came under the influence of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (1918-2008), a Hindu guru and an ambitious self-promoter who promised practitioners of his trademarked Transcendental Meditation (TM) program that they could not only discover their innate God-self but also learn to levitate and create world peace. The prospects were appealing, as it sounded like a spiritual alternative to the Beatles’ recent project, the surrealistic *Magical Mystery Tour*, which had been conceived largely under the influence of LSD. In August of ‘67 Harrison introduced the rest of the Beatles to the Maharishi, and the following February the four of them, along with their wives and girlfriends, joined other celebrities including the actress Mia Farrow at the Maharishi’s meditation ashram in Rishikesh, India to devote themselves to his spiritual insights and practices. However, the infatuation proved to be more ephemeral than ethereal. Starr and his wife Maureen left after ten days, McCartney and his girlfriend Jane Asher departed after five weeks, and the disillusioned Lennon and Harrison followed sixteen days later. According to the *New York Times*, their magical mystery tour of India had at least one positive result: it weaned them off LSD.

When John Lennon was growing up, he attended an Anglican church in which he was involved in Sunday School, a Bible class, and sang in the choir. At age 15 he even went through confirmation class, and he first met Paul McCartney at a Liverpool church fair where Lennon’s band, The Quarrymen, were playing. Contrary to Derek Taylor’s comments in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Lennon was not “anti-Christ,” although admittedly he was anti-Christian. Throughout his life he was intrigued by Jesus’ life and teachings, but like many skeptics he doubted his divinity and believed that the apostles concocted the “Christ-myth.” After his mother was killed when he was 17, Lennon became increasingly sullen, bitter, anti-social and rebellious. Perhaps like McCartney, he felt that a good and just God would not have allowed such a tragedy to happen.

In the mid-sixties Lennon often read religious books, but usually by occultists, Eastern gurus or radical liberal clerics and theologians such as the influential Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson. He was particularly intrigued by Hugh Schonfield’s *The Passover Plot* in which the author claimed that Jesus Christ orchestrated the scenario surrounding his crucifixion and “resurrection” to appear that he had died and been raised from the dead. This, in conjunction with the Church of England’s rather desperate and pathetic attempts to attract more people

back into the stagnant institution by softening the Gospel so as to make it more “relevant” to contemporary sensibilities, further confirmed in Lennon’s mind that Christianity was a fraud that appealed mostly to ignorant and gullible simpletons.

In his 1970 song, “God,” Lennon wrote, “God is a concept by which we measure our pain.” He then proceeded to list people and things that he never or no longer believed in, including “magic,” the “I-Ching,” “Kennedy,” “Buddha,” the [Bhagavad] “Gita,” “yoga,” “Elvis,” “Zimmerman” [Bob Dylan]; the “Beatles,” and “Jesus” and the “Bible.” He concluded the litany with the lines, “I just believe in me... Yoko and me... That’s reality.”

As mentioned earlier, the defining song of Lennon’s post-Beatles career was “Imagine.” Although some have attempted to reinterpret the song as something other than atheistic, no amount of reimagining can alter its clear anti-religion message.

*Imagine there’s no heaven
It’s easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us, only sky.
Imagine all the people living for today...
Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion, too.
Imagine all the people living life in peace...
You may say I’m a dreamer
But I’m not the only one
I hope someday you’ll join us
And the world will be as one.*



Remarkably, Lennon seriously considered becoming a Christian during two periods in the 1970s. In recent years his interest in the Christian faith has been much discussed and debated, but

according to Steve Turner’s *The Gospel According to the Beatles* the basic facts seem to be as follows: After the breakup of the Beatles, Lennon became a recluse, rarely appearing in public. By 1972 he had become a television addict, and among those whom he regularly watched were TV evangelists Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson and Jim Bakker. In 1972 he wrote a desperate letter to Roberts, confessing his addiction to drugs and his fear of facing “the problems of life.” He regretted having said that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, and after quoting the line, “I don’t care too much for money / ‘Cause money can’t buy me love” from his song, “Can’t Buy Me Love,” he wrote: “It’s true. The point is this, I want happiness. I don’t want to keep on with drugs.... Explain to me what Christianity can do for me.” [Note: His primary

motives seemed to be fear and a longing for happiness – not repentance for past sins and total surrender of his life to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.]

