

INTRODUCTION

“Dear Sir or Madam, Will You Read My Book?”

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ON A CLOUDY, frigid afternoon in January 1969, the Beatles performed their final, impromptu concert on the rooftop of their London office building. In the ensuing months, they recorded their brilliant swan-song *Abbey Road* (1969), saw their personal relationships dissolve into bitter litigation, and seemingly walked off their considerable global stage forever. Yet in the decades since their disbandment, they have continued to exert a substantial impact on the direction of Western culture. In 2000 alone, the surviving Beatles debuted a restored print of their much-ballyhooed film *A Hard Day's Night* to renewed critical acclaim; published a lavish, best-selling coffee-table book titled *The Beatles Anthology*; and released a compilation of their greatest hits that topped the musical charts in thirty-four countries and vastly outsold contemporary music's other popular boy groups, 'N Sync and the Backstreet Boys. As Edna Gundersen recently observed in *USA Today*, “Though defunct for the past 31 years, the Beatles still deliver the rock of ages—all ages” (E1). Perhaps even more remarkably, the Beatles continue to influence our conceptions of gender dynamics, the nature and direction of popular music, and the increasingly powerful and socially influential constructions of iconicity and celebrity.

The reasons behind the phenomenon of the Beatles and their sustained success are as multifarious and as eminently complex as Western culture itself. Beatlemania emerged on a postwar British landscape pocked with poverty and craters—the literal scars of the socioeconomic havoc wrought by the long

reach of World War II. Vast unemployment and stultifying class disjunction were in the air, but younger Britons had simply had enough. They no longer wanted to hear about the Great Depression or the Blitz. As events would so clearly demonstrate, they wanted to bathe themselves in the sounds of “Please Please Me” and “She Loves You”—and they wanted to hear the words of love and possibility over and over again. Things could not have been more different in the United States, of course, where Americans were winning the peace during one of the nation’s most sustained periods of economic growth and expansion. Clouds were on the horizon, to be sure—the realities of the cold war had been rendered all too clear by the missiles of October 1962. But nothing could have prepared Americans—indeed, the world—for the devastation of the Kennedy assassination and its attendant effects on a nation’s belief in itself and in the possibilities of the future. But then, like a proverbial breath of fresh air, the Fab Four arrived on the scene in February 1964, and a nation in mourning became transfixed by “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and the notion—pleasant relief that it was—of meeting the Beatles.

Their Englishness no doubt played a central role in their initial charm—their North Country accents soaring above a deft blend of Mersey beat music and African-American rhythm and blues. Armed with their ready wit and unflinching smiles, the Beatles were simply too much for Americans to resist. Overstating George Martin’s role in fashioning the sound that first caught the attention of British and American ears, that transformed the Beatles into the stuff of history, is nearly impossible, of course. The A&R (Artists & Repertoire) men at Decca may have genuinely believed that guitar-oriented music was on its last legs, but Martin clearly heard something different in the unpolished, stage-honed thrashings of John, Paul, George, and Ringo. With his guidance, the Beatles dared to experiment with their sound, to revivify it with irony and nostalgia, to adorn it with a string quartet, a full-blown orchestra, and even a sitar. Martin afforded them with the courage and the knowledge to tinker with their sound as far as their artistry would take them. And, as history has shown, their fecund imaginations traversed well beyond the boundaries of their musicality, transmogrifying Western culture’s conceptions of hope, love, and the idea—whimsical as it may seem—of an everlasting peace.

Reading the Beatles: Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, and the Fab Four addresses the enduring nature of the band’s many sociocultural achievements. But the volume also pointedly examines the Beatles’ considerable *literary* accomplishments. And why not? Little argument exists among musicologists and literary critics alike about the Beatles’ inherent literary qualities. After all, their songs—like our greatest works of literature—almost exclusively concern themselves with the human condition and the dilemmas that confront us regarding the interpersonal relationships that mark our lives. The Beatles’ albums offer a range of decidedly literary characters, from Mean Mr. Mustard, Eleanor Rigby, and Polythene Pam to Billy Shears, Bungalow Bill, and Rocky

