

## Introduction



**Figure I.1** Oddballs – Presenting their new look to the public in Hyde Park, May 1967.  
Photo by Marvin Lichtner/The LIFE Images Collection via Getty Images/Getty Images

This book reassesses the Beatles, the sixties and the relationship between the two. In the preface, we saw cartoonists' profound ambivalence to the band and what they appeared to represent. The next chapter analyses opinion polls to measure broader public attitudes to the 'permissive society'. Polling provides the context necessary to understand the social, cultural and political debates about the Beatles explored in Chapters 2 to 5. Chapter 2 examines how the Beatles and Beatlemania were interpreted as social phenomena up to 1965. Chapter 3 considers how the band became semi-detached from the society in which they lived and worked in the second half of the decade. The questions of whether the Beatles were artists and their impact on cultural hierarchies are the subjects of Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with their political significance to Westminster politicians and the revolutionary left. The Conclusion compares the book's findings with narratives of the Beatles generated at the time of their break-up, in major popular accounts and in oral testimony recorded at the turn of the millennium. But first, this introduction will outline the book's scope and methods and explain how they offer a different approach to a familiar subject.

Half a century of debate on the role of the Beatles in 1960s Britain has produced three main models.<sup>1</sup> The first is that of the Beatles as trailblazers of change. The second presents the Beatles as exemplars, riding on the bandwagon of social transformation. The third is of the Beatles as outliers, pursuing their own path while largely divorced from wider society. The catalytic effect of the Beatles is envisaged in the first model as having revolutionised popular music, redefined celebrity, collapsed distinctions between popular and high culture and exerted a major influence over how their contemporaries looked, thought and lived. To their champions, they were emancipators; to their critics, destroyers of established norms. The second model presents the 1960s as an equally significant turning point but attributes less agency to the Beatles. They are not held to have created the 'permissive society' so much as have been notable participants in and proponents of it. The third model forms part of a wider scepticism about the significance of the 1960s and the concomitant emergence of permissiveness. It questions whether the changes associated with the decade actually happened; whether they occurred earlier or later than is commonly thought, or for reasons unrelated to figures such as the Beatles; and whether ordinary people were aware of, affected by or favourable towards such developments.

It is hard to find an academic historian who subscribes to the first model of the groundbreaking effect of the Beatles, although the political scientist Samuel Beer once portrayed them in true Romantic fashion as ‘the “unacknowledged legislators” of Britain’s populist revolt’.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the model smack of an antiquated Great Man view of history, it also assumes that the sixties were a transformational historical moment. This heroic view of the Beatles is intertwined with a series of Whiggish notions about the 1960s that historians have sought to nuance or refute. Many of them are no more convinced of the existence of the ‘swinging sixties’, ‘permissive society’, ‘sexual revolution’, ‘global village’, ‘birth of the teenager’ and ‘Summer of Love’ than they are of the ‘Age of Aquarius’.<sup>3</sup> The notion of the sixties as a distinctive and cohesive period is itself widely disputed.<sup>4</sup>

The second model of the Beatles as representatives of the sixties enjoys more academic support. It moderates claims of the Beatles’ agency by portraying them as embodying social trends rather than engineering them. It is compatible with several different conceptions of the sixties, from ‘cultural revolution’ at one pole to near stasis at the other. The main proponent of the ‘cultural revolution’ model, Arthur Marwick, argued that the Beatles ‘*were* the sixties’ inasmuch as they represented and promoted its quintessential qualities.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Oded Heilbrunner and Dominic Sandbrook argue that the Beatles were symptomatic of the lack of change in 1960s Britain. According to Heilbrunner, the Beatles stood for an ‘anti-revolutionary, consensual and conservative’ form of Englishness.<sup>6</sup> Sandbrook cites the early Beatles as evidence that the sixties were ‘a stage in a long evolution’ of modern British history rather than ‘a dramatic turning point’.<sup>7</sup>

Sandbrook switches to the third model of the Beatles as outliers in his account of their later career. Having depicted them as unthreatening in the early 1960s, he sees them as hypocritical, unpopular and out of touch in the late 1960s and early 1970s. David Fowler agrees that the Beatles were ‘detached . . . from youth culture by the late 1960s’ and goes so far as to question ‘[w]hether the Beatles had a major influence on British youth culture’ at any point.<sup>8</sup>

