

The Long and Winding Road of Beatlemania: How the British Invasion Defined the American Identity

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John, Paul, George, and Ringo formed a group known as The Beatles. They were one of the first British rock groups of consequence to have an influence in American and Western culture. Coming from the Liverpool underclass, they were drawn to the rock and roll, and rhythm and blues that celebrated the life of the common man. In the beginning, the Beatles learned their music through inspiration of the American music they loved. As they gained popularity, the uproar of Beatle fandom grew to what is now known as the immortal Beatlemania. Finally, they developed their skills and style to express themselves and define their own image. It is at this point that The Beatles evolved to become a dominant influence on the Cultural Revolution that began in the 1960's. Through the fandom of Beatlemania, the American identity is defined as an escapist society that relies on structure and ideal love.

Because of the struggles that American citizens were going through during the changing times of the 1960's, they turned to the Beatles as a form of escapism and a place of solace. In the early 1960's, President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated, and because he was such a loved president by the people, the citizens of America had been in mourning due to his death. There were other factors in the U.S. at the time that led to a changed outlook by the American citizens, especially the youth, such as the Vietnam War and differences within the U.S. government. In an article written by Veronica Majerol, she talks about the assassination of John F. Kennedy and how it historically connects to the arrival of the Beatles. She states, "Shortly after the Beatles hit it big in Britain, Americans experienced a national shock when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in...1963. The Beatles arrived on American soil... in February 1964" (Majerol 1). She later quotes author Steven D. Stark saying, "Americans were open to something that would lift them out of their gloom,' says Stark. 'It would be hard for an American act to have pulled it off quite like that because [Americans] were still in mourning'" (Majerol 1). This is why the craze over Elvis Presley is distinctive. He was an American act who did not embody the fantasy like image of coming from another country, which the Beatles did. The Beatles' sound was different and so was their look. It was a new sensation that had never

been seen before. Because of the mourning in America at the time, the 1960's teens were looking for an escape from the tragedies they were facing and found it in the Beatles. John, Paul, George, and Ringo had such a personality in them and their music that created a hysterical craze among fans.

The arrival of the Beatles in pop culture not only meant a change in music and style, but a cultural shift from the 1950's to the 1960's in which teenage girls during that time found a form of escape away from their parents' conservative lifestyle. Beatlemania was an intense phenomenon. Ian Inglis puts it very well in saying that "[It] is impossible to exaggerate Beatlemania because Beatlemania was in itself an exaggeration" (68). Beatle fans did not only consist of screaming teenage girls, but they were the majority. After watching videos or seeing pictures of these Beatles fans, it is easy to see how there was just so much more going on underneath that made them act in such a way. Janice Winship evaluates a book called *Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun* that tries to understand the hysterical reaction by teenage girls to the Beatles in the 1960's. Winship talks about how the authors of the book, Barbara Ehrenrich, Elizabeth Hess and Gloria Jacobs, examine the views about the craze in the context of sexuality. She writes, "At that time, all that was held out to girls was the dream of domestic marriage in suburbia...and 'saving themselves' for the marital bed...It was the more active sexual component to the girls' riotous fan behaviour that adults...found difficult to acknowledge" (Winship 218). During that time, females were expected to be "good girls" sexually, which meant they were not allowed to withhold sexual desire, and if they did, they were to wait until marriage to express their desires. However, these girls perceived the Beatles as sexy, and for the first time the Beatles were able to attract this sexual attention in massive numbers in a way that had never been done before. In Jonathan Gould's *Can't Buy Me Love: the Beatles, Britain, and America*, he offers a psychoanalytic look into the hysteria surrounding Beatle mania. He suggests, "Since the really dedicated screamers consisted of girls aged twelve to seventeen – the years between the onset of puberty and the beginning of active sexual experience –...the frenzy of girls at Beatle concerts suggested a simulation of orgasm" (Gould 181). Beatle mania represented the conversion of psychological stress into symbolic symptoms, which explains the parallels between sexual excitement and the buildup of screams during their performances. This type of escapism was different for it was a sexual escape for the girls who were expected to save these sexual desires for marriage.

