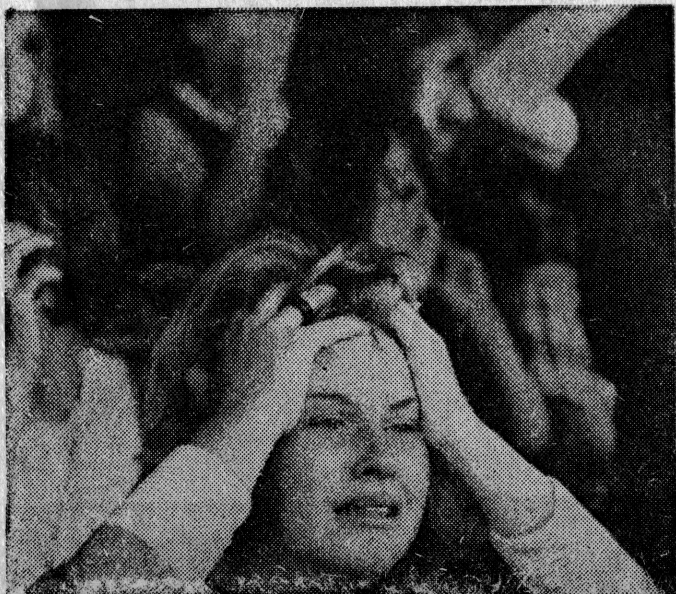


The Beatles: The dream is over



They changed rock, which changed the culture, which changed us

By Jeffrey Greenfield *First of 3 articles*

They have not performed together on a stage for more than eight years. They have not made a record together in five years. The formal dissolution of their partnership in a London courtroom last month was an echo of an ending that came long ago. Now each of them is seeking to overcome the shadow of a past in which they were bound together by wealth, fame and adulation of an intensity unequalled in our culture. George Harrison scorns talk of reunion, telling us to stop living in the past. John Lennon told us years ago that "the dream is over."

He was right. When the Beatles broke up in 1970 in a welter of lawsuits and recriminations, the '60s were ending as well — in spirit as well as by the calendar. Bloodshed and bombings on campus, the harsh realities beneath the facile hopes for a "Woodstock nation," the shabby refuse of counterculture communities, all helped kill the dream.

What remains remarkable now, more than a decade after their first worldwide conquest, is how appealing this dream was; how its vision of the world gripped so much of a generation; how that dream reshaped our recent past and affects us still. What remains remarkable is how strongly this dream was triggered, nurtured and broadened by one rock-and-roll band of four Englishmen whose entire history as a group occurred before any of them reached 30.

THEIR VERY POWER guarantees that an excursion into analysis cannot fully succeed. Their songs, their films, their lives formed so great a part of what we listened to and watched and talked about that everyone affected by them still sees the Beatles and hears their songs through a personal prism. And the Beatles themselves never abandoned a sense of self-parody and put-on. They were, in Richard Goldstein's phrase, "the clown-gurus of the '60s." Lennon said more than once that the Beatles sometimes put elusive references into their songs just to confuse

their more solemn interpreters. "I am the egg man," they sang, not "egghead."

Still, the impact of the Beatles cannot be waved away. If the Marx they emulated was Groucho, not Karl, if their world was a playground instead of a battleground, they still changed what we listened to and how we listened to it; they helped make rock music a battering ram for the youth culture's assault on the mainstream; and that assault in turn changed our culture permanently. And if the "dream" the Beatles helped create could not sustain itself in the real world, that speaks more to our false hopes than to their promises. They wrote and sang songs. We turned it into politics and philosophy and a road map to another way of life.

THE BEATLES GREW UP as children of the first generation of rock 'n' roll, listening to and imitating the music of Little Richard, Larry Williams, Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley and the later, more sophisticated, sounds of the Shirelles and the Miracles. It was the special genius of their first mentor, Brian Epstein, to package four Liverpool working-class "rockers" as "mod," replacing their greasy hair, leather jackets and onstage vulgarity with jackets, ties, smiles and carefully groomed, distinctive haircuts. Just as white artists filtered and softened the raw energy of black artists in the 1950s, the Beatles at first were softer, safer versions of energetic rock-and-roll musicians.

By coming into prominence early in 1964, the Beatles probably saved rock and roll from extinction. Rock in the early 1960s existed in name only. Apart from the soul artists, it was a time of "shlock rock," with talentless media hypes like Fabian and Frankie Avalon riding the crest of the American Bandstand wave. By contrast, the Beatles provided a sense of musical energy that made successful a brilliant public-relations effort. Of course, the \$50,000 used to promote the Beatles' first American appearance in February, 1964,

fueled some of the early hysteria. So did the timing of their arrival.

