

## She Loves You: The Beatles and Female Fanaticism

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## She Loves You: The Beatles and Female Fanaticism



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## She Loves You: The Beatles and Female Fanaticism

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Year I – The University of Western Ontario

The 1960s was a decade marked not only by the Beatles' global conquest but also by the stirrings and eventual advent of radical feminism. Particularly in the United States, women began searching for liberation in various areas of life, such as freedom from traditional domestic roles imposed by the historical patriarchy of society. According to Marcy Lanza, an early American fan of the Beatles, the women's movement "didn't just happen. It was an awareness that came over you – that you could be your own person. For many of us, that began with the Beatles. They told us we could do anything."<sup>1</sup> The Beatles provided the opportunity for women to break free from expected gender norms through a movement that the press called "Beatlemania," a new kind of fanaticism that seized the 1960s with unprecedented ferocity. Beatlemania was the first widespread outburst during the sixties to feature women – in this case, teenaged girls – in a radical context.<sup>2</sup> Despite the long history of feminism, Beatlemania was unique in that it was rooted in areas

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Steven D. Stark, *Meet the Beatles: a cultural geography of the band that shook youth, gender, and the world* (New York: HarperCollins Publishing Inc., 2005), 137.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, et.al., "Beatlemania: Girls Just Want To Have Fun," in *The Adoring Audience*, 84-105, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 85.

traditionally distinct from the political sphere, particularly music and pop culture. Throughout the history of rock and roll, women have always played a crucial role as consumers,<sup>3</sup> but most female Beatles fans exceeded this passive role.

Contemporary feminist scholars such as Barbara Ehrenreich recognize Beatlemania as “a dramatic uprising of women’s sexual revolution.”<sup>4</sup> Historically however, mass hysteria surrounding male stars certainly occurred before the Beatles burst onto the music scene. Neither America nor Great Britain was a stranger to rock and roll heroes in the 1960s. In fact, Elvis Presley had already grinded and gyrated his way to the top of the music charts and into many teenaged girls’ hearts before the Beatles even assembled as a band.<sup>5</sup> Many other artists, such as Frank Sinatra, had also elicited similar responses from their female fans,<sup>6</sup> but while Presley mostly used his sex appeal, Sinatra relied on his romantic and sentimental “crooner” image to achieve the same results. None of them, however, garnered as much attention and hysteria as the Beatles did throughout their career. What was it about the Beatles that made them so appealing to their female audience? Many rock and roll artists of the sixties shared common points of interest that made them attractive to young women, such as upbeat music and sex appeal, but the Beatles successfully managed to expand these conventions. Steven Stark notes that the Beatles had the advantage of having been “oblivious of the blues tradition, as they were growing up in a Liverpool musical scene grounded in skiffle, the music hall, rockabilly, and country music.”<sup>7</sup> Because

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<sup>3</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 129.

<sup>4</sup> Ehrenreich, “Beatlemania,” 85.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love: The Beatles, Britain, and America* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007), 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>7</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 130.

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of this advantage, the Beatles were able to bend and break the conventions of rock and roll that promoted machismo and rebelliousness, and as a result, they played a significant role in the stirrings of a gender revolution.

Unlike many of their musical predecessors, the Beatles, at least at the onset of their career, were a clean-cut group without any rebellious or overtly masculine overtones. Brian Epstein, their manager, orchestrated this image for the group by putting them in matching collarless suits, boxy short jackets, heeled boots and dark sweaters.<sup>8</sup> Combined with their relatively long hair, the Beatles' overall appearance deviated from a traditional masculine image. This moderated type of masculinity made audiences equally interested in the group's appearance and music,<sup>9</sup> and also added to the band members' allure among young female fans. As Stark argues, girls were able to see the Beatles as a reflection of themselves – a phenomenon that would be imitated in the future by androgynous stars such as David Bowie and Michael Jackson.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, in contrast to Presley who was “too phallic and groin-centered” in his concerts and outfits,<sup>11</sup> the Beatles did not flaunt their male sexuality when they performed. This deviation from a traditional hyper-masculine image enabled the Beatles to appear attractively vulnerable.

