

The Music of the Beatles

[Ned Rorem](#) [January 18, 1968 Issue](#)

*I'm taking the time for a number of things
That weren't important yesterday.
—from *Fixing a Hole**

I never go to classical concerts any more and I don't know anyone who does. It's hard still to care whether some virtuoso tonight will perform the *Moonlight Sonata* a bit better or a bit worse than another virtuoso performed it last night. But I do often attend what used to be called avant-garde recitals, though seldom with delight, and inevitably I look around and wonder: what am I doing here? Where are the poets and painters and even the composers themselves who used to flock to these things? Well, perhaps what I am doing here is a duty, keeping an ear on my profession so as to justify the joys of resentment, to steal an idea or two, or just to show charity toward some friend on the program. But I learn less and less. Meanwhile the absent artists are at home playing records; they are *reacting* again, finally, to something they no longer find at concerts.

Reacting to what? Why, to the Beatles, of course, whose arrival I believe is one of the most healthy events in music since 1950. What occurred around 1950 will be the starting concern of this brief essay, an essay with a primarily musical approach. Most of the literary copy devoted to the Beatles extols the timely daring of the group's lyrics while skirting the essential quality, the music. Poetry may be the egg from which the nightingale is hatched, though in the last analysis that nightingale must come first.

My "musical approach" will be that of what once was termed long-hair composer, somewhat disillusioned, nourished at the conservatory yet exposed

all his life (as is any American, of necessity) to jazz. It will not pretend to a total appraisal, only to the fact that I and my colleagues have been happily torn from a long nap by the energy of rock, principally as embodied in the Beatles. Naturally I've grown curious about their energy. What are its origins? What need does it fill? Why should the Beatles—who seem to be the best of a good thing, who are, in my view, far superior to all the other groups who pretend to copy them, but who nevertheless are mostly American and perpetuating what once was an essentially American thing—why should the Beatles have erupted from *Liverpool*? Could it



The Beatles; drawing by David Levine

be true, as Nat Hentoff suggests, that they “turned millions of America adolescents on to what had been here hurting all the time...but the young here never did want it raw so they absorbed it through the British filter”? Do the Beatles hurt indeed? Are they really so new? Does their attraction, whether of pain or pleasure, stem from their words—or even from what’s called their *sound*—or from their tunes? Those are the questions, more or less in order, that I’d like to examine.

AROUND 1940, after a rather dim puberty, American music grew up. Cut off from Europe, composers began producing an identifiably native product. By the war’s end we had cultivated a group worthy of export. Symphonies of all shapes were being ground out; new operas were being performed in Mid-western towns; and vocal soloists were everywhere making themselves heard. On one side were Sinatra, Horne, and Holiday, stylists of a high order, wonderfully performing material of little musical interest (when not derived from Gershwin or Porter) and dim literary content. On the other side were

specialized concert singers—Frijsh, Fairbank, and Tangeman—who, though vocally uneven, helped to create a new style by persuading certain youngish composers to make singable songs based on texts of quality.

BY 1950 the export of American music was well under way. But we soon realized that no one abroad cared much. Jazz, of course, had always been an attraction in the Europe that dismissed American “serious” music as not very serious; Europe, after all, was also reawakening after the war. But that awakening was mainly concerned with the past, namely with the dodecaphonic system which in America had atrophied, and in Germany had been forgotten since the war. This device (no, not a device but a way of thinking) was being revitalized not in Germany where it had all begun, but in France. By 1950 Pierre Boulez virtually single-handedly had cleared the path and set the tone that music would follow for the next decade. America took the cue, allowing her newfound individuality to dissolve into what ultimately became the bandwagon of International Academicism.

This turn of events surprised no one more than the composers themselves. Although Copland and Thomson, after Satie, had been reacting in the Twenties against the complicated romantic Teuton soup in which music had wallowed for centuries, in the Fifties complex systems were revived, literally with a vengeance, by certain middle-aged composers (Elliott Carter, Milton Babbitt, Arthur Berger, etc.) whom fame had by-passed during the Forties, and by the young in general; while the randomness of Dada was reanimated by John Cage, Copland, on the other hand, became engaged in serial formality, this time with a straight face, as though intimidated by those deadly serious composers half his age.

