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Interpreting The Beatles

Marcus Collins, Loughborough University

(published in *Teaching History*, 2009)

'The Beatles were history-makers from the start,' proclaimed the liner notes for the band's first LP in March 1963.¹ It was a bold claim to make on behalf of a beat combo with one chart-topping single, but the Beatles' subsequent impact on 1960s culture put their historical importance (if not its meaning) beyond dispute. The notion that they represented the spirit of the sixties was firmly established in the British press by the end of 1963, achieved global acceptance after their conquest of the United States in 1964, and was preserved in perpetuity by the dissolution of the band at the end of the decade.

During the 1960s, the Beatles expressed conflicting views about their place in history. Ringo Starr looked forward to appearing in 'school history books ... read by kids' in 1967, whereas two years later John Lennon reportedly suggested that 'history books should be eliminated completely from schools.'² On the whole, however, they didn't dwell on such matters while still performing and recording together. They were busy, perplexed by their phenomenal fame and understandably reluctant to be categorised and misconstrued (a problem highlighted in 1969 by the 'Paul is Dead' hoax and the *White Album*-inspired Manson murders).

The two leading Beatles reacted to the break-up of the band in characteristically different fashions. While Paul McCartney clammed up and moved on, John Lennon laid waste to what he termed the 'Beatles myth' in a notorious interview conducted by Jann Wenner of *Rolling Stone* in 1970. Lennon characterised the four happy-go-lucky mop-tops as 'the biggest bastards on earth' and himself as a tormented genius forever seeking to escape his Faustian pact with fame.³

Though Lennon was an unreliable narrator, his account encouraged an iconoclastic approach among popular historians of a sensationalist bent, who set about exposing the Beatles as plaster saints. Since Lennon had asserted that 'No truth was written' by Hunter Davies in his authorised biography of 1968, Philip Norman promised 'The True Story of the Beatles' in his unauthorised biography of 1981.⁴ Norman made Lennon the tragic hero of his warts-and-all narrative and correspondingly denigrated McCartney as a facile tunesmith and control freak.

The success of Norman's book and the authorised documentary-cum-hagiography *Imagine: John Lennon* (1988) indicated how Lennon's original

demythologising account had ironically become a myth unto itself following his murder in 1980. There consequently followed another spate of debunking, with Lennon now the target. Albert Goldman's *The Lives of John Lennon* (1988) was too vitriolic to accomplish its aim of exposing Lennon and Yoko Ono as degenerate hypocrites, but tallied in certain respects with other, less axe-grinding accounts. More justifiable if scarcely less subtle was Paul McCartney's attempt to redress the balance regarding his and Lennon's artistic credentials and contribution to the Beatles' canon: his main reason for sanctioning an authorised biography in 1997.⁵

At the opposite extreme to sensationalism was the antiquarianism of those popular historians who compiled chronicles and encyclopaedias, transcribed songs and interviews and released bootlegs of every recorded sneeze. The prime exponent of this technique is Mark Lewisohn who, having written meticulously researched chronicles of the Beatles' every concert and recording session, will soon publish the first instalment of a three-volume biography.⁶ Lewisohn's *magnum opus* will surpass all previous biographies in its comprehensiveness. Less certain is whether it will diverge from the descriptive and narrative approach adopted by popular historians – sensationalist and antiquarian alike – when telling the overly familiar tale of the Beatles' rise and fall.

Scholarly studies of the Beatles have displayed many of the same characteristics as their popular counterparts, not least in their portrayal of John Lennon as the most interesting, important and innovative Beatle. The first non-musicological monographs on the Beatles appeared shortly after Lennon's death and concerned his literary works and political activities.⁷ The thriving subfield of Lennonology has generated work of the calibre of Janne Mäkelä's 2004 study of how Lennon 'creates himself and is created' as a celebrity.⁸ However, it has also tended to exaggerate Lennon's singularity within the Beatles and to draw attention away from the band's heyday in sixties Britain and towards his increasingly marginal existence in seventies America.

Academic historians have also shared popular historians' enthusiasm for debunking the Beatles myth, as exemplified by works published last year by David Fowler and Oded Heilbronner. One of the 'powerful myths' questioned by Fowler was '[w]hether the Beatles had a major influence on British youth culture during the 1960s.' This was a quixotic task which could be sustained only by defining 'youth culture' so narrowly as to exclude all but the most autonomous of subcultural activities and by caricaturing the Beatles as 'young capitalists ... exploiting youth culture by promoting fan worship'.⁹

Heilbronner similarly placed the 'anti-revolutionary and anti-anarchistic' Beatles in opposition to the most radical currents of sixties youth culture.¹⁰ This argument was no more persuasive than Fowler's, premised as it was on contrasting the Beatles' conservatism to the radicalism of the Rolling Stones. In fact, the Stones were Jean-Luc Godard's second choice after the Beatles to star in his right-on film *One Plus One* (1968), while their song 'Street

Fighting Man' was every bit as ambivalent about student protests as the Beatles' 'Revolution'.

