The Beatles and Sixties Britain

Though the Beatles are nowadays considered national treasures, this book shows how and why they inspired phobia as well as mania in 1960s Britain. As symbols of modernity in the early sixties, they functioned as a stress test for British institutions and identities, at once displaying the possibilities and establishing the limits of change. Later in the decade, they developed forms of living, loving, thinking, looking, creating, worshipping and campaigning which became subjects of intense controversy. The ambivalent attitudes contemporaries displayed towards the Beatles are not captured in hackneyed ideas of the 'swinging sixties', the 'permissive society' and the all-conquering 'Fab Four'. Drawing upon a wealth of contemporary sources, *The Beatles and Sixties Britain* offers a new understanding of the band as existing in creative tension with postwar British society: their disruptive presence inciting a wholesale re-examination of social, political and cultural norms.

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The Beatles and Sixties Britain

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978-1-108-70846-3 — The Beatles and Sixties Britain
Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

Contents

List of Figures [*page* vi]
List of Tables [vii]

Preface: Imagining the Beatles [ix]

Introduction [1]

1 The Other Sixties: An Anti-Permissive Permissive Society? [23]

2 Society, 1963–1965: The Beatles and Modernity [48]

3 Society, 1966–1970: The Beatles Go Too Far [76]

4 Culture: The Beatles as Artists [112]

5 Politics: The Beatles, Parliament and Revolution [151]

Conclusion [193]

Notes [204]
Bibliography [299]
Index [350]

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-70846-3 — The Beatles and Sixties Britain
Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

Figures

P.1 Phobes – *Daily Mirror* cartoonist Stanley Franklin anticipates the Beatles' appearance at the Royal Variety Performance, October 1963. Photo by *Daily Mirror*/Franklin/Mirrorpix/Mirrorpix via Getty Images [*page* ix]

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 [1]

1.1 Pollsters – Anne Geldart conducts a door-to-door survey, March 1966. Photo by Reg Burkett/Express/Getty Images [23]

2.1 Fans – Awaiting the Beatles' arrival at the Liverpool premiere of *A Hard Day's Night*, July 1964. Photo by Staff/Mirrorpix/Getty Images [48]

3.1 Butchers – Dismembering the moptop image, March 1966. Photo by Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images [76]

3.2 Deviants – John Lennon and Yoko Ono leave court after being charged with possession of marijuana, October 1968. Photo by Bettmann/Getty Images [102]

4.1 Intellectuals – Lionel Bart, Osbert Lancaster and Yehudi Menuhin with guest of honour John Lennon at a Foyle's luncheon, April 1964. Photo by *Evening Standard*/Getty Images [112]

4.2 Artists – George Martin and John Lennon at Abbey Road Studios, 1965. Photo by SSPL/Getty Images [127]

5.1 Politicians – With Labour Party leader Harold Wilson, March 1964. Photo by © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS/Corbis via Getty Images [151]

6.1 Headliners – The Beatles' break-up goes public, April 1970. Photo by Mirrorpix/Getty Images [193]

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Tables

1.1 Predictions in 1970 of the likelihood and desirability of changes over the next fifteen years [*page* 25]
1.2 Topics related to permissiveness covered in opinion polls, 1963–1975 [27]
1.3 Perceptions in 1969 of the best and worst changes during the 1960s [32]
1.4 Permissive and anti-permissive laws, policies and appointments in postwar Britain [33]
1.5 Sample questions by topic to assess permissiveness and anti-permissiveness within social categories [37]
1.6 The most permissive groups by topic within social categories [40]
1.7 The most anti-permissive groups by topic within social categories [41]
1.8 Typical characteristics of permissive and anti-permissive respondents in opinion polls [42]
1.9 Binary logistic regression analyses of selected questions from British Election Study, 1974–1975 [44]
3.1 The sixties event of greatest personal importance to respondents in 1969 [110]
4.1 Divisions within popular music perceived by writers and musicians, 1965–1975 [131]
5.1 Parliamentary comments on the Beatles by year, 1962 to April 1970 [155]
5.2 Parliamentary comments on the Beatles by party, 1962 to April 1970 [156]
5.3 Parliamentary comments on the Beatles by theme, 1962 to April 1970 [158]