Raccoon. These personages, in addition to the psychological dimensions of the band members' personalities themselves, imbue their works with a particularly literary texture. "The Beatles treated the album as a journey from one place to another," Tim Riley observes. "They built cornerstones into their records by positioning their songs in relation to one another: beginnings and endings of sides can sum up, contradict, qualify, or cast a shadow over the songs they introduce or follow" (29–30). For this reason, one can hardly imagine hearing the final a cappella chords of "Because" without anticipating "You Never Give Me Your Money" and the bittersweet nostalgia of the symphonic suite that punctuates the end of the band's career on *Abbey Road*. Similarly, the manner in which "Drive My Car" and "Taxman" introduce *Rubber Soul* (1965) and *Revolver* (1966), respectively, not only signals us about the musical direction of various stages of the band's development, but also becomes inextricably bound up in our successive "listensings" (or readings) of those recordings. In short, the positioning of the Beatles' songs on their albums underscores the ways in which the band intended for us to receive—indeed, to interpret—their artistic output. Who could conceive, for example, of listening to the beginning of the *White Album* (*The Beatles*, 1968) and not hearing the soaring jet engines that announce the familiar opening strains of "Back in the U.S.S.R."?

Perhaps the band's abiding self-consciousness about the overall production, design, and presentation of their art invites us to read (and reread) the Beatles in the first place. From their heyday as recording artists from 1962 through 1969, the Beatles enjoyed a staggering musical and lyrical leap that takes them from their first album *Please Please Me* (1963), which they recorded in a mere sixteen hours, to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the *White Album*, and *Abbey Road*, which took literally hundreds of hours to complete. Paul McCartney astutely recognized the artistic integrity of their musical oeuvre when he recently spoke of their albums as a singular and sacrosanct "body of work." When considered in this fashion, the Beatles' corpus reveals itself to be a collection of musical and lyrical impressions evolving toward an aesthetic unity that appears to reach its artistic heights during the late 1960s and the band's studio years. Numerous music critics echo McCartney's sentiments, including Ian MacDonald, who notes that "so obviously dazzling was the Beatles' achievement that few have questioned it." Their recordings, he adds, comprise "not only an outstanding repository of popular art but a cultural document of permanent significance" (1, 33). Riley similarly describes their canon as a "very intricate art. . . . The Beatles are our first recording artists," he writes, "and they remain our best" (9, 26; emphasis added). The chapters herein, with their emphasis on the literary, musicological, and ideological components of the band's phenomenal success, tell us why.

Divided into three parts, *Reading the Beatles* traces the sociocultural impact of the Beatles via their music's interdisciplinary connections with various modes of literary, musicological, and cultural criticism. The chapters in

part one, titled “Speaking words of wisdom’: The Beatles’ Poetics,” examine the literary and musicological qualities of selected Beatles songs in relation to their social and cultural ramifications. In “‘I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together’: Bakhtin and the Beatles,” Ian Marshall draws on Mikhail M. Bakhtin’s wide-ranging theories of dialogism in a reading of the formal structures inherent in the Beatles’ poetics. In addition to applying Bakhtinian concepts such as novelization, chronotope, carnival, and genre blending to the Beatles’ musical corpus, Marshall discusses the qualities of open-endedness and irresolution, in Bakhtin’s phraseology, that characterize the band’s evolving artistic legacy. In “From ‘Craft’ to ‘Art’: Formal Structure in the Music of the Beatles,” John Covach demonstrates the ways in which early John Lennon–Paul McCartney compositions are closely dependent on models drawn from American music of the 1950s and early 1960s. Using models such as “From Me to You” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” Covach chronicles the Beatles’ musical development from “craft” to “rock” and suggests that such analysis forces us to rethink conventional accounts of rock style and its development—a point that extends well beyond the music of the Beatles in specific and rock music of the 1960s in general. Sheila Whiteley’s “‘Love, love, love’: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Selected Songs by the Beatles” explores the ways in which sex plays an integral role in the fanatic adoration of the Beatles by young, predominantly white girls caught up in the throes of Beatlemania. Drawing on recent insights in cultural subjectivity, sexuality, and gender, Whiteley investigates the relationship among musical, narrative, and lyrical focuses in representative songs throughout the Beatles’ career. In “Painting Their Room in a Colorful Way: The Beatles’ Exploration of Timbre,” Walter Everett argues that the Beatles’ recordings provide their listeners with vivid means for encountering both the inner and outer worlds of the human imagination. Everett highlights the band’s use of tonal color, or timbre, as the mechanism via which the Beatles revived the brilliant sensory world of their lyrics in their music.