COMING AS IT DID less than 100 days after the murder of John Kennedy, the advent of the Beatles caught America aching for any diversion to replace the images of a flag-draped casket and a riderless horse in the streets of Washington.

The Beatles, however, had more than hype; they had talent. Even their first hits — "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "She Loves You," "Please Please Me," "I Saw Her Standing

There"—had a hint of harmonies and melodies more inventive than standard rock tunes. More important, it became immediately clear that the Beatles were hipper, more complicated, than the bovine rock stars who could not seem to put four coherent words together.

In the spring of 1964, John Lennon published a book, "In His Own Write," which, instead of a ghost-written string of "groovy guides for keen teens," offered word plays,

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The quartet needed police escorts to protect them from crushing crowds.

The Beatles: Dream that changed us all has e

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puns and black-humor satirical sketches. A few months later came the film "A Hard Day's Night," and in place of the Chords plot of rock movies, the Beatles and director Richard Lester created a funny movie parodying the Beatles' own image.

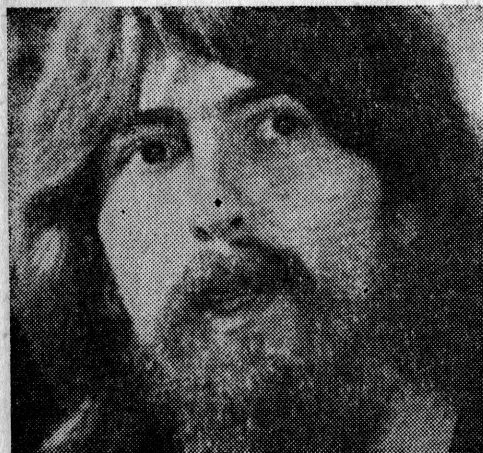
I vividly recall going to that film in the midst of a National Student Assn. congress;

at that time, rock and roll was regarded as high-school nonsense by this solemn band of student-body presidents and future CIA operatives. But after the film, I sensed a feeling of good will and camaraderie among that handful of rock fans who had watched this movie: The Beatles were media heroes without illusion, young men glorying in their sense of play and fun, laughing at the conventions

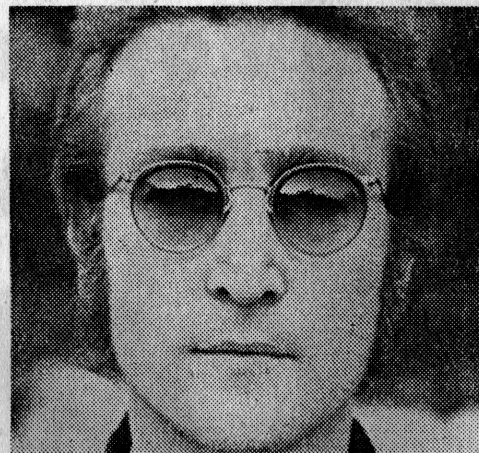
of the world. They were worth listening to and admiring.

THE REAL SURPRISE came at the end of 1965, with the release of the "Rubber Soul" album. Starting with that album, and continuing through "Revolver" and "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," the Beatles began to throw away the rigid conventions of rock-

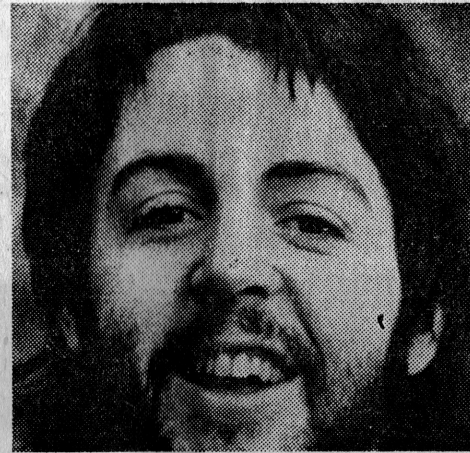
and-roll music and lyrics. The banal, abstract, secondhand emotions were replaced with sharp, sometimes mordant portraits of firsthand people and experiences, linked to music that was more complicated and more compelling than rock had ever dared attempt. The Beatles were drawing on their memories and feelings, not those cut from Tin Pan Alley cloth.



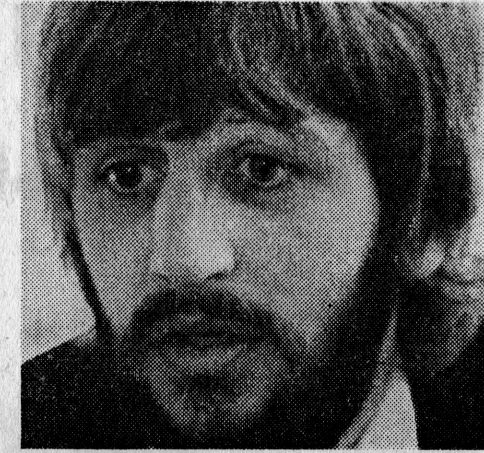
George Harrison



John Lennon



Paul McCartney



Ringo Starr

Each on his own, here's where young millionaires are now

The formal dissolution of the Beatles' partnership by a London court recently leaves four men in their early 30s a lot richer (Millions of dollars in earnings had been held in escrow.), free from any possible legal ties to each other and each increasingly successful on his own.