The Beatles also projected a collective image, which may have contributed to their mass appeal amongst teenage girls. Well-known feminist scholars, such as Deborah Tannen and Carol Gilligan, have argued that while men tend to work within hierarchical structures, women are more likely to create collaborative groups.<sup>12</sup> While both Presley and Sinatra performed

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<sup>8</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 133.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

as lead singers with a band or an orchestra accompanying them, the Beatles performed without any hierarchical roles. The lack of a single lead singer made them rock and roll non-conformists. Onstage, both John Lennon and Paul McCartney would each use a microphone, sharing with George Harrison during chorus or harmony sections. Furthermore, unlike Sinatra, each Beatles' member played his own instrument, again contributing to a collective image; there was no lead singer and back-up band, there was just *the* band. Likewise, most decisions were made democratically; although they had Brian Epstein as a powerhouse manager, the Beatles still made decisions as a group through consensus.<sup>13</sup>

As Stark also points out, the “Fab Four” also “provided hints of feminine sensibility within the largely masculine world of rock and roll,” not just because of their dress or collective identity, but also because they were comfortable covering songs by emerging American girl groups.<sup>14</sup> In the early 1960s, girl groups were a “feminized island” in a musical world dominated by men.<sup>15</sup> These groups were born from a marketing strategy used by record company moguls to capitalize on the booming record industry in America.<sup>16</sup> Composed mostly of teenagers signed straight out of inner-city high schools, girl groups were designed primarily to satisfy teenagers’ need for a “beat they could dance to and performers they could identify with.”<sup>17</sup> Despite the patronizing marketing that accompanied this enterprise, most girl groups achieved substantial success because their music reflected typical adolescent sentiments of

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<sup>13</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 133.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Goldsmith, *The Beatles Come To America* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004), 145.

<sup>15</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

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vulnerability, solidarity, and longing<sup>18</sup> – characteristics that the Beatles were able to incorporate into their own music by covering girl group songs and adopting similar musical tropes.

The Beatles' first two albums, *Please, Please Me* and *With the Beatles*, featured covers of girl group songs such as “Boys” and “Baby It’s You” (The Shirelles), “Chains” (The Cookies), “Devil in Her Heart” (The Donays), and “Please Mr. Postman” (The Marvelettes).<sup>19</sup> George Martin, the group’s record producer, even noted that the Beatles “sound[ed] like a male Shirelles,” with their high voices and heavier concentration on vocals rather than instrumentation.<sup>20</sup> This marked a significant departure from the style of male rock groups of the 1960s, who performed heavy rock and roll and blues. By covering girl group material, the Beatles were not only able to attract a large female audience, they also managed to “[transform] female dependence into male vulnerability.”<sup>21</sup> They accomplished this by changing the gender pronouns in lyrics and, later, writing songs with pronounced themes of sensitivity, collectiveness, and romance.

In contrast, songs in the blues tradition typically spoke of “women trouble,” and for the most part, many rock and roll bands and artists of the period followed this convention.<sup>22</sup> In the early sixties, rock artist Dion released a single entitled “The Wanderer,” which features him singing of living on the road and “[going] through life without a care” and using women as objects of pleasure, not romance. The first verse reads:

*Oh well, I'm the type of guy who will never settle down,  
Where pretty girls are well, you know that I'm around,*

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<sup>18</sup> Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 130.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

*I kiss 'em and love 'em 'cause to me they're all the same,  
I hug 'em and squeeze 'em, they don't even know my name.*<sup>23</sup>

Even the girl group The Crystals capitalized on this rock and roll tradition with their song “Please Hurt Me.” The lyrics of this piece also reinforce an unequal gender dynamic in lines such as

*So darling, if you gotta hurt somebody, please hurt me,  
And if I have to be a plaything, that's what I'll be . . . ,  
I know someday you will leave me, but at least I'll have you for a  
while.*<sup>24</sup>

Given the problematic perspective offered by this tradition, it is no surprise that the female audience gravitated toward the Beatles’ more positive portrayal of women.

In a late 1980s interview, the Beatles’ bassist and co-writer McCartney recalled the significance of the band’s early lyrics: “A lot of our songs – ‘From Me To You’ is [one] – were directly addressed to our fans. ‘From *Me To You*,’ ‘Please Please *Me*,’ ‘*She Loves You*.’ Personal pronouns. We always used to do that.”<sup>25</sup> Acutely aware of their mostly female following, the Beatles wrote songs that would be well-received by this demographic. “She Loves You,” for instance, not only speaks of a common real-life dynamic between lovers, but also – and most importantly – places responsibility on the man, not his partner. This song

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<sup>23</sup> Dion and Belmonts, “The Wanderer,” *Greatest Hits* (Repertoire B000025AZ7), 2001, compact disc.

<sup>24</sup> The Crystals, “Please Hurt Me,” *The Best of the Crystals* (Abkco B000003BDS), 1992, compact disc.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Mark Hertsgaard, *A Day In The Life: The Music and Artistry of the Beatles* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1995), 51.