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Preface: Imagining the Beatles

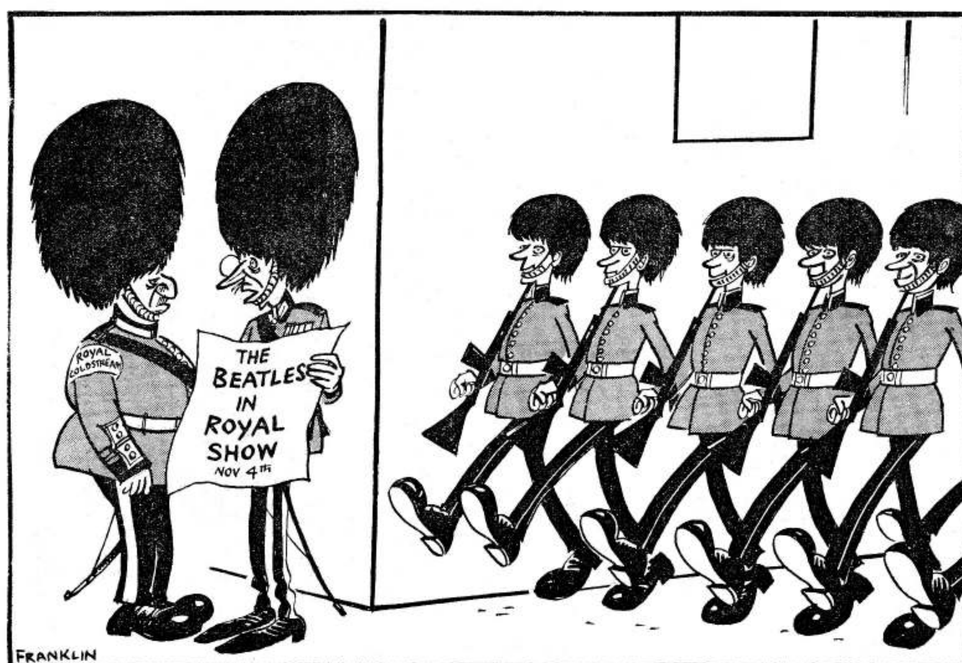

Figure P.1 Phobes – *Daily Mirror* cartoonist Stanley Franklin anticipates the Beatles' appearance at the Royal Variety Performance, October 1963. Photo by *Daily Mirror*/ Franklin/Mirrorpix/Mirrorpix via Getty Images

Four heads appeared on the front page of the *Daily Mail* in February 1964.[1] The sketches lacked mouths and ears, but on each a few thin, dark lines emanated from a crown and ended in a rough fringe. 'You can't get away from', stated the caption, the unfinished sentence at once assuming and reinforcing the iconic status of a band whose hair alone ensured instant recognition. The Beatles were their own logo. They were advertisements for themselves.

This book seeks to understand what the Beatles meant to people in 1960s Britain. It argues that they were iconic, divisive, atypical and prefigurative:

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Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

themes introduced and illustrated in the preface using contemporary cartoons. Their depiction as icons in the 1964 *Daily Mail* cartoon contrasted starkly with their first appearance in a Fleet Street cartoon twelve months previously, when theirs had been one of a barrage of British records raining down on the Kremlin in a display of soft power.[2] They received minor billing in February 1963 compared to Susan Maughan, Helen Shapiro, Cliff Richard, Adam Faith, Marty Wilde and the Tornados, as befitted a band whose second single ('Please Please Me') was competing for the number one spot with Frank Ifield's 'The Wayward Wind' (1963). Over the following year, they would achieve what commentators agreed to be an unprecedented level of celebrity.

