

DOCUMENTARIES ABOUT THE BEATLES

The Authenticity of Documentaries

A documentary about the past is typically presented as an authoritative account of the subject matter it deals with, its form suggesting a higher level of objectivity and credibility than a fictionalized account of the past. This air of authenticity is usually established by the inclusion of historical footage, interviews with witnesses and experts, and a factual over-narration voice. In general, documentary films are regarded as educational and informative, although their degree of factuality, objectivity and authenticity actually depends exclusively on the integrity and journalistic ability of the filmmakers. Just as a dramatization of history is created within the restrictions of the fictional genre it is part of, a documentary about the past is usually also scripted, and the way it is constructed follows a dramatic pattern which is designed to convey what Stuart Hall calls an 'intended meaning' (vgl. Stuart Hall 1981:128-138). The filmmaker creates the intended meaning of a documentary by the choice of subject matter, the documentary's focus, the choice of material included in the film, and the relationships he or she establishes between individual scenes or segments in the editing process. Meanings are further created and affected by the quality of the research, the way the footage is filmed (camera perspective, etc.), and by the filmmaker's overall attitude toward the subject matter. While the form of a dramatization is defined by the conventions of the narrative genre it is part of, the form of a documentary is primarily defined by its intended function and purpose. Its function may be to entertain, to educate, to propagate certain values, or to make a political or social statement. The recipient then decodes and interprets the meaning of the text – the documentary – in the context of his or her own experience. Therefore, in spite of the fact that documentaries of the past claim or suggest to represent past events in an objective and authentic way, they are not necessarily more adequate or more dependable portrayals of history than dramatizations. However, their convincing appeal and their image of factuality make them a powerful influence on the historical consciousness of mass culture audiences.

In addition to constituting a relevant economic factor in the music video- and DVD market, documentaries about The Beatles fulfil two

primary functions. On the one hand, the ‘official’ documentaries – which are also the most dominant and most widely distributed ones – propagate an often censored version of history, which the band members prefer the public to perceive because of commercial or personal reasons. On the other hand, numerous smaller-scale productions, such as *The Beatles with Tony Sheridan* or *Brian Epstein: Inside the Fifth Beatle*, deal with certain chapters in the band’s history, often emphasizing an individual’s contribution to the band’s development and success. While these productions may offer interesting insights to certain aspects in the band’s history, they have hardly got any impact on the way the general Beatles audience perceives the band, because they lack the promotion and distribution of official Beatles products. However, both kinds of documentaries, official and unauthorized ones, contribute to an overall impression of The Beatles and their history, which is considerably distorted, as any documentary contains factual errors and contributes to the distribution and reinforcement of myths and misunderstandings.

Official Accounts

The First U.S. Visit and The Beatles Anthology

While there had been several television programs about The Beatles’ career, the first serious attempt to capture the history of The Beatles’ amazing impact on film had been initiated by Brian Epstein in 1964, when he hired Albert and David Maysles to follow and film The Beatles during their first stay in the United States. The Maysles’ direct cinema documentary *What’s Happening – The Beatles in the USA* was first shown on British television in February, 1964, and it was released on DVD renamed *The First U.S. Visit* forty years later. The film is quite unique, as the Maysles filmed The Beatles backstage and in their hotel rooms. Even though Albert Maysles points out that The Beatles were professionals and knew what was expected from them in front of the camera, the film contains some private scenes that Epstein and The Beatles were probably not fond of at the time the footage was first aired. While Ringo Starr and George Harrison stage quite some entertaining scenes on the train, Paul McCartney is seen in a short sequence admitting that he is not in a good mood at all. Other revealing scenes show The Beatles at a nightclub, drinking and dancing with New York DJ Murray the K and a crowd of girls. Although the image of wild rock stars would appeal only a few years later, the scene was a rather daring inclusion in the film on the Maysles’ part.

In 1969, Neil Aspinall, the director of Apple until 2007, was asked to collect film material featuring the group.

