

BEATLES HISTORY - PART TWO: 1964-1966.

A CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BEATLES' IMAGE CHANGE IN 1966

The Beatles followed the release of *A Hard Day's Night* with their first tour through the United States in August and September 1964. In October, Brian Epstein published his autobiography *A Cellarful of Noise*. In December, The Beatles released their studio album *Beatles for Sale* in the United Kingdom, while Capitol Records released a slightly modified version of the album under the name *Beatles '65* in the United States. By Christmas The Beatles again topped the charts on both sides of the Atlantic.

In 1965, The Beatles filmed *Help!*, toured North America and Britain again, and continued to be virtually omnipresent in all kinds of mass media. As their enormous success constituted a significant economic factor in Great Britain, they were awarded Membership of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours list, which upset several previous recipients of this award (vgl. Lewisohn 2000: 180). Despite these criticisms, the MBEs crowned the group's acceptance by the Establishment. The release of Paul McCartney's composition "Yesterday" on The Beatles' *Help!* album also introduced a major change in the way The Beatles were discussed by music critics and scholars, as many of whom had not taken them seriously before. The atmospheric recording of "Yesterday", the simple but haunting melody, as well as George Martin's arrangement of the song, featuring a string quartet, soon made the song the most popular Beatles song. In between filming and touring The Beatles wrote and recorded the songs for their albums *Help!* and *Rubber Soul*, which were both released in 1965.

Although The Beatles accepted their MBEs and the presence of members of the Royal family and politicians at their concerts and film premieres, they did not want to actually assimilate into the sphere of the Establishment. On the contrary, The Beatles had always encountered the representatives of the upper classes with their cheeky humor, and when they finally moved to London and became introduced to the city's underground art scene and various political, social and religious youth movements, they quickly absorbed a variety of ideas and contributed signifi-

cantly to the popularization of countercultural ideology and aesthetics. Because of their enormous popularity and their sincere commitment, The Beatles became the spokesmen of a worldwide countercultural youth movement.

At that time various countercultural movements evolved from independent youth cultures in Great Britain and in the United States. While young people's social and political criticism had previously only reached a minority of the population in these countries, the 60s-movements managed to gain a much greater influence by appealing to a mass audience via the means of mass media. Previous countercultural movements, such as the Beat Generation in the 1950s, had never managed to cause mass interest. The hippies' ideology, however, was publicized in the media when young artists and stars made use of the media to propagate certain values and ideas.

"While most of the beatniks' thoughts and ideas were adopted by the hippies, the main difference between them lies within the structure of both movements itself: although the beatniks formed a radical critique of what they found was wrong with society, they simultaneously withdrew from society and detested it only among themselves; they sought individual and theoretical solutions rather than collective solutions. The hippies, in contrast though, represented a 'generational unit', looking for collective solutions or alternatives to social traditions of career or life-style" (Kolodge 1999: 147).

While the beatniks remained an underground movement, intellectual American folk singers, such as Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, adopted many elements of the beatniks' ideology and represented this countercultural value system. However, these folk singers still only reached a limited audience, as folk music only appealed to a certain target audience. When pop musicians such as The Beatles became interested in youth culture movements, they were able to convey their messages to a mass audience, as their popularity enabled them to communicate their opinions through the mass media. After numerous pop groups, such as the Byrds, the Hollies, and Peter, Paul and Mary, had released commercial cover versions of Bob Dylan's songs, Bob Dylan became finally known to a larger audience. While most pop musicians lacked the creativity to formulate and express intellectual concerns in their original songs, The Beatles began to use their music and films as media to express actual experiences, observations, criticism, and philosophical concepts. As their musical and intellectual interests had developed quite rapidly, they were able to include a wide range of ideas, sounds and images in their popular music recordings as well as in their promotional films and movies. Their 1966 album *Revolver* can be regarded as their first attempt at intellectual pop music, as

the album consists of a variety of entirely different sounds, musical styles and lyrical forms, which are used intentionally to communicate a certain world-view. On the other hand, the massive popularity of The Beatles' music inspired Bob Dylan to make his recordings more accessible by arranging his songs in a more commercial way. Their mutual influence on each other as well as their ability to adapt to recent musical developments made Bob Dylan and The Beatles the outstanding personalities in the genre of popular music in the 1960s. They were the first artists to consciously use popular music as a medium to convey and propagate certain ideologies. Even though conservative critics tried to undermine the emerging hippie movement, The Beatles' overpowering popularity allowed them to voice the concerns and ideas of youth movements they identified with in the mass media.