The contributions in part two, “A splendid time is guaranteed for all’: Theorizing the Beatles,” trace the development of the Beatles’ artistry from their filmic efforts through classic works such as *Revolver*, *Sgt. Pepper*, and the *White Album*. Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis’s “Mythology, Remythology, and Demythology: The Beatles on Film” examines the manner in which the band appropriated the power of Beatlemania and self-consciously established a cultural mythology to ensure their commercial and popular dominion. Womack and Davis discuss the infancy, maturity, and ultimate disillusionment the band experienced during the production of their four feature films—*A Hard Day’s Night* (1964), *Help!* (1965), *Yellow Submarine* (1968), and *Let It Be* (1970)—as well as their television movie, *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967). In “*Vacio Luminoso*: ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ and the Coherence of the Impossible,” Russell Reising argues that *Revolver*’s final track, the psychedelic

"Tomorrow Never Knows," affords the album with a sense of musical coherence by incorporating all of the album's major themes in a single song. Reising contends that the album's wide-ranging musical styles come together in a truly revolutionary fashion through the oscillating rhythms and themes inherent in "Tomorrow Never Knows." In "The Spectacle of Alienation: Death, Loss, and the Crowd in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*," William M. Northcutt discusses the Beatles' vastly influential album in terms of its overarching themes of sociocultural detachment and alienation. Northcutt devotes particular attention to the work's inherent "political unconscious," especially in terms of the ways in which *Sgt. Pepper* impinges on salient issues regarding class consciousness and class conflict. Jeffrey Roessner's "We All Want to Change the World: Postmodern Politics and the Beatles' *White Album*" illustrates the manner in which the album's radical eclecticism and self-reflexivity function as the band's attempt to adorn their work with a scathing political commentary. Roessner argues that the Beatles employed postmodern notions of pastiche and parody on the *White Album* in an effort to challenge the commodification of popular music and our larger assumptions about what constitutes political relevance during the late 1960s and beyond.

The chapters in part three, "We can work it out': The Beatles and Culture," explore the ways in which the band functions as a cultural, historical, and economic product that both adheres to and challenges established ideological norms. Paul Gleed's "'The rest of you, if you'll just rattle your jewelry': The Beatles and Questions of Mass and High Culture" investigates the many ways in which the Beatles' musical accomplishments blur existing distinctions between what constitute high and low forms of culture. In addition to demonstrating that the Beatles—through a process of "double-coding"—self-consciously merged divergent genres of musical expression such as classical and Eastern music, Gleed contends that this inventive and original approach to their art resulted in the band's virtual remapping of prevailing cultural value systems. In "A Universal Childhood: Tourism, Pilgrimage, and the Beatles," Kevin McCarron discusses the Fab Four's vaunted place in contemporary British tourism, especially in terms of the manner in which it serves to maintain their iconoclastic image and the myths associated with the story of Beatlemania. McCarron devotes particular attention to the quasi-religious dimensions of the band's legacy, as well as to England's Beatles shrines and the Beatles "pilgrims" who annually visit them. James M. Decker's "'Baby You're a Rich Man': The Beatles, Ideology, and the Cultural Moment" dissects the ideological and economic imperatives behind the band's dramatic resurgence in popularity during the late 1990s and the early years of the new century. In addition to investigating McCartney's considerable role in engineering the Beatles' revival, Decker highlights the ways in which McCartney, Ono, Harrison, and Starr marketed the band's artistic output for consumption by new generations of fans. In "Spinning the Historical Record: Lennon, McCartney,

and Museum Politics,” John Kimsey examines the recent museum exhibition, “Lennon: His Life and Work,” along with McCartney’s contemporaneous public activities in the light of an ongoing struggle over the meaning of, and the power to configure, the Beatles’ historical legacy. Kimsey argues that the Lennon exhibition can be seen as working officially to confirm Lennon’s status as cultural icon and martyr—to canonize him, in effect, as a pop-culture saint—while rewriting the popular narrative that depicts Lennon’s Beatles work as the finest of his career and by reframing McCartney not as Lennon’s greatest collaborator/rival, but as a relatively marginal figure in his artistic life. Finally, Jane Tompkins’s Afterword, “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” offers a poignant autobiographical account about the ways in which the Beatles afforded her with the self-actualizing means to become less alienated from popular culture, gender expectations, and herself during the early 1960s.