This book reconceives the relationship between the Beatles and sixties Britain as one of creative tension. The Beatles’ own creativity does not need belabouring. The case for their musical inventiveness has been most powerfully made by the composer and broadcaster Howard Goodall. He quickly dispenses with claims that the Beatles were a generic rock ‘n’ roll outfit at the beginning of their career or the passive beneficiaries of George Martin’s studio experimentation later on.<sup>9</sup> More startling is his contention

that ‘the Beatles rescued western music’ through reclaiming harmonic and melodic systems discarded by twentieth-century classical composers.<sup>10</sup> When their mastery of melody is added to their groundbreaking recording techniques, eclectic instrumentation, audacious modulation and fusion of Eastern and Western musics, Goodall concludes that the Beatles were instrumental in creating a ‘new musical mainstream’:

There are very, very few composers in history whose work changed all the music that followed it. Beethoven was one, Wagner was another and I believe that posterity will add to their select ranks the Beatles, whose musical revolution and thrilling songs will rightly be regarded as one of the crowning glories of twentieth-century music.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporaries saw the Beatles’ recordings as just one facet of their innovation. ‘Everything about them is – first’, maintained the *NME*’s Norrie Drummond in 1967: ‘their music, their clothes, their ideas’.<sup>12</sup> There were few limits to their creative ambition. Having revolutionised popular music and become ‘famous and loaded’ in the process, they sought to parlay their creativity into pioneering new forms of living, loving, dressing, worshipping, working, selling, lobbying, thinking, performing and maturing.<sup>13</sup> This versatility was itself a form of creativity as they made a name for themselves not merely as musicians but as songwriters, actors, comics, authors, celebrities, artists, socialites, activists, businessmen, heartthrobs, missionaries, criminals, patrons and (whether they liked it or not) role models and oracles.

How the Beatles fared in these ventures will be the subject of the sequel to this book. This volume focuses not on the Beatles’ actions but their contemporaries’ reactions. The Beatles’ creativity engendered creativity in others. Most obviously, they inspired the creation of countless bands. The music critic Henry Pleasants prefigured Goodall when crediting the Beatles in 1969 for creating a ‘new mainstream’. He noted that ‘thousands of groups have been founded in their image, all called the This, the That and the Other Thing, and all of them sounding more or less like the Beatles’.<sup>14</sup> The Beatles’ impact beyond youth culture was manifested during Beatlemania in the ‘[m]illions of words’ of newspaper copy which assessed their ‘social significance’.<sup>15</sup>

This iconic status – one of the four themes previewed in the preface – may appear to be the Beatles’ most obvious and least interesting characteristic. They are so iconic, indeed, that the *Cambridge Dictionary* illustrates the correct usage of the word with the sentence ‘John Lennon gained iconic status following his death.’<sup>16</sup> But it is worth considering how this happened. The Beatles’ exceptional talent, charisma and originality did not

guarantee success – they might never have got the chance to record a note or make a broadcast. Success in pop music did not inevitably lead to fame or even name recognition beyond the young singles-buying public. And fame once attained need not have made its beneficiaries central to key debates about the current state and future trajectory of society. It was the Beatles' fulfilment of all these criteria that made them fit the dictionary definition of iconic figures 'considered to represent particular opinions or a particular time'.<sup>17</sup>

As David R. Shumway has argued in an American context, the type of rock stardom enjoyed by the Beatles came to be 'defined by the embodiment of cultural controversies'.<sup>18</sup> The controversy surrounding the Beatles in sixties Britain explains why their creativity generated tension and returns us to the preface's other three themes: namely, their divisive, atypical and prefigurative character. The divisive effect of the Beatles on contemporaries has been obscured by their subsequent veneration as national treasures and symbols of the sixties. Opposition to the Beatles is represented in conventional narratives of their career as a rearguard effort by forces of reaction.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to empathise with those who inveighed against mop-tops and Beatle-maniacs and who swore that the Beatles' music would be rapidly and deservedly forgotten. But empathy is precisely what is necessary to understand the Beatles' world. In sixties Britain, many intelligent and educated observers could not envisage the Beatles' music as having any merit or lasting appeal. Others perceived the Beatles as grammar-school failures, half-formed Marxists, a substandard soul outfit or agents of moral degeneration. This book attempts to show that the Beatles' critics were not simply curmudgeons, killjoys and contrarians, but people who had reason to believe that their cardinal values were threatened by the band and what it represented.

