

# ‘I say high, you say low’: the Beatles and cultural hierarchies in 1960s and 1970s Britain

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## Abstract

*The debate over the cultural value of the Beatles was as vehement as it was significant in 1960s and early 1970s Britain. Lennon and McCartney’s early compositions received some early critical plaudits, Sgt. Pepper sought to blur distinctions between high and low culture and the band members’ side projects forged links with the avant garde. To accept the Beatles as artists, however, required critics to rethink how art was created, disseminated and evaluated and how it interacted with contemporary social, economic and technological change. This article makes extensive use of contemporary journalism, scholarship and fan literature, much of it unstudied, to demonstrate that the rethinking process was contested and protracted. No consensus emerged. Claims made for their artistry, which contributed to a wider discourse elevating ‘rock’ over ‘pop’, were countered by cultural conservatives who defended their own status as artists and intellectuals by exposing the Beatles as kitsch.*

Were the Beatles artists? The question first received sustained attention in an article by the *Times*’ music critic William Mann in December 1963. It stated that John Lennon and Paul McCartney were ‘composers’ who exhibited similarities to Gustav Mahler and Peter Maxwell Davies and referred to ‘the Beatle quartet’ as if it bore comparison with the Amadeus or Végé (Mann 1963, p. 4). The question acquired new meaning with the release of *Sgt. Pepper* (1967), which was pronounced by theatre critic Kenneth Tynan (1968, p. 27) to be a work of genius and ‘Britain’s most important contribution to the arts in 1967’. And it implied something different still when Lennon and Yoko Ono were widely ridiculed in the late 1960s for their experiments in conceptual art, performance, cinema, installations and lithography.

From this one question regarding the artistry of the Beatles flowed scores more concerning the medium, genre, performance, composition, creation, reception, dissemination, evaluation and social context of popular music. As Paul Gleed has noted, most analysis has considered the matter from the Beatles’ perspective by seeking to discover ‘when did the Beatles get all artsy?’ (Gleed 2006, p. 164; see also Riley 1987; Lewisohn 1988; MacDonald 2005). This article is not concerned with the extent to which the Beatles were artists or considered themselves to be so, but with whether they were regarded as artists and intellectuals in the society in which they lived and worked.

Three existing explanations make the case for early acceptance, accreditation and rejection. They broadly correspond to the three events mentioned above: Mann's 1963 article, the impact of *Sgt. Pepper* and the critical reception accorded to Lennon and Ono. Mann's accolades seemed part of a trend when ballet critic Richard Buckle (1980, p. 362) declared Lennon, McCartney and Harrison to be 'the greatest composers since Beethoven' in that week's *Sunday Times*. The early acceptance narrative appears in some of the first rock criticism (Cohn 1969, p. 128) and in an early rendering of Arthur Marwick's 'cultural revolution' thesis (Marwick 1971, p. 175), which cited Mann's and Buckle's articles as evidence that the Beatles had conquered 'all sections of British society' by 1963. It has latterly been given a pejorative slant by Oded Heilbrunner who, following in the tradition of New Left cultural criticism, argues that English popular musicians including the Beatles achieved acceptance by 'modell[ling] themselves on the cultural codes of the English middle class' (Heilbrunner 2008, p. 110).

The second explanation sees the Beatles as achieving cultural accreditation in the second half of the 1960s. This is partly due to their increasing musical sophistication (Womack 2007), but in Bernard Gendron's influential account their accreditation is secured by key interventions from 'literary critics and musicologists ... and pundits from mass magazines' (Gendron 2002, p. 162) which focused on *Sgt. Pepper*. Gendron sees the Beatles' 'acquisition of the status of "artist" as opposed to "entertainer"' as furthering the broader ambitions of young music writers to identify an elevated category of white male 'rock' music and claim authority over its evaluation (Gendron 2002, pp. 161, 203–24). The negative consequences of the Beatles' accreditation are explored by Elijah Wald in *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* (2009). He blames their 'complex artistic experimentation' for helping to resegment American music between black dance music and cerebral white 'rock' (Wald 2009, p. 246).

The third explanation, that of outright rejection, was advanced by the Beatles' publicist Derek Taylor in 1969 when berating 'all the fat and weary intellectuals' who condescended to the Beatles (D. Taylor 1973, p. 177). Taylor was writing in reaction to a televised spat between the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, Ono and Lennon, who was the Beatle most criticised by his contemporaries and the most critical of them. He justified his decision to emigrate in 1971 on the grounds that he and Ono were 'treated like artists' in America but as mere celebrities at home (cited in Watts 1971). Oblique support for this thesis comes from David Fowler's work on attacks on the Beatles by intellectuals in the *New Statesman* in 1963–4 and *Black Dwarf* in 1968–9 (Fowler 2008).

This article argues that each of these explanations offers a partial understanding of the Beatles' critical reception in 1960s Britain. The first section, which focuses on the Beatlemania era, suggests that the unparalleled attention paid to the band and its fans did not signal widespread early acceptance. On the contrary, novelist Anthony Burgess (1963, p. 626) argued that it was precisely because 'Beatle drivell' was 'low [and] corrupting' that it deserved to be exposed. If the early acceptance narrative does not account for the hostility initially facing the Beatles, nor does it explain the equivocation of their first supporters. Mann qualified his praise for the Beatles' music with patronising comments about their fans and pop music as a whole, while Buckle's comparison to Beethoven was facetious in intent.

Neither accreditation nor rejection fully captures the wide-ranging discussions about the cultural value of the Beatles in the second half of the 1960s: the subject of the second half of the article. It draws attention to the ambivalent critical reception of the Beatles' experiments in words, music and side projects, with *Sgt. Pepper* being a

case in point. Producing an album 'to be listened to, rather than danced to' represented a breakthrough to musicologist Wilfrid Mellers (1973, p. 86). Yet some primitivist music critics denounced *Sgt. Pepper* for the same reason that it appealed to the head rather than the feet and heart, while the music press more generally assessed the album in terms of its entertainment value (Julien 2008, p. 8). Mann's recollection that his fulsome review of *Sgt. Pepper* in the *Times* 'made a lot of people very angry' indicates that the band's usual critics remained unmoved by the album (cited in Hollingworth 1971, p. 21).