“In ’69, in all the chaos, the traumas – things were falling apart, but they were still making *Abbey Road* – Paul called me saying, ‘You should collect as much of the material that’s out there, get it together before it disappears.’ So I started to do that, got in touch with all the TV stations around the world, checked what we had in our own library, like *Let It Be*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, the promo clips, what have you. Got newsreel footage in, lots and lots of stuff. We edited something together that was about one hour and three quarters long. But the Beatles had split up by then, so there was really no chance of anything happening with it. I sent them a copy of it each which they all quite liked, then I put it on the shelf from 1971 ’til ’89, about 20 years” (Du Noyer 1996: 78).

The Beatles *Anthology* was one of the first projects Neil Aspinall initiated after The Beatles’ legal settlement. The announcement of *The Beatles Anthology* caused an unprecedented media hype, which reminded one of Beatlemania in the mid-Sixties. *Newsweek* called *The Beatles Anthology* “the most fearsome flood of product since the days of the Beatle wig” (Giles/Chang 1995: 62). In fact, The Beatles’ history project was designed to generate millions of dollars with merchandise products alone. In 1995 and 1996, The Beatles earned \$ 130 million with *The Beatles Anthology* (vgl. Reed/Norman 1995: 125). In an interview, Paul McCartney jokingly admits the cash-in philosophy behind the project: “Once we started to resolve all our differences – now we’re chatty and all mates again – we began booking for the CD, the T-shirt and the cookbook” (Reed/Norman 1995: 125). The Beatles, however, were not the only ones making profits from their unexpected reunion. For instance, Tommy Hanley, who had worked as a photographer for Apple, sold a photograph showing Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr together in London to *The Sun* for £100,000 (vgl. Badman 2001: 540).

The documentary was designed to be broadcast in several parts, the premiere date being coordinated with the release of the single “Free as a Bird” and the first *Anthology* double album. Prior to the broadcast, the UK press reported of the “biggest bidding war in TV history” (Badman 2001: 530) for the upcoming *Anthology* television series. In the United States, ABC TV paid Apple nearly \$20 million for the broadcast rights in the U.S. (vgl. *Forbes* 1995: 131), while ITV paid £5 million for the series in Great Britain (vgl. Badman 2001: 535). ABC showed the six-hour series in three parts, while ITV decided to broadcast *The Beatles Anthology* in six parts. The media hype surrounding the documentary guaranteed healthy record sales as well as high television ratings. In the United States, the first episode was broadcast on 19 November, 1995, and it was

watched by 48 million viewers, making it one of the top-rated programs of the year. In Great Britain, the first show was aired on 26 November, 1995, and attracted 14.3 million people. Although the show was a tremendous success, the number of viewers dropped quite significantly as the series progressed. In Great Britain, the shows dealing with The Beatles' early years attracted between 10 and 14 million viewers, while the last two episodes were watched by only three to four million people (vgl. Badman 2001: 547-548). The public was apparently more interested in the parts of The Beatles' story depicting their early careers up to the frenzy of Beatlemania than in their 'psychedelic years' and the story of their break-up.

Despite its main function as a money-generating product and its mainstream appeal, *The Beatles Anthology* is surprisingly honest in its portrayal of some of the less pleasant chapters in The Beatles' history. Instead of ignoring or minimizing, for instance, the controversy surrounding John Lennon's remark about Christianity or the business troubles with their company Apple, George Harrison, Paul McCartney, and Ringo Starr thoroughly and soberly discuss these issues. They also present themselves much less nostalgic than other Sixties icons. In fact, they even express criticisms of their own work and look back at several events with a healthy dose of humor.

While this approach increases the documentary's credibility, it is also consistent with The Beatles' rather honest and open attitude from 1965 onwards, when their manager Brian Epstein's regulations lost their significance for The Beatles. Despite their honesty and their attempt at factual accuracy, *The Anthology* contains a few simplifications and errors. For example, John Lennon's recollection of how he met Paul McCartney is inaccurate. The sound excerpt is taken from one of the last interviews John Lennon gave before his death in December 1980. In the interview, he quickly summarized the main events leading up to the birth of The Beatles and provides a rather simplified version of his first encounter with Paul McCartney: "I asked Paul to join there and then, and I think he said yes the next day" (*Anthology* 2003: DVD 1). This is simply wrong, because – as pointed out by both, McCartney and Lennon, in other interviews – Lennon asked his friend Pete Shotton to find out whether McCartney wanted to join the band days after their initial encounter, and McCartney waited for several months until he finally joined The Quarry Men.

