Conclusion: Image, Myth, History, and The Beatles

Popular Culture and the Evolution of The Beatles' Image

Popular music, like all other forms of popular culture, is primarily a form of commercial entertainment, created with the intention of generating money. Every genre of popular culture consists of a set of specific patterns, stereotypes, and clichés, which enable the recipient to categorize each text and to regard it in the context of the genre it represents. The audience of mass culture has 'naturalized' the specific characteristics of a genre and expects a popular culture text to fulfil these qualities. Literary critic Linda Badley compares mass audiences to a preschool child "who requests the same stories over and over" (Badley 1996: 23). Therefore, the chance of commercial success is increased by fulfilling the expectations of the target audience.

On the one hand, the process of 'naturalization' has led to a formulaic way of producing pop culture texts, including TV shows, movies, comics, and songs. On the other hand, the audience has come to expect a text to work according to the conventions of the genre he or she prefers, and to fulfil certain patterns characteristic of the genre. The recipient is not necessarily aware of this process, because the genre conventions have become so natural in the recipient's perception that he or she only becomes aware of them when a convention is broken.

A mass audience does not exist as a homogenous accumulation of individuals but of a mass of people consuming pop culture texts individually, perceiving each text in the context of their own social and emotional situation and experience (vgl. Riemann). However, history and experience show that there are particular qualities in texts, which appeal to large numbers of people. These qualities become defining conventions of a genre and can be used by the producer of popular culture texts to consciously attract a certain target group. On the producer's side, this set of conventions, stereotypes, and formulas constitutes what Stuart Hall calls the 'preferred meaning' (vgl. Hall 1981: 128-138). – it is the information the audience is intended to receive.

In popular culture, a star's 'public image' constitutes an important part of defining his or her commercial potential, as it projects an artificially created persona, which is deliberately designed to convey a certain intended meaning and thereby attract a specific target group. A public image consists of a star's appearance, attitude, behavior, and the worldviews and opinions he or she expresses in the media. In the sphere of pop music, a star's public image is significantly shaped by the conventions of the musical genre the star is part of. The genre may not only determine the sound but also the appearance and the ideology expressed by the star's image.

The Beatles considered themselves as artists and were very aware of their appearance and the importance of their image. With their art-college background, John Lennon and Stuart Sutcliffe designed an artificial image for the band, which was inspired by the appearance of Teddy Boys (which none of The Beatles was). Their friendship with German art students Astrid Kirchherr and Jürgen Vollmer inspired them to change their look and to adapt a combination of 1950s rocker outfits, consisting of leather jackets and trousers, boots, and a feminine hairstyle fashionable among European art students at the time. Kirchherr and Vollmer were also responsible for the first professional photos taken of the group, which became iconic representations of the group's period in Hamburg and were a considerable influence on The Beatles' official press photos and album covers in the early 1960s. Their unusual clothes and hairstyle became The Beatles' distinctive trademark, adding to their unique appearance on stage, which was further characterized by the way The Beatles held their guitars and their careless attitude.

When Brian Epstein took over The Beatles' management, he modernized their look by persuading them to change into more fashionable suits, which made them more acceptable in the world of showbusiness. Initially, Epstein made The Beatles also cut their hair, but they soon adopted their previous 'Exi'-hairstyle again, when they found out that this particular hairstyle (as well as their unique vocal style) got attention in the press. From 1962 to 1966, The Beatles always wore the most stylish suits and boots, and their look was imitated by other pop groups, such as The Byrds, as well as by their leagues of fans.

Like Elvis Presley, The Beatles were among the pioneers of using a variety of media channels to distribute their image to the public. For example, The Beatles' movies were important means of establishing and perpetuating their powerful visual image to the world. Their first movie *A Hard Day's Night* was one of the most influential factors in defining and distributing the band's collective image as well as each band member's individual public image. The movie was released at the height of

their success as entertainers and had a lasting impact on the way the public has perceived the group ever since. Television was an equally important means of distributing the band's image to the world. Steven D. Stark argues that "[w]ith television finally beginning to penetrate the vast majority of English homes, the Beatles were among the nation's first TV phenomena – which was hardly surprising, since their appeal was always visual as well as musical" (Stark 2005: 143). Between 1962 and 1965 The Beatles appeared on more than thirty TV shows in Great Britain, a number unparalleled by any other artist (vgl. Stark 2005: 143). When The Beatles and their management realized that they would be able to increase their presence on worldwide television by sending out promotional videos for their songs instead of appearing live on selected TV shows, they contributed to the evolution of contemporary music videos, which are now an extremely important factor in promoting popular music releases.