These “serious” youngsters, in keeping with the times, were understandably more geared to the practical concerns of science than to “superfluous” considerations of self-expression. When they wrote for the human voice

(which they did less and less often) it was treated not as an interpreter of poetry—nor even necessarily of words—but as a mechanism, often electronically revamped. Verse itself was no longer married to the music, or even framed *by* the music, but was illustrated *through* the music. There was little use left for live singers.

Live singers themselves, at least those of formal training, weren't interested anyway. Modern music was too difficult. Besides it had no audience any longer, nor did the classical song recital so beloved in the already distant years of Teyte and Lehmann. Young singers were lured away from *lieder*, from *la mélodie*, from the American “art song,” until not one specialist remained. They had all been seduced by the big money and chance of celebrity of grand opera. Even today the few exceptional singers are mostly European: Schwarzkopf, Souzay, Fischer-Dieskau. Even the accurate Bethany Beardslee certainly makes no money, while her excellent West Coast counterpart, Marni Nixon, now does movie dubbing and musical comedy. But most modern song specialists have awful voices and give vanity concerts for invited guests.

Elsewhere the Progressive, or Cool, jazz of Brubeck and Kenton and Mulligan was developing, a rarefied expression that had nothing to do with song or dance. The Hit Parade was defunct, Negro stylists out of jobs, and the vulgar vocalists of college bands in low esteem. Song was out.

Meanwhile the wall separating so-called classical from so-called jazz was crumbling, as each division sought some-how to join with and rejuvenate the other. Yet the need for “communication,” so widely lamented today, seemed to be satisfied less through music—any music—than through other outlets, particularly movies. Movies, in becoming accepted as a fine art, turned out to be the one medium which could depict most articulately the inarticulateness of today, even to intellectuals; whereas the intellectualization of music had

ironically alienated the intellectual and has not much interested anyone else.

Myself and a handful of song-writing friends (Paul Bowles, Daniel Pinkham, William Flanagan, David Diamond) who began in the Forties I consider as having come in at the end, as having attempted an irrelevant resuscitation of a creature with sleeping sickness. Most of us have written depressingly few songs lately, and those few emerged less from driving need than from ever-rarer commissions extended by die-hard specialists. Since there's little money, publication, recording, performance, or even concern for songs, our enthusiasm for that most gently urgent of mediums has been, alas, pretty much dampened.

But if the once thriving Art of Song has lain dormant since the war, indications now show it restirring throughout the world—which is not the same world that put it to bed. When it fully awakens, its composition and interpretation will be of a quite different order and for a quite different public.

Since big-time vocalists like Leontyne Price are, for economic reasons, no longer principally occupied with miniature forms, and since “serious” composers like Stockhausen are, for scientific reasons, no longer principally occupied with human utterances (of which singing is the most primitive and hence the most expressive), and since a master like Stravinsky has never been famous for his solo vocal works, the artful tradition of great song has been transferred to the Beatles and their offshoots. Their music was already sprouting a decade ago through such innocent male sex symbols as Presley in America and Johnny Hallyday in France, both of whom were caricatured by the English in a movie called *Expresso Bongo*, a precursor of *Privilege*, about a none-too-bright rock singer. These young soloists (still functioning and making lots of money) were the parents of more sophisticated, more committed, soloists like Dylan and Donovan, who in turn spawned a horde of

masculine offspring including twins (Simon & Garfunkel, the most cultured), quintuplets (Country Joe & The Fish, the most exotic), sextuplets (The Association, the most nostalgic), even septuplets (Mothers of Invention, the most madly satirical). With much less frequency were born female descendents such as Janis Ian or Bobbie Gentry (each of whom has produced one, and only one, good song) and the trio of Supremes. Unlike their “grandparents,” all of these groups, plus some twenty other fairly good ones, write much of their own material, thus combining the traditions of twelfth-century troubadours, sixteenth-century madrigalists, and eighteenth-century musical artisans, who were always composer-performers—in short, combining all sung expression (except opera) as it was before the twentieth century.

