The Beatles: Leaders of the 1960s Counterculture

The Beatles Re-Vitalize Rock and Roll

The forces of American cultural repression came after rock and roll in the late 1950s with a vengeance. The American media and governmental leadership, which eventually came to be known among young people of the counterculture as the establishment, most feared two aspects of rock and roll.

First of all, rock and roll supposedly encouraged so-called juvenile delinquency. The USA was the by far the most prosperous country in the world in the post-World War II era, and young people, through part-time jobs and “allowances,” had, for the first time in history, discretionary income of their own to buy music, clothes, and cosmetics that fit their tastes. They had their own rooms, their own televisions, their own record players—and their own thoughts and opinions—all of which led to the phenomenon of “teenage rebellion.” The young movie star James Dean made this rebellion very attractive in his 1955 movie, Rebel without a Cause. This juvenile independence was unprecedented and frightening. Young people had to be returned to their traditional “place” as dutiful children of the “nuclear family.”

Second, and most incendiary, rock and roll brought the races together, both musically and socially. Rock and roll concerts featuring black performers like Little Richard and Fats Domino drew increasingly integrated audiences at a time when racial segregation was still legally enforced throughout the South and racial prejudice among all American whites was still the norm.

The same media/governmental coalition that had organized and perpetuated the “Red Scare” now went into action against rock and roll. By 1960, disc jockeys were being hounded for “payola,” Elvis Presley was in the army, Chuck Berry was in jail, lily-white “teen idols” like Bobby Darin and Fabian were marketed as “safe alternatives” to real rock and roll, and “novelty songs” like “Alley Oop” were marketed as parodies of the original rock and roll genre.

This repressive situation had somewhat improved, though, by 1963 (See p.2 of the handout, “Rock and Roll and the 1960s Counterculture.”). Young songwriters (Carole King, her husband Gerry Goffin, and others at the Brill Building in New York) and young record producers like Phil Spector were issuing much better quality music for teenagers that, while not as raw as the original blues and gospel-based rock, once again accurately reflected the romantic and rebellious longings of young people. “Be My Baby,” produced by Phil Spector and sung by a black “girl group,” The Ronettes (led by Spector’s wife, Ronnie Spector) is an outstanding example of this positive trend.

Also in 1963, a charismatic young British rock and roll group, The Beatles, became the most popular entertainers in England. The Beatles—John Lennon (lead vocals and rhythm guitar), Paul McCartney (lead vocals and bass), George Harrison (lead guitar and lead vocals), and Ringo Starr (drums)—were all natives of Liverpool, a working class port city on the Northwest coast of England. Although the official national radio outlet in England, the BBC, did not play rock and roll,
in Liverpool, rock and roll records came in through sailors and travelers returning from the US, and pirate radio stations, on converted commercial ships off the coast, also played rock and roll. All of the Beatles got their start as teenagers playing in "skiffle groups," using cheap instruments like "washboard basses," and trying their best to imitate their American rock and roll idols: Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, and Buddy Holly.

Under several different provisional names (They did not settle on The Beatles until around 1960.), these young men served a daunting apprenticeship, playing in sleazy bars and clubs converted from local basements, until they were recruited to play in Germany, on Hamburg's notorious "Reeperbahn," one of the most famous nightclub and "red light" districts in Europe. Forced to play six hours or more a night for a drunken, raucous clientele, they put in over a thousand hours of performance time and developed a repertoire of hundreds of songs.

Finally, in 1962, their manager Brian Epstein finally contacted a record producer named George Martin of Parlophone Records, who was willing to give The Beatles a chance as recording artists. The Beatles’ music was still rough-hewn, but Martin was so charmed with their cheeky wit that he saw potential in the group, even giving them a chance to perform their own material, written by John and Paul.