Despite their continuing – and even increasing – success as recording artists in the second half of the Sixties, the way they encountered the public in the years 1963 to 1965, including their outfits, their instruments, as well as their choreography on stage, has become an iconic image of the early Sixties, and one of the most lasting visual representations of the band in the last forty years. Their unusual haircuts, their fashionable suits, their instruments, and the way they held their guitars higher than most guitarists became an image imitated by countless pop groups evolving in The Beatles' shadow. However, the fact that Paul McCartney played his guitar left-handed and John Lennon and George Harrison played right-handed created a unique appearance on stage. As described by Steven D. Stark, "when two approached the microphone together, it tended to created a choreographed symmetrical picture with the guitars gracefully to either side rather than poking one another" (vgl. Stark 2005: 143).

The perception of The Beatles and of each individual member is still shaped by the image they established and projected to the world at the time of their initial, overwhelming commercial success. Although The Beatles kept changing their outfits as well as their manners and opinions constantly until the group's break-up in 1970, the way they dressed and behaved at the time of 'Beatlemania' has lingered most persistently in the public's collective memory. It seems as though the public – the media and their audiences – has chosen to remember The Beatles in the idealized way they projected themselves in the early Sixties. As long as they behaved according to the patterns they had successfully developed with their management, their popularity exceeded every previous phenomenon in the entertainment business. Around 1965 and 1966, The Beatles were

getting weary of their artificial public image, and it became increasingly difficult for them to embody this particular image, as they had experienced many personal developments, which contradicted their image as pop singers. Their expanding musical horizon, their increasing interest in art, literature, and spiritual enlightenment, as well as the consumption of psychedelic drugs, i.e. LSD, influenced their perception of themselves and led to an astonishing development away from teen idols to pop artists. The Beatles gradually removed their Mop-Top personae and began to express their views on politics and society – an absolute first in the world of pop music. Consequently, they did not fulfil the public's expectations anymore. The public, in turn, was shocked by The Beatles' change. The scandal concerning John Lennon's remark about Christianity is probably the most drastic example of what can happen when the audience does not get what they want.

The public was stunned by The Beatles' new outspokenness and by their unexpected behavior. The media began to criticize The Beatles, and the group's estranged audience turned to other, less controversial pop acts. It is hardly ever mentioned today, but The Beatles' popularity diminished significantly in 1966. They did not sell out their second performance at Shea Stadium, where they had celebrated their most spectacular concert in front of 55,600 people the year before (vgl. Lewisohn 2000: 229). In addition, the group lost out to The Beach Boys in *N.M.E.*'s annual reader's poll.

It is quite ironic that The Beatles' popularity decreased the year the group transformed into more serious artists. In 1966, they recorded their most valued album *Revolver* and practically invented contemporary music video with their promotional films for "Paperback Writer" and "Rain". The band also stopped touring and decided that they would exist only as a recording band in the future.

A Hard Day's Night, Merchandise, and the Creation of History

In 1964, *A Hard Day's Night* was the most effective means of reinforcing The Beatles' official image in the public consciousness, as it captured the attention of a world-wide audience and has since been used as an 'authentic' representation of the band's most exciting period. However, the semi-documentary style of *A Hard Day's Night* is symptomatic for the constant confusion of reality and myth in The Beatles' history. Devin McKinney points out the movie's apparent function: "*A Hard Day's Night* seeks to place the Beatles, pretty much as they are, at the center of

a portrait approximating their real lives and true selves. The film will soften a harsh truth but not polish an ideal: it seeks, essentially, to quash Beatle myth before any can be born" (Kinney 2003: 64). While this may appear true on the surface, the movie does actually establish a considerable set of myths about the band, which have been responsible for the stereotyped view of the group and its members even long after the group's break-up. The movie's air of authenticity conceals the fact that it was a cleverly designed piece of merchandise that deceived the public into thinking that what is presented in the movie reflects the lives of the real Beatles in an accurate way.

Similar to the way The Beatles' movies paved the way for a certain kind of rock movie, distributing the image of its stars, The Beatles phenomenon practically led to the invention of contemporary rock and pop merchandise production, which nowadays contributes significantly to the amount of money generated in the music business. Geoffrey Ellis, who worked in The Beatles' management agency and was later instrumental in creating the hype surrounding Elton John, points out that "[p]rior to the Beatles, merchandising was a gimmick, a novelty, something – usually little more than a programme, poster or badge – produced so that the fans would have a keepsake or memento of a concert or public appearance" (Ellis 2004: 99). The immense popularity of The Beatles, however, changed this particular paradigm and led to the recognition of the market potential in teenage entertainment.