Whereas the first two accounts of early acceptance and accreditation underestimate opposition to the Beatles' cultural contribution, that of rejection overestimates it. Lennon's was a defensive reaction towards the unflattering reviews he and Ono received for their various artistic endeavours. The article shows that the couple's collaborations displeased not only diehard opponents of popular culture but also otherwise sympathetic critics who championed the Beatles' artistry in populist and anti-modernist terms. Characteristically, Lennon contradicted himself when claiming in 1970 that the 'bullshitter' Mann had 'got people talking about us in that intellectual way ... going, "Ooh, aren't they clever?"' (cited in Wenner 2000, p. 48) as early as 1963.

The article's findings differ in part owing to its different methodology. While Fowler views the Beatles almost exclusively from the perspective of their detractors, here such figures are placed within the full spectrum of contemporary opinions on the band. Heilbrunner (2008, p. 114) conversely cites almost no contemporaries who embraced the Beatles; in the single instance where he lists primary sources, two of the three references are untraceable. Much of what makes Cohn's work so readable renders it unreliable. He admitted to fabricating quotations and his 'cynical' intent of 'slagging the Beatles' to cause 'mild sensation' (cited in Turner 1972).

Bernard Gendron is a much more careful researcher, which paradoxically sits at odds with his highly schematised account of accreditation. His main claim that 'all had changed' (Gendron 2002, p. 163) in American cultural attitudes towards the Beatles from 1964 to 1967 is undermined by the mixed reception accorded to *Sgt. Pepper*. Against the 'torrent of accolades' (Gendron 2002, p. 163) for the album must be weighed the misgivings he notes among several prominent critics. His focus on the accreditation of *Sgt. Pepper* also leads him to simplify developments after 1967. It was not the case that 'highbrow' interest in popular music 'last[ed] little more than one year and was directed almost exclusively at the Beatles' (Gendron 2002, p. 203; see Levine 1990 for distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow culture in the modern era). On the contrary, the late 1960s saw the establishment of the Popular Studies Association, the *Journal of Popular Culture* and the first scholarly American works on pop. These included Carl Belz's *The Story of Rock* (1969), which compared the Beatles' development of 'Rock as Fine Art' with that of Bob Dylan and Frank Zappa (Belz 1969, ch. 5). The concomitant appearance of at least a dozen American academic theses and journal articles on the Beatles from 1968 to 1970 does not square with his claim that the 'brash new academic field of cultural studies' arrived along with punk in 1976 (Gendron 2002, p. 224).

Gendron's American model also maps poorly onto Britain, where the Beatles lived and worked. He suggests that there was 'greater toleration of British high culture toward mass culture' than was the case in the United States (Gendron 2002, p. 164). Yet the Beatles entered a British intellectual world so elitist and circumscribed within a 'London–Oxford–Cambridge Axis' that embracing popular culture, the

provinces and lower classes was an act of dissidence exhibited by 'Angry Young Men' (Shils 1955, p. 11). Wald's thesis is a vital intervention in the cultural politics of race in twentieth-century America, but has little applicability to Britain, where 0.7% of the population was non-white in 1961 (Ballard 1999, p. 6) and where the Beatles were prominent advocates of multiculturalism. The critical reception of the Beatles was also affected by Britain's particular configuration of cultural institutions. No American equivalent existed to its monopoly in licensed radio, the duopoly in television, arts subsidies, competition between Fleet Street titles and the capacity of established music newspapers to develop rock criticism.

This article pairs sources produced by all of these institutions with contemporary satire, academic writings and fan magazines to explore the cultural impact of the Beatles. It is divided chronologically into two. The first section deals with the period of Beatlemania up to and including 1965. The second section concerns the Beatles' later career from 1966, which Steve Turner (2016) convincingly pinpoints as 'The Revolutionary Year' in their artistic development. The purpose of incorporating material up to 1975, five years after their public break-up, is not to consider the Beatles' solo careers, but to consider the first retrospectives of the Beatles' career before punk and how the murder of Lennon transformed debates about the band (see Collins 2014, p. 82).

## The Beatlemania Years

A lively debate about the boundaries between high and low culture developed in postwar Britain in response to pop art, jazz, New Wave cinema and the novels and plays of the Angry Young Men (Hewison 1981, 1987; Sinfield 1989), which made the lack of interest in pop music among the intelligentsia all the more telling (MacInnes 1958). The occasional mentions of the subject appeared in wider discussions of youth culture by left-wing critics, who were as troubled by mass culture as had been Matthew Arnold in the 1860s and F.R. Leavis in the 1930s. Richard Hoggart's unsparing depiction of the aimless Juke Box Boys found echo in subsequent critiques by Eric Hobsbawm and T.R. Fyvel, who proposed extending education into late adolescence in order to combat 'the commercial mass attack directed against youthful minds' (Hoggart 1958, pp. 202–5; Newton 1959; Fyvel 1961, p. 328). The principal charge levelled by such writers against the music industry was that it manufactured and marketed culture no differently from baked beans. Critics emphasised the mechanical nature of the whole record-making process: from the recording of electrical instruments and amplified vocals by 'engineers', through the manipulation of these sounds by a 'producer' at a mixing desk, to the publicity campaigns which channelled 'spontaneous teenage enthusiasms' into profits (Lyttleton 1964, p. 10). Callow stars managed by cynical Svengalis produced ersatz music enriching greedy executives using manipulative marketing to con gullible children out of pocket money.

Early claims for the Beatles' cultural worth did not challenge this analysis head-on. Instead, they followed Brian Epstein's line that 90 per cent of pop was devoid of 'artistic merit' while claiming the Beatles to be 'definitely ... an art form' (cited in Whitcomb 1963, p. 16). Mann (1963, p. 4) saw pop as 'a genre of music in danger of ceasing to be music at all', which made the 'distinctive and exhilarating flavour' of the Beatles' music all the more noteworthy. Stuart Hall and Paddy

Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1964) likewise saw the Beatles as a partial exception to the dismaying lack of 'variety', 'integrity' and 'inner musical life' of conventional pop (Hall and Whannel 1964, pp. 307, 310). As well as contrasting the Beatles with other pop musicians, sympathetic critics also distinguished between ordinary fandom and their own appreciation of the band. Mann (1963, p. 4) disclaimed any interest in a craze 'which finds expression in handbags, balloons and other articles bearing the likenesses of the loved ones'. Moreover, while teenagers preferred the Beatles' 'noisy items', Mann (1963, p. 4) heaped particular praise on their slower numbers: 'This Boy' with its 'chains of pandiatonic clusters' and the 'Aeolian cadence' of 'Not a Second Time' (both 1963). Hall and Whannel (1964, p. 312) were no more enamoured than Mann with 'the disturbing elements of mass hysteria' on display in Beatlemania, while acknowledging the fact that Beatles concerts engendered a more direct relationship between singers and their audience.