The Beatles' iconic power, which seems self-evident in retrospect, struck contemporaries as being so fascinating and peculiar that it formed the principal subject of cartoons about them. Their appeal is represented in the cartoons as pervasive, extending from Smithfield Market to Rishikesh and encompassing everyone from Francis Chichester to Richard Nixon.[3] So omnipresent are the Beatles that you could not escape them if you were stranded on a desert island, entered a monastery or journeyed to other planets.[4] It is cause for comment if an entire day passes 'without a story about some shaggy-'air doing something or other!'[5]

In these cartoons, the Beatles' influence is as intensive as it is pervasive. Small children pray to them and teenagers fantasise about possessing them.[6] Owning a Beatle is the ultimate memento, so that two girls kidnap one and another puts one on her list for Santa Claus.[7] If a whole Beatle is not available, a piece of one would do, leading to a bidding war for Ringo Starr's tonsils.[8] These scenarios did not seem far-fetched at a time when *Honey* magazine photographed a fan's room featuring Beatles wallpaper, a Beatles ottoman, a Beatles blanket, a Beatles mirror, a Beatles rug, a Beatles record cabinet, a Beatles lilo, a Beatles tablecloth, a Beatles mug, a Beatles plate, a Beatles tele-set, a Beatles tea towel, a Beatles Christmas card, Beatles talcum powder, Beatles wall plaques, Beatles stickers and Beatles handbags.[9]

Fame pays. Cartoonists presented the Beatles as richer than royalty and as the only thing standing between Britain and bankruptcy.[10] They are so valuable that their body parts are auctioned at Sotheby's and 'Beatle-meat' is the most expensive joint a housewife can imagine.[11] Their convoy to the 1965 Shea Stadium concert consists of one armoured car to transport the band and another to carry their fee.[12] Their return to Britain a fortnight later empties Whitehall of every Treasury official, so eager is the government to claim its share of tour proceeds.[13]

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Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

What made these cartoons satirical rather than surreal was that they often exaggerated or simply replicated real events. The cartoonist who imagined the American president greeting the British prime minister in 1964 with witticisms about the Beatles was vindicated two days later, when Lyndon Johnson complimented Alec Douglas-Home on his 'advance guard'.[14] A cartoon showing the Beatles arriving at Buckingham Palace to receive their MBEs in 1965 is clearly based on a famous photograph of a police line buckling under the crush of fans.[15] The band actually arrived at Shea Stadium in an armoured car, sat cross-legged at the feet of an Indian guru and were asked to record 'O Come All Ye Faithful – Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!' by a Methodist minister, much as cartoonists depicted. John Lennon and Yoko Ono's later escapades hardly needed embellishment. The nude album cover, rude lithographs, Bed-Ins, Bag-Ins and donation of hair to the Black Power movement were if anything toned down by cartoonists when compared to the reality.[16]

The band's iconic status rested on more than their popularity, talent, wealth and fame. It existed because, as their press officer put it, 'The Beatles are not a pop group, they are an abstraction, a repository for many things.'[17] For cartoonists, they functioned as ready-made symbols of modernity and controversy. They are associated with new technology such as ham radio, computers and space rockets;[18] with the latest outfits and hairdos; with the current state of the 'Special Relationship' and the Cold War; and with all manner of social trends, including secularisation and embourgeoisement, multiculturalism and the 'brain drain', student protest and the 'generation gap'.[19] Cartoonists also pondered whether the Beatles' influence would shape Britain for decades to come. Would the Cavern Club become a coal cellar or a tourist attraction?[20] Would retired baby boomers in lapelless jackets and winkle-pickers drone on about the Beatles?[21] Would the Beatles mean anything to generations to come?[22]