> "By 1963 it had become apparent that the Beatles presented a merchandising phenomenon that no-one – the band, their management, the merchandising companies or even the fans – could fully comprehend. Such was the fever for the group that fans would have bought virtually anything that had the band's name on it. [...] Most notable in the plethora of Beatles-related knick-knacks was the Beatles wig. In the early 1960s their collar-length hair was fashionably 'long' [...] and was virtually the Beatles' trademark" (Ellis 2004: 100).

Their image was used to sell all kinds of products, including hats, flags, candy, cups, toys, T-shirts, sweaters, buttons, notebooks, pencil cases, pens, bags, instruments, 'Beatles bread' (!), biscuit tins, comic books, ice cream, record players, record carrying cases, jigsaw puzzles, bathroom rugs, diaries, hair pomade, lampshades, shoes, glasses, plates, crockery, headphones, watches, alarm clocks, costumes, and toothpaste.[1] The Beatles' omnipresence in the media, as well as the fact that their image

1 For a detailed overview of Beatles-related merchandise see Richard Buskin. *Beatle Crazy! Memories and Memorabilia*. London: Salamander, 1994.

of 1964 was displayed on all products imaginable, made sure that the group's appearance entered the public consciousness of the Western hemisphere. In the United States, where the commercialization of The Beatles was much more developed than in Great Britain, their impact was unprecedented, and is still remembered and appreciated today. In 2003, *Time* magazine recalled the advent of Beatlemania as one of the 80 defining moments in the 20th century. Christopher Porterfield emphasizes the point that The Beatles were perceived as a visual phenomenon rather than a musical one. "You could hardly hear the music, but what did that matter? The Beatles' sheer presence was the point – their air of wholesome charm and cheeky wit, their instinctive connection with their audience. (It would be another couple of years before albums like *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper* showed that they were a musical phenomenon too)" (Porterfield 2003: 47).

Not only were The Beatles the first pop group to cash in on the new market of pop merchandise, but they also introduced a new dimension of tie-in merchandise with their television cartoon show and – to an even greater extent – with their cartoon feature film *Yellow Submarine*. Their immense commercial appeal in terms of memorabilia and merchandise is unparalleled in the field of pop music, because no other act has had the ability to appeal to such a diverse audience. On the one hand, The Beatles have always appealed to children, not only because they occasionally wrote songs for children, such as "Yellow Submarine" (1966) and "All Together Now", but also because their image easily translated into a cartoon version of the band. The Beatles' cartoon representations exist independent from the real Beatles. In turn, The Beatles themselves, as a group phenomenon, have existed for more than 35 years without its members. The Ex-Beatles themselves often refer to the group in third person. George Harrison explained the way he separated his own image from his Beatle-image in an interview with *Q* in 1995.

> "The Beatles will go on and on – on those records and films and videos and books and whatever, and in people's memories and minds. It's become its own thing now. And The Beatles, I think, exist without us. [W]e can carry on being individuals. For me, Beatle George was a suit or a shirt that I once wore, and the only problem is for the rest of my life, people are going to look at that shirt and mistake it for me" (Du Noyer 1995: 124).

The way The Beatles' image was introduced at the height of their success had such a powerful impact on the public's conception of the band that the group's members have since been perceived only in connection with their past image.

Similar to the way the public chooses to behold a certain positive image of the star, the public's historical consciousness also beholds a simplified and idealized version of the past. Therefore, the less pleasant chapters in The Beatles' history are usually not of great interest to the larger segment of the public, because they are not compatible with what the fans want to believe. In films, the most accurate portrayal of history is not necessarily accepted by the public as authentic, if it fails to fulfil the expectations of the audience. On the other hand, a simplified or distorted representation of history may find acceptance if it meets the conventions of a popular genre and the viewing audience's preconceptions of the past. The past becomes what the public chooses to remember.

The Beatles' history has become a mythtified contemporary legend, which continues to be re-told in all kinds of modern mass media. While The Beatles' story has previously been told from various points of views, The Beatles themselves set out to present their own view of their history with *The Beatles Anthology* in 1995. In one of his rare interviews, George Harrison expresses his view of history after working on Anthology.

"[Q:] Is it possible, with *Anthology*, to paint a complete picture?
[George Harrison:] Well, there's a way of twisting history – because if you find a roll of film on a cupboard, that's going in the documentary. I may have been doing something far more important on the same day, but because I didn't film it, it's no longer important. I think in the end it's shown me that all history must be total rubbish – because if we can't even tell our story, and we're still alive, then God help all those stories about the Romans or Alexander the Great or ... anyone" (Du Noyer 1995: 124).

Although Harrison exaggerates by calling all history 'rubbish,' he quite effectively points out the selective character of what the majority perceives as history and the power of the media in simplifying and (re-) creating history. On a larger scale this means that the rather arbitrary and selective way history is presented on film will shape all future conceptions of the past.