It is the Beatles' fundamental ambivalence that is missing from Fowler's and Heilbrunner's studies. The Beatles were self-proclaimed capitalists and communists, revolutionaries and reactionaries. They were by turns populist and elitist, cosmopolitan and parochial, feminist and chauvinist, promiscuous and monogamous, addicted and abstinent. The Beatles personified the countervailing forces within the 'permissive' and 'affluent' society, a theme best captured by music critic Ian MacDonald's song-by-song commentary, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (1994, rev. 2005). If teachers follow his lead, schools will steal a march on scholars.

Further Reading

Leigh, S. (2005) 'Gimme Some Truth',
http://www.spencerleigh.demon.co.uk/Feature_Beatlebooks.htm
Mäkelä, J. (2004) *John Lennon Imagined: Cultural History of a Rock Star*.
New York: Praeger
MacDonald, I. (1994, rev. 2005) *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*. London: Pimlico

References

[See endnotes]

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by Dr Marcus Collins, Lecturer in History, Loughborough University. He edited *The Permissive Society and Its Enemies: Sixties British Culture* (2007) and is currently writing a book on the Beatles and permissiveness.

Designing enquiries to make pupils think about different interpretations of the Beatles

A Level: 16 to 19 years

Revolution? Assessing the significance of the Beatles

As the arguments of Fowler and Heilbrunner show, historical disagreements often turn on definitions – on the criteria used, on definitions of concepts, and so on. Pupils often get distracted by what historians say and fail to consider what historians presuppose or assume. We need to consciously counter this and to encourage students to ask questions like 'what criteria is this historians using?', 'are these reasonable definitions of concepts?' and so on. Comparing and critically evaluating historical judgments of the significance of the Beatles ought to get pupils thinking in these ways. What differing assessments have been made of the historical significance of the Beatles? How has the significance of the Beatles been assessed? 'Are all assessments equally defensible?'

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Pop History? Beatles stories and Beatles histories

Celebrity culture thrives on stories – not least multiple autobiographies – and is all about ‘what’: ‘what’ happened, ‘what’ it looked like, ‘what’ someone was wearing, and so on. Historians are interested in ‘so what?’ questions, however: in what an event in the past can be made to ‘mean’ or to ‘tell us’ about a problem we are trying to solve. Studying Beatles stories is likely to engage pupils and it should also help pupils think historically. Collect together examples of ‘pop history’ – chronicles of the Beatles, stories about the Beatles, Beatles time lines – and spend some time exploring ‘what’ the Beatles were, ‘what’ they did, and so on. Then raise the ‘so what?’ question - making the point that ‘meaning’ rather than ‘story’ is what matters in history. Tasks pupils to design and pursue an enquiry question something like ‘So what can Beatles stories tell us about...’ whichever aspect of change in the 1960s your pupils feel the material can give insights into.

The Editors

¹ Barrow, T. (1963) *The Beatles, Please Please Me* LP. London: Parlophone

² Starr cited in Davies, H. (1968) *The Beatles: The Authorized Biography*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 338; Gardiner, S. (1969) ‘Beatle’s Peace Crusade’. *Ottawa Journal* article reproduced at <http://beatles.ncf.ca/sandyg2.html>: accessed 3 August 2009

³ Wenner, J. S. (2000) *Lennon Remembers* [rev. edn]. London: Verso, 2000, p. 64

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61; Norman, P. (1981) *Shout! The True Story of the Beatles*. London: Elm Tree

⁵ Miles, B. (1997) *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now*. London: Secker and Warburg

⁶ Lewisohn, M. (1986) *The Beatles Live!* London: Pavilion Books; *idem* (1988) *The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions*. London: Hamlyn

⁷ Saucedo, J. (1983) *The Literary Lennon: A Comedy of Letters*. Ann Arbor, MN: Pierian Press; Wiener, J. (1984) *Come Together: John Lennon in His Time*. New York: Random House. No other band member attracted comparable scholarly interest until the recent publication of two books on George Harrison’s spiritual beliefs, for which see Allison, D. C. Jr. (2006). *The Love There That’s Sleeping: The Art and Spirituality of George Harrison*. New York: Continuum; and Greene, J. M. (2006). *Here Comes the Sun: The Spiritual and Musical Journey of George Harrison*. New York: John Wiley. An excellent popular study of the Beatles and religion is Turner, S. (2005) *The Gospel According to the Beatles*. London: Westminster Press

⁸ Mäkelä, J. (2004) *John Lennon Imagined: Cultural History of a Rock Star*. New York: Praeger, p. 4

⁹ Fowler, D. (2008) *Youth Culture in Modern Britain 1920-1970*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 168, 171

¹⁰ Heilbronner, O. (2008) ‘The Peculiarities of the Beatles: A Cultural-Historical Interpretation’. *Cultural and Social History* 5:1, p. 100