



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Magical Mystical Tour”

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Centering Thoughts

Adults may not dig, but how could 20 million teenagers be wrong? The Beatles are fab. The Beatles are great. The Beatles are different. The Beatles are cool, cool, cool, cool.
‘Time’ magazine, February 21, 1964

We were all on this ship in the sixties, our generation, a ship going to discover the New World. And the Beatles were in the crow’s nest of that ship. John Lennon

The Beatles were then, and remain to this day, the world’s most astonishing rock ‘n’ roll band...Their music is eternal. Kurt Loder, former editor, ‘Rolling Stone’ June 1998

Sermon

Fifty years ago this past February, The Beatles performed on The Ed Sullivan Show, their first appearance in America. I remember sitting on the floor in front of my family’s black and white TV that night. Well, more accurately, I was alternately kneeling, hopping, bouncing, jumping, and squealing my excitement on seeing The Beatles shake their shaggy heads and yell, “Yeah, yeah, yeah!”

I was only 9 years old when I watched The Beatles that night. I got as close to the set as possible to pretend the handsome lads from Liverpool were singing just to me. But I wasn’t alone in watching that show. Roughly 73 million people watched—one of many firsts the band would set. [Philip Norman in SHOUT!, p224; Hunter Davies in The Beatles, p196]

Were any of you watching? Wild, wasn’t it.

I was ecstatic, but they were anxious that night. John Lennon taped song lyrics to the back of his guitar in case nerves overwhelmed his memory. George Harrison threw-up before they walked out on stage to sing several hits, including their number-one hit, “I Want to Hold Your Hand.”

After that performance The Beatles played two additional concerts before heading back to England. Fifty years ago this month they returned to play their first full tour across America. Since UUFA’s 60th anniversary focused on music this month, it seems appropriate to close out the

month by paying tribute to fifty years of The Beatles' musical, cultural, and religious influences. As part of this service I'll share extended readings from Beatle biographers, journalists, and musicologists who offer expert reflections on the band. The first comes from Hunter Davies' book, *The Beatles* [p179], only authorized biography of the band. He writes:

Beatlemania descended on the British Isles in October 1963... There was perpetual screaming and yeh-yehing for three years, one long continuous succession of hysterical teenagers of every class and color, shouting uncontrollably, not one of whom could hear what was going on for the noise of each other. Each of them emotionally, mentally, or sexually excited, foaming at the mouth, bursting into tears, hurling themselves like lemmings in the direction of the Beatles or just simply fainting.

... Writing about it now makes it all sound like fiction. It is impossible to exaggerate Beatlemania because Beatlemania was itself an exaggeration. No words can fully describe those scenes...

Once it had stopped, by 1967, ... it was difficult to believe it had all happened. Could everyone have been so mad? It wasn't just teenagers; people of all ages and all intellects had succumbed, though perhaps not all as hysterically as the teenagers.

The Beatles' influence didn't end when they broke up ten years after they first started playing together in 1960. During the 50th anniversary tribute concert televised this past February, many of today's popular musicians, such as Pharrell Williams, Katy Perry, Maroon 5, John Legend, and more, admitted that The Beatles influenced their own music.

[<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cbs-to-air-encore-presentation-of-beatles-50th-anniversary-special/>]

I loved The Beatles' music. Early on it was frenetic, happy, fun to sing, and resonated with my stage in life. "I Saw Her Standing There", "All My Loving," "Love, Love Me Do," and similar songs all spoke to my blossoming pre-adolescent desire for love. I initially fell in love with Paul's smile and charm (not this Paul, yet), but later George's more complex personality attracted me. His interest in religion only enhanced his appeal. But what best attracted me to the whole band was my parents' disinterest and mild disdain. Teenagers have always been good at liking whatever their parents don't.

The Beatles continued to captivate me as I grew older and other youth because every album they released revealed something new. The Beatles were never boring; they didn't rely on tried and true formulas. Their music was an adventure I, and you, avidly followed. As they changed, we changed.

Clothing, hairstyles, speech, even our views on religion, war, and drugs changed. Uniform buzz haircuts gave way to a different kind of buzz, and everyone let their hair grow long. I wore the new uniform, long straight hair and short 'mini' skirts in rainbow colors and psychedelic patterns. We 'turned off our minds, relaxed, and floated downstream' as their song, "Tomorrow Never Knows" recommended.

This next reading is from *The Gospel According to the Beatles*, by Steve Turner [This excerpt found online as "John Lennon: A New Jesus?" at Beliefnet's website.

www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Music/2006/08/John-Lennon-A-New-Jesus.aspx?p=1]:

The Beatles, at the height of Beatlemania, were agnostic and didn't hide this belief. Religion, Paul said in 1963, was something he didn't think about: "It doesn't fit in with my life." While touring Britain in October 1964 he admitted to *Playboy* [magazine], "None of us believe in God." John clarified the group's position: "We're not quite sure what we are, but I know that we're more agnostic than atheistic."