The divisive effect of the Beatles is the second theme of the cartoons and the book. Inserting the Beatles into almost any situation, real or imagined, invited viewers to consider what a Beatlified Britain would look like, and what would need to change to make such a scenario conceivable. Cartoonists re-fashioned traditional symbols of nationhood to assess Britain's capacity for reinvention. Thatched cottages gain moptops, as do Highland cattle, the guy for Bonfire Night and the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Square.[23] Sartorial traditions perish as barristers wear Beatle-style wigs in court, public schools clothe their boys in Beatle-style 'with-it college gear' and stockbrokers trading shares in Northern Songs dress for the part.[24] A monocled officer in the Coldstream Guards can only wonder

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Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

'Gad . . . what next?' upon receiving news that the Beatles are to appear in the Royal Variety Performance (see Fig. P.1). His question is answered as he speaks, as his troops march past in bearskins newly styled to resemble moptops.[25]

Cartoonists used motifs of inversion to explore the Beatles' effect on taken-for-granted institutions and identities. In the images they created, gender inversion occurs when female fans inflict violence on any male who stands in the way of their obsession. In one cartoon, young girls wielding slingshots and hammers lay siege to Buckingham Palace in response to an unflattering remark about the Beatles allegedly made by the Duke of Edinburgh. They debag a policeman, remove the helmet from his colleague and knock a soldier senseless.[26] Another cartoon shows a girl throttling a policeman and a third has a female lynch mob descending upon two boys who have offended their idols.[27] While girls transgress conventional feminine behaviour, men falter in their traditional masculine roles as providers and protectors. Henpecked husbands meekly agree to their newborn sons being named after the Beatles and are hectored to earn incomes as sizeable as Starr's.[28] Cowardice is displayed by a guard who deserts his post when the Beatles visit Buckingham Palace and policemen who flee upon news of their imminent arrival.[29] A police officer returns from a shift with his uniform torn, brained by a Beatles placard.[30]

Class inversion is symbolised by oiks chanting 'yeah, yeah, yeah?' when mocking the pre-eminence of Eton, and by Brian Epstein's NEMS vying with Oxbridge as a top destination for school-leavers.[31] A posh woman boasts that her husband is 'the first Knight Commander ever to get Ringo Starr's autograph' and a decorated officer shows off a medal containing a lock of Starr's hair.[32] It is the Beatles, not the royals, whom one fan expects to appear on the balcony of Buckingham Palace.[33] The Beatles try to purchase the place in a cartoon from 1963, and Lord Starr does so in one that appeared a decade or so later.[34]

Cultural hierarchies are toppled by the staging of a Beatles ballet, the prospect of operagoers behaving like Beatlemaniacs and the band rivalling William Shakespeare as the prime symbol of British creative genius.[35] Religious traditions crumble as church bells chime Beatles' melodies, monks translate Beatlisms into Latin, vicars sermonise about Lennon's apostasy and priests follow McCartney's example by discovering God through LSD.[36] The Beatles' global popularity mollifies patriots shaken by decolonisation and relative economic decline. As Malta gains independence, Britain loses yachting's America's Cup and BOAC

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Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

considers removing the Union flag from its livery, an updated flag featuring the four Beatles is the one national symbol left flying at full mast.[37] A year after he had vetoed British membership of the Common Market, President de Gaulle feels threatened by the Beatles' visit to Paris.[38] Eighteen months after former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson stated that 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role', the 'British invasion' crowns the entire North American continent with a moptop.[39]

If scenes of inversion consider the possibilities of change, those depicting opposition to the Beatles draw attention to the obstacles. In public, the greatest resistance to the Beatles comes from mature men accustomed to running the country. In one image, an old duffer in a tuxedo is the only audience member who refuses to join Lennon and Ono in stripping off at the Royal Albert Hall.[40] Royal officials object to Starr's presence at court.[41] When the Beatles receive MBEs, one blimpish type in full uniform earns a medal for his bravery at the Battle of Buckingham Palace, a second shows off the medal he has been awarded in recognition for repudiating his own gong, and a third fumes over the Beatle wig that he was sent in exchange.[42] In 1969, a group of highly decorated retired military men in a gentlemen's club toast their decision to 'send our Beatle LPs back' in protest against Lennon returning his MBE.[43] When two youths spot a bowler-hatted, pinstripe-besuited, brolly-wielding gent skipping down the road in 1966, they surmise that he has either won the pools or heard confirmation that the Beatles had broken up.[44]