In response, Roberts sent him a copy of his latest book and followed with several letters, but they apparently had little effect. Then, suddenly, in 1977 Lennon told a friend that he had become a “born-again Christian” as a result of watching on TV the Franco Zeffirelli motion picture, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Lennon was so moved by the movie’s depiction of Christ that he reportedly took Yoko and their son, Sean, to church a week later on Easter Sunday. For several weeks he spoke enthusiastically about Jesus and even wrote a couple of Christian songs, “Talking With Jesus” and “Amen.” During this time he also called the prayer line of Pat Robertson’s program, *The 700 Club*.

Far from being impressed, Yoko was hostile toward her husband’s newfound faith. In return, as Turner notes, “John became antagonistic toward her, blaming her for practicing the dark arts and telling her that she couldn’t see the truth because her eyes had been blinded by Satan.” Friends of the Lennons suspected that the main reason Yoko was so contemptuous was because she sensed that she would lose control over his life, and that he would no longer be dependent upon her and her occultist advisors. But soon, things worked out in Yoko’s favor. The couple traveled to Japan in the summer of 1977, and Lennon spent much of that time in isolation inside a Tokyo hotel room while she visited relatives. He later related that at night he often suffered horrifying nightmares, and that “I’d lie in bed all day, not talk, not eat, and just withdraw.” Then, he recalled, “a funny thing happened. I began to see all these different parts of me. I felt like a hollow temple filled with many spirits, each one passing through me, each inhabiting me for a little time and then leaving to be replaced by another.”

Whether he realized the connection or not, the whole episode is frightening similar to the lesson Jesus taught in Luke 11:24-26: When a demon is cast out of a man, unless he fills the void with the presence of the Holy Spirit, the demon soon returns “with seven other spirits more wicked than itself.... *And the final condition of that man is worse than the first.*” Apparently, this was the condition of Lennon’s soul. As in Jesus’ parable of the soils in Luke 8, he had initially received the good seed of the Gospel, only to have Satan “come and take away the word” from his heart, rendering him incapable of believing and being saved. Turner comments:

Whatever happened in Tokyo, it marked the end of his personal interest in Jesus.... Yoko had again become the captain of his soul, the mistress of his destiny. Yet his life didn’t improve. He sank into depression, concerned that his creativity had deserted him and that he had no real purpose in life....

His life was out of control.... Instead of the freedom he wanted when he broke away from the Beatles, he was now completely enslaved. He

couldn’t travel anywhere without advice from a directionalist, do deals with anyone without knowing their star sign, or make plans for the future without consulting the *I Ching*. [Steve Turner, “John Lennon’s Born-Again Phase. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/januaryweb-only/001-22.0.html>]

From that time on, Lennon was more antagonistic toward Christianity than ever. When Bob Dylan went public with his Christian testimony later that year and released his song, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” Lennon wrote a riposte entitled “Serve Yourself.” Still, not long before his death in December of 1980, Lennon commented in an interview, “I’m a most religious fellow.... I was brought up a Christian, and I only now understand some of the things that Christ was saying in those parables.” Unfortunately, there is no evidence that he ever committed his life to Christ.

Paul McCartney was baptized as a Roman Catholic in his childhood. His mother, who died when he was fourteen, was a nominal Catholic, but his father was a lapsed Protestant turned agnostic, and McCartney grew up unchurched. During his early- and mid-adulthood years he never expressed much interest in religious matters. In 1963, just as the Beatles were gaining fame in Britain, McCartney confessed that religion wasn’t something he thought about or cared about. “It doesn’t fit in with my life,” he told a reporter. Thirty years later he would echo the popular post-sixties New Age mantra, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” In comparison to Lennon, Harrison and even Starr, McCartney has always maintained an essentially materialistic and secularistic worldview.

Like McCartney, George Harrison was given a perfunctory christening in the Catholic Church but was otherwise raised in a secular family. In 1965, during the filming of the motion picture *Help!* his interest in Hinduism was piqued when he read a book on reincarnation. Following the last Beatles tour in 1966, he traveled to Bombay, India where he studied sitar, met several gurus, and visited various Hindu holy places. It was also during this time that he began experimenting with LSD, which he credited for opening him up to the “spiritual” side of reality.