Another error in *The Anthology* concerns Pete Best's replacement with Ringo Starr. Both, George Harrison and Ringo Starr claim that Pete Best had missed a few performances, and Ringo Starr was asked to sit in. As this particular constellation worked very well and because of George

Martin's criticisms of Pete Best's drumming abilities, Ringo Starr was asked to join The Beatles. This may sound logical, but it is not true, although it correlates to the story Ringo Starr used to tell the press in the 1960s. Pete Best had never missed a performance, and the true reasons for his dismissal have remained the source of speculations ever since.

In spite of these occasional errors, *The Anthology* solves a few mysteries concerning some individuals' involvement with the band. For example, much has been written about Allan Williams, and his tendency to exaggerate and to confuse events in interviews has diminished his credibility as to his actual contributions to The Beatles' history. Alistair Taylor, Brian Epstein's personal assistant has further fuelled the rumor that Williams is basically an impostor and had never been the group's manager. However, *The Anthology* quite clearly describes Williams' role in The Beatles' early history, and at one point Paul McCartney simply states, "We had a manager in Liverpool called Allan Williams" (*Anthology* 2003: DVD 1).

The way the new interviews with Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr are filmed is also interesting in regard to their images as solo artists. While George Harrison and Ringo Starr are filmed in conventional interview situations at their lavish homes or at a studio, Paul McCartney is seen in less conventional situations: he is steering a boat while talking about George Harrison's talent as a songwriter, he is preparing a bonfire while recalling unpleasant Apple business meetings, and he is sitting in front of his giant stage of his 1993 world tour, recalling the recording of John Lennon's song "Tomorrow Never Knows". McCartney, who makes a point of wanting to appear hyper-active and multi-talented has developed a tradition of being interviewed in similarly unconventional situations. In his documentary *Wingspan*, for instance, he is driving a Land Rover while talking about Wings' first tour through Great Britain (vgl. *Wingspan* 2001).

On 7 October 1996, an expanded version of *The Beatles Anthology* was released as an eight volume video box set. In 2003, the documentary was finally released as a five volume DVD set, topping the DVD charts around the world.

The Beatles Anthology focuses on the recollections of The Beatles themselves as well as their inner circle, which in 1995 consisted of producer George Martin, publicist Derek Taylor, and Apple director Neil Aspinall. In addition, archive material of John Lennon and Brian Epstein was used to achieve an equal representation of the main protagonists in the band's history.

Imagine: John Lennon and Wingspan

When Albert Goldman published his Lennon biography *The Lives of Lennon* in 1987, it caused quite some controversy, because it portrayed John Lennon as a tortured soul and spoiled hypocrite, accusing him of being responsible for the deaths of two people. Goldman, whose research was inaccurate and whose interviewing methods were questionable, quite clearly exaggerated and scandalized the history of John Lennon in order to obtain international attention. His description of John Lennon's fight with Bob Wooler after Lennon's holiday with Brian Epstein serves as a good example of how Goldman intentionally twists history to defame Lennon.

"[...] Bob Wooler came up to Lennon and said, 'How was the honeymoon, John?'" Taking Wooler's remark as an insulting reference to the recent trip to Spain, John doubled up his fist and smashed the little disc jockey in the nose. Then, seizing a shovel that was lying in the yard, Lennon began to beat Wooler to death. Blow after blow came smashing down on the defenseless man lying on the ground" (Goldman 2001: 141).