Yet just a few months later this assurance in God's nonbeing would be rocked by their first encounter with LSD. All their material dreams had been achieved so dramatically, at such an early age, that they were starting to ask themselves what was left to look forward to. Since their teen years they'd been motivated by the possibility of wealth, fame, sex, and acclaim, but now that they had these things a fresh purpose was required. Drugs seemed to offer new possibilities.

... They cut down on drinking whiskey as they took up smoking pot, and read Aldous Huxley rather than Ian Fleming. George was saying that the only worthwhile pursuit was the search for the answers to the questions, who am I? why am I here? and where am I going? "We made our money and fame, but for me that wasn't it," he said. "It was good fun for a while, but it certainly wasn't the answer to what life is about." ...

John would later refer to the mid-sixties as the Beatles' "self-conscious" period, and during it he made his most contentious comment about religion: "The Beatles are more popular than Jesus." It was an artlessly delivered observation that would have unforeseen consequences, both for the Beatles as a touring group and for John as an individual.

Although the controversy centered on his opinion of the [weak] crowd-pulling power of Christianity in the mid-20th century, he was also saying something about the religious function of rock music.

The cult of The Beatles imitated religious practices. Concert venues were sanctuaries, songs were sermons. The singers were prophets and sages whom followers revered. They were pilgrims whose journey taught them materialism couldn't buy love or happiness so they sought the meaning of life elsewhere, thus their willingness to experiment with non-traditional forms of potential enlightenment.

The Beatles' religious exploration guided our own. Non-Western practices such as meditation, chanting, yoga, and others, expanded our spiritual horizons. The Beatles' experiences impacted their music. Indian instruments, such as the sitar and harmonium, and Hindu teachings, such as the idea that everyone carries the light of the divine within, entered into their music. George Harrison's song, "The Inner Light" appeared on the flip side of The Beatles "Lady Madonna" single. His lyrics reworded a brief text from the Chinese *Tao De Ching*. Accompanied by Indian instruments, George sang:

Without going out of your door,
You can know all things on earth
without looking out of your window,
you can know the ways of heaven.
The farther one travels
the less one knows
the less one really knows.

Arrive without traveling,
See all without looking,
Do all without doing.

Not the most traditional of pop song lyrics, but we liked it anyway.

Pop music historian and reviewer Richie Unterberger writes in his brief biography of The Beatles, [www.allmusic.com/artist/the-beatles-mn0000754032/biography]

So much has been said and written about the Beatles. Their story is so mythic in its sweep — that it's difficult to summarize their career without restating clichés that have already been digested by tens of millions of rock fans. To start with the obvious, they were the greatest and most influential act of the rock era, and introduced more innovations into popular music than any other rock band of the 20th century. Moreover, they were among the few artists of any discipline that were simultaneously the best at what they did, and the most popular at what they did. Relentlessly imaginative and experimental, the Beatles grabbed a hold of the international mass consciousness in 1964 and never let go for the next six years, always staying ahead of the pack in terms of creativity, but never losing their ability to communicate their increasingly sophisticated ideas to a mass audience. Their supremacy as rock icons remains unchallenged to this day, decades after their breakup in 1970.

Two of The Beatles are gone now, one murdered, the other taken by disease. Ringo just celebrated his 73rd birthday, and age-defying Paul is 71. After George's death, Ian MacDonald wrote this in his book on their music, *Revolution in the Head* [Preface, page xi]:

When the remaining two Beatles are gone, the afterglow of the group's presence in the 20th-century popular culture may begin to wane. Or perhaps The Beatles changed history enough to reorder the way we regard things, so that their aura will never henceforth depart from the popular cultural scene. All we can be sure of is that something extraordinary happened in pop music during the 1960s and that the centre of it was the eight or so years of The Beatles' public career. They broke and rewrote the rules. We live partly in the consequences of the resulting renewal (or, according to bias, collapse of traditional values). The Beatles are, in a sense, us.

Whether we are baby-boomers who lived through Beatlemania or not, they are us because our culture—who we are and what we think and sing—has been unalterably influenced by these boys from Liverpool.

To close, I share one last excerpt from the book, *Meet the Beatles*, by Steven D. Stark [p8]:

The semi-religious allure of the Beatles was a key factor in allowing the group to endure. John Lennon was on to something in 1966 when he compared the group's popularity with that of Jesus. He was not alone at the time in noticing how the multitudes flocked to 'witness' them or how sick children were brought to see the Beatles in the hope that the Fab Four might change their lives. Yet even John might be surprised at how it has all

continued for four decades: with the subsequent Talmudic study of their songs, the weaving of their story into legend, and the elevation of the Fab Four into a kind of sainthood, there is a way in which the Beatles have become our modern counterparts to the religious figures of the past. To their scores of followers, the Beatles were not only a group but something of a way of life.

To that, I can only add, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What song by The Beatles is your favorite or most resonates with your story? Please share.
2. What do The Beatles, and/or their lives after the breakup, mean to you – spiritually, emotionally, culturally, historically, or otherwise?
3. Music and songs express human struggles, desires, hopes, and more. What songs or artists currently express these dimensions of your life? Are The Beatles relevant to you today?