As mentioned above, it was Harrison who first established contact with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and in February of 1968 he traveled with the other Beatles to Rishikesh to immerse himself in TM. But unlike the others who abandoned Eastern religion altogether after concluding that the Maharishi was a fake, Harrison persevered and was drawn deeper into Eastern meditation and yoga. In the late sixties he became a vegetarian and a devotee of the Indian mystic Paramahansa Yogananda, and in 1969 he joined the Society for Krishna Consciousness. A few years later, in a 1974 press conference, he tried to explain his philosophy of religion and why he was drawn to the Eastern path:

Just certain things happened in my life which left me thinking "What's it all about?" And I remembered Jesus said somewhere, "Knock and the door shall be opened," and I said (knock, knock), "Hellooo!".... The Lord, or God, has got a million names, whatever you want to call him, it doesn't matter as long as you call him. Jesus is on the mainline, tell him what you want.... We're all conditioned, our consciousness has been so polluted by the material energy, it's hard to try and pull it all ways in order to really discover our true nature. Every one of us has within us a drop of that ocean and we have the same qualities as God, just like a drop of the ocean has the same qualities as the whole ocean. Everybody's looking for something and we are it. We don't have to look anywhere – it's right there within ourselves.

In a 1982 interview Harrison further explained his long-term devotion to Krishna Consciousness:

I always felt at home with Krishna. You see it was already a part of me. I think it's something that's been with me from my previous birth.... I'd rather be one of the devotees of God than one of the straight, so-called 'sane' or 'normal' people who just don't understand that man is a spiritual being, that he has a soul.



However, Harrison's conversion to Krishna Consciousness apparently had little effect on his sex life or his drug habit. According to his first wife, Patti Boyd, she

left him in 1974 due to his continued use of cocaine and his constant infidelities with other women.

Ringo Starr had some connection with the Christian faith in his early years, having attended an Evangelical Anglican church in Liverpool. But by the time he was a teenager, rock 'n' roll had become his idol and he disconnected from anything religious for more than 40 years. (In fact, Ringo didn't even care for Transcendental Meditation. He and his wife Maureen were the first to leave the Maharishi's meditation ashram in 1968.) Therefore, it came as quite a surprise in February of 2010 when he announced at the Grammy Museum in Hollywood that he had returned to the Anglican faith of his childhood. He was quoted as saying:

For me, God is in my life. I don't hide from that. I think the search has been on since the 1960s. I stepped off the path there for many years and found my way [back] onto it, thank God.

Christians and Culture

Regarding popular culture and the arts, Christians (like everyone else) are of three different orientations: Many are cultural ascetics, others are cultural consumers, and some are cultural connoisseurs.

Cultural ascetics* have little interest in aesthetics** – or at least, little if any interest in popular literature, music, movies, TV, and the arts in general. This is understandable when one considers that most popular culture, including most music, is of negligible value either aesthetically or spiritually. Furthermore, over the past 50 years much of popular entertainment has become an unabashed celebration of decadence. As Christians we are called to be a radical counter-cultural community in the midst of a degenerate and dysfunctional society. As the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, followers of Christ should consciously and conscientiously resist being conformed to the values, the standards, and the thinking of this world, but instead be "transformed by the renewing of your mind." Then, Paul writes, we will be able to discern God's good and perfect will for our lives.

In light of the fact that we live in a very degraded culture, and that much of popular entertainment is directed toward impressionable youth and young adults with unrefined and indiscriminating tastes, cultural ascetics tend to ignore the arts altogether. But even if we concede that 95% or more of popular music and entertainment is crass and worthless, *some* is not. There is always *some* that is intelligent, thought-provoking, uplifting, inspiring and worthy of our time, our attention and our appreciation.

To live without inspiring music, literature and art is to experience a sterile existence. Among Christians, this is often the orientation of those who have a fundamentalist mentality and define the Christian life in strictly pietistic terms. It also often characterizes those adults who are excessively job-centered, money-motivated and materialistic-minded. But if the Platonic ideal of the Good, the True and Beautiful has merit, and if one of the qualities of being made in the image of God is the ability to appreciate the aesthetic blessings of life, then to be a cultural ascetic is to deprive oneself of some of God's greatest gifts to mankind.

At the opposite end of the aesthetic scale is cultural consumerism. This is often the tendency of young Christians, especially those who were raised in families that largely ignored the arts and never cultivated

* The traditional understanding of the term "**asceticism**" relates to a life of strict austerity, devoid of the usual amenities and comforts of life. I use the term "cultural asceticism" to describe those who have no interest in the arts or, for various reasons, choose to ignore the arts.