George Harrison, who will be 32 Tuesday, recently completed a 50-city tour of the United States and Canada that was greeted by critical boredom. The once "silent" Beatle, who was the first to achieve superstar success on his own with the album "All Things Must Pass" and the Bangladesh concert in Madison Square Garden in August, 1971, is still a devotee of Eastern music and religion. During his tour, he regularly turned over the stage for an hour to Indian composer-sitarist Ravi Shankar and a 16-piece ensemble. Harri-

son is separated from his wife, Patti Boyd, who now lives with rock guitarist Eric Clapton, but he has no plans for a divorce. ("That's as silly as marriage.") He has recently formed a record company called Dark Horse but, as with every other ex-Beatle, is obligated to record his own albums for Apple Records until the end of next year.

John Lennon, 34 last Oct. 9, has been by far the most visible and controversial ex-Beatle, enlisting in the anti-Vietnam War, Women's Liberation and Indian causes as the spirit moved him. He is living in New York, apart from his second wife, Yoko Ono, and is fighting a 3-year-old battle against the government's attempt to deport him because of a British drug conviction. He has had a hit single ("Whatever Gets You Through the Night") and a hit album ("Walls and

Bridges"). The release of Beatle earnings will free him from his position as the least financially secure of all the Beatles.

Paul McCartney, who will be 33 on June 18, has lately begun to win back some of the rock audience that found his first solo albums cloying and talentless. "Band on the Run," with his wife, Linda Eastman McCartney, and "Wings," were a financial and critical success. He lives with his wife and their three children on a large Scottish estate, and was most recently in New York for the debut of the "Sgt. Pepper" road show. He also attended George Harrison's New York concert in disguise. He toured England and France recently and is planning an American tour later this year.

Ringo Starr, who will be 35 on July 7, the

last to join the Beatles and the one generally judged the least exceptional in terms of talent, has done very well on his own. He recorded and released two hit albums this year, and co-starred in a recent movie, "That'll Be the Day," which chronicles the early years of a British superstar (probably John Lennon). He lives with his wife, Maureen, in a London suburb.

Lennon, Harrison and Starr are all enmeshed in lawsuits and countersuits with Allen Klein, who managed the three of them after the death of the Beatles' first manager, Brian Epstein. It is said that one reason neither Lennon nor Starr appeared on stage with George Harrison was that Klein had staked out Madison Square Garden with process servers, armed with subpoenas. The case will drag on, probably for years.

ended

"Norwegian Wood" was about an unhappy, inconclusive affair ("I once had a girl/or should I say, 'She once had me?'"). "Michelle" and "Yesterday" were haunting, sentimental ballads, and Paul McCartney dared sing part of "Michelle" in French. (Most rock singers regarded English as a foreign language.) "Penny Lane" used cornets to evoke the suggestion of a faintly heard band concert on a long-ago summer day. Staccato strings lent urgency to the story of "Eleanor Rigby." A sitar, a harpsichord effect, a ragtime piano — everything was possible.

WITH THE RELEASE of "Sgt. Pepper" in the spring of 1967, the era of rock as a strictly adolescent phenomenon was gone. One song, "A Day in the Life," with its recital of an ordinary day combined with a dreamlike sense of dread and anxiety, made it impossible to ignore the skills of Lennon and McCartney. A decade earlier, Steve Allen mocked the inanity of rock by reading "Hound Dog" or "Tutti-Frutti" as if they were serious attempts at poetry.

Once "Sgt. Pepper" was recorded, Partisan Review was lauding the Beatles, Ned Rorem proclaimed that "She's Leaving Home" was "equal to any song Schubert ever wrote," and a Newsweek critic meant it when he wrote: "Strawberry Fields Forever" (is) a superb Beatleizing of hope and despair in which the four minstrels regrettably recommended a Keatian lotus-land of withdrawal from the centrifugal stresses of the age."

"We're so well established," McCartney had said in 1966, "that we can bring fans along with us and stretch the limits of pop." By using their fame to help break through the boundaries of rock, the Beatles proved that they were not the puppets of backstage manipulation or payola or hysterical 14-year-olds. Instead, they helped make rock music the music of an entire international generation. Perhaps for the first time in history, it was possible to say that tens of millions of people, defined simply by age, were all doing the same thing: They were listening to rock and roll. That fact changed the popular culture of the world.

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NEXT: The broadening of rock and roll