By 1963, the quickly maturing Beatles were composing and performing songs that took over the British pop charts and were performing before increasingly manic crowds of teenagers—girls did all the screaming, but boys were there, too. Their self-composed hits “She Loves You” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” offered the same kind of teenage romance being served up in the USA by the "girl groups," but The Beatles were performing their material as a high-voltage, guitar-driven, rock and roll band. With the overwhelming success of “I Want to Hold Your Hand” on the American record charts, and their extraordinary debut before 73 million viewers on the Ed Sullivan Show on February 9, 1964, the Beatles returned rock and roll to America, charmed the American media establishment, and revived the nation from the depression that had hung over it since the assassination of President Kennedy in November, 1963.

The Beatles Mature as Musicians

The Beatles then entered the most hectic schedule in entertainment history. In 1964 and 1965, they issued four full albums of almost all original music, issued over a dozen hit singles, made two movies, hosted a weekly radio program on the BBC, appeared regularly on TV, and toured England, America, Europe, and Australia. Despite this pressure, or maybe because of it, The Beatles’ creativity as songwriters and musicians did not wane, but instead became more sophisticated. John Lennon was adapting the rock and roll idiom to expressions of introspection and self-doubt (“I’m a Loser,” Help”) and Paul McCartney was composing love ballads (“Yesterday” and “Michelle”) that even mainstream musical icons like Frank Sinatra could praise and cover.

Part of this explosion of talent and expression was due to natural musical genius, of course. But the Beatles did not become leaders of what would become the counterculture by staying as squeaky clean as their management would have had the public believe. On the second American visit
in August of 1964, Bob Dylan, the leading American “folk-rock” songwriter, mishearing part of “I Want to Hold Your Hand” as “I get high” (instead of “I can’t hide”), decided to bring some marijuana to his meeting with the group in New York. All of The Beatles tried it, and they were instant converts to the drug, feeling that it gave them new insights and fresh creativity. They brought their new “high” back to the studio, and George Martin had to “look the other way” while the Beatles slipped out to the bathroom and returned giggling during their recording sessions. By the end of 1965, the Beatles album *Rubber Soul* featured a distorted picture of the group on the cover and numerous songs that contained sly references to their new, pot-inspired, state of mind (“The Word,” “I’m Looking through You,” “Think for Yourself”).

About the same time as the issue of *Rubber Soul* in late 1965, John Lennon, George Harrison, and their wives Cynthia and Patty, were socializing with their dentist. The dentist spiked their after dinner coffee with LSD, a “psychedelic” hallucinogenic drug that affected the brain directly, causing both powerful hallucinations and deep feelings of spiritual insight and cosmic revelation. John and George convinced their initially hesitant band mates, Paul and Ringo, to try the drug as well, and when The Beatles returned to the studio in the spring of 1966 to record their next album, *Revolver*, the first song to be recorded was “Tomorrow Never Knows,” featuring Indian-inspired drone music, extensive sound effects, and John intoning lyrics like “turn off your mind, relax and float downstream” and “surrender to the void.” Now, instead of George Martin guiding The Beatles, they were telling him what to do, demanding more unusual musical arrangements and sound effects. George Harrison, now completely involved with Indian music and spirituality, started using sitars and other Indian instruments in the songs that he was writing; Paul’s songs now featured horn and string arrangements; and John was openly describing intense psychedelic experiences in his lyrics (“She said, ‘I know what it’s like to be dead, I know what it feels to be sad,’ but you’re making me feel like I’ve never been born.”).

Other groups by this time were picking up on The Beatles’ influence and writing their own psychedelic songs (The American group The Byrds, for instance, with “Eight Miles High”), but the Beatles found a way to make this experimental music accessible to a wide audience. The double-sided single of early 1967, with “Penny Lane” (Paul) and “Strawberry Fields Forever” (John) offered not love lyrics, but adventurous arrangements of lyrics based on idyllic reminiscences of their Liverpool childhoods. With this single, The Beatles announced that they had grown up, and that rock and roll could be, in fact, grown up music, not just the province of teenage love and anxieties.

The Beatles had also decided to quit touring. Their concerts were becoming literally dangerous events, as fans, especially in the US, become almost insanely frenzied. During their last world tour in 1966, they were also subjected to death threats and “Beatle burnings” in the US over John’s offhand comment to an interviewer that they were “more popular than Jesus,” and they were physically assaulted by paramilitary thugs in an airport in The Philippines because they had skipped a party hosted by the wife of the country’s dictator, Fernando Marcos.

