

## THE BEATLES AND THE COUNTERCULTURE

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Author:

Jessica Corry

Faculty Sponsor:

David Venturo,

*Department of English*

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### **ABSTRACT**

Throughout the 1960s, the Beatles exerted enormous influence not only as a critically acclaimed and commercially successful band, but also in the realm of social and cultural change. A number of factors facilitated the Beatles' rise to success, including the model of 1950s rock 'n' roll culture, their Liverpoolian roots, and a collective synergy as well as a unique ability to adapt and evolve with their era. As both agents and models of change, the Beatles played a key role in establishing three main attributes of the embryonic counterculture: the maturing sensibility of rock music, greater personal freedom as expressed by physical appearance, and experimentation with drugs. United by the goal of redefining social norms, activists, protestors, hippies, and proponents of the growing counterculture found in the Beatles an ideal representation of the sentiments of the times. Embodying the very principle of change itself, the Beatles became a major symbol of cultural transformation and the veritable leaders of the 1960s youth movement.

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"All you need is love, love, love is all you need" (Lennon-McCartney). Broadcast live on the international television special, "Our World," the Beatles performed "All You Need is Love" for an unprecedented audience of hundreds of millions around the world. As confetti and balloons rained down from the studio ceiling, the Beatles, dressed in psychedelic attire and surrounded by the eccentric members of Britain's pop aristocracy, visually and musically embodied the communal message of the 1967 Summer of Love. By doing so, the Beatles asserted their role not only among the most famous people of the world but also as the acknowledged leaders of the counterculture. Indeed, the Fab Four attained power over millions singular in history among artists, in part a credit to the postwar baby boom, the resulting generational conflict and other cultural events which led to the creation of a subculture rooted in rock 'n' roll. From their Liverpoolian roots to the first screams of Beatlemania and eventually to the release of the *Sgt. Pepper* album, the Beatles developed a collective mentality and appreciation of alternative forms of consciousness which came to mark them as both agents and models of change in the counterculture.

By 1945, the United States had emerged as the victor of World War II and found itself an economic lord among the destroyed Allied and Axis powers. With the past miseries of the Depression and devastating war fresh in the collective mind, the ensuing economic boom and cornucopia of wealth were cherished all the more. Robust with confidence, the flush of prosperity and the thrill of victory, the American economic boom came to be measured in terms of the number of births in an unparalleled baby boom. In the growing age of consumerism, the middle class flourished in "rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing" (Gitlin 49). As the Puritan utopia of a "city upon a hill" found its culmination in suburban conformity, it seemed as though the promise of opportunity in the land of plenty at long last was coming true (Gitlin, 13).

Although conformity and cornucopia were thought to promise contentment and utopia, satisfaction kept slipping out of reach for the middle class. In an attempt to keep fear at bay, the middle class resorted to building up islands of affluence, while the waters kept rising with ripples of discontent (Gitlin, 22). Conservatives feared social disintegration, immorality and rock 'n' roll, as well as the menace of communism. Perhaps the greatest fear however, was the atomic bomb and the nuclear terror it represented. Roused by discontent in the 1950s suburban Eden, a minority of the early pre-Vietnam New Left emerged and created the foundation for the later movement of the 1960s. Thus, beneath the self-satisfied facade of the fifties there existed expanding underground channels where conventional wisdoms

were resisted, undermined, and weakened.

At the same time, in a less focused yet more extensive manner, popular music and movies began to exert a greater influence on adolescents, questioning the norms and illusions of the affluent society to which many belonged. By packaging the culture of delinquency in a marketable form, popular culture of the mid-Fifties challenged the generation of outdated parents and advocated a spirit of fun and adventure which came to represent the burgeoning teenage culture of the Fifties. In turn, this aspect of the subculture marked the territory of the farther reaching youth upheaval of the late Sixties. Rock 'n' roll music that "whooped and groaned, shook, rattled and rolled" was the main youth subcurrent of the decade (Gitlin 37). The clamor of rock music was the outward projection of the noise of youth submerged by order and affluence, now desperately seeking an escape from the guise of suburban life. At its most basic level, the thump, throb, and quaver of rock enticed, urged, even commanded the listener to dance and express oneself.

