

Ladies and Gentlemen—the Beatles!

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2012 marks the fiftieth anniversary of the release of the first Beatles song. “Love Me Do” was first played on the airwaves in 1962. From that time until now rock and roll, and music in general, has never been the same. While it was not overly complicated music, it did capture the imagination of the Baby Boom generation. One critic at the time called the early Beatles’ style, “Three chords and the truth.” That was all it took to make a hit back then. Although as the singer David Grohl, in his Grammy acceptance speech last year said, perfect music is not as good as real music. Today you can polish a sound up with synthesizers and computer technology all you want, but what really counts is the raw truth of it; imperfections and all. Grohl’s sentiment harkens back to the days of Beatles whose brash rawness and innovative sound set the trajectory for everything else. When you are singing the truth, three chords are more than enough.

A significant part of that truth had to do with religion. Particularly in the later years, the Beatles dealt with more serious issues such as

religion, life and death, the peace movement, and of course psychedelics. George Harrison in particular was strongly influenced by Eastern religion. As is often the case with spiritual seekers who take an Eastern bent, George started off exploring one thing, and found himself immersed in another. His initial interest was with the sitar, an Indian version of the guitar, and the living master at the time Ravi Shankar. Through mutual friends, George met Ravi Shankar and began studying the sitar from him. Occasionally he would record some sitar strains into Beatles songs. Soon George began to see that religion was all around him in India. The complex raga system of sitar music is based on Hindu texts. Thus to study a music instrument in India meant that one had to also learn at least a little bit about the religion. That proved to be the first step in George's foray into Eastern thought.

George Harrison was raised a Catholic in Liverpool England. Liverpool is a working class city mostly associated with the shipping industry and the formidable British navy. As a young adult encountering Hinduism for the first time, George began to question a lot of what he had grown up with. Once on a trip back home he was staring pensively at the house in which he spent his childhood. "Why was I born here?" he thought. "Why this place and in this body? What were the karmic conditions that made it possible for this life to arise under these circumstance?"

To answer those questions, George turned to music. “Within You, Without You,” which we just heard, kicked off the B side to Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. Most of the lyrics are a chapter from the Tao Te Ching. “Without going out of my home, I can know the way of heaven. The further one travels the less one knows.” “The Way of Heaven” in the original context meant the Tao, the ultimate state of Being that is unspeakable and unknowable. One need not leave home because the Tao is everywhere. The true spiritual journey is an inward one, not an external journey to some magical place. Even the beloved Taoist idea of *wu wei*, the action of non-action, can be found in Harrison’s lyrics. “Do all without doing, see all without seeing.”

George Harrison’s interest in Eastern religion caught on with his band mates, and the whole group studied Transcendental Meditation with the Maharishi. TM, as it is called, is a form of mediation that involves the repetition of a mantra silently in one’s head over and over; usually when exhaling. By Hindu standards it’s nothing particularly revolutionary. In fact most Hindu masters consider it kind of like kindergarten meditation practice. I suppose that is precisely why the Maharishi thought to teach it to Western people—teach the most basic form of meditation to folks who have not done any before.

What happened as a result was that a whole generation began to look at Eastern thought and mysticism during the 1960s. For most it was a fad that passed away like bell-bottom pants. But for others what

started off as the cool thing to try became a way of life. Almost all of the great teachers that populate the bookstore shelves on Eastern religion today got their first taste of practice during this era: John Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, Lama Surya Das, all of them started practicing in the 1960s and stayed with it. Ironically, George Harrison may have been one of the single greatest contributors to the changing landscape of American religion. Buddhism in America is a complex phenomenon, not easily reducible to single individual, but one cannot deny that the first mainstream presentation of Eastern Religion since Emerson and Thoreau was the Beatles.

It was while he was studying with the Maharishi that Paul McCartney wrote “Lady Madonna.” Also a former Catholic, Paul began to take great delight in moving away from the religion of his upbringing. The Madonna in the song is at times mocked and also revered. Catholic presentations of the Virgin Mary lift her up as the ideal woman. Many feminist theologians have noted the contradictory nature of Mary—she is both a virgin and a mother—two ideals which are mutually incompatible for every woman besides herself.

Paul plays off of this assumption that Mary is perfect. In the song Mary is presented with very human problems. She has to feed her children, figure out how to get money, and even deal with a run in her stockings. The inference is that life is very ordinary and difficult. How does one maintain perfection under such circumstances? Where is the

Holy in the midst of the everyday? Perhaps Paul meant to imply that Catholic religious symbols were irrelevant to such concerns. I am sure it might have seemed that way to him living in India studying this new philosophy, meditating every morning, and hearing lectures by the Maharishi at night.

But I don't know. I rather like the Mary presented in this song. She seems so much more relatable when she is forced to face everyday situations rather than the big cosmic sweep of the gospels. In a way one wonders if this isn't exactly what the Catholics have in mind in their devotion to Mary—that she is present in their daily lives. The holy is imminent with us down here on Earth and not just up there behind some cosmic pearly gate.

When I was in college studying religion we were given an assignment in my Anthropology class. Our job was to pick an image of the Virgin Mary and analyze its symbolism. It might be Mary at Lourdes or the Virgin of Guadalupe. I chose “Lady Madonna” by the Beatles. It was one of those college assignments that stays with you long after you turn the paper in. I had to analyze that song six ways to Sunday in order for my TA to accept it. But it was a lot of fun. I don't remember any Unitarian or Universalist theologians making much mention of Mary, but if they did, I would like to think they would have preferred a Mary who was like Paul McCartney's; human, caught in the

muck of the world, scraping by like the rest of us, but doing so with grace under fire.

