

We Love Them, Yeah Yeah Yeah: 7 Ways the Beatles Changed American Culture

It's difficult to underestimate the Beatles' influence on the course of popular music in America. Like certain other key individuals in the history of American pop, such as Benny Goodman, Frank Sinatra, and Elvis Presley, they caused an initial fervor, a "mania" period when teenagers expressed their excitement en masse at their concerts and public appearances. But the Beatles, like their predecessors (but even more so), progressed beyond this stage and became a cultural force, their compositions and attitudes transforming the way pop music was experienced by large numbers of people. Coinciding with one of the most socially tumultuous periods in the history of America, the Beatles' music reflected its era but also transcended it, so that even now their music remains fresh to each successive generation that discovers it.

Today, in honor of the anniversary of the Beatles' arrival on these shores, we take a lighthearted look at the impact they had on the American cultural landscape. Here are seven ways in which the Beatles changed America forever.

1. The Beatles raised the bar for teen idol quality.

Before the Beatles arrived in America, the pop scene squeaked along on the charms of a handful of clean-cut, pearly-toothed fellows, mostly from Philadelphia, whose music was as manufactured as their boy-next-door images. These fellows were nice enough, and in some cases even had some talent, but their careers were directed by producers and industry men who turned the gears of the hit-making machine that pop music had become by the early 60s. No more the wild ravings of a Little Richard or a Jerry Lee Lewis; rock'n'roll was now represented by more manageable song slingers like Fabian, Frankie Avalon, and Bobby Rydell.

Questioning the taste of America's youth is a pointless endeavor (it's a matter of record that in the 50s, Pat Boone rivaled and occasionally exceeded Elvis Presley in teen popularity polls), but certainly the Beatles were a blast of cool air into a somewhat arid teen idol landscape. Not only were they intriguingly exotic with their Liverpudlian accents and unusual looks, but they were also like four teen idols wrapped

up in one gleaming package. There was Paul, the cute and adorable one; John, the smart and slightly dangerous one; George, the quiet and shy one; and Ringo, the fun and goofy one. There was something for all teen tastes, made all the more enticing by the “all-for-one, one-for-all, lads” uniformity of their presentation: the matching mop-tops, collarless button-down suits, and Cuban-heeled ankle boots.

One important difference between the Beatles and their teen idol competition, though, was that the Beatles controlled their presentation. With their manager Brian Epstein, they chose their wardrobe, much of it derived from fashionable friends they made in their early days in Hamburg. More significantly, the Beatles also controlled their music, which was based on rhythm and blues and Motown models, not Patti Page or Mitch Miller. When they weren't covering rock 'n' roll chestnuts of their own choosing, they were composing their own songs, something that few teen idols were allowed to do, even when they were capable. This made all the difference. In addition to being cute and charismatic, the Beatles had substance, and they were intent on proving it.

2. The Beatles made irreverence hip in mainstream culture.

The Beatles were more self-aware than their previous pop sweepstakes aspirants. They recognized a certain absurdity to the pop game and seemed determined to go their own way. This attitude was always apparent in their dealings with the press. During such encounters, they would good-naturedly turn questions back to reporters or answer them with nonsense. The Beatles made it clear that they were independent thinkers who were going to do what they wanted to do, whether the world approved of them or not. Teens had cottoned on to the rebellious stance of James Dean and Elvis Presley a few years earlier; the Beatles adopted this stance, but they conveyed it in a more sophisticated and subtle way. Never as docile as Elvis, who was unfailingly polite to all adults no matter how crass they were, the Beatles' quips during their press conferences could have genuine bite to them. It was one of many ways that they showed their awareness of the showbiz apparatus that they operated in and how deserving it was of lampooning. The resultant anarchy was confusing and charming to adults in equal measure.

Occasionally the group would push their irreverence a bit too far; a John Lennon remark that they were “bigger than Jesus” resulted in record album bonfires in certain parts of the country and a temporary downturn in their sales in 1966. But most pop music fans (and if you were a fan of pop music in the 60s, you were a fan of the Beatles) appreciated the group's honesty and trusted them. This trust would only

strengthen as the Beatles continued to grow and move into more esoteric areas musically and politically. Young people viewed the Beatles as their cultural representatives, and they followed the group's lead. It wouldn't be long before irreverence would turn national, and, after a time, become a permanent feature of American youth culture (some might say all of American culture). The Beatles, a self-contained unit with a damn-the-consequences attitude, had as much to do with this transformation as anyone. They also opened the door for any number of bands who could express this attitude more freely once the barrier had been pushed.

3. The Beatles made long hair for men acceptable, even desirable.

It seems ridiculous now, but before the Beatles came to America, "longhair" was a term applied to a very small group of people, mostly artists. "Longhairs" was a dismissive way of referring to certain classical musicians, for example, or to beatniks and other bohemians. Long hair was seen as part and parcel of an eccentric artistic temperament, perhaps with a special exemption for religious men from exotic climes who grew their hair and beards devotionally.