The Beatles' adulthood and maleness made them less alien to commentators ill-equipped to fathom the motives of bobby-soxers. So did their apparent wit and education, which helped to explain their unusual compositional abilities and elevated them from entertainers to creators. 'I've never met rock stars who were so concerned with their writing', noted Adrian Mitchell in February 1963 (Mitchell 1963, p. 10), after Lennon and McCartney boasted to him that they had completed a hundred songs and 'a couple of plays' before hitting the big time (McCartney cited in Mitchell 1963, p. 10). Tony Barrow's liner notes for their first LP argued that the Beatles' songwriting betokened a broader creative self-sufficiency. 'They write their own lyrics, design and eventually build their own instrumental backdrops and work out their own vocal arrangements', he stated: 'The do-it-yourself angle ensures complete originality at all stages of the process' (Barrow 1963). The Beatles' artistry attracted further attention with the publication of Lennon's *In His Own Write* in March 1964 and the cinematic release of *A Hard Day's Night* in July 1964. Both received more coverage than Beatles' records in broadsheet newspapers, which had yet to conceive of a 'rock critic', still less to employ one.

The early attention accorded to the Beatles did not, however, translate into ready acceptance of their cultural stature. There was no shortage of traditionalists, sceptics and assorted naysayers in the early 1960s for whom the Beatles simply reinforced existing prejudices about popular culture in general and pop music in particular. In a manner redolent of (though without reference to) the Frankfurt School, British cultural critics roundly excoriated the manufacturing and marketing of the Beatles. The Leavisite music lecturer Donald Hughes (1964, pp. 154, 173) saw the Beatles as corroborating his thesis that 'mass-produced pop' was an escapist and exploitative medium. Marxist historian and jazz critic Eric Hobsbawm maintained that their noise-making was best characterised not as 'music' but as a 'sound' which '[a]nyone can produce' (Newton 1963, p. 673).

Although the Beatles' supporters drew attention to the age gap between the Beatles and their fans, critics pointed instead to the chasm between both and the adult population. Al Alvarez (1964, p. 300) portrayed the Beatles as juveniles engaged in an 'adolescent revolt', which explained but did not excuse their mediocrity. The Beatles' early detractors were unimpressed by their intelligence. They were 'moronic' in Malcolm Muggeridge's estimation: Britain's answer to the Beverly Hillbillies (Muggeridge 1965a, p. 22). The publicity given to Harrison, Lennon and McCartney's selective secondary education invited otherwise well-disposed commentators to view them as having failed to progress beyond that level. Literary critic



Michael Wood (1968, p. 949) traced the 'intelligent, informed and infantile humour' of Lennon's writings back to grammar school: 'the "B" stream' in the precise estimation of Terry Eagleton (1964, p. 176).

The film critic M.M. Carlin noted the 'very patronising' tone of reviews of *A Hard Day's Night*, however positive (Carlin 1964, p. 37). In any case, many of the plaudits went to director Richard Lester and screenwriter Alun Owen, which meant that a film which lampooned the notion that the Beatles were ciphers of the entertainment industry appeared from another perspective to confirm it. Favourable and unfavourable reviews of Lennon's fiction agreed on its resemblance to the nonsense verse of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll and the wordplay of James Joyce. What was at dispute was whether he had anything to add to these literary traditions or was indeed conversant with them. Literary figures such as John Wain concluded that he was a populariser and nothing more (Wain 1965, p. 61).

Their musical originality was questioned by the folk music critic Karl Dallas, who conversely claimed that the formulaic nature of their first recordings was the secret to their success. Dallas (1971, p. 62) thought that their 'genius for pastiche' put them on a par with Lionel Bart, not Bach. The 'bad words' of their early numbers made still easier targets (*New Statesman* 1964, p. 82). Musician and writer Fritz Spiegl (1979, p. 341) doubted whether Lennon and McCartney deserved to be considered 'lyricists' or 'songwriters' after producing doggerel like 'I Wanna Be Your Man' (1963) and trumpeter Humphrey Lyttleton (1964, p. 10) cited 'I Saw Her Standing There' (1963) as exemplifying that Beatles songs lacked '[a]ny really close contact with everyday life'.

It was no coincidence that Dallas, Spiegl and Lyttleton worked in three musical genres overshadowed by the Beatles' success: folk, classical and jazz. Most musicians and critics in these fields took it for granted that the Beatles were musically inferior, yet felt threatened by their commercial success. Cassandra of the *Mirror* somehow held the band responsible for the financial troubles of the Philharmonia Orchestra (Cassandra 1964, p. 6). The cancellation of a Stan Kenton gig in Liverpool (*Daily Express* 1963, p. 16) and the axing of Victor Silvester's *Dance Club* after a 16-year run (Jackson 1964, p. 7) were likewise presented as confirmation that jazz and sweet music had lost their audiences to the Beatles.

The apparently crude arrangements, vapid lyrics and primitive musicianship of the Beatles' early recordings led detractors to conclude that the Beatles' early success had little to do with the band itself. It was fruitless to seek meaning in the words, tunes and actions of four fairly ordinary young men, and efforts to do so were disconcertingly redolent of the obsessive behaviour of their fans. Some critics therefore observed journalist Allen Brien's maxim that 'We don't study a shoe to understand a shoe fetishist' (cited in Fast 1968, p. 124) and directed their attention away from the Beatles and towards Beatlemania. The composite portrait critics painted of Beatlemania was as the opposite of themselves. The Beatlemaniac was young, female, hysterical, incoherent, ignorant, naïve, indiscriminating and conformist; the archetypal critic was mature, male, composed, articulate, erudite, wise, discerning and independent. The fans' youth accounted for their pathetic devotion to the Beatles, prompting Sid Chaplin (1963, p. 14) to express pity for the 'child-slaves' of the music industry. Stupidity and ignorance further predisposed youngsters towards Beatlemania. Anthony Burgess (1963, p. 626) diagnosed a 'cutting-off of the higher centres' of maniacs' brains and Douglas Gillies (1965, p. 656) hypothesised that the appeal of the Beatles diminished 'as the IQ rises'. The pathologisation of female

fandom that appeared in earlier critiques of mass culture (Jenson 1992; Huyssen 1986, ch. 3) resurfaced in chauvinistic remarks about the Beatles' 'pathetic girl fans' (*New Statesman* 1964, p. 82). Although femaleness and mental incapacity appeared to be incurable conditions, Beatlephobes hoped that some fans might simply grow out of Beatlemania. 'Let teenagers scream at the Beatles', counselled Auberon Waugh (Waugh 1963), until they came to their senses.