For this expression one must now employ (as I have been doing here) the straightforward word song, as opposed to the misleading *lieder* which applies just to German repertory, or the pretentious *art song* which no longer applies to anything. (The only designation in English that ever really distinguished “serious art song” from what used to be named “pop tune” was “recital song.”) Since pop tunes, as once performed by such singers as Billie Holiday and the Big Bands during an epoch not simply dormant but dead, are heard not only in nightclubs and theaters but in recitals and concerts, and since those tunes are as good as—if not better than—most “serious” songs being composed today, the best cover-all term is simply song. The only sub-categories are good and bad. Curiously, it is not through the suave innovations of our sophisticated composers that music is regaining its health, but from the old-fashioned lung exercise of gangs of kids.

That the best of these gangs should have come from England is unimportant; they *could* have come from Arkansas. The Beatles’ world is just another part of an International Academicism wherein the question is to be better rather than different. It seems to me that their attraction has little to do with “what

had here been hurting” (as Hentoff implied), but on the contrary with enjoyment.

No sooner does Susan Sontag explain that “the new sensibility takes a rather dim view of pleasure,” than we discover her “new” sensibility growing stale. Her allusion was to a breed of suspiciously articulate composers—suspicious because they spend more time in glib justification than in composition, and denigrate the *liking* of music, the *bodily* liking of it. Indeed, one doesn’t “like” Boulez, does one? To like is not their consideration; to comprehend is. But surely fun is the very core of the Beatles’ musically contagious expression: the Japanese, the Poles (who ignore the poetic subject matter of suicide and bombs) love them as much as do their English-speaking fans. The Beatles are an antidote to the new (read “old”) sensibility.

The Beatles are good even though everyone knows they’re good, i.e., in spite of the claims of people under thirty about their filling a new sociological need like Civil Rights and LSD. Our need for them is neither sociological nor new, but artistic and old, specifically a renewal, a renewal of pleasure.

WHY are the Beatles superior? It is easy to say that most of their competition (like most everything everywhere) is junk. More important, their superiority is consistent: each of the songs from their last three albums is memorable. The best of these memorable tunes—and the best is a large percentage (*Here, There and Everywhere, Good Day Sunshine, Michelle, Norwegian Wood*)—compare with those by composers from great eras of song: Monteverdi, Schumann, Poulenc.

Good melody—even perfect melody—can be both defined and taught, as indeed can the other three “dimensions” of music: rhythm, harmony, counterpoint (although rhythm is the only one that can exist alone). Melody may be described thus: a series of notes of varying pitch and length, which

evolve into a recognizable musical shape. In the case of a melody (tune means the same thing) which is set to words, the musical line will flow in curves relating to the verse that propels it inevitably toward a “high” point, usually called climax, and thence to the moment of culmination. The inevitable element is what makes the melody good—or perfect. But perfection can be sterile, as witness the thousands of thirty-two-bar models turned out yesterday in Tin Pan Alley, or today by, say, The Jefferson Airplane. Can we really recall, such tunes when they are divorced from their words?

Superior melody results from the same recipe, with the exception that certain of the ingredients are blessed with distortion. The Beatles’ words often go against the music (the crushing poetry that opens *A Day in the Life* intoned to the blandest of tunes), even as Martha Graham’s music often contradicts her dance (she gyrates hysterically to utter silence, or stands motionless while all hell breaks loose in the pit). Because the Beatles pervert with naturalness they usually build solid structures, whereas their rivals pervert with affectation, aping the gargoyles but not the cathedral.

THE UNEXPECTED in itself, of course, is no virtue, though all great works seem to contain it. For instance, to cite as examples only the above four songs: *Here, There and Everywhere* would seem at mid-hearing to be no more than a charming college show ballad, but once concluded it has grown immediately memorable. Why? Because of the minute harmonic shift on the words “wave of her hand,” as surprising, yet as satisfyingly *right* as that in a Monteverdi madrigal like “*A un giro sol.*” The notation of the hyper-exuberant rhythms in *Good Day Sunshine* was as elusive to me as some by Charles Ives, until I realized it was made by triplets over the bar; the “surprise” here was that the Beatles had made so simple a process *sound* so complex to a professional ear, and yet (by a third convolution) be instantly imitable by any amateur “with a beat.” *Michelle* changes key on the very second measure (which is also the second word): in itself this is “allowed”—

Poulenc often did it, and probably he was the most derivative and correct composer who ever lived; the point is that he *chose* to do it on just the second measure, and that the choice worked. Genius doesn't lie in not being derivative, but in making right choices instead of wrong ones. As for *Norwegian Wood*, again it is the arch of the tune—a movement growing increasingly disjunct, an inverted pyramid formed by a zigzag—which proves the song unique and memorable, rather than merely original.