As parents grew concerned with the implications of "rough, raw and insistent" rock 'n' roll, so very different from the easy-going crooning of the previous decade, it became clear that popular music helped insulate youth from the prerogatives of the previous generation. The lyrics of Chuck Berry summed up such generational defiance, "Hail, hail rock 'n' roll / Deliver me from the days of old" (Gitlin 43). Unfortunately as the popularity of rock 'n' roll spread, it devolved into overproduced mainstream teenage singers very far from the sneering, vibrating Elvis Presley whom young people unsuccessfully imitated. Luckily, however, a certain Liverpudlian religiously tuned into broadcasts of Presley's "Heartbreak Hotel," which awakened such a strong passion for rock 'n' roll that he went on to found perhaps the best known and most successful band in history. This boy, of course, was John Lennon, and the band, the Beatles.

An important factor in the Beatles' success was the unique era in which the band emerged, a time when musicians could become forces for social change with power over millions. With the postwar baby boom, the percentage of young people in the population was unprecedentedly high. The fifties rock 'n' roll subculture rose to a new level and music became a liberating force for the millions of teenagers who would become the activists, protestors, hippies, and proponents of the growing counterculture of the late 1960s. A product of many influences including the beat movement, the antiauthoritarianism of Henry David Thoreau, and the American tradition of radical utopianism, the counterculture is best defined as a "fluid set of assumptions and beliefs" united by the inherent goal of redefining the norms of society (Stark, 195). Most of all, the counterculture was the creation of the young, challenging older generations and unleashing conflicts regarding affirmative action, religion, abortion, homosexuality, and the meaning of work and success, all through the media of music, drugs, and politics.

The Beatles' roots in Liverpool were essential in establishing the "outsider" attitude which later developed into a more mature collective sensibility. As an English port city in terrible decline following WWII, Liverpool seemed almost like the frontier. In the eyes of self-satisfied Londoners, it was inhabited by impertinent, tough, and proletarian Scousers, the common slang term for Liverpudlians. This sentiment in turn fueled a kind of antiestablishment attitude, distinct to Liverpool which marked its inhabitants for life as outsiders. In fact, the city's social character found an exemplary agent of expression in the unmistakable Souse accent and dialect, the perfect medium for the blunt, mocking humor on which Liverpudlians prided themselves. As native Scousers, the Beatles aptly possessed both of these characteristics and took advantage of them as a means to trumpet their unique identity to the world.

A second important result of their upbringing in the economically depressed city was the Beatles' identification with working class, proletarian roots, a sentiment which was attractive to the increasingly discontent members of American youth culture. In a sense, the Beatles were the "first working-class heroes," in that the band was the first to make rock 'n' roll respectable by winning over "the class snob, the intellectual snob and the music snob" (DeGroot 223). Indeed the Sixties were intrinsically democratic and the Beatles represented an "upsurge of working-class expression in a medium till then mostly handed down to the common man by middle class professionals with little empathy for street culture" (DeGroot 228).

The final key element of the Beatles' Liverpudlian upbringing was the collective synergy the group evoked, very different from that of the solo figures of the 1950s. The group ideal flourished in Great

Britain because of the importance of the national sea culture, with the romantic archetype of sailor buddies together aboard a ship. This cultural notion was emphasized even more in the port city of Liverpool. However, the concept of an integrated collective band of colleagues was a relatively new idea in music and its novelty transformed both rock and the overall culture (Stark 64). With this new sensibility of music, the Beatles were able to create more cohesive and collaborative compositions. It also encouraged the band dynamic; as Paul McCartney asserts, "It made us very tight; like a family almost, so we were able to read one another" (Stark 64).

With identical outfits and androgynous "mop-tops," the Beatles created an identity that defined their solidarity as a group and was unique in its dual uniformity and idiosyncrasy. To the Beatles, "the whole was always greater than the sum of the parts" (Stark 13). As the band gained popularity, the Liverpool model promoted the notion of collectivism as a lasting precept of the growing youth culture. Thus, by example, the Beatles inspired one of the most important ideals of the counterculture and came to personify an ethic of collective nonconformity which "took the loneliness out of rebellion and linked the activist and hedonist wings of the counterculture" (Gould 345).