The Beatles also provoke resentment from two archetypal figures, the postman and the policeman, who are of lower status but of equal importance to the social order. Cartoons depict them as casualties of Beatlemania. Tons of fan mail clog up the sorting offices and make mailbags impossible to carry, threatening to bring an essential service to a standstill.[45] Policemen are charged with defending social order against hordes of Beatlemaniacs running riot through concert venues and streets. Order cannot be maintained when fans besiege the police at the Royal Variety Performance and corner a bald officer under the misapprehension that he is Starr in disguise.[46]

The middle-aged father serves as the usual foil to the young female Beatlemaniac in cartoons. Only the occasional image depicts a son as the fan or a mother as the disapproving parent.[47] In almost all family scenes, a trendy daughter is pitted against a trad dad determined to spoil her fun. Fathers refuse to sport moptops, complain about visiting Liverpool,

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Frontmatter
More Information

grimace at news of McCartney's recovery from gastric flu and forbid their children from displaying Starr's tonsils in the family home.[48] One father shelters behind his paper and pipe while his daughter plays Beatles records, while another still refuses to talk to his daughter months after they were awarded MBEs.[49] The only enthusiastic father cuts a ludicrous figure playing a guitar. Looking on bemused is his daughter, whose mother explains that 'He's just found out what the Beatles earn!'[50]

The third theme is the Beatles' atypicality. This is signified by their distinctive appearance in the cartoons, which makes them as similar to one another as they are different from everyone else. In their first years of fame, they remain their inimitable selves whatever the circumstances. Whether being scalped by an oblivious Native American, harassed by gendarmes in Paris, placed before a firing squad in Manila, turned away at the gates of Buckingham Palace, forced to view the FA Cup Final on stilts, exiled to the South Seas or fired off into space, their environment changes while they stay the same.[51]

Cartoonists envisaged the Beatles as becoming increasingly divergent and distant from British society in the late sixties and early seventies. During Beatlemania, they are typically depicted as inciting bizarre behaviour in others, whether fan or foe. The Beatles' eccentricity is largely confined to their hairstyles. This changed from 1967 onwards, when their weird lives, art, looks, sayings and doings regularly became the target of ridicule. A later chapter will discuss what these cartoons depict: the identification of the Beatles with some of the least popular elements of late sixties society. They are associated with illegal immigrants, barefooted hippies, drug pushers, pornographers and Japanese performance artists.[52] Their eccentricity is indicated by their appearance in loincloths and turbans,[53] Pepper gear[54] and birthday suits.[55] They are so out of touch at the beginning of the seventies that they have not heard of 'inflation, unemployment, [or] food prices' and are unknown to a new generation of children.[56]

Parents who had previously been wrong-footed by the Beatles now impart wisdom to daughters who had mistaken Lennon for 'a stable, middle-class family man' and sons who are unable to accept that the Beatles have split up.[57] Even Harold Wilson sometimes appears favourably in comparison with them, being less of a 'champion bore' than Lennon and a safer bet as prime minister than Starr.[58] Most jarring are the later cartoons which portray the Beatles as elitist. Once viewed as Everymen, they are now pitted against working-class archetypes. Alf Garnett is rejected as a disciple of the Maharishi, dustmen chuck a bag

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Frontmatter
More Information

containing Lennon and Ono into a compactor and a lavatory attendant keeps his facilities drug-free after hearing of Lennon's misbehaviour in Buckingham Palace.[59]