The Beatles' superiority, of course, is finally as elusive as Mozart's to Clementi: both spoke skillfully the same tonal language, but only Mozart spoke it with the added magic of genius. Who will define such magic? The public, in realizing this superiority, is right, though not for the wrong reason, as it was, say, ten years ago with *Lolita*. For while *Lolita* was accepted pretty much as just a naughty novel, the Beatles can legitimately be absorbed by all ages on all levels: one is allowed to dance or smoke or even have a funeral (play-wright Joe Orton's in London) while listening to this music. I suspect that the same public when discussing the Beatles does not do so by relating them to others, but by relating them to aspects of themselves, as though they were the self-contained definition of an entire movement, or as though in their brief career they had, like Picasso or Stravinsky, already passed through and dispensed with several "periods" (which is true). For example, no sooner was the "Sgt. Pepper" album released than a quiver of argument was set off as to whether it was inferior to their previous album "Revolver," or to "Rubber Soul." A critic in the *Village Voice* disparaged *She's Leaving Home* as an imitation of *Eleanor Rigby*. But if one must compare them—the songs are independent and incomparable—the point, as I wrote at the time, is that *Eleanor Rigby*, though set to a poem of touchingly original and quasi-surrealist winsomeness, is a tune as predictable and banal as the average Kentucky carol. *She's Leaving Home*, while set to less interesting verse, is a mazurka equal in melancholy and melodic distinction to those of Chopin.

And what's this one hears about their *sound*, those psychedelic effects produced from orchestration "break-through" presumably inspired by Paul McCartney's leanings toward Stockhausen and electronics? Well, as first demonstrated in *Tomorrow Never Knows* and *Strawberry Fields*, the sound proves less involved with content than with color, more with glamor than with construction. McCartney's composition has not been affected by these "innovations" which are instrumental tricks glossily surrounding the composition. Nor is any aspect of that composition itself more "progressive" than that of the old Big Bands, or the Cool groups of yesterday. The harmony at its boldest, as with the insistent dissonances of *I Want to Tell You*, is basically Impressionist, not more advanced than Ravel's *Chansons Madécasses*. The rhythm gets extremely fancy, as in *Good Day Sunshine*, but nearly always falls within a 4/4 measure simpler than that in Bartók fifty years ago. The melodies, such as *Fixing A Hole* or *Michelle*, are exquisitely etched, but evolve from standard modes—those with the lowered thirds and sevenths of the Blues. The counterpoint when strict, as in parts of *She's Leaving Home*, is no more complex than *Three Blind Mice*, and when free, as in *Got to Get You Into My Life*, has the freedom of Hindemith (which is really Bach without working out the problems presented by the rigors of eighteenth-century part-writing). The Supremes, not to mention instrumentalists like Ornette Coleman, go much further out than the Beatles in this domain. As for their form, most of the songs of "Sgt. Pepper" are less complicated than those of previous albums which, themselves, seldom go beyond a basic verse/chorus structure. It is not in innovation that Paul McCartney's originality lies, but in superiority. It remains to be seen how, if ever, he deals with more spacious forms. But of that miniature one, *Song*, he is a master. As such he is the Beatles' most significant member.