Having cut the Beatles and Beatlemaniacs down to size, the Beatles' early critics set about doing the same to their educated apologists. The *Daily Telegraph* (1963, p. 8) invoked class loyalty when enjoining '[p]rofessors, writers, intellectuals [and] bishops' to spurn plebeian culture. Donald Soper made a comparable appeal to generational solidarity. He upbraided his peer group for 'trying to cram itself into jeans' and engaging in a 'palsied twitching of bald heads' in time with the Beatles (cited in *Daily Mail* 1964, p. 16). John Gross advanced a more considered argument against ceding cultural legitimacy to the Beatles in a 1963 *Observer* feature. He reasoned that 'pop culture' was simply a new name for the same mass culture that had been exerting a corrupting influence for decades past. The 'myth of pop culture' was being spread by publicists investing the Beatles with a bogus significance and by critics attempting to extract 'something that feels more authentic' from commercial dross (Gross 1963, p. 21).

## The later Beatles

The rapid evolution of their music, lyrics and image meant that the Beatles represented a different cultural proposition in the second half of the 1960s. Moreover, their side projects made further incursions into fields hitherto associated with high art. They directed films, composed electronic music, exhibited art, wrote for the stage, sponsored artists, subsidised a theatre troupe and established a record label which promised to do for spoken-word recordings 'what the paperback revolution did to book publishing' (Zapple advertisement cited in Miles 2002, p. 258). As the Beatles changed in the second half of the 1960s, so did the cultural environment in which they worked. The decision by Karl Miller (1969, p. 602) to revamp the *Listener's* cultural coverage without regard for 'the categories of "high" and "low", "serious" and "vulgar"' had parallels in other publications of high repute. Broadsheets hired regular pop critics in 1965 and *Gramophone* began reviewing Beatles LPs from *Rubber Soul* (1965) onwards (Clayton 1966, p. 82).

The conversion of prominent music critics was another sign of the Beatles' rising cultural stock in the late 1960s. The most eminent convert to the Beatles' cause was the academic musicologist Wilfrid Mellers. During Beatlemania, he was willing to countenance teenagers 'accept[ing] Beatles and Bach', but saw the first as a stepping-stone towards a mature appreciation of the second and distanced himself from any 'inverted intellectual snobbery' suggesting otherwise (Mellers 1964, pp. 502, 501). He rated the Beatles' music as 'OK' and their lyrics as 'fatuous' and condemned the electric guitar to be a 'perversion' of the 'authentic Spanish variety' (Mellers 1964, pp. 501, 502). '[B]analities are sometimes inspired' was the backhanded compliment he gave them in 1966 (Mellers 1966, p. 784).

Mellers then experienced something of an epiphany with the release of *Sgt. Pepper* the following year. He had hitherto conceived of music in hierarchical terms between and within genres, so that the Beatles represented the best of the

least kind of music. *Sgt. Pepper* convinced him that the once 'vast gap between the serious and the popular arts' was narrowing in terms of outlook and artistry (Mellers 1967, p. 770). '[T]hough it starts from the conventions of pop it becomes "art"', he argued, 'and art of an increasingly subtle kind' (Mellers 1967, p. 770). He was at this point unsure whether this signified the Beatles' evolution from entertainers to artists or a broader merger between pop and serious music. His curiosity impelled him to write the first scholarly monograph on the Beatles, published in 1973 (Mellers 1973).

Mellers and other advocates of popular music in the late 1960s were more prepared to challenge the critics' indiscriminate attacks on the music industry than they had been just a few years earlier. Geoffrey Cannon (1969, p. 43) disputed the notion that it was uniquely debased by commerce, arguing that 'vital music has no more (and no less) to do with the "pop music industry" than vital books, or movies, say, have to do with their industries'. Richard Mabey (1969, p. 18) took on the 'prejudice' that the 'laboratory manufacture' of music in the recording studio nullified its artistic value. He claimed that electronic instruments were instruments like any other. In fact, synthesisers were arguably superior to pianos or violins because their ability to produce any sound allowed fuller scope for artistic expression (Mabey 1969, p. 18). Nor could pop musicians be considered mere cogs in a money-making machine. Mabey (1969, p. 17) argued that the idol as a 'creature of the public' had evolved into an artist who was 'very much his own man [*sic*]', uninclined to sing for supper.

The Beatles' fans, who had been something of an embarrassment to the band's defenders in the early 1960s, were now presented as a more discerning lot. George Harrison's observation in 1967 that 'all the people who thought they were beyond the Beatles are fans' had two principal consequences (cited in Porterfield 1967). The first was that the Beatles could no longer be accused of pandering to young, dumb Beatlemaniacs. The Express credited *Revolver* (1966) for making 'no attempt to hold the simpler souls in their following' (*Daily Express* 1966, p. 7) and greeted *Sgt. Pepper* as the creation of 'a group now withdrawn from the screaming hysteria of pop world audiences and dedicated to originality and perfection' (Simons 1967, p. 6). The second was that fandom could be reimagined as being akin to connoisseurship. Mabey (1969, p. 15) envisaged a new relationship between artist and fan now that 'more of the audience is listening', with music becoming a more mature form of communication.

The more sophisticated that the Beatles and their ilk became, the more these critics questioned the value of pop as an analytical category. "'Pop" is now as indefinite a label as "jazz" or "classical music"', stated the *Sunday Times*' music critic Derek Jewell in 1968 (Jewell 1968b, p. 39). That same year, composer Tim Souster (1968a, p. 2) declared it 'worthless' to generalise about a genre encompassing everything from the Beatles to Leicester crooner Engelbert Humperdinck. The distinction between supposedly serious and lightweight popular music eventually became codified as one between 'rock' and 'pop'. The origins of this hierarchical division have been heavily debated in popular music studies and its validity has been widely disputed (Frith 1983; Keightley 2001, 2011). For the purposes of this study, what matters is not whether 'rock' was objectively distinguishable from 'pop', but that contemporaries subjectively considered it to be so and credited the Beatles in part for rock's emergence.