The Beatles' atypicality is also emphasised in cartoons on the theme of role reversal. In the early years, it is scarcely conceivable to envisage the Beatles as anything other than themselves. The most outlandish fantasy is that of a bald Beatle.[60] Cartoonists instead made mischief by bestowing authority figures with moptops to show their incapacity of being modern and popular. Politicians provided the ideal targets. Before Harold Macmillan suddenly resigned as prime minister in October 1963, cartoonists depict the Tory leadership forming a beat combo to court popularity.[61] In the search for his replacement, they alight on Quintin Hogg as 'the best Pop Minister' among the candidates, thanks to his demagoguery and occasionally unkempt hair.[62] Cartoonists had fun underscoring the contrast between the Beatles and the new prime minister Alec Douglas-Home, a skeletal and balding sixty-year-old aristocrat, by decking him out in Beatle gear and depicting his new Cabinet in similar attire under the banner of 'Modernisation'.[63] Still more debasing are the scenes which depict Tories comporting themselves like Beatlemaniacs. In one cartoon, a crowd of mini-skirted Alec Douglas-Homes at a Beatles concert scream 'We love you, yeah, yeah, yeah' at a nuclear weapon.[64] Another shows Home and Rab Butler joining the ranks of autograph hunters outside the stage door, hoping that the Beatles will sign up to become Tory candidates.[65]

The Tories cannot match the Beatles' appeal. They are billed as 'The Unpopular group' and appear desperate when promising the electorate 'anything that you want' in the manner of 'From Me to You' (1963).[66] Home's rendition of 'She Loves You' (1963) in front of President Johnson is no match for the Beatles' own US performances, which leave him in the shade.[67] After winning the Greater London Council elections in April 1964, it is Labour leader Harold Wilson who sings 'They love me, yeah, yeah, yeah', kitted out with drainpipe trousers, Chelsea boots, pipe and electric guitar.[68]

Once he becomes prime minister later that year, Harold Wilson proves to be as pathetically dependent on the Beatles as his predecessor. He beseeches a hospitalised Starr in December 1964 to 'tour the world to save the balance of payments situation!'[69] The poor reception accorded to the *Magical Mystery Tour* television special in December 1967 causes Wilson to reflect that the Beatles' failure would be more damaging to the British economy than the devaluation of sterling implemented the previous

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Marcus Collins
Frontmatter
More Information

month.[70] His shameless populism naturally draws him to emulate the Beatles. In 1965, he is depicted joining senior Cabinet members in growing his hair, then deciding to appoint the Beatles in their stead after awarding the band MBEs.[71] By the late sixties, he is shown cravenly adopting their every fad, from flower power and transcendental meditation[72] to Bed-Ins and Bagism.[73] Wilson makes no more plausible a hippie than Starr makes a prime minister or Lennon an Archbishop of Canterbury when imagined as such in other cartoons.[74] The impossibility of squares becoming the Beatles or the Beatles becoming squares symbolises the divergence perceived by cartoonists between the young and old, the radical and the staid and the political and cultural worlds in 1960s Britain.

The fourth theme of the book, that the Beatles were prefigurative, is demonstrated by the familiarity to us of the events depicted in the cartoons and the unfamiliarity of their underlying assumptions. As the art historian Ernst Gombrich observed, cartoons draw upon a 'common stock of knowledge . . . immediately accessible to anyone'.[75] In the Beatles' case, the cartoons show how large that stock had to be. At the minimum, cartoonists assumed that their audience knew the names of the band members plus those of their wives, girlfriends and children. In fact, the cartoon opening this chapter shows that the names were often considered superfluous.[76] The Beatles were expected to be readily identifiable by sight, and to be distinguishable from one another, throughout their myriad changes of appearance.[77]