THE LYRICS, or rather the poems, of John Lennon have been analyzed beyond recognition. They are indeed clever, touching, appropriately timely,

and (which is most important) well mated to the tunes. Yet without the tunes, are they really all that much better than the words of, say, Cole Porter or Marc Blitzstein? Certainly Blitzstein's music succeeds in spite of the dated commentary of his words, and Porter's songs remain beautiful with no words at all. We are often told (for instance by Korall in *Saturday Review*) that the Beatles "are shouting about important things," but are these things any more pertinent than *Strange Fruit* was yesterday, or than *Miss Otis Regrets*? And even if they are, could that be what makes the Beatles good? While the film *Privilege* portrays a rock singer so subversive he requires total control, the fact, as Gene Lees puts it, is that "thus far no rock group, not even the entire rock movement put together, has made a government nervous, as Gilbert and Sullivan did." Even if, in a pinch, poems can be successfully political, no music can be proved to "signify" anything, neither protests, nor love, nor even bubbling fountains, nothing. John Lennon's words do indeed expose not only current problems (*A Day in the Life*) but suggest solutions (*Fixing A Hole*); and the music—which is presumably set to the verse, not vice versa—works. But that music is stronger; and, like the slow and meterless Gregorian Chant which altered the "meaning" of the rapid and ribald street chanties it stemmed from, Lennon's words do or don't matter according to how they're sung.

With Billie Holiday it was not so much the song as her way with the song; like Piaf she could make mediocre material seem masterly. With the Beatles it's the song itself, not necessarily their way—like Schubert whom even a monster can't destroy. *Michelle*, for example, remains as lovely but becomes more clearly projected when performed by a "real" singer like Cathy Berberian. Her diction (and the diction of nearly anyone) is better than theirs, at least to non-cockney ears. Even if the words did not come second, the Beatles oblige you to judge the music first, by virtue of their blurred diction.

As for George Harrison's excursions into India, they seem the least persuasive

aspect of the more recent Beatle language. Like McCartney with electronics, Harrison seems to have adapted only the frosting; but in pretending to have adapted also the structure his two big pieces, *Love You Too* and *Within You Without You*, end up not hypnotic, merely sprawling. Harrison's orientalism is undoubtedly sincere but sounds as fake as the overdone pentatonicism of *Country Joe & The Fish*. Debussy, like all his colleagues, was profoundly influenced by the Balinese exhibits at the Paris World's Fair of 1900 which inspired his *Pagodes* and *Lindaraja*. These pieces were as persuasive in the same *genre* as were the concert works many decades later by Henry Cowell or Harry Partch or even Peggy Glanville-Hicks. But whereas these sophisticated musicians without concern for "authenticity" translated Eastern sound effects into Western jargons and then spoke those jargons with controlled formality, Harrison still flounders for faithful meaning where it just won't work: good will and "inspiration" will never provide him with the background—the birthright—which of necessity produced the music he would emulate.

Ringo Starr's projects, when not involved with his comrades, are unknown, though he does seem to be learning to sing with what is quite literally an unutterable charm. Nor have I seen John Lennon's war movie. Thus far, however, when the Beatles are creating their songs together (even more than as a performing unit) they are at their most interesting.

Just as today my own composition springs more from pristine necessity than from driving inspiration (I compose what I want to hear because no one else is doing it), so I listen—sifting and waiting—only to what I need. What I need now seems less embodied in newness than in nostalgia: how many thrilling experiences do we get per year anyway, after a certain age? Such nostalgia is most clearly engendered by the Beatles. There isn't much more to say, since structurally they're not interesting to analyze: they've added nothing new, simply brought back excitement. The excitement originates (apart, of course, from their talent) in their absolutely insolent—hence innocent—unification of

music's disparate components—that is, in using the most conservative devices of harmony, counterpoint, rhythm, melody, orchestration, and making them blend with a contagious freshness. (Parenthetically, their recent *I Am A Walrus*, seems a bit worrisome, more contrived, less “inspired” than anything hitherto. Though the texture may be Vaughan Williams with a Bebop superimposition and all very pretty, the final effect becomes parody of self-parody, the artist's real danger. Though probably even the holy Beatles must be permitted an occasional stillborn child.)

The Beatles, have so to speak, brought *fiction* back to music, supplanting criticism. No, they aren't new, but as tuneful as the Thirties with the same exuberance of futility that Bessie Smith employed. They have removed sterile martyrdom from art, revived the sensual. Their sweetness lies in that they doubtless couldn't care less about these pedantic explications.