Evidence from critics, musicians and fans shows that the Beatles were widely acknowledged as 'the most influential mentors, catalysts and inspirers of ... pop



adulthood' in the late 1960s (Jewell 1968b, p. 39). However, they were less easy to pigeonhole as 'rock' artists than, say, the Pink Floyd. Their career predated the concept of 'rock' and initially conformed to much of the 'pop' archetype in its unabashed courting of a large, young and mostly female fanbase. However, musicians did not view the Beatles as invalidating the distinction between pop and rock so much as epitomising its evolution from one to the other. Mick Jagger in 1967 pinpointed the release of *Revolver* in 1966 as 'the beginning of an appeal to the intellect' subsequently pursued by the Rolling Stones and 'most of the new groups' (cited in Altham 1967, p. 4).

The pop-rock debate played out within the pages of the *Beatles Book* fan magazine when it polled its readership on whether *Sgt Pepper* was 'too advanced for the average pop fan to appreciate' (F. James 1967, pp. 24–7). A rump of Beatlemaniacs (estimated by the editor to be 5% of readers) pined for the 'head shaking, screaming and ooohing' records of yore (*The Beatles Book* 1967, p. 2; Jan and Chris 1967, p. 19). However, more were pleased that 'the Beatles' music has grown up with me', to the extent of proclaiming the Beatles as 'true musicians' and future Poet Laureates (Janet and Susan 1967, p. 19; Santose 1967, p. 19). The male subcultures studied by sociologist Paul Willis in 1969 also drew sharp distinctions between the Beatles of the early and late 1960s. The working-class 'motor-bike boys' were confirmed rockers who 'ranked the early Beatles very highly' as an extension of 1950s rock 'n' roll. However, they 'despised some of their late "really stupid stuff"' (Willis 2014, p. 89). The very 'melodic asymmetry and complexity of rhythm' of the later Beatles' work which alienated bikers appealed to the hippies encountered by Willis (2014, pp. 86, 10).

Among critics, the establishment of hierarchies within pop music went hand in hand with the erosion of hierarchies between pop and other musical genres. It has been widely noted that the emerging field of rock criticism demanded the acceptance of 'rock' on terms equal or superior to those granted to folk, jazz, blues and sweet music owing to its newfound sophistication and 'social core' (Walsh 1968, p. 10; see Lindberg *et al.* 2005). What is less acknowledged is that critics from within these fields increasingly agreed. *Telegraph* folk critic Maurice Rosenbaum (1968, p. 16) argued that the Beatles' experiments, although largely originating in the folk revival, had repaid the favour by 1968 through 'encourag[ing], with almost every new song they produce, a more understanding and more penetrating approach to the whole world of demotic music'. The *Guardian's* jazz critic Ian Breach (1967, p. 7) declared the Beatles the equals of Billie Holiday, Hans Keller (1967, p. 536) considered them 'truly creative' like George Gershwin and the Composers' Guild agreed in 1966 to admit to its ranks Lennon, McCartney and 'other "pop" composers with a serious, dedicated approach to music' (cited in Nightingale 1966, p. 3).

Still more radical were the claims made in the late 1960s for the best of pop to be accorded parity with classical music. William Mann, who had portrayed the Beatles as an exception to the general insignificance of pop music in 1963, claimed in 1971 that their work and other 'progressive stuff' had turned the best rock into an 'art form' (cited in Hollingworth 1971, p. 21). The American expatriate Henry Pleasants went further in claiming that the terms 'classical' and 'popular' obscured the 'essentially indivisible' nature of music (Pleasants 1969b, p. 29). They proposed that the pop-rock division could be applied within and across genres by distinguishing between music intended to entertain and that with higher aspirations. They also applauded the ambition of progressive music to fuse popular and classical. Mann

(1969, p. 7) welcomed *Abbey Road*'s 'skilful but sparing use of symphonic resources', while Pleasants (1969b, p. 197) envisaged an 'even exchange' between the Beatles and classical and jazz musicians.

However, the Beatles were not always seen as the best exponents of the 'exciting and creative confluence' between rock and classical music (Jewell 1968b, p. 39). Derek Jewell saw them as being overtaken by other progressive musicians in 1968 and welcomed their 'dethroning' in 1970 by more progressive acts such as Chicago and Fairport Convention (Jewell 1968b, p. 39, 1970, p. 30). Other critics warned against the mulish beast produced by the crossbreeding of pop and classical music. Tim Souster (1968b, p. 430) credited the Beatles with upholding the tonal musical tradition in popular music, but considered atonality better suited to composers of 'extended and complex musical expression' such as himself. This argument gained credence from Lennon's musical collaborations with Ono. Jewell (1968a, p. 5) declared Ono responsible for the 'worst' and most 'ludicrous' music of 1968 and awarded *Unfinished Music No. 1: Two Virgins* (1968) booby prizes for the 'ugliest sleeve [and] most boring sound' of the year.

An alternative objection to the marriage of pop and the classics was that classical music could not be saved from itself. Deryck Cooke (1968, p. 157) used the Beatles as a stick with which to beat serialist and aleatoric composers who had eschewed the 'common musical language evolved by humanity at large' in favour of wilfully abstruse and atonal experimentation. It was therefore ironic that just as Cooke (1968, p. 157) announced that he had 'finished with post-Schoenberg music', the Beatles had begun to dabble in it. Critics who shared the Beatles' catholic tastes were unfazed by their engagement with the work of Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage. However, it posed difficulties for Cooke, who championed the romanticism of Schubert and Wagner (Cooke 1959, 1979). Pleasants, who had declared contemporary music 'A Dead Art' in 1955 (Pleasants 1955, p. 14), ridiculed the same avant gardism embraced by McCartney at an AMM concert when 'running a penny along the coils of the old-fashioned steam radiator' (Pleasants 1969a, 95; Miles 1996, p. 237).