Merseyside author Spencer Leigh showed Wooler Goldman's description of the incident. "Bob exploded when he saw this: 'This is preposterous,' he said, 'Absolute nonsense. Goldman sees that the party was in the garden and rushes to the conclusion that all the garden implements are to hand. He'll have me buried in the rose bushes next'" (Leigh 2002: 183). Despite its errors and its exploitative character, the book is still one of the bestsellers among the countless Beatles biographies and has contributed to the distribution of some rather less pleasant and often completely inaccurate conceptions of John Lennon. Consequently, many fans and Beatles historians were disappointed by Goldman's depiction of Lennon and craved for a more balanced view of John Lennon as artist and as private man. In 1988, a theatrical movie called *Imagine: John Lennon* was released in the United States and soon saw a worldwide release on video. The film was a documentary by Andrew Solt, who had previously directed documentaries of other popular culture icons, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

Imagine: John Lennon sets out to explore the life of John Lennon in a more objective way than, for instance, the Goldman book. Andrew Solt was allowed access to Yoko Ono's Lennon archive and chose from more than 200 hours of private recordings and footage of John Lennon. Instead of creating some sort of autobiography from the material, Solt put it in the context of new interviews and recollections of many important people in Lennon's life. The movie equally explores Lennon's time with The

Beatles as well as his solo years, featuring interviews with Yoko Ono, Cynthia Lennon, May Pang, Sean Ono Lennon, Julian Lennon, David Bowie, and many others. However, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr did not participate in the production. The main difference between *Imagine: John Lennon* and other productions endorsed by Yoko Ono is the fact that it does not exclusively focus on Lennon's time with Yoko Ono. Considering the fact that Yoko Ono usually completely ignores Lennon's relationship with May Pang from 1973 to 1975, it is quite a surprise to see her interviewed in the documentary. Pang comments that "[t]he fact that I was included, along with Cynthia and Julian, demonstrates they tried to achieve fair representation, if not a 'balance' (there were a few remarks in the narration that suggested our period together as 'incidental'). However, the absence of Paul, George and Ringo kept the movie from going as in-depth as it could have" (Pang 2003). Despite this deficiency, *Imagine: John Lennon* projects a well-researched and rather objective view of John Lennon's life.

As *The Beatles Anthology* turned out to be such a great commercial success, Paul McCartney decided to produce a similar documentary about his career with his pop group Wings in the 1970s. In 2001, the documentary called *Wingspan* was aired as a prime-time special on TV stations around the world, including ABC in the United States, and Channel 4 in Great Britain. Soon afterwards the documentary was released as a DVD, accompanied by a best-selling *Wingspan* double CD, which contained many of Wings' greatest hits.

Wingspan provides Paul McCartney's personal view of his time with Wings and includes footage spanning Wings' whole career from 1971 to 1980. As *Wingspan* was a McCartney solo project, the documentary allowed him to be more outspoken about The Beatles' break-up and about the way Yoko Ono's presence contributed to friction within the band than in *The Beatles Anthology*, which had to be approved by Yoko Ono.

"[Paul:] It was getting near the break-up of The Beatles. Yoko was coming down the studio. We didn't really want to say much to John about it, at the risk of offending him and Yoko. We didn't say, "What's she doing here?" But we did kind of imply that, which made things a bit uncomfortable. And when she moved the bed in to the middle of the recording area...

[Mary:] Are you serious...

[Paul:] I am serious. It was like, "Okay, we've got to roll with the punches here. This is a bed and she's lying down. That's okay." It was like a happening" (*Wingspan* 2001).

Not only does the way McCartney describes his view of The Beatles' dissolution differ from the band's official autobiography, but also what

McCartney has got to say about The Beatles' first long-term drummer Pete Best is quite a surprise. In the *Anthology*, McCartney only mentions that George Martin did not like Best at The Beatles' first audition at EMI (vgl. *Anthology* 2003: DVD 1). In *Wingspan*, however, he implies that Best was replaced by Ringo Starr because of personal reasons: "In The Beatles we had Pete Best, who was a really good drummer. But there was something. He wasn't quite like the rest of us. We had a sense of humor in common, and he was nearly in with it all. But it is a fine line, as to what is exactly in and what is nearly in" (*Wingspan* 2001).

