

SPOOFS

The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash

In the 1970s, Eric Idle, a former member of the legendary British comedy team Monty Python, featured a Beatles parody song called “It Must Be Love” on *Rutland Weekend Television*, his own television show on BBC-2. The song had been written by Neil Innes, who had previously worked with Monty Python and the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band. The song was performed by ‘The Rutles’, a Beatles look-alike band featuring Neil Innes as the John Lennon character, and Eric Idle as the Paul McCartney character (vgl. Harry 1985: 69). In October 1976, the parody was shown on America’s NBC TV’s show *Saturday Night Live* as a sequel to the running gag of a Beatles reunion for \$3,000. The parody went down so well that Eric Idle and Neil Innes decided to produce a feature program about The Rutles for television. Idle, who was a close friend of George Harrison, was allowed to watch Neil Aspinall’s unreleased documentary about The Beatles, called *The Long and Winding Road*. Aspinall’s film featured a bulk of famous footage of The Beatles, from their first televised performance at the Cavern Club in Liverpool to their last group performance on the roof of their Apple business building. Idle used *The Long and Winding Road* as a model for his fake-documentary about The Rutles and basically re-told the history of The Beatles projected upon this imaginary rock band, adding essential elements of parody and the Pythonesque sense of surreal humor.

Neil Innes provided the soundtrack for the film, re-creating the sound of The Beatles in songs that contained countless references to The Beatles’ songs from each of their creative periods. Innes’ songs provided the appropriate soundtrack for the footage, which was all inspired by the archival footage of The Beatles. In fact, Apple had allowed Idle to use original footage of The Beatles in the movie. Neil Innes remembers that “The Beatles were very good about it. They allowed us to use lots of their old footage – stuff that eventually became the bones of *The Anthology* series – and intercut it with newly filmed Rutles sequences to give it more authenticity” (Black 1996: 59).

The Rutles’ history, as described in the movie, parallels the history of The Beatles, with Dirk McQuickly (Eric Idle, the McCartney character),

Ron Nasty (Neil Innes, the Lennon character), Stig O'Hara (Rikki Fataar, The Rutles' George Harrison), and Barry Womble (John Halsey, the Ringo character) starting out in Liverpool. Arthur Scouse, who has won The Rutles in a bet, sends them to Hamburg, where they perform at the Ratkeller. Back in Liverpool, they find a manager called Leggy Mountbatten, who improves their outfit by buying them trousers, which starts the whole Rutles craze. They get a recording contract, and 'Rutle-mania' really takes off. The Rutles go on to conquer America, make feature films (*A Hard Day's Rut* and *Ouch!*), quit touring, find a guru, produce masterful albums, and split after filming their last movie, *Let It Rut*. Among the classic Rutles albums mentioned in the film are *A Hard Day's Rut*, *Sgt. Rutters' Only Darts Club Band*, *Tragical History Tour*, and *Let It Rot*.

Eric Idle and his co-director Gary Weis re-created and re-interpreted many of the well-known scenes from The Beatles' movies and television footage, and added a more absurd dimension to it. For example, Ron Nasty – the Lennon of The Rutles – falls in love with a Nazi woman, while the equivalent of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, The Beatles' Indian guru, looks like a bank accountant. The sequence parodying The Beatles' cartoon feature *Yellow Submarine* was created by some of the original artists involved with The Beatles' production. The Rutles' film is called *Yellow Submarine Sandwich* and features the song "Cheese and Onion". As it was apparently not possible to increase the lovely absurdity of The Beatles' original motion picture, the *Yellow Submarine Sandwich* looks more like a genuine tribute to the movie, imitating and re-creating the psychedelic style of the original.

Other scenes evoking The Beatles' famous film and television performances include their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the filming of *A Hard Day's Rut*, and the performance of "Love Life", the equivalent of The Beatles' "All You Need Is Love". Although basically a fictional parody of The Beatles, *All You Need Is Cash* merges fact and fiction in the way original 1960s footage is combined with Rutles footage from the 1970s as well and the way it recalls The Beatles' success story, whose mythic character Idle's film reveals and reflects. Eric Idle's friend George Harrison, who even appears in the movie as a reporter, was a great admirer of The Rutles and liked to express some of The Beatles' experiences by comparing them to The Rutles, emphasizing the surreal quality of The Beatles' overwhelming success. In his autobiography *I Me Mine* (1979), Harrison expressed his enthusiasm for The Rutles and the way The Beatles' history has been mystified ad absurdum.

“The Rutles told the story so much better than the usual boring documentary. [...] It is all so silly anyway, all the way through. Ringo’s story was funny, you know. We were talking about school once, and he said that he had been in hospital so much, that when he went back to school [they] said to him: ‘you never went to this school’ and he said: ‘yes, I did. I’ve just been in hospital a lot.’ Then, he said, a couple of years later, they were saying, proudly, ‘This was Ringo’s desk. The great man sat here.’ Madness” (Harrison 2002: 65).

According to Gary Weis, the co-director of *All You Need Is Cash*, George Harrison played a significant role in the production of the film: “George Harrison was involved from the beginning. He was around quite a lot, even when he didn’t need to be there. [...] I think he was the only one of The Beatles who could see the irony of it all” (Black 1996: 59).

The prime-time special *All You Need Is Cash* was first shown on television in both, the United States and in Great Britain, in March 1978 and soon became a cult movie. The Rutles soundtrack album was equally successful, reaching #12 in the UK Top 40. When The Beatles reunited for their *Anthology* project in 1995, Neil Innes released another spoof album called *The Rutles Archaeology*. In 2005, Eric Idle initiated another Rutles revival when he released a sequel to *All You Need Is Cash* on DVD. The film, which was only released in the United States, was called *Can’t Buy Me Lunch* and consisted of re-edited footage and outtakes from the first film, and new interviews with David Bowie, Tom Hanks, and Bonnie Raitt, talking about The Rutles’ enormous impact on pop culture and society.

Further Tributes and Spoofs

The Beatles’ appearance, their music, as well as their album covers have been imitated countless times for various reasons. On the one hand, critics of the band, who have considered them as a hype rather than an artistic phenomenon, have made fun of their distinctive outfits or appearance. For example, the American enfant terrible of rock music, Frank Zappa, imitated The Beatles’ cover of *Sgt. Pepper* for his own album called *We’re Only In It For The Money* (1968) to criticize the commercial character of The Beatles’ music and image. Despite his criticisms, Zappa later collaborated with John Lennon on a live recording in 1971. Other artists have imitated The Beatles’ famous album covers to show their respect for the band. For example, the Red Hot Chili Peppers’ *Abbey Road* E.P (1988) features the famous zebra crossing outside the Abbey Road Studios. The cover is an imitation of The Beatles’ *Abbey Road* (1969) album cover.

Similar to the way The Beatles' sounds and music have been imitated and quoted in countless popular songs, their cover artwork has become subject of humorous tributes as well as malicious ridicule. No other act's album artwork has got a similarly iconic status as The Beatles'. Although there have been occasional imitations of Elvis Presley's and The Rolling Stones' album sleeves, The Beatles are probably the only band whose artwork has achieved such fame. This supports the notion that The Beatles always strove for powerful visual images and innovative and unique designs to support and project their image not only as pop singers but as artists in a broader sense.