As the Beatles gained fame in Britain and eventually America, a singular phenomenon of mass hysteria known as Beatlemania developed. High-pitched young women's wailing, both joyous and hysterical, followed the Beatles, whether at concerts or simply impending arrivals at hotels or airports. In fact, the Beatles' arrival at Kennedy International Airport during the first 1964 U.S. tour was greeted with such crazed enthusiasm by the largest crowd the airport had ever experienced, "three thousand teenagers...girls, girls and more girls," that the Beatles concluded it must be for President Lyndon B. Johnson. As fan Lynne Harris recalls, "We screamed because it was a kick against anything old-fashioned. They represented what we could do with our lives" (Stark 9).

While young girls surrendered to their passions, the sheer force of their emotion demolished the rigid, sexless self-control of the Fifties. Furthermore, Beatles' fans were the first to be influenced by the band's example of working and living collaboratively, with one fan asserting her relationship with fellow audience members as "a community...almost a family" (Stark 65). As adolescents seized cultural power from the control of adults, Beatlemania demonstrated the impulsive force of "direction action" which would drive the youth movement in the years to come. Thus, the adolescent fervor of Beatlemania merged into one of the main tributaries of a broad convergence of pop enthusiasm, student activism, and mass nonconformism which would flood the political, social, and cultural landscape of the decade.

With over two hundred million records sold and the achievement of worldwide acclaim, the Beatles could have continued to offer more of the same. However, the band was ambitious not for money and fame but freshness and originality. For them, "fame bought freedom, the freedom let creativity bloom" (DeGroot 223). As a result, the group exercised a compulsion for growth, change and experimentation, "always pushing ahead . . . louder, further, longer and more different" (Stark 148). One of the band's remarkable attributes was the ability to remain in tune with the collective consciousness of their time, remaining progressive yet traditional. In this way, the Beatles were leaders who traveled "only a few miles behind in the mainstream," taking advantage of progress and promoting new trends. One acquaintance summed up their influence as "reinventing the sixties for the rest of us" (Stark 151). Through their music, the Beatles distilled the mood of their time, epitomized the tension between generations, "the loneliness of the dislocated sixties [as well as] the bitter sweet of young love in any age" (Porterfield 103).

Following their first U.S. tour in 1964, the Beatles achieved international fame, yet among serious student activists and intellectuals, rock 'n' roll was considered too mainstream and trivial to be relevant. Instead, folk music was adopted as a more suitable representation of the political atmosphere of the time. Future *Rolling Stone* writer Michael Lydon bemoaned the Beatles as "British synthetics," complaining, "Whenever the first strains of 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' began to twitch my stirrup bones, I send out silent screams for help to Chuck Berry, Elvis, Little Richard . . . and those other greats who have long defended the American way of rock" (Stark 162).

However, with the release of *A Hard Day's Night*, the group's Goonish wit and sensibility on-screen paired with the director Richard Lester's inventive use of New Wave and distinctly eclectic realist techniques bolstered the band's artistic credentials. Among the effects of this development was the

gradual convergence of teen culture with Bohemian culture, which sought to impart a far more serious and artistic critique of society. By fall of 1964, the influence of the movie on more politically minded youth was demonstrated at a Berkeley student protest in support of the Free Speech Movement. In addition to the traditional folk ballads, the protestors sang "It'll Be a Long Hard Fight," to the tune of "A Hard Day's Night." With this the Beatles had crossed into new territory and established the first of three attributes of the emerging youth culture: the maturing sensibility of rock music.

The second attribute of the embryonic counterculture was the move towards greater personal freedom. Having ended touring in 1966, the band was able to rejuvenate their artistic drive and enjoy the freedom to improvise in the studio. Most importantly, they no longer needed to conform to audience expectations. Disenchanted with the trappings of fame, George Harrison explained, "I no longer need to pretend to be a Beatle" (DeGroot 227). Commitment to personal freedom lies at the core of the counterculture in its struggle with "the establishment." The outward symbol of this personal freedom encompassed personal appearance, and assumed major cultural and political significance.

