

Gurus of the new culture

By Jeffrey Greenfield

The Beatles not only saved rock and roll, they gave it a respectability it had never had, even among the young.

The culturally alienated went in for cool jazz, and folk music was the vehicle for the politically active minority. (The growth of political interest at the start of the '60s sparked something of a folk revival.)

ALONG WITH THE LEAP of Bob Dylan into rock music, the Beatles destroyed this division. Rock and roll was now broad enough, free enough, to encompass every kind of feeling. Its strength had always been rooted in the sexual energy of its rhythms; in that sense, the outraged parents who had seen rock as a threat to their children's virtue were right. Rock and roll made you want to move and shake and get physically excited. The Beatles proved that this energy could be fused with a sensibility more subtle than the let's go-down-to-the-gym-and-beat-up-the-Coke-machine quality of rock music.

In 1965, Barry McGuire recorded the first "rock protest" song (excluding the teen complaints of the Coasters and Chuck Berry). In his "Eve of Destruction," we heard references to Red China, Selma, nuclear war and middle-class hypocrisy pounded out to heavy rock rhythms.

That same year came a flood of "good time" rock music, with sweet, haunting melodies by groups like the Lovin' Spoonful and the Mamas and the Papas. There were no limits to what could be done, and the market was continually expanding.

LOOKING BACK ON the last half of the last decade, it is hard to think of a cultural innovation that did not carry with it the influence of rock music, and of the Beatles in particular: the miniskirt, discotheques, the graphics of Peter Max, the birth of publications like Rolling Stone, the "mind-bending" effects of TV commercials, the success of

The Beatles: The dream is over

Second of three articles

Laugh-In on television and "Easy Rider" in the movies — all of these cultural milestones owe something to the emergence of rock music as the most compelling and pervasive force in our culture.

This is especially true of the incredible spread of drugs — marijuana and the hallucinogens most particularly — among the youth culture. From "Rubber Soul" through "Sgt. Pepper," Beatle music was suffused with a sense of mystery and mysticism: odd choral progressions, mysterious instruments, dreamlike effects and images that did not seem to yield to "straight" interpretation.

Whether specific songs ("Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," "A Little Help from My Friends") were deliberately referring to drugs is beside the point. The Beatles were publicly recounting their LSD experiences, and their music was replete with antirational sensibility. Indeed, it was a commonplace among my contemporaries that Beatle albums could not be understood fully without the use of drugs. For "Rubber Soul," marijuana; for "Sgt. Pepper," acid.

When the Beatles told us to turn off our minds and float downstream, uncounted youngsters assumed that the key to this kind of mind-expansion could be found in a plant or a pill. Together with "head" groups like Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead, the Beatles were, consciously or not, a major influence behind the spread of drugs.

IN THIS SENSE, the Beatles are part of a chain: The Beatles opened up rock, rock changed the culture and the culture changed us. Even limited to their impact as musi-



ExBeatles Ringo Starr (left) and George Harrison (second from left) join Bob Dylan and Leon Russell in 1971 Bangladesh benefit show in New York's Madison Square Garden.

cians, however, the Beatles were as powerful an influence as any group or individual; only Bob Dylan stands as their equal. They never stayed with a successful formula; they were always moving.

By virtue of their fame, the Beatles were a giant amplifier, spreading "the word" on virtually every trend and mood of the last decade. John Gabree, one of the most perceptive of the early rock writers, said that "their job, and they have done it well, has been to travel a few miles behind the avant-garde, consolidating gains and popularizing new ideas."

Yet this very willingness meant that new ideas did not struggle and die in obscurity; instead, they touched a hundred million

minds. Their songs reflect the widest range of any group of their time. Their openness created a kind of salon for a whole generation of people, an idea exchange into which the youth of the world was wired.

It was almost inevitable that, even against their will, their listeners shaped a dream of politics and life-style from the substance of popular music. It is testament both to the power of rock music, and to the illusions that can be spun out of impulses.

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NEXT: The creation of a new class