The Beatles' later lyrics also found their champions. As with the Beatles' music, their admirers divided on whether the Beatles were contributing to high culture as well as popular culture and whether they offered an alternative to modernism. At a minimum, they agreed that the Beatles improved upon the 'formal and unrealistic' songs of the 1950s and early 1960s (Gunn 1967, p. 129). Some went so far as to envisage them as rescuing poetry from the obscurantism and formalism of a prevailing modernist idiom. Thom Gunn (1967, p. 129) favoured 'Eleanor Rigby' (1966) over W.H. Auden's 'Miss Gee' (1937) for its greater empathy and economy of language. Fellow poet Christopher Logue asserted that the Beatles succeeded where established poets failed. Their poetry was oral, popular, urban and relevant, full of the 'disobedience, sexuality, revolution, new values' to be found in almost all 'good new verse' (Logue 1969, p. 17).

Proponents of the 'New Poetry' (Gunn 1967, p. 17), 'new music' and related artistic endeavours had to decide whether the Beatles could be evaluated using the same criteria as high culture, or whether different yardsticks were required to map a transfigured cultural landscape. For Tony Palmer, the only valid distinction was one of quality. 'Ultimately, there can be only three kinds of music – whether it is composed by the Beatles or Brahms', he stated: 'good music, bad music and nonmusic' (Palmer 1970, p. 22). Other critics preferred to devise new criteria befitting the new

cultural forms emerging in the 1960s. Music critic Geoffrey Cannon (1968, p. 17) argued that rock was a 'culture' rather than an 'art form' and that its greatest creations could not be assessed according to 'any existing cultural frame'. Advocates of this approach placed less emphasis than Palmer on locating the Beatles within an existing canon. They argued that the apparent 'formlessness' of the Beatles and their followers represented a 'form of freedom' of writers un beholden to 'the literary achievements of the past' (Magee 1969) and even innocent of them – Tynan being disconcerted that Harrison had not heard of William Blake (cited in Lahr 2002, p. 29). According to Clive James (1970, p. 574), such ignorance did not invalidate their artistry so much as require critics to reconsider their assumption that 'the ability to create in the arts is directly dependent on scholarly knowledge'. New tools of criticism were needed to assess the Beatles and other 'talented yob[s]' (C. James 1970, p. 574).

The eclecticism and experimentation of the Beatles in the second half of the 1960s did nothing to change the minds of their detractors. They attributed any musical sophistication to collaborators, poured scorn on the lyrics' excursions into poetry and philosophy and found them wanting against a battery of standard tests of cultural value. Claims for the Beatles' canonical status were either rejected or left to posterity. In the early 1960s, critics had confidently predicted that they would soon disappear and take their 'trivial and evanescent' music with them (*Daily Telegraph* 1964, p. 17). However, the Beatles lasted longer than anyone had expected (themselves included). Naysayers accordingly shifted to arguing that 'memorability must be tested by years, not months' (Fuller 1968, p. 494). Since future generations could not yet pass judgement, critics spoke on their behalf. Muggeridge (1967a, p. 743) maintained that 'the eyes of posterity' would look unfavourably upon the Beatles, if at all.

Sceptics credited the greater artistry of the Beatles' later work to producers and session musicians. Proof was provided by composer Michael Nyman (1968, p. 19), who cited 'the pathetic arrangement' of 'Yellow Submarine' for the Black Dyke Mills Band (1967) as evidence of McCartney's shoddy 'musical craftsmanship' when deprived of Martin's expertise, overlooking the fact that the arrangement was by Martin himself. The band's 'modestly accomplished' musicianship came under scrutiny from the *Sunday Times* Insight team in 1966 (*The Sunday Times* 1966, p. 8). It pronounced Starr to be one of the 'most moderate' (that is, worst) drummers to make a living from music (*The Sunday Times* 1966, p. 8). Harrison was adjudged the best instrumentalist of the four, but that made him merely 'passable', one of the top thousand or so guitarists in the country (*The Sunday Times* 1966, p. 8).

The Beatles' later lyrics also did nothing to improve their reputation among their detractors. Jillian Becker (1969, p. 17) answered Christopher Logue's panegyric by drawing parallels between the Beatles' verse and that of Patience Strong and Hallmark cards. Anthony Burgess chose the same two songs which later featured in *The Penguin Book of Oral Poetry* (Finnegan 1978) as evidence of their 'vapid sentiments'. 'Eleanor Rigby' (1966) and 'She's Leaving Home' (1967) concerned themselves with 'suburban little emotions', he claimed, rather than the great themes tackled by great lyrical verse (cited in Palmer 1970, p. 118).

Critics' eyebrows arched ever higher when the Beatles branched out into other genres. They tore into the *Magical Mystery Tour* TV special (1967). Critics divided over *Yellow Submarine* (1968) but united in their disdain for *Let It Be* (1970), *The Times* arguing that it failed to meet the 'minimum technical requirements' of *cinéma vérité* (J. Taylor 1970, p. 7). Still worse received were the Beatles' individual film ventures. *Candy* (1968) and *The Magic Christian* (1969) disillusioned critics who

had seen comedic potential in Starr's performances in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965). The 1969 ICA screening of Lennon's collaborations with Ono, which included slow-motion footage of Lennon's semi-tumescent penis, left Ian Christie unmoved. 'John Lennon's money has given him a licence to talk rubbish and be photographed doing it', was his withering judgement (Christie 1969, p. 15).

Lennon's cultural stock fell with every other one of his side projects in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The mixed notices given to the stage adaptation of *In His Own Write* in 1968 indicated that the novelty of his literary works had worn off very quickly indeed. The skit he contributed to Kenneth Tynan's *Oh! Calcutta* revue (1969, transferring to London in 1970) was considered 'marvellous' only by Ono (cited in Norman 1981, p. 40). Obscenity charges collapsed against his exhibition of explicit lithographs in 1970; harder to dismiss was the *Sunday Times*' accusation that the works failed to 'do anything for art' (Russell 1970, p. 32).