Identifying the Beatles was only the first step towards understanding the jokes. A strong working knowledge was assumed of their songs,[78] tribute songs to them and their position in the charts.[79] Three cartoons appeared on the day in January 1964 that the Dave Clark Five dethroned the Beatles at number one, each imagining the Beatles' oblivion.[80] The viewer had to be aware of the band's whereabouts when they were abroad, including their first visit to the United States in 1964, their North American tours later that year, in 1965 and 1966,[81] their ill-starred trip to the Philippines[82] and their pilgrimage to India.[83] Events assumed to be common knowledge included the demise of the Cavern Club,[84] rumours of the band's break-up in 1966,[85] the opening and closing of the Apple Boutique[86] and the bad reviews of the *Magical Mystery Tour* TV special.[87]

Such was their fame that cartoonists took for granted the British public's familiarity with Starr's medical condition,[88] Harrison's sitar lessons, McCartney's facial hair, and the paint job on Lennon's Rolls Royce.[89] Viewers were expected to keep up to date with Lennon's controversial

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Frontmatter
More Information

remarks about religion,[90] his claim to have smoked pot in Buckingham Palace[91] and the many and varied Happenings he staged with Ono.[92] The Beatles' weddings were assumed to be a matter of general knowledge,[93] as were the births of Starr's two sons.[94]

'Mummy, darling, what were the Beatles?' a young boy asks his incredulous mother in a 1971 cartoon by Osbert Lancaster.[95] It appeared days after McCartney had filed suit to dissolve the band, and looked ahead to a time when the band would be forgotten and cartoons about them rendered meaningless. This was the cartoon's natural fate, Gombrich observed, its wit inextricably intertwined with 'recondite allusions to long-forgotten issues and events'.[96] In the Beatles' case, however, that future has not yet arrived. We still remember them and something of their times. The volume of information which contemporaries needed to know in order to make sense of cartoons about the Beatles is remarkable enough. But what is truly extraordinary is that much of the same Beatle lore is recalled half a century later. The opening and closing ceremonies of the 2012 London Olympics placed the Beatles at the core of British national identity and assumed that the global audience would be familiar with their greatest hits.[97]

But the more we lionise the Beatles today, the harder it is for us to understand the controversy they caused in sixties Britain. '[O]ld cartoons are often so difficult to appreciate', Gombrich argued, because '[t]he analogies used, once topical and illuminating, so often have faded.'[98] In contemporary cartoons about the Beatles, those analogies were based on a series of attitudes and assumptions that from today's perspective are unfamiliar and unfathomable.

If you think it ludicrous that men's hair falls below their collars and women's skirts reach above their knees, that couples cohabit or that parents name their sons Zak, then you would experience little culture shock being transported back to sixties Britain.[99] The music, fashions and gossip which so captivated contemporary admirers of the Beatles provided an alternative form of entertainment for their critics, who were invited by cartoonists to have a laugh at the expense of the band and their fans. Mockery provided a means of engaging with the 'swinging sixties' without embracing its values, acknowledging the spectacle while upholding existing norms.

Conversely, the cartoons may leave you cold if you fail to see anything odd in the notion that pop stars are highly paid and much feted, that they marry, take drugs, express political and religious opinions and try their hand at other arts. Much of what seemed absurd to the cartoonists seems unexceptionable now. For popular culture to generate national pride,

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newspaper headlines, international earnings and collaborations with high art has lost much of its novelty, controversy and comedic potential.

If you are not amused or alarmed by such ideas, then the Beatles are part of the reason why. They are prefigurative because their viewpoints seem closer to our own than do those of their satirists. The transformation of values over the intervening half century has many causes, but the cartoons provide a comic-book account of how the Beatles catalysed debate about the social, political and cultural underpinnings of mid-twentieth-century Britain and consideration of the alternatives. To understand the Beatles in their time, we need to examine why their thoughts and actions were often considered so funny peculiar in 1960s Britain. To understand their legacy, we should consider why we struggle to laugh at these cartoons today.

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