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adheres to the “advice formula” of girl-group songs,<sup>26</sup> a model that the Beatles used quite often. The third verse says:

*You know it's up to you,  
I think it's only fair,  
Pride can hurt you, too,  
Apologize to her.*<sup>27</sup>

Here, the man is at fault and the lyrics encourage him to apologize, a novel perspective for the time, and certainly a departure from traditional blues and rock and roll themes. Such lyrics also underpin the ideal of the second generation of feminism: the freedom of women from traditional gender-related constrictions. Women in the Beatles' songs were not depicted as the idealized figures described in typical rock lyrics, but instead represented fully-formed characters.<sup>28</sup> The Beatles famously continued this theme of female empowerment in many of their songs, such as “Let It Be,” where the Virgin Mary (or, as some interpretations suggest, McCartney's mother, Mary McCartney) speaks “words of wisdom;”<sup>29</sup> “Lady Madonna,” in which the narrator wonders how women persevere and “[make] ends meet;”<sup>30</sup> and “Blackbird,” a song that is sympathetic to the Civil Rights Movement in America and encourages African-American women to

*take these broken wings and learn to fly*

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<sup>26</sup> Sheila Whiteley, “Love, Love, Love,” in *Reading the Beatles: cultural studies, literary criticism, and The Fab Four*, 55-69, ed. Kenneth Wolmack and Todd F. Davis (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), 60.

<sup>27</sup> The Beatles, “She Loves You,” *1962-1966* (Capitol B000002UYZ), 1993, compact disc.

<sup>28</sup> Stark, *Meet the Beatles*, 132.

<sup>29</sup> The Beatles, “Let it Be,” *1967-1970* (Capitol B000002UZ1), 1993, compact disc.

<sup>30</sup> The Beatles, “Lady Madonna,” *1967-1970* (Capitol B000002UZ1), 1993, compact disc.

*All your life, you were only waiting for this moment to arise.*<sup>31</sup>

In addition, the Beatles depicted women as ideal partners. In “Here, There, and Everywhere,” they sing that “to lead a better life, I need my love to be here” and “if she’s beside me, I know I need never care.”<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in the song “And I Love Her,” the narrator describes a lover who “gives me everything/and tenderly” and praises a love that “could never die/As long as I have [her] near me.”<sup>33</sup> Finally, in stark contrast to the lyrics of Dion’s song “The Wanderer,” which portray a man’s eagerness to leave women behind, the lyrics of the Beatles’ song “Martha, My Dear” implore the subject of the song to remain faithful:

*Martha, my dear, you have always been my inspiration,  
Please,  
Be good to me, Martha my love,  
Don't forget me.*<sup>34</sup>

This egalitarian and complex image of love held particular appeal for women in the 1960s.

Prior to the Beatles’ arrival on the music scene in 1963, young girls were typically quiet followers of the postwar culture, resigning themselves to domestic responsibilities and stricter parental control.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the male pop culture idol

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<sup>31</sup> The Beatles, “Blackbird/Yesterday,” *Love* (Capitol B000JK8OYU), 2006, compact disc.

<sup>32</sup> The Beatles, “Here, There, and Everywhere,” *Revolver* (Capitol B000002UAR), recorded 1966, reissued 1990, compact disc.

<sup>33</sup> The Beatles, “And I Love Her,” *1962-1966* (Capitol B000002UYZ), 1993, compact disc.

<sup>34</sup> The Beatles, “Martha, My Dear,” *The White Album* (EMI B0025KVLU6), recorded 1968, reissued 2009, compact disc.

<sup>35</sup> Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 182.

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became an important part of young girls' lives; the popularity and accessibility of records allowed girls to enjoy the company of their favourite singers in the privacy of their own bedrooms.<sup>36</sup> Through this medium, the Beatles were able to extend their influence on their female fans. As Jonathan Gould notes, the Beatles were able to provide a “socially and emotionally secure environment for the expression of female assertiveness, aggression, sexuality, and solidarity” with their unique image and empowering lyrics.<sup>37</sup> This musical environment allowed for the expansion of Beatlemania, a collective hysteria where girls wept, screamed, and fainted at the mere thought of seeing their idols in person. Such is the influence of the Beatles' music that even today, the group remains one of the most popular and well-loved of all time. From the 1960s onwards, Beatlemania spread “Across the Universe,” forever leaving its mark as one of the most notable influences on the gender revolution that grew into the unrelenting musical and pop culture phenomenon, one that is still remembered and celebrated today.

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<sup>36</sup> Gould, *Can't Buy Me Love*, 183.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

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