Such criticism went beyond mere disdain. In attacking the Beatles, traditionalists were defending culture as they understood it. They saw themselves as performing their public duty as a clerisy in apostolic succession to Britain's greatest public moralists. The Oxford Professor of Poetry Roy Fuller pledged himself to Matthew Arnold's mission to ensure that 'the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light' (cited in Fuller 1971, p. 17). As Paul Long details in his invaluable *Only in the Common People: The Aesthetics of Class in Post-War Britain* (2008), F.R. Leavis was the touchstone for the educationalists and literary critics clustered around *The Use of English* and *Critical Quarterly*. Brian Cox, the co-editor of *Critical Quarterly* and the associated *Black Papers on Education*, envisaged himself as engaged in a Leavisite 'battle' between upholders of 'the traditional justifications of high culture' and those pushing a "'value-free" concept of culture' (Cox 1971, p. 196).

These critics founded their opposition to the Beatles on the conviction that, as Fuller put it, 'criticism's primary task [is] that of telling us whether the work of art under consideration is any good or not'. The 'chief cultural evil' which he confronted was that this truism was being ignored (Fuller 1971, p. 15). The 'cultural fog' permeating 1960s culture made it possible for people to mistake John Lennon for James Joyce and 'A Day in the Life' (1967) for a work of art (Fuller 1967, p. 305). Fuller's indignation at 'Philistines' who failed to distinguish between 'highbrow' classical music and the Beatles' 'kitsch' indicated how closely he associated genre with worth (Fuller 1971, pp. 12, 14).

The Beatles' critics assumed the mantle of cultural authority, yet feared that those listening to the Beatles were no longer listening to them. Strident proclamations of the insignificance of the Beatles signalled the very opposite. Every time a bastion of culture fell to the Beatles, their detractors experienced a diminution in their power to police the production, dissemination and appreciation of art. Developments in broadcasting, the press and education drew ire and indignation. Malcolm Muggeridge's suggestion that Lord Reith would have given no airtime to the 'Beatles bleat' (Muggeridge 1967b, p. 685) was corroborated by John Scupham, who had recently retired from his post as Controller of BBC Educational Broadcasting. Scupham urged the BBC to 'renew with missionary zeal the attempt to create and maintain a common culture' of an unapologetically highbrow kind by elevating Bach and Boulez above the Beatles (cited in Wiggin 1967, p. 52). The concurrent serialisation of Beatles biographies by the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer* served to 'cheapen' broadsheet journalism in the opinion of Bill Grundy (1968, p. 9), who later famously traded insults with the Sex Pistols. *Punch* (1968, pp. 388–9) produced a mock-up of a



*Sunday Times* front page devoted entirely to the Beatles, including articles by the Bishop of Southwark, Beverley Nichols and Malcolm Muggeridge and Lord Snowden's portraits of the Beatles' dogs.

Anthony Burgess and the historian Max Beloff and Burgess presented claims that the Beatles were the equals of Beethoven as an indictment of comprehensive education. Beloff (1971, p. 47) blamed such sophistry on the same misplaced egalitarianism that wished to do away with selective schooling and 'excellence in education'. Burgess (1967a, p. 11) likewise fretted that comprehensives placed dull children in the same classrooms as 'the educable'. These brighter pupils would be less likely as a consequence to grasp the 'true vision of reality' contained in the great literature, art and science and to distinguish it from 'the travesty-art of the Beatles' (Burgess 1967a, p. 11). Nor was higher education insulated from the same levelling tendencies. Academic interest in the Beatles became a byword for lower educational standards. David Holbrook savaged two further education lecturers who had the temerity to place the Beatles within a 'lesser tradition' of culture (Chorley and Nicholls 1968, p. 48). To him, The Beatles were fit only to condemn; to do otherwise was to be a 'traitor to humanity and to civilised values' (Holbrook 1969, p. 212).

Besides speaking their minds, it was unclear what critics could do to reverse the situation. Suggested remedies ranged from the paternalistic to the coercive. Hoggart (1971, p. 837) recommended that broadcasters steer listeners from the Beatles to Beethoven to give 'more of us ... more chance to hear these good – these better – things'. Marghanita Laski made the case for the state to subsidise a 'high art' which 'consoled, renewed, strengthened [and] purified' its audience as opposed to a 'pop art' which made people 'happy, or excited, or relaxed' (Laski 1965, p. 508). Her observation that 'many people want Beatles and only a few want art' (Laski 1965, p. 508) was expressed in more confrontational terms by Arts Council chair Arnold Goodman, who spoke of a 'battle' between pop groups and high culture (cited in Oldham 2012, p. 304).

Goodman's call for more arts funding was as self-interested as that by educationalist Roy Shaw (1969, p. 5) for educational projects to counteract 'the cultural immaturity of the majority'. Shaw (1969, p. 5) warned that '[m]ass democracy will mean cultural decay' in the absence of public largesse. However, his proposal for government measures 'restrain[ing] the commercial providers of pop culture' (Shaw 1969, p. 5) was tellingly vague and indicated the weakness of cultural paternalism against the forces of mass culture. Fellow educationalist Bryan Wilson (1970, p. 100) was more concrete in his suggestion that the 'the entertainment industry ought to be placed under public examination' through a licensing system. This was censorship by another name, and no more realistic than his plans to sequester students in 'the ivory tower' in order to protect them from 'dubious jazz-musicians, the popular press, pop singers, TV commentators, women of easy virtue and the contemporary satirists' (Wilson 1970, p. 132).

Conservative critics were acutely aware of their own marginality and weakness in the face of mass culture and what they perceived to be the treason of intellectuals who were supportive of the Beatles. The result was a cultural declinism verging on apocalypticism (for the equation of mass culture with social decay, see Brantlinger 2016). A minority of Jeremiads came from the left. The veneration of the Beatles betokened 'decadence' to socialist poet Alan Bold and confirmation that 'the Enlightenment has turned into its opposite' to historian George Lichtheim (Bold 1971, p. 214; Lichtheim 1970, p. 272). Yet they were outdone in their doom-



mongering by those on the right. The crowd at a 1965 Beatles concert so disturbed Noël Coward that he wondered whether 'we are whirling more swiftly into extinction than we know' (cited in Payn and Morley 2000, p. 603). Max Beloff (1971) associated the Beatles with 'Barbarism', Peter Simple (1967, p. 18) invoked Spenglerian fears of the 'Suicide of the West' and C. B. Cox (1973, p. 9) warned of a 'revulsion from the achievements of Western civilisation' among the young.