Then the Beatles showed up with their "mop tops." Most early press coverage of the group obsesses over hairstyles we would now consider rather neat and tidy. In one instance, a reporter asking "Where did you get those hair-dos...?" was stopped short by John Lennon, who quipped wryly, "You mean, 'hair-don'ts'." Like their stage uniforms, the Beatles' haircuts were a product of German ingenuity, coming from the artistic community that adopted the Beatles in Hamburg. Once established, the hairstyle took on a life of its own as Beatle wigs were manufactured and comedians on television variety shows donned the look for easy laughs. Not above profiting from such mindlessness, the Beatles saw their bank accounts grow, although it wasn't long before the mop top was topped. As time went on and other groups followed the Beatles' example, hair grew longer and longer.

By 1966, the Beatles were sporting facial hair. The full-blown "hippie" look was around the corner, and the Beatles spearheaded the trend. By the end of the 60s, the mop-top hairstyle would be considered quaint in light of the mountain-man appearance that so many pop figures adopted (Beatle George among the hairiest). Long hair became a signifier, a badge of disdain for societal norms; consequently, most establishment figures hated the hippie look, and attacks on hippies were not unheard of even into the early 70s. Eventually, though, even politicians had hair growing over their ears and collars, and the

revolution was won. Wearing long hair was no longer a provocative act as it was when the Beatles first did it. It simply became another choice.

4. The Beatles psychedelized us.

Although there were early rumblings on the west coast of the U.S., and Donovan was beginning to sing about sunshine supermen and “taking trips” in the U.K., the Beatles were among the first and certainly the most far-reaching of the pop bands of the 60s to infect mainstream America with the psychedelic virus. LSD was still a legal drug in America when the Beatles started to sing about “turning off your mind,” but in a couple of years it would be outlawed, in large part because of its raised profile.

The first indication that the Beatles had entered a new phase of exploration was the last song on their 1966 album *Revolver*. The lyrics to the song “Tomorrow Never Knows” were cribbed from a book called *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, co-written by LSD advocate Dr. Timothy Leary, guru Ram Dass, and academic Ralph Metzner. Like the language of the book, “Tomorrow Never Knows” featured abstract lyrics infused with a spiritual undercurrent, and the music matched their tone—an Indian music drone weaved through a hypnotic, unceasing drum pattern that seemed about to trip itself with every repetition, and various reoccurring backwards tape effects created an otherworldly scramble. John Lennon’s vocal was processed so that it sounded swirling and distant. Paul McCartney’s laughter was looped and played backwards to produce a flock of crying seagulls.

Impressionable youth could sidestep this “weird” track by lifting the tonearms of their phonographs a little early, but there would be no escaping the psychedelic smart bomb of “Strawberry Fields Forever,” the Beatles’ next single. From its cryptic lyrics (“Nothing is real/And nothing to get hung about”) to its unusual, dissonant chords, it was trippy through and through, complete with a spacey coda awash in Indian zither, woozy cellos, and backwards instruments. Of course, it also featured a big dollop of Beatles melody, making all of the strangeness palatable.

A Top 10 hit, “Strawberry Fields Forever” set the template for the full flowering of the Beatles’ psychedelic tones on *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, an album often cited as the most influential rock album ever recorded. Everyone was listening to it, from the Beatles’ peers in the music scene to teenagers on

their transistor radios. Psychedelic rock (and its lifestyle inspirations) would subsequently become a major aspect of U.S. culture for the next several years. Once the Beatles weighed in, tangerine trees and marmalade skies were no longer the exclusive province of a handful of British musicians and the American chemists who inspired them.

5. The Beatles pioneered the music video.

America famously became the first country to have an all-music television network when MTV debuted in 1981. Back then, the network primarily existed to showcase music videos, which would eventually become almost as popular as the songs themselves when artists like Michael Jackson and Peter Gabriel began to get innovative. Music video became a hallmark of the 80s, but it had much earlier roots. As you might have guessed, the Fab Four were on board pretty early.

The Beatles changed all this with their first film *A Hard Day's Night*. The film features several full-song sequences that do not necessarily further the plot of the film but instead serve as expressions of the music. The most famous of these is probably the sequence for "Can't Buy Me Love," which features the Beatles cavorting around a field in a playful way. The editing is quick, the film is sped up and slowed down in time with their movements, and there is creative use of low-level and aerial photography. In essence, "Can't Buy Me Love" is a music video.

The Beatles built upon this with two actual stand-alone videos for their double-sided single of "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane." Short films were shot for both. By far the more interesting is "Strawberry Fields Forever," which once again finds the band out in a field, but this time the effect is not carefree and silly, but spooky and discombobulated, with use of film reverse, superimposition, and off-center close-ups creating a feeling of disorientation. The film climaxes with an upright piano falling over, its exposed front drizzled with paint by the group.

Since the Beatles had ceased touring, these kinds of promotional films became important, and they would make several other films for TV and movie theaters before their careers came to a close. Many other artists (including George Harrison and Paul McCartney) would continue to make such films through the 70s until MTV came along and made videos a standard tool of record promotion.

