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Beatlemania and the Construction of The Beatles' Image

While it would appear that Beatles fans would later be more appreciative of the new sound of The Beatles' music itself, the early stages of Beatles' fandom, better known as Beatlemania, seemed to be associated with the mass produced image of the Four Mop Tops from Britain. Commenting on the publicity and hysteria of Beatlemania many years after the fact, John Lennon claimed, "Our image was only a teeny part of us. It was created by the press and by us" (Lennon quoted in Davies, 187-188). The media seemed to think very differently, however, when the *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that The Beatles were, "75 per cent publicity, 20 per cent haircut and 5 per cent lilting lament" (Norman, 251). This seems to indicate that The Beatles' image was significantly influenced by the buildup from the press. It was the combination of the individual personalities of the four Beatles that started the large fan following surrounding the group, and once the media got involved, the business world recognized the "biggest marketing opportunity since Walt Disney had created Mickey Mouse." This led to the mass production of Beatles paraphernalia and created a music fandom rooted in popular culture and the creation of star identities, not music.

Although The Beatles would eventually receive more press than any other music group to date, it actually took a while for the media to catch on to Beatles fandom. According to Tony Barrow, The Beatles' press officer, there were teenagers throughout Britain going wild about the group, but the papers did not really seem to notice. Many of their songs were becoming instant hits, and yet the news stories failed to exist. Davies claims that the only explanation for this delay is that the British media had never seen a phenomenon of this magnitude before, so they

had very little way of recognizing the hysteria that was brewing (Davies, 169-170). The scenes the media would eventually recount were ones of mass emotion, which had never before been thought possible and likely never to be matched again (179).

A similar situation occurred when The Beatles hit the United States. The Beatles' popularity was slow to catch on, but their performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* on February 9, 1964 would provide the impetus for Beatlemania in America. Considering that the *Ed Sullivan Show* was *the* show to watch back then, it is not surprising that this was the case. Millions of Americans sat down Sunday night to see the new pop group from Liverpool. Each Beatle was given a subtitle bearing his name and a small caption to describe him. John's, for example, said, "Sorry girls—he's married" (251). In this event we can see a clear example of the media's impact on The Beatles' image. By "labeling" each Beatle, the media was presenting a very clear image to the American people about how they should look at each member of the group and the group as a collective. So, even though the media was a little slow to identify The Beatles as the object of a major fandom, once it caught wind of the phenomenon, it was very eager to promote and prolong what would become a hysterical fandom.

Once the media became involved, it was extremely careful and adamant about constructing a specific image for the group. The press seemed to have settled on its view of the Beatles—"the four happy-go-lucky Liverpool lads who look absurd, but knew it, and whose salty one-line witticisms seemed to epitomize the honesty of the working classes, blowing through the seedy lies of the Profumo upper crust" (Norman, 213). A journalist from England's *Daily Mirror* said, "You *had* to write it like that way. You knew if you didn't, the *Sketch* would and the *Express* would and the *Mail* and the *Standard* would. You were writing in self-defense" (213). It is also important to recognize that most, if not all, the journals and newspapers wrote about the

hysterical scenes at concerts and the individual personalities of the band, not about The Beatles' music. This was all a very interesting phenomenon then, because although it is clear the media had a very key role in controlling the image of The Beatles, it also seems like the image ended up controlling them, restricting what they could and could not write about the group.

For Beatles fans, the collective of four charming and witty personalities seemed to provide the basis for their fandom, most likely because that was the aspect of the group that all major publications were focusing on. Barrow said the image of being “four local lads from down the street” made The Beatles extremely accessible to the public and allowed people to identify with the group right from the start (Tony Barrow quoted in Davies, 187). For this reason, it actually became somewhat unacceptable not to be a fan of The Beatles in one way or another.

For example, this excerpt from the *Daily Mirror* said:

You have to be a real sour square not to love the nutty, noisy, happy, handsome Beatles. If they don't sweep your blues away—brother, you're a lost cause. If they don't put a beat in your feet—sister, you're not living (Norman, 221).

According to London's *Evening Standard*, “an examination of the heart of the nation at this moment would find the name ‘Beatles’ upon it” (235). The whole nation had Beatles fever, and it would soon spread as The Beatles and their image traveled around the world.

Teenage girls became particularly caught up in Beatlemania. Many of them, if not most of them, formed romantic attachments to members of the group that often led to obsessions. One fan shed some light on this phenomenon in an interview Davies conducted for his book. She said, “I suppose the Beatles were outlets for love and hate,” and later said, “they all furnished something I desperately needed” (Davies, 189). The Beatles gave young girls an outlet to express strong emotions of love and happiness. At concerts, these girls believed that the boys were singing directly to them. One fan said, “They were being sexy with you personally,” (198) which functioned as an outlet for many young women's sexual and romantic desires. Now, although

these girls all listened to Beatles music, pre-ordered records months in advance, etc., it seems that their obsession with the group, or individual members of the group, stemmed instead from their fascination with the different personalities of the Beatles. Calling upon Cavicchi's article from *Fandom*, we are reminded "the act of loving music often idealized identification with performers" (Cavicchi, 238), so it would make sense that this would happen with The Beatles.

In addition to the influence of the press, it is important to point out how the commercialization of the group added to Beatlemania. Pop music had always been a source for capitalizing on the growing economic power of pre-adolescents and young adults. As Norman says, these teenagers "were a market, undreamed of in size and potential, to be wooed and cajoled by the retail trade at every level" (Norman, 210). Beatlemania, however, demonstrated as never before how gigantic and exploitable the market of young people could be (231). Norman considers it "the biggest marketing opportunity since Walt Disney had created Mickey Mouse" (242). Businessmen started biting at the bit trying to profit off The Beatles' name. Initially, Brian Epstein, The Beatles' manager, kept careful tabs on what products the group would officially endorse in order to control their image, but the merchandising market would get so saturated with knock-off products that it was virtually impossible to control. Any efforts they made to prevent products that might be overtly exploitative of their fans seemed pointless. Fans, then, were able to buy Beatles' wigs to look more like their idols, magazines to learn all the personal details of the band members' lives, plastic figurines, and much more in order to satisfy the desires of their fandom.

So, Beatlemania was very much a product of the aggressive presence of the media and businesses looking to capitalize on the mass consumer market of teenage fans. Still, it is difficult to understand Beatlemania in the context of "typical" music fandom since, in itself, is such an

exaggeration of the