Unauthorized Documentaries

When the *Anthology* was released on DVD, Passport Video released an unauthorized Beatles documentary as a 3-DVD set, in order to cash in on the revived interest in The Beatles. The documentary is called *A Long and Winding Road* – in reference to the *Anthology*'s working title – and works very well as a complementary account of The Beatles' history, as it features several contributors to the group's history, who are not represented in the *Anthology*, such as the re-formed Quarry Men, the band's first manager Allan Williams, Brian Epstein's personal assistant Alistair Taylor, and the band's chauffeur and bodyguard Alf Bicknell.

Even though the *Anthology* also features most of the facts presented in *A Long and Winding Road*, the unauthorized documentary presents the events from the point of view of various people who belonged to the group's inner circle in the past. For instance, Lennon's musical beginnings with his first group, The Quarry Men, is represented more in-depth than in the *Anthology*, simply because *A Long and Winding Road* featured interviews with some of the original Quarry Men. On the other hand, the producers of *A Long and Winding Road* rely too much on the information provided by some less reliable sources, such as the recollections of Allan Williams and Alistair Taylor. Especially Williams often confuses the sequence of events or simply re-invents what he cannot remember in a way that only partly resembles what actually happened. Although some different points of view are set against each other in the documentary, most of the information is not balanced or commented by an independent source, which leaves the audience with the impression that the documentary presents facts, when a lot of the information is actually not reliable.

The producers of *A Long and Winding Road* used some of the material filmed for the DVD set in another documentary called *Brian Epstein – Inside the Fifth Beatle*. Although Epstein's life and involvement with

The Beatles is explored quite comprehensively in the film, the documentary only features a few old interview excerpts of The Beatles and, therefore, lacks the perspective of the group members. The award-winning *Anthology*, on the other hand, explores The Beatles' history from the perspective of The Beatles and their inner circle in the 1990s. Even though the documentary offers a comprehensive and quite honest account of The Beatles' history, it is interesting that it lacks the perspective of some of the people who were actively involved in their development. While Apple claims that the idea behind the project was to have The Beatles "set the record straight", this does not explain the inclusion of interviews with Neil Aspinall, Derek Taylor, and George Martin; nor does it explain excluding their first long-term drummer Pete Best, personal assistant Alistair Taylor, and recording engineer Geoff Emerick, who were all instrumental in the group's progress. Therefore, despite the producer's attempt at a factual representation of The Beatles' story, the chance of an entirely balanced view was lost by not including some vital contributors to The Beatles' success.

While The Beatles' *Anthology* marked the first official band history since Hunter Davies' authorized biography *The Beatles* (1969), there had been a few notably successful documentaries about The Beatles before. In 1984, MGM/United Artists released a 119 minutes long video documentary called *The Compleat Beatles*, which allowed a thoroughly researched and quite balanced look on the history of the group. It featured historical footage showing The Beatles at several significant points in their career, as well as exclusive interviews with some of the more important contributors to their success, such as George Martin, Bill Harry, Tony Sheridan, and Allan Williams. In addition, the documentary, which is narrated by Malcolm McDowell (*Clockwork Orange*), also includes a rare interview with John Lennon's aunt Mimi. However, none of the surviving Beatles nor Yoko Ono participated in the production of this documentary, although Paul McCartney granted an exclusive interview to the authors and editors of a lavish songbook of the same title.

Again, The Beatles' history is told in chronological order, opening with black-and-white footage of Liverpool during the Second World War. Like The Beatles' own *Anthology* and *A Long and Winding Road*, the film recalls the evolution of skiffle and rock and roll in Great Britain, and how this musical development inspired John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr to become musicians. The film contains archival footage similar and, partly, identical with the footage presented in The Beatles *Anthology* and *A Long and Winding Road*. *The Compleat Beatles* features quite some footage from The Beatles' company Apple's archives, such as the unreleased promotional film for the

song “A Day in the Life”. Therefore, the documentary must have been made with the consent of Apple. In fact, *The Compleat Beatles* may well have been the model for the *Anthology* in the way it is edited.

According to Bill Harry, *The Compleat Beatles* was one of the biggest-selling music video cassettes on both sides of the Atlantic (vgl. Harry 1985: 153).