A defence of high culture spilled over into claims for the superiority of Western civilisation. George Steiner (1974, p. 63) worried that the young no longer saw Western culture as 'self-evidently superior', while politician and occasional poet Quintin Hogg (cited in Scott 1968, p. 5) accused Lennon of renouncing 'the whole of Western culture and dynamism from Athens and Rome and Jerusalem down to the present day' by associating with the Maharishi. The argument that 'western civilisation today was being challenged from within' was most fully developed by John Sparrow, the gadfly Warden of All Souls (Sparrow 1969, p. 629). He pounced on the Beatles' 'muddled animism' and Lennon's comment that 'The Mona Lisa is a load of crap' as evidence of the young's 'desire to repudiate the traditional culture of the West and to reject in its totality the concept of Fine Art' (Sparrow 1969, p. 629, 1971, p. 15). The individualism and experimentalism espoused by the Beatles threatened the body politic. Following their lead, hippies sought to 'escape from the inhibitions imposed on them by western society' and 'live the life of the noble savage' through taking drugs and indulging in the 'hysterical worship of pop groups' (Sparrow 1969, p. 629).

The most apocalyptic models of cultural decline came from religious writers. The Catholic convert Christopher Booker slotted the Beatles into his grand theories about the nature of art and its role in the rise and fall of civilisations. He identified 'two very different kinds of art' across time (Booker 1969, p. 355). One was moral, truthful, profound, harmonious and in tune with 'true organic order' (Booker 1969, p. 348). Its opposite was perverted, sensationalist, superficial, dissonant: a 'vitality fantasy' which fomented disorder in the name of 'freedom and excitement' (Booker 1969, p. 66). According to Booker, decolonisation, affluence and the erosion of class distinctions since 1956 had made Britain 'uniquely vulnerable' to vitality fantasies (Booker 1969, p. 81). The impact of rock 'n' roll in 1955–1956 was symptomatic of the nation's deteriorating 'psychic health', which was then dealt a bodyblow by Beatlemania (Booker 1969, p. 358). The Beatles' 'Ooohs' constituted a 'disturbance of ordered normality' in the androgyny of their 'girlish falsetto' and the frenzy it created in their audience (Booker 1969, p. 65). William Mann's 1963 *Times* article signalled 'the surrender of more traditional forms of culture to this new mass hysteria' (Booker 1969, p. 232). His views chimed with those of Malcolm Muggeridge, who pitted religious and artistic truth against the sordid fantasies of popular culture. The Beatles, the Maharishi and an assortment of modernist writers and artists conjured up 'the bad dreams of a materialistic society' (Muggeridge 1968, p. 12). Their cultural contribution, such as it was, consisted of amassing wealth without talent or scruple, inciting lust among pre-pubescent girls and falling for the guff of Transcendental Meditation (Muggeridge 1965b, p. 27, 1966, p. 46, 1968, p. 12).

## Conclusion

'It is difficult for a civilised, literary man to understand pop', stated the journalist Ray Gosling (1970, p. 11). So it proved, but the Beatles made many of them try. Their

critical reception in 1960s and early 1970s Britain reconfigured debates over the relationship between high and low culture in several crucial respects. The Beatles brought pop music from the margins of cultural discourse to its centre. They joined likeminded musicians in composing, recording, performing and discussing music which aspired to artistic recognition. Yet their background, youth, education, commerciality, popular audience and stylistic promiscuity challenged critics to rethink the very definition of art and its function in society.

However, this article has shown that the rethinking process was contested and protracted. It did not conform to the accounts of early acceptance nor eventual accreditation advanced at the time or in subsequent scholarship. Instead, the Beatles provoked a fully fledged debate about the meaning of culture which showed no sign of resolution at the start of the 1970s. The debate was as much about its participants and their role as cultural critics as it was about the Beatles. The Beatles' detractors tended to be older and more right-wing, but there were many significant exceptions. Moreover, differing and often conflicting views of the Beatles could be found within every conceivable cultural group: poets, playwrights, composers and pop artists; literary critics, art critics and film critics; jazz, folk, rock and classical music writers and musicians.

From one perspective, contemporary debates over the Beatles' artistry created more heat than light and exposed the educated at their most ignorant. Critics misspelt the Beatles' names, misdated albums, misnamed songs, misquoted lyrics, misattributed compositions and misidentified instrumentalists. Richard Williams (1969, p. 1) notoriously reviewed the blank sides of a test pressing of Lennon and Ono's *Wedding Album* (1969) as if they were experimental recordings. Howard Barker wrote an entire play around the conceit that 'Lennon had actually known this girl Eleanor Rigby ... and served her up as song material', which would have made more sense if Lennon was the principal composer of the song (cited in Rabey and Huijser 1989, p. 20).

Champions and opponents of the Beatles sought to dismiss summarily each other's arguments. Tony Palmer (1968, p. 24) maintained that 'only the ignorant will not hear and only the deaf will not acknowledge' the greatness of *The Beatles* double album. Conversely, Fritz Spiegl (1979, p. 341) refused to take seriously anyone who took pop seriously, lambasting the likes of Palmer as charlatans 'apply [ing] musical terms they do not understand to music which is beyond the music-critical pale'. However, the cultural authority of the Beatles' critics rested upon slenderer foundations than they cared to admit. Spiegl had once been an orchestral musician, but as a conductor he specialised in light music and composed theme tunes, one of which was released on Andrew Loog Oldham's Immediate Records. Anthony Burgess (1967b, p. 431) was the only 'serious' British composer whose criticism displayed more than a passing acquaintance with the Beatles' music, while non-musicians based their preference for classical music on 'common sense' (Crosby 1969, p. 8) or their 'depths [being] stirred' (Wesker 1966, p. 4). Clive James (1971, p. 723) had reason to claim that "'High culture" is being defended as a category, rather than as a set of qualities ... by people who are not qualified to defend it'.

The very vehemence of the debate spoke to its significance. However poorly their arguments have aged, contemporaries who questioned the Beatles' cultural value were not simply curmudgeons, killjoys and contrarians. To accept the Beatles as artists meant revising many of their most ingrained assumptions not simply about art, but also about their own status as artists, critics and intellectuals. The stakes for the Beatles' foremost defenders were almost as high. They found

themselves accused of philistinism and complicity in ‘the treason of the intellectuals that is at the root of every society’s decay’ (Beloff 1971, p. 47). That they persevered is testament to the originality and impact of the Beatles and to the febrile state of post-war cultural criticism.

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