The Beatles’ career as prophets of the new counter-culture reached its peak in June of 1967 with the release of The Beatles’ record album *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the single,
“All You Need Is Love.” This music became the soundtrack of the “Summer of Love” in 1967, when the hippie rebellion of young people was coalescing into a full-scale cultural movement. On the cover of the album, The Beatles, dressed in the colorful costumes of the band led by “Sgt. Pepper” (Ringo), stand over the grave of “The Beatles” and take their place among a group of iconic entertainment and political figures of the twentieth century. They portray themselves as grown-up, mature visionaries, and in the album they prove that they can master, and put to their own creative purposes, any popular, or even classical, musical form they choose to employ: Indian music and philosophy in George’s “Within You Without You”; witty, 1920s style music hall woodwinds for Paul’s “When I’m Sixty-Four,” and all-out psychedelic sound effects for John’s “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”

The culminating track, “A Day in the Life,” took two different songs by John and Paul and combined them seamlessly, ending on an overwhelming orchestral crescendo that has never been topped in popular music. The song itself is a commentary on the power of media to create a self-sufficient, dream-like “alternative reality,” based on both sensational celebrity headlines (“the lucky man who made the grade’ who “blew his mind out in a car”), banal, largely meaningless news (“four thousand holes in Blackburn, Lancashire”) and film going (“I saw a film today, oh boy, the English army had just won the war”)—all based on genuine headlines and experiences (John had acted in a failed movie called How I Won the War). An orchestral crescendo ending with an alarm clock going off “wakes up” the character created by Paul (“woke up, fell out of bed, dragged a comb across my head”) who then slips back into reverie on the bus (“four thousand holes”), only to be re-awakened by the final orchestral crescendo, which is also meant to “wake up” the audience.

The song was banned by the BBC and was unplayed on the radio in the US, though there was no official censorship of it, because of the key line, “I’d love to turn you on.” “Turning on” was a common term among hippies for using drugs, and The Beatles may have meant for that literal meaning to be there, but the phrase is also completely consistent with the overarching theme of the song concerning the hypnosis induced by media, in which one turns on reality by turning on the radio or television. By saying that “I’d love to turn you on,” the Beatles directly address the consciousness of the listener himself or herself to “turn on” one’s real, personal perceptions, and wake up from the media-induced dream. That call is still as relevant, and even more so, today, given the given the incredibly seductive power of digital, social media.

The End of The Beatles

The Beatles’ explosive creative influence and relentless innovation began to tail off after the summer of 1967. In August, 1967, The Beatles’ manager, Brian Epstein, died of an accidental drug overdose. A closeted gay man at a time when homosexual behavior was a criminal offense in England, his personal life was always on the verge of scandal, and The Beatles’ increasing maturity and lack of interest in touring had made him feel dispensable, though there is no evidence that his death was a suicide. The Beatles lost a key mooring their professional lives, and their attempts to compensate for the loss with a meditation trip to India and an ambitious business venture (the Apple Corporation) both ended in disappointment and disillusion, not to mention the financial
losses from Apple. There were the inevitable personal clashes within the group as well (John Lennon’s leaving his wife and son to marry the Japanese artist Yoko Ono being the worst). The Beatles remained enormously creative and productive during 1968 and 1969 despite these problems, but they went “back to basics” in their music for the most part, and just built on their innovations rather than trying anything radically new, as they had in 1966 and 67.

Ironically or coincidentally, the Beatles decided to break up in 1969 just as the counterculture that they had largely spawned ran aground in August of 1969 at the disastrous Rolling Stones’ concert at Altamont Racetrack. The Beatles went their separate ways after a painful series of lawsuits, and by 1973 all four members had entered successful solo careers. Reunion rumors persisted through the 1970s, but, as Paul McCartney put it, “You can’t re-heat a soufflé.” It all became moot on December 8, 1980, when John Lennon was murdered by a madman with a handgun in New York City. George Harrison died of cancer in 2001, but Paul and Ringo are still recording and touring today, in their 70s.