In 1966, The Beatles absorbed a variety of philosophical concepts and musical ideas. Their album *Revolver* mirrors these personal developments which were significantly influenced by countercultural youth movements. As The Beatles had access to the key figures in the spheres of art, music, protest movements, religion, and philosophy, they were able to gather a conclusive knowledge of recent trends and developments in these matters and incorporated concepts, approaches, recording techniques, and film aesthetics in the production of their works at the time.

For instance, Paul McCartney had developed a profound interest in classical music. As a result, he included elements of classical music in the arrangements of Beatles songs, such as "For No One" and "Eleanor Rigby". In addition, he wrote the score for the movie *The Family Way*, which was arranged by The Beatles' producer George Martin. McCartney also became actively involved in London's underground and avant-garde scene. For example, he financially supported and contributed to the underground magazine *International Times*, he helped establishing the Indica Gallery and held occasional meetings with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol, and Bertrand Russell.

George Harrison, on the other hand, became interested in Indian music and culture, and began to integrate Indian instruments and arrangements in The Beatles' songs, such as "Nowhere Man" and "Love You To". His involvement with Indian culture, music, and philosophy, as well as his support of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and Ravi Shankar eventually made him one of the key figures in introducing and popularizing Indian culture in the Western hemisphere.

Just like his songwriting partner Paul McCartney, John Lennon also established his initial contact with the avant-garde art in 1966, when he first met Yoko Ono, one of the most prominent representatives of the 'Fluxus' movement. He supported one of her exhibitions in London and

went on to initiate a variety of art projects with Ono, whom he married in 1969. While all of The Beatles were interested in underground films, only John Lennon actually released some of his films in the late 1960s.

Their involvement with opinion leaders in the various contemporary youth movements also marked a change in The Beatles' attitude toward expressing their own views on international politics and society. Although Brian Epstein had prevented them from communicating their political opinions, the American magazine *Datebook* managed to create an anti-Beatles hysteria by quoting John Lennon's view of Christianity out of context in the summer 1966. In an interview with Maureen Cleave from the *Evening Standard*, Lennon had discussed the decline of Christianity: "Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first – rock and roll or Christianity" (Coleman 1992: 404). While Lennon's discussion of religion was largely ignored by the British public, who had become quite used to Lennon's critical and often flimsy statements, *Datebook* used the quotation as a headline for an article on The Beatles. The *Datebook* article suggested that Lennon was claiming that The Beatles were actually bigger than Jesus Christ. The reaction in America, especially in the area of the Bible Belt, was devastating. Lennon's comments were considered to be blasphemy, and he was denounced by many fervent believers. Journalist Ray Coleman remembers: "The Ku Klux Klan marched; there were bonfires of Beatles records; and an estimated thirty-five radio stations across America banned Beatles records" (Coleman 1992: 404). The Beatles' manager immediately travelled to the United States to explain the misinterpretation of Lennon's quotation. He was told that only a public apology from Lennon could save the situation for The Beatles, who had planned on going on a tour through America in August 1966. Lennon, who did not understand why anybody would expect an apology from him, tried to clarify what he had actually meant with his statement: "Look, I wasn't saying The Beatles are better than God or Jesus. I said 'Beatles' because it's easy for me to talk about Beatles. I could have said 'TV' or 'the cinema', 'motorcars' or anything popular and I would have got away with it. I'm not anti-god, anti-Christ or anti-religion. I was not saying we are greater or better" (Miles 2001: 240). In the end, the public seemed to accept Lennon's explanation, and the group went on their last American tour. However, instead of avoiding controversial issues, The Beatles voiced their opinions quite clearly from now on. John Lennon became the most political Beatle, composing songs such as "Revolution" and "Give Peace a Chance", supporting several radical groups and controversial in-

dividuals, as well as leading numerous campaigns for world peace between 1969 and 1972.

The “bigger than Jesus”-fiasco, as well as several other unpleasant occurrences in Japan and in the Philippines, prompted The Beatles’ decision to quit performing live in 1966. On August 29, 1966, The Beatles performed their last ever concert in front of a paying audience at Candlestick Park, San Francisco. From now on, The Beatles existed only as a studio band. However, their newly discovered interest in different genres of music and art, as well as their increasing versatility in the recording studio encouraged them to produce several masterpieces of popular music, such as *Revolver* (1966), *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), *The Beatles* (1968), and *Abbey Road* (1969).

