

The Beatles' Cultural Influences

I have only a handful of memories from age five. Watching the Beatles perform on "The Ed Sullivan Show" is one of those memories. It was a family event as my parents, two brothers, and sister gathered around our black-and-white television. Before the band even played a note, the audience which was mostly teenage girls, erupted in squeals of frenzied excitement. It was difficult to hear the music over the screaming. Some of my parents' comments I recall were about their ridiculous haircuts, suits, and shoes...and that terrible screaming! We all decided which Beatle we thought was the cutest. My favorite was Ringo. The music they played was lively and electric, and it made us want to move to the beat. Even my mom and dad seemed to enjoy the rhythm. That single show on February 9, 1964, broke a record with 73 million viewers. That was 40 percent of the population at that time. Despite the success of that evening, no one could even begin to guess what these four young musicians would become and the changes they would make. The Beatles' arrival in America made an impact on our nation's culture which still endures through the generations.

In 1964, the nation was experiencing immense cultural changes; and in the midst of it all the Beatles arrived from Liverpool, England. President Kennedy had been assassinated just months earlier; the danger of war threatened in Vietnam; the nation was coping with racial conflicts; and drug use was becoming popular among our youth. These historical events, in combination with the invasion of the foreign-born Beatles, were turning points for our country. What made the Beatles seem so foreign was their long hair, high-heel boots, strange clothing, and the way they performed. Parents were offended by their hairstyles because boys at that time just didn't grow hair over their ears. Americans were used to flattop haircuts and penny loafers. Kane, journalist on tour with Beatles in 1964, remembers how they were called names like "mopheads", "freaks", and "slobs" by anyone who resented change and by the media (12). As it turned out, everyone soon realized they were none of these things. They were modern, electric, and confident. Although strange-looking, they were sunny, funny, and loveable. Because the Beatles connected so well to the styles, feelings, and moods of the times, their social impact was relevant (Connolly 10). In describing the impact they had, Kane remarks, "their joint and individual personalities were resonating, and their style was informing of the dramatic cultural change that was already underway" (12). But, no one could foresee just how dramatic the cultural changes would be.

Who could possibly realize how relevant the social impact these four young musicians would make and the megastars they would become? Along with many other writers and theorists about the Beatles, Kane speculates they were a big influence in how the country dealt with its difficulties (269). In search of an explanation for the Beatles' influence on us, the popular theory is that people, teenagers in particular, needed a diversion. Music critic Kozinn believes that the conflicts in the country generated a need for escape (81). There was a desire for something light and cheerful. The Beatles' timing was just right. They arrived at a time when the demand for fresh, new music was high. Just as important as the need for a diversion from turmoil, Kozinn's opinion is that the Beatles rejuvenated pop music (1). Because of their outstanding musical talent, Kane observes that, "eventually, the hero worship ended, and everyone fell in love with the music" (21). It was Kozinn's opinion, along with many others, that the charts had been filled with dull and lifeless pop music (82). The number one song on the chart was "Dominique" by the Singing Nun before the Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" hit the number one spot. My friend, who was a teenager in 1964, wittily calls the popular music at the time a "snooze fest" because teenagers were being put to sleep by Pat Boone and show tunes (Knudson). This is further explained by Martin when he says, "those early songs were so fresh and sparkling, always surprising and delighting...with each new offering. Never did they fall back on a cliché or a rehash of an earlier success. Each one was a gem" (1). Not only were they show business superstars, but as Kloer comments, "they were also cutting-edge artists. You almost never get that convergence" (1). Nobody in America was doing things or making music like the Beatles.

Besides creating artistic music and setting new standards for large stadium concerts and tours, the Beatles have many other cultural influences attributed to them. The influences range from hair styles,

fashion, films, pop art, and bringing eastern beliefs and viewpoints into western society. As Knudson point outs, John Lennon was what we know today as a multi-media artist (Knudson). Not only was he a singer, he was a songwriter, musician, artist, writer, poet, film maker, pacifist, and spokesperson (Knudson). It is Kloer's insight that the nonconformist lifestyle in the 60's did not occur because of the Beatles. The way Kloer sees it is that the Beatles burst so quickly onto the scene, unlike the slower occurring changes the country was experiencing. That sudden burst played a large part in the changing attitudes during that period of time (1). The many cultural changes already occurring, combined with the forcefulness of the Beatles, were powerful factors in influencing our way of life.

The world in which I was raised was a different place because of the Beatles; therefore, the environment helped to shape my perceptions and thoughts. I was considered to be somewhat rebellious, liberal-minded, and expressive as a teenager. Furthermore, my friend believes the political stands and statements made by the Beatles have helped to mold my anti-war beliefs (Knudson). Would I have been this way without the influence of the Beatles? There is no way of ever being certain. I do agree with Kloer's idea that some of their tunes and lyrics are somehow burned into my brain and have become part of my DNA construction (1). I can't imagine my mental collection of music without unforgettable songs such as: "The Long and Winding Road," "It's Been a Hard Days' Night," "Hey Jude," and "Twist and Shout." Time and time again, as Connolly illustrates, Lennon and McCartney song lyrics have been used to reflect and describe feelings and experiences (9). They produced so many unforgettable songs with unforgettable lyrics.

Much has changed since the Beatles' arrival. They made their marks on music, fashion, social behavior, attitude, and philosophy. They were the trendsetters in a social revolution. To further support this opinion, Martin, producer of The Beatles 1 musical compilation, states that "They will be remembered as being the most significant music creators of the twentieth century" (1). Forty years later, it is difficult to imagine a pop music group could have so much influence on our culture and country. Considered to be tame by today's standards, the haircuts and clothing seemed scandalous in 1964. At that time, it was amazing how fast the Beatles went from being unknown to being famous. In the year 2004, outrageous clothing and styles, scandals, and overnight stardom is practically commonplace for musicians. In 1964, the process was just beginning to take life, Kloer explains (1). I believe Connolly sums it up well by saying: "The Beatles captured perfectly the mood of the generation and expertly put it to music" (9). Beatlemania was so strong because the times and the youth of America were simpler and more naïve.

In my attempt to pass along my love and knowledge of the Beatles to my teenage son, I am experiencing a generational gap. He does not seem very appreciative when I tell him about their great music; nor is he very interested when I tell him about how the Beatles captivated kids his age, 40 not-so-long years ago. I am certain though, that someday he will learn to value the music and be grateful for the enrichment. Then the generation gap will be closed. Until that someday comes, the timeless music of the Beatles will make me, the 45-year old, reminiscent of a teenager in my heart.

Works Cited

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