In 1964, the untraditionally long and androgynous Beatle haircut was considered more strange than threatening. However, as the band's hair grew longer, it became a symbol of rebellion which many adolescents emulated. Hair became the outward focus of the youth movement because "it's so obvious, easy and cheap to manipulate and color . . . it has always been a frontline symbol of teenage rebellion" (Stark 177). Longer hair came to represent a multitude of possibilities, and high school and college students alike began to challenge hair and dress codes. As the rigid gender-bound modes of appearance and behavior weakened, a new style consisting of beads, necklaces, and brightly embroidered fabrics emerged to complement longer hair in the revolt against the restraints of society. Simply put, the Beatles provided a generation of cultural rebels with a banner of their rebellion, beginning with a protestation of the "indisputable principle that short hair equals men, long hair equals women" (Gould 345).

Lastly, experimentation with drugs marked the final and perhaps most important defining attribute of the counterculture. In the words of Robin Richman, "In many ways, the counterculture was about altered states of consciousness, which really meant drugs" (Stark 171). In previous decades, the drug of choice had been alcohol, which induced aggressive and intemperate conduct. However, as the counterculture began to question the hectic aggressiveness of society, marijuana and other psychedelic drugs offered an antidote by inducing more introspective and passive behavior. Thus, drug use helped to cement the notion of peace as a key element in the growing counterculture. Marijuana dissolved the tension of political life, allowing one to take refuge from the Vietnam war and from one's own hope, terror, or anguish by providing either "a spiritual search or the ultimate giggle" (Gitlin 202).

For the Beatles, marijuana served as an antidote from the pressures of fame and fostered a more reflective mentality which soon became apparent in the maturing themes of their music. In a departure from the usual notion of rock 'n' roll as overly mainstream, the Beatles brought serious artistic questions from the realm of high culture into the more easily accessible region of popular culture. Once again, it was a student strike at Berkeley that illustrated the new niche the Beatles had come to occupy in the eyes of dissident youth. In the fall of 1966, a thousand demonstrators present at an antiwar protest sang "Yellow Submarine" in a communion of hippies and activists, students and nonstudents. Activist Michael Rossman explained the symbolism, "Yellow Submarine was first proposed by the Beatles, who taught us a new kind of song . . . celebrating the growing fusion of head, heart and hands; of hippies and activists . . . making a resolution which broke into song; and we adopt for today this unexpected symbol of our trust in our future" (Gould 345).

The optimism of the youth movement reached its apex in 1967. In fact, *Time* magazine awarded the 1966 Man of the Year to anyone under twenty-five. The sentiment of the times was most fully expressed in the Beatles, who embodied in music and personalities the very principle of change itself. With the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* at the dawn of the "Summer of Love," the Beatles crystallized the emergence of the counterculture and formally crowned themselves leaders of the alternative movement. John Lennon recognized the role of the Beatles in the "revolution in a whole way of thinking. . . . We are all on this ship—a ship going to discover the new world. And the Beatles were in the crow's nest" (DeGroot 226). The album cemented the link between politics and art by taking to a new level their role as deities of the youth culture. Most importantly, the album reasserted the theme of

communalism the Beatles evoked, exemplified by the crowded cover shot and songs like "With a Little Help from my Friends," bestowing upon the album the unifying message of the counterculture.

Thus, it was in this setting that the Beatles performed "All You Need is Love," a song which best captured the spirit of the Summer of Love. It marked the transformation from a former emphasis on individual romantic love to the philosophy of universal love. Above all, it communicated a sense of infinite possibilities: there was nothing one could know that was not known, there was nowhere one could be that was not where one was meant to be. Timothy Leary, an LSD advocate, advised the generation, "Close your eyes and listen to the sermon from Liverpool. Learn that it's the oldest message of love and peace and laughter, and trust in God and don't worry" (Turner 126).

According to Derek Taylor, "The Beatles [were] not a pop group; they [were] an abstraction—a repository for many things" (Stark 2). As one of the century's major symbols of cultural transformation, the Beatles unprecedentedly converged with and epitomized their era. As Lennon explained, "Changing a lifestyle and the appearance of youth didn't just happen. We set out to do it" (Stark 8). The Beatles as an entity inherently possessed and evoked collective synergy and appreciation of an alternative worldview, which came to be major principles of the counterculture. Thus, the rise of the Beatles stimulated the embryonic counterculture, reaching its apex with the Summer of Love and *Sgt. Pepper*. Naturally, the dissolution of the band symbolized culturally the end of an era. As Lennon asserted, "The dream is over" (Wenner 11).

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