** **Aesthetics** relates to beauty and the fine arts – including the literary, the visual, the auditory, and the performing arts. In relation to popular culture, this includes music, literature, movies, television, etc.

within their children aesthetic discernment and the ability to think critically in regards to music, literature, movies, TV, etc. If cultural asceticism is sterile and uninspiring, cultural consumerism is morally irresponsible and spiritually dangerous. In lieu of thoughtful aesthetic standards and prudent judgment, avid cultural consumers lack the ability to discriminate between true art and crass entertainment – in which case everything becomes a variation on *American Idol*.

While cultural ascetics marginalize themselves to the point of cultural irrelevancy, cultural consumers often allow their values to be compromised by the standards of this world. By contrast, cultural connoisseurs realize the value of being culturally aware, but they also understand that we must be culturally discerning. As a result, they conscientiously strive to develop their spiritual, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities. Understanding that every thing we see, hear and think leaves an impression (for better or worse) on our soul, cultural connoisseurs seek to cultivate high standards. While disinterested in pop culture in general, they can appreciate the exceptional movie or TV program that stimulates the mind, stirs the soul, and offers perceptive insights into the realities of human nature and the challenges of life.

By way of a relevant analogy, the economic principle of Gresham's Law holds that "bad money drives out good money." This principle can be applied to many areas of life, but certainly it relates to how we interact with our culture. Those who expose their hearts and minds to trash entertainment blunt their sensibilities and eventually lose the capacity to distinguish between the good, the bad and the downright ugly. Without being elitist or pretentious, Christians who are cultural connoisseurs guard their heart and mind, and they understand the difference between being counter-cultural and anti-cultural. They are cognizant of the fact that ours is an over-stimulated, entertainment-crazed society with generally low standards that rarely discriminates between true art and crass commercialism. This being the case, it is incumbent that we learn to exercise sound judgment and spiritual and aesthetic discernment regarding what we allow into our heart and mind.

Acknowledging that most popular music is unworthy of our time and attention, there is nonetheless some that is truly ingenious and inspiring. But even most good music is produced by recording artists who, like the Beatles, do not exemplify Christian values in their personal life. Therefore, we face a dilemma: unless we opt to become cultural ascetics and live in a bland bubble, we must endeavor as much as possible to separate our appreciation of art from the artist him/herself. In other words, we must judge an artist's work on the basis of its intrinsic merit aside from the individual(s) who produced it. Otherwise, we find ourselves in a situation where there is little if anything that we can enjoy.

Granted, this can be easier said than done, and it becomes more challenging once an artist achieves a certain level of public notoriety. But when we think about it, past generations often faced the same dilemma – whether it was the music of Mozart, Beethoven, Frank Sinatra, or any number of other gifted composers, singers and performers. But of course there are artists whose personal lives are so appallingly repugnant as to render their art intolerable. This is why, personally, I generally assume that when it comes to most pop culture celebrities – whether they are recording artists, authors, actors, or movie producers – the less I know of their personal lives, the better. Otherwise, it creates in my mind too much cognitive dissonance and an insurmountable barrier to appreciating their art on the basis of its own intrinsic merits.

The Rap on Rock

In the whole span of music history, no genre has been so potent as rock when it comes to its visceral affects on both performers and listeners. By its very nature, its rhythmic patterns, melodies and beat engage the senses unlike any other music ever invented. While jazz has the ethereal affect of liberating the mind from linear thinking, the driving beat of rock 'n' roll affects our brain as well as our heart. Furthermore, once we "turn on" and "tune in" to the spirit and the message of the music, it has the power to either elevate our emotions to new heights or drive our consciousness deep into the depths of our soul. This is why rock music can function as an exuberant celebration of life – everything from the simple sensate joys of beauty, art and romantic love to songs that expressly glorify God.

Yet we understand that when it comes to aesthetics, all that human beings produce are shades of grey. Although created in the image of God, we can never totally transcend our egoistic nature. Nothing we do is ever pristine pure and perfect, either in terms of our motives or the product itself. In this respect, rock music has always had its darker side. It used to be said, simplistically, that the Beatles represented the lighter side of rock 'n' roll while the Rolling Stones (along with others such as Jimi Hendrix and the Doors) personified the darker side of rock. But of course this is utterly simplistic, and there was much in the lives and the music of the Beatles that was anything but positive and exemplary.

Rock music can tap into the darker side of human nature and become an uninhibited celebration of mindless hedonism and neurotic egocentrism, just as it has often been exploited to unleash subliminal and repressed hostility and aggression along with every conceivable kind of anti-social attitude and behavior, anarchy, violence, and sexual exhibitionism. And when fused with mind-altering drugs such as marijuana, LSD, cocaine or methamphetamines, it can produce a dangerous cocktail that radically alters one's physiology just as it breaks down ego-boundaries and

destroys self-restraint.