By atypical, I mean that the Beatles' social attitudes placed them at odds with those of most of their contemporaries (see Fig 1.1). This is not to say that they were party-line permissives. On the contrary, the sequel to this book will argue that their behaviours and beliefs were characterised by ambivalence, contradiction and vacillation. Their open-mindedness towards a whole array of issues nonetheless positioned them far outside the mainstream of public opinion. Polls show that these putative spokesmen for their generation, region and class did not represent the attitudes of the young, the North-West, CDEs – or any sizeable segment of the population.

Furthermore, the evolution of the Beatles' attitudes over the course of the 1960s far outpaced that occurring in wider society. British social

attitudes were different at the end of the 1960s than at the beginning, but they did not develop in a uniformly permissive manner and did not change anything like as fast as the Beatles had hoped. The Beatles responded by attempting to bridge the gap between themselves and the general population through campaigns of public enlightenment. Somewhat unwilling targets of social, cultural and political commentary in the first half of the 1960s, they instigated such debates in the late 1960s to effect societal change. Celebrity granted them a hearing but not acceptance. Their activism often simply highlighted their idiosyncrasy and associated them with some of the period's most unpopular and eccentric causes. The more the Beatles intervened in public affairs, the more alienated they became.

The Beatles were not prefigurative in the sense that later generations adopted their behaviours and beliefs wholesale. Most people in subsequent decades were scarcely more likely to take LSD, visit an ashram, flirt with communism, campaign for gay rights or women's liberation or seduce their best friend's spouse than they were to become pop stars. Yet these and other acts of the Beatles lost much of their shock value over time as they became incorporated into a nostalgic vision of the 1960s. Retrospective accounts of the decade as a time of experimentation and emancipation reveal more tolerance of the Beatles and less tolerance of the intolerance they once faced.<sup>20</sup>

The Beatles' cultural stature showed little sign of diminishing in the early twenty-first century. As Alina Kwiatkowska elegantly demonstrated through web searches, they overtook Shakespeare as the standard source for literary quotations and allusions. She discovered in 2010 that there were almost twice as many exact and fuzzy Google hits for 'All you need is love' than for seven famous Shakespearean quotations put together ('To be or not to be: that is the question'; 'All the world's a stage'; 'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark'; 'The green-eyed monster'; 'If music be the food of love, play on'; 'My kingdom for a horse!'; 'The lady doth protest too much'). There were ten times as many hits for 'We all live in a yellow submarine' as for 'My kingdom for a horse!' and for 'I read the news today, oh boy' as for 'The lady doth protest too much.'<sup>21</sup> References appeared in every kind of online text, from adverts to scientific papers, and often took the form of puns that demonstrated the adaptable and ever-evolving character of Beatles lyrics. Such wordplay exhibited the author's wit and taste and established bonds with equally savvy readers.

Opinion polls display the appeal of the sixties to subsequent generations. In 1985, 47 per cent of those questioned by Gallup considered that 'the British people "never had it so good"' as they did in the 1960s, even though

the phrase was coined by Harold Macmillan during and about the previous decade. All age groups decidedly preferred the sixties to any other decade.<sup>22</sup> Sixties nostalgia showed little sign of waning when YouGov asked respondents in 2016 to name the decade in which ‘Britain was at its greatest’. Although half declined to answer, the 1960s was over twice as popular a choice as its nearest rival, the 1980s, and as popular as the 1940s, 1950s and 1970s combined. Only 1 per cent of people thought Britain to be in its prime in 2016, the year of the Brexit referendum.<sup>23</sup>