Actually at that point in my life it was no surprise that I would have chosen Lady Madonna for my project. For about two years in the mid-nineties all I would listen to was the Beatles. It wasn't because I didn't like the music of that time; quite the opposite in fact. I think I responded to their music because it spoke so deeply to my own religious quest. I was about their age at the time, and like the Beatles of the mid-sixties I was exploring Eastern religion. I was born a couple of years after the Beatles broke up, but I remember my parents having their albums and hearing their music as a kid. Even now the later Beatles albums resonate with me because they were in the background in my childhood. I have developed over the years a chronic curiosity of the 1970s because I sometimes stumble across some cultural artifact, like a picture or a song, that is mysteriously familiar to me. Perhaps you too are curious about your first decade of life. You were there but you may not remember more than flashes or images. The Beatles are like that for me—a familiar image that was powerful at the time maybe because I didn't understand it. It was more primal than rational.

But by my early 20s I was pretty immersed in their music. As I said, I listened to almost nothing but the Beatles and sixties rock for nearly two years. It spoke to my spiritual journey. I was disillusioned with the liberal Christian upbringing I had received. I did not have a

traumatic break with Christianity as some Unitarian Universalists report having, but a break it surely was. That was a very discombobulating experience. I didn't have any orientation—life didn't make sense. I knew what I did not believe, but I had not yet arrived at what I did believe. This moment of transition was for me a time of intense spiritual seeking. I bet this is true for many. In my time as a minister I have noticed that quite a number of people walk through that door because life has dealt them a pretty stinging blow. Unable to make sense of the lost job, the new divorce, your kid with the funny haircut or perhaps living with the other parent now, people go on a spiritual quest. For folks who grew up in the days of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, the nation and the culture seemed to be heading in the wrong direction, and that dissonance put them on a spiritual journey. But we all have our own private revolutions that happen in our lives from time to time and the pattern repeats itself.

Losing faith in the God of my childhood, like Paul and George, I turned to Eastern religion. There I found a way to find meaning and connection to life again in a spiritual way. As it turned out, that profound loss of faith I had was the beginning of my call to ministry—I just didn't know that at the time. To paraphrase the old spiritual, God has to trouble the water to start something new. In my case I was even able to come back around to gain a new appreciation for God imagery and language even if it isn't my preferred religious vocabulary.

All of this found symbolic expression in the music of the Beatles. So that in my moments of spiritual seeking I would listen to other spiritual seekers—they just happened to have done their work thirty years prior to me. But for these things time is not really important. Music is like a kind of time machine in a way. The thoughts and feelings of the artist are encapsulated in the music and when we listen to a song we are transported to the space the artist was in when he or she wrote or sang the song. It is the closest we get to magic.

John Lennon was raised by his aunt. His mother Julia was young when he was born—too young according to family lore. So her older sister raised John. John's father was in the merchant marines and did not play a role in his life. In fact John only heard from his father after he got famous. But his mother Julia would come and visit. At first there was a lot of resentment that he felt about being left with his aunt. But in his adolescent years, John was able to warm up to his mother and they had a very good relationship. Sadly this would not last long, because Julia was killed in a car accident when John was fifteen. This tragedy made John even more angry and withdrawn than he had been before.

But music can serve as a healing balm for old wounds. As I said, it is the closest we get to magic because the artist can transport us into his or her world that they create with the song. Decades after his mother's death, John wrote and sang the song Julia on the Beatle's White Album. Obviously it is a tribute to his mother. "But Seashell eyes Windy smile.

So I sing a song of love Julia. Her hair of floating sky is shimmering Glimmering In the sun Julia.” The Julia of the song is almost as if she were in a dream. The imagery is warm and loving, but also of a distorted memory—like he is trying to grasp an image of Julia that is not solid but nearly fading from memory. But what is solid is the feeling of love even if the object of love is a bit hazy. It is almost like we have entered John Lennon’s mind and are with him trying to remember his mother too. John has taken us into his space. He has transported us there. That is one of the more powerful aspects to the Beatle’s music. The imagery could be incredibly vivid—so vivid that it could inspire whole cartoons off of one song: Yellow Submarine.

Plato said that music is the language of the soul. It speaks to both our minds and our emotions all at once. When we hear good music we are transported to another place. Music, even rock and roll music, can be a kind of religious scripture if you have eyes to see and ears to hear. I think that is particularly the case when the music in question is as vivid and as explicitly religious as that of the Beatles. Only two of them are left now. John of course was killed by John Chapman in 1982; a fan whom he had given an autograph to moments before getting shot. George Harrison died a few years ago of cancer, and a new documentary on his life entitled Living in the Material World came out just this year. I am obviously not the only one avidly listening to the Beatles decades after the last song was sung in the early seventies. It has been about two

years since the entire Beatles catalog was released on iTunes, and it has already earned over 10 million dollars in downloads. Yes that is a record, in case you were wondering. No matter if you are listening to a vinyl rendition of their songs, or an mp3, the Beatles music still has the magic to take us into their world. May it ever be so. Amen Blessed Be.