Many of the Beatles' early songs were all based on a notion of ideal love, which gave their fans hope and easy belief in what love was like. Songs like, "Love Me Do", "She Loves You", and "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" are all examples of an idealized love, or as Chuck Klosterman refers to as "fake" love. He explains that people idealize love in a way that can never be realistically attainable and gives credit of "fake" love to bands like Coldplay. He writes, "Coldplay songs deliver an amorphous, irrefutable interpretation of how being in love is supposed to feel, and people find themselves wanting that feeling for real" (Klosterman 4). Klosterman explains that love in real life is not the same as the love these musicians try to sell to people. In comparison to some of Coldplay's songs, the Beatles give off a similar understanding of how love is supposed to feel. Jonathan Gould would agree with Klosterman's views in his book. He explains the context of "She Loves You" as an example of one of the many love songs by the Beatles that introduces this proposal of idealized love as he writes

In a one-dimensional pop universe where the quest for personal happiness is commonly seen as life's sole preoccupation, this singer is an uncommonly generous character, who surely wants the same for himself but is committed here and now to seeing it fulfilled in a friend. "She Loves You" celebrates the socially vicarious dimension of romantic love, and its chorus provides a commentary in the Sophoclean sense: "With a love like that," the Beatles sing, "you know you should be glad." (Gould 159)

Youth in particular wanted the kind of love the Beatles were describing in their famous love ballads. Gould later writes, "The Beatles suggested that you could fall in love, and have your friends fall in love alongside you, and together share in the special world these four boys appeared to share with one another: their happiness, their success, their fun" (Gould 184). Thus, this kind of love is neither attainable nor realistic, but the idea is what fed into the escapism most Americans were open to during this era and helped the Beatles' popularity along the way.

What the Beatles also had to offer to society was their identification of uniformity and structure. The Beatles embodied what was defined as the rock group and had the solidarity of a group with a clarity that had not been seen before in that era of entertainment. Author Jonathan Gould explains the vision the Beatles set for themselves which represents that of working class unity and middle class ambition. The Beatles were able to relieve the uneasiness held by much of the youth about the responsibilities of adulthood. He suggests, "A large number of young people, nearly all of them male, responded to this vision in the most direct manner possible – by joining with their mates in forming pop groups of their own...these now bloomed with foursomes and

fivesomes got up in modish uniforms and Beatleish haircuts” (Gould 179). Some of the groups that Gould mentions came to success by following the magic the Beatles possessed are Freddie and The Dreamers, the Hollies, the Dave Clark Five and the Rolling Stones. Most young boys idolized them and tried to be as much like them as possible, from the iconic hair to their clean-cut style. They “emulated their dress, speech, and attitudes” (Gould 179). This symbolizes the tendency in American society to take structure and uniformity as a way of living. The Beatles always had a similar look. From their classic “A Hard Day’s Night” black suit and combed hair look to the older, scruffier Sgt. Pepper’s look, the Beatles were able to maintain a similar uniform look throughout their different phases of style. They each played into the sovereign identity of the Beatles as a group. This idea comes into play for a much larger idea about the American identity in comparison to the Beatles; as the times change, the style changes and like the Beatles, even when they changed their style, they were still all in uniform.

The Beatles as a cultural influence grew out of Britain, swept through America, and fell heavily amongst the rest of the world. Their music, style, and personality as a group won the hearts of the American citizens instantaneously during their first live television appearance on the Ed Sullivan show in 1964. Their popularity grew rapidly and mainly among the youth of America. It turned into a hysteria known famously as Beatle mania. Teenagers across the country were falling head over heels and resulted in screaming crowds like no other to this day. Their impact in American culture is arguably one of great consequence. It led to a fandom so massive and well known that defines America’s cultural identity as one with a tendency towards escapism through the elements of structure and ideal love provided by the Beatles.

Works Cited

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