Not only can rock music affect us physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. It can lift our soul to transcendent heights in joyous celebration just as it can generate anti-social aggression, numb our mind, drive us into depression, and serve as an avenue of escapism from reality. Just as songwriters and musicians employ the music to glorify God, celebrate life and reveal the realities of human nature, so is it used to glorify decadence and distort reality in the service of Satan. So as with all other products of human creativity, engineering and technology, rock music is a force that can be used for good or evil.

The Beatles in Retrospect

Like rock 'n' roll music in general, the Beatles' influence on American culture was ambiguously complex. Much of their early music was a celebration of youth culture, the youthful exploration of life, and the joys and heartbreaks of romantic love. In their musical expressions they were refreshingly candid, and in their public performances they were the consummate showmen, singing and playing with uninhibited zeal. While other popular recording artists of the time tried so hard to cultivate a look and a persona that was fashionable, trendy and cool, the Beatles *were* cool. Their style and demeanor exemplified the spirit of the sixties, and for a teenager growing up in those years, they opened up a fresh new perspective on life that was both inspiring and liberating.

There was a restless energy and an exuberant spirit in their early songs, and like many others I was intrigued by the mysticism inherent in their later music. Of course, my perspective has changed over the years as I've transitioned to adulthood. I evaluate things differently now, and I have a clearer perspective on their music and their cultural legacy in general. But as a teenager sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor, listening intently to their music with my headphones plugged into the stereo, studying the photos on the album jackets and reading the liner notes and album credits over and over, every Beatles album was to me a magical mystery tour.

One of the more interesting retrospectives on the 1960s is Bruce Pollock's book, *When the Music Mattered*, in which he writes that the mid-to-late sixties was "a time when the words of our musicians were regarded as the gospel; in their lyrics, we were sure, was the key to the universe." Today, in our jaded postmodern culture, popular music is considerably more cynical. Much of it is little more than an unabashed celebration of decadence performed by shameless exhibitionists such as Madonna, Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber and Miley Cyrus. Therefore, it is hard to imagine that there was once a time when popular music was taken seriously. But in the sixties it was a fresh and creative art form produced by gifted recording artists from Bob Dylan and Phil Ochs to the

Byrds, Simon & Garfunkel, the Association, the Mamas & the Papas, Joni Mitchell, and many others. But all of these artists were inspired and influenced to some extent or another by the Beatles.

Along with Dylan, the Beatles were in the vanguard of the social and cultural revolution that was the 1960s, and their legacy is very much a mixed one. As their experimentation with LSD became apparent, millions of naive and impressionable youths followed them down the yellow brick road of hallucinogenic drugs. In the process, many descended into the hell of drug addiction. As George Harrison witnessed while in San Francisco during the 1967 "Summer of Love," for most young people LSD, far from being the "door of perception" that led to spiritual reality, became the door of deception and the gateway to hell.

As a group the Beatles were immensely talented, extraordinarily creative, and phenomenally influential. Unfortunately, they were also spiritually bankrupt. In the end, their magical mystery tour came to an abrupt end, aborted by drug-fueled ego conflicts. Their subsequent careers as solo artists confirmed the truism of the whole being greater than the sum of the individual parts. But for a brief few years they were sensational. There has never been anyone like them, and given the decadent state of contemporary pop and rock music, it is unlikely that another recording artist or group will ever have the kind of influence and acclaim that they achieved. But in this life "all things must pass," and as John Lennon wrote in 1970...

*The dream is over, what can I say?
The dream is over, yesterday.
And so dear friends, you just have to carry on
I once was the Walrus, but now I'm [just] John
The dream is over....*

When I was growing up, I sometimes experienced intimations of transcendence in the music of the Beatles. For me, it was much more than mere entertainment. And that, of course, is the great deception. Like all products of human creativity, music can become a kind of surrogate spirituality. But as C. S. Lewis observed, the arts are merely mediums through which we access the True, the Good and the Beautiful. If we make music the thing itself, it becomes an idol. It is only when we see through it and beyond it to the Ultimate Source of Truth and Goodness and Beauty that it has any real spiritual value. And that Ultimate Source is of course God.





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After graduating from college and before returning to graduate school, Dr. Breshears worked for Capitol Records, the Beatles' record company in the United States, and it was during that time that he experienced a spiritual conversion and committed his life to Christ.