6. The Beatles made the world safe for rock cartoons.

It was clear early in their career that the Beatles' appeal was not limited to one age group. Teenagers made up the largest portion of their initial audience, but older people, as well as younger ones, also jumped on the bandwagon. One way of appealing to a very young audience was to meet them on their level, and so the Beatles approved the production of a weekly animated series that would feature their music. Less remembered than some of their other audiovisual exploits, *The Beatles* cartoon show ran for three seasons on ABC-TV in the mid-to-late 60s and exposed the younger brothers and sisters of Beatle fans to Beatle music.

The Beatles was the first pop music cartoon; it was quite possibly also the first cartoon series that was based on real people. The scenarios were silly, of course: John gets shrunk by a potion; Ringo becomes a matador; Paul gets kidnapped by a mad scientist who wants him to marry his vampire daughter; George gets involved in a surfing duel with a character named Surf Wolf. Each episode's story was mostly an excuse to feature two Beatles songs, some of which were fairly obscure album cuts. The animation was not very sophisticated, but the show was a Saturday morning staple from 1965 through 1969 (the last two years were repeats).

By the time bubblegum records were topping the charts, the Beatles had left behind the cartoon world, but not before giving the go-ahead for the production of a full-length animated movie based on their song "Yellow Submarine." The psychedelic palette of the resulting *Yellow Submarine* movie more accurately reflected their tastes at that point in their career, although it is intriguing to note that the TV show did attempt to feature "Strawberry Fields Forever." Once again, though, the Beatles had opened the door, and other animations involving the music of Nilsson, Pink Floyd, and various heavy metal bands would follow later. Despite its influence, *The Beatles* cartoon series has yet to be reissued on DVD, although various semi-legal versions circulate, and much of it can be viewed on-line in low quality versions.

7. The Beatles changed the way we experienced our music.

We live now in the age of the audio download, when music listeners are more likely to buy music over the Internet than in a record store, and when they are more likely to buy one hit song by an artist than an entire album. In some ways, this manner of music-buying harks back to an era before the arrival of the

Beatles, when all resources were focused on the production of a hit song. A song would be recorded, released on a 78 or 45 r.p.m. single, and people would buy it or not buy it. If they bought it, it would become a hit. The Beatles in their early days thrived because their singles were almost always hits. In April 1964, a mere two months after their landfall in America, Beatle songs occupied the top five positions on the *Billboard* Top 100 chart.

Although this was the accepted way that the record industry functioned, the Beatles did not see themselves as a singles machine, even though they released some of the most successful singles in music history. They tried to make all of their songs worthwhile at a time when album releases were mostly filled up with lesser material included to bolster sales of a hit song. There had been exceptions to this rule before the Beatles, such as Frank Sinatra, who assembled many LPs of songs that related to a theme, or various jazz artists, whose sound evolved with each record release. But the Beatles were the first pop musicians to craft consistent albums in which each song was an important part of the whole. They worked to make each Beatles album high quality, beginning to end. They began to stress the primacy of the album over the hit song.

Ironically, in America, much of that effort was watered down by the Beatles' American record label, Capitol. Eager for more product to fill the shelves, Capitol would take the Beatles' British Parlophone releases and redistribute their contents over more albums, adding singles that were generally left off the U.K. LPs and shortening the running time. As a consequence, there were almost twice as many U.S. releases as U.K. releases. On rare occasions, Capitol's willy-nilly approach would give U.S. fans access to songs that weren't available in the U.K. (such as "Dizzie Miss Lizzie" from *Beatles VI*), so British fans would have to order U.S. LPs as imports! But most of the time, what U.S. fans experienced were garbled versions of the Beatles' original intentions. The Beatles didn't like their single releases mixed in with the groupings of songs that they had assembled so carefully, but that's exactly what Capitol did. It's worth noting, though, that however distasteful this practice might have been to the Beatles, it was often a boon to American fans, who could hear all of their favorite hits in a long-playing format.

The practice continued right up to *Sgt Pepper's* in 1967, when the Beatles were finally able to make sure that both of their record companies released the same version of the album, preserving their vision. Possibly one of the reasons that *Sgt Pepper's* has the cachet as an LP that it holds today is that it was experienced the same way all around the world. The Beatles' subsequent releases, all regarded as

quintessential examples of great pop music albums, followed this pattern. Although there were singles excerpted from *Abbey Road*, for example, it is usually perceived as a cohesive whole that is best experienced that way. Although the idea of hit songs did not disappear, some later groups, inspired by the Beatles' approach, would become so focused on making album statements in the 60s and 70s that they did not even bother to release singles.

Despite the fact that some Beatlemaniacs regard them as butcheries, many American fans still have a sentimental attachment to the U.S. versions of the early Beatles albums. Right now, a box set reissue of the Beatles' U.S. albums resides in the Top 50 of the *Billboard* albums chart. On the 50th anniversary of their arrival here, the Beatles can now be experienced once again as Americans first encountered them—with all of the hits included!

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