Polls also show how Britain since the 1960s has become a more diverse nation, accustomed to (if not necessarily approving of) a multiplicity of lifestyles, cultures and tastes.<sup>24</sup> Consider the answers given in British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys conducted around the turn of the millennium.<sup>25</sup> By this point, many more British people had personal experience of the permissive lifestyles modelled by the Beatles in the 1960s. A quarter said they had taken cannabis; a quarter’s parents had divorced.<sup>26</sup> Almost half had discovered their ‘own way connecting with God without churches or religious services’, much like the Beatles in their meditative phase, and four fifths accepted the pluralistic notion that many religions shared ‘basic truths’.<sup>27</sup> The kind of behaviour which earned John Lennon and Yoko Ono moral opprobrium in the 1960s mattered less at the end of the century. Although 28 per cent of people still disapproved of couples who decided to have children out of wedlock, half thought the matter had ‘nothing to do with morals’.<sup>28</sup> One in fourteen disputed that ‘divorce can be a positive first step towards a new life’ and one in seven disapproved of cohabitation.<sup>29</sup> The same proportion said they would ‘mind a lot’ if a close relative married someone of Asian descent.<sup>30</sup> Only 6 per cent picked cannabis and 16 per cent picked LSD from a list of drugs ‘most harmful to frequent users’, whereas a third named tobacco and alcohol.<sup>31</sup> For almost every answer, permissive attitudes were strongest among the young and weakest among the old. This cohort effect indicated that Britain was likely to become more permissive as conservatives born in the early twentieth century came to the end of their lives, as later BSA surveys confirmed.

## Time and Place

The core chapters of the book, which examine the social, cultural and political impact of the Beatles, cover the period 1963 to 1975. They begin when the Beatles attained national attention following the chart success of

‘Please Please Me’ (1963) and the outbreak of what was soon dubbed Beatlemania. Their formative years in Liverpool and Hamburg and their first record release fall outside the ambit of the book because they did not generate much printed discussion beyond the pages of *Mersey Beat*.<sup>32</sup> The significance of their first years of fame has been obscured by their later creative achievements, which relegated their earlier recordings to the unfavoured half of the ‘pop’/‘rock’ split. The Beatles’ subsequent embarrassment over their mop-top phase added to the denigration and trivialisation of the Beatlemania era. Yet the extraordinary effect of their sudden rise to fame should not be understated. ‘Peak Beatles’ as measured in column inches and parliamentary speeches occurred in 1964, by which point most principal lines of argument about the band were well established. The purpose of incorporating material up to 1975, five years after their public break-up, is not to consider the Beatles’ solo careers in the early seventies. It is to allow the book to consider the first retrospectives of the Beatles’ career before punk and the murder of Lennon transformed debates about the band.<sup>33</sup> This Introduction and the conclusion have a wider brief, surveying more than half a century of interpretations of the Beatles and the 1960s.

As for place, this book concerns British attitudes to a British band who travelled widely but lived and recorded music almost entirely in Britain during the 1960s. Their Liverpoolian origins, German sojourns and global success often overshadow the national context in which they operated. For all the diversity and division within sixties Britain, the Beatles and their compatriots interpreted each other by drawing upon a medley of assumptions, experiences and cultural references peculiar to themselves. The sources examined here are essentially those produced for a national audience or polls based on a national sample, rather than for or about the United Kingdom’s constituent nations, regions and localities. Domestic commentary on the Beatles was far from insular, ranging as it did across issues of Americanisation, Eastern religion, Western civilisation and Britain’s post-imperial identity. Furthermore, the book’s definition of a British primary source is expansive enough to include British commentators living overseas (e.g. the poet W. H. Auden and the New Age writer Alan Watts) and non-British commentators resident in Britain (e.g. the intellectuals Germaine Greer and George Steiner). However, it does not attempt to explore ‘the intersection of global vectors across one local terrain’ in the manner of Timothy Scott Brown’s illuminating *West Germany and the Global Sixties* (2013).<sup>34</sup>



## Primary Sources

The primacy given to contemporaneous sources stems from the book's aim to explore attitudes towards the Beatles during and immediately after their recording career. The band and the decade have generated powerful myths and countermyths over the past half-century. These narratives are at once an object lesson in the contested nature of the past and a substantial impediment to understanding how the band and the decade were conceived at the time. In theory, any contemporary British discussions of the Beatles and their work fall within the book's remit. Direct encounters with the Beatles occurred when attending their concerts, interviewing them or meeting them at social functions. More common were mediated encounters such as listening to their records, watching their films or reading about their sayings and doings. Contemporaries also encountered the Beatles through each other's commentary. They were the subject of thousands of newspaper articles and broadcasts. Politicians made speeches about them, academics wrote treatises on them and they were represented in novels, plays, ballets, films, paintings, sculptures and cartoons.

The volume of material on the Beatles is undeniably daunting, but in practice it is reduced by the requirement that sources were created at the time and have survived since. The primary sources available to the researcher testify to the elitist bias of the recording and preservation of past voices. As a rule of thumb, the more likely you were to appreciate the Beatles in the 1960s, the less likely it is that your opinions were documented at the time and have survived to this day. Young, working-class female fans were more prominent as consumers than producers of media, although the book draws heavily upon the girls' magazines and fan-club publications which published their views. The predominance of older, richer, educated males in the press, the arts, broadcasting, literature and scholarship – and consequently in the sources for this book – is a distortion of societal opinion but an accurate reflection of cultural authority. Their often reactionary perspectives provide an alternative narrative of the sixties in which the Beatles appear as undereducated, overpaid, talentless, clueless, unexceptional, objectionable, pretentious and preposterous figures whose comic hairstyles constituted their only cultural contribution of note.

Between these poles of mania and phobia exists a diverse and complex array of discourses about the Beatles and the sixties which digitisation has rendered accessible as never before. These include daily and Sunday papers (*The Telegraph*, *The Express*, *The Mirror*, *The Mail*, *The Times*, *The Sunday*

*Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Observer* and the non-digitised *Herald* and *Sun*).<sup>35</sup> Periodicals are used extensively, whether musical (*Melody Maker*, *New Musical Express*, *Record Mirror*, *Disc and Music Echo*, *Rave*), political (*Spectator*, *Economist*, *New Statesman*, *Tribune*), literary (*Times Literary Supplement*), social (*New Society*), countercultural (*Oz*, *International Times*, *Gandalf's Garden*, *Frendz*, *7 Days*) or general interest (*Listener*, *Punch*).<sup>36</sup> Radio and television broadcasts and recordings of interviews and press conferences have been obtained thanks to the painstaking work of collectors and bootleggers. Physical archives have been used more sparingly. These include the BBC Written Archives Centre, the British Library Sound Archive and the Special Collections and Archives of Liverpool John Moores University.

Each chapter supplements these sources with more specialised ones. The cartoons examined in the preface mostly come from the British Cartoon Archive. In Chapter 1, top-line statistics from opinion polls are culled from digests issued by polling companies, while the cross-tabulations use raw data deposited in the UK Data Archive, the German-based GESIS Data Archive for the Social Sciences and the United States-based Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Chapters 2 and 3 on society make especial use of religious publications (*Church Times*, *Catholic Herald*, *Blackfriars*) and magazines targeted primarily or exclusively at teenage girls (*Beatles Book*, *Fabulous 208*, *Honey*, *Petticoat*, *Jackie*, *Girl*).<sup>37</sup> Academic journals and specialist arts and music publications feature prominently in Chapter 4, which focuses on culture.<sup>38</sup> Chapter 5, on politics, uses materials ranging from parliamentary debates recorded in Hansard through cyclostyled anarchist pamphlets to the digitised archives of the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Because it is concerned with representations of the Beatles, the book seldom features the Beatles' own creative output, interviews and writing. When they are quoted, for example when discussing their fall from grace in the second half of the 1960s, it is to explain how others reacted to them. This situation will be remedied by a companion volume, *The Beatles' World*, which will view the same issues from the opposite perspective by assessing how the Beatles themselves understood the society, culture and politics of 1960s Britain. *The Beatles' World* will argue that although they were the most celebrated figures of the 'permissive society', the Beatles exhibited uncertainty over most of its cardinal values. They both embraced and renounced materialism, secularism, drugs, self-disclosure, casual sex, revolutionary politics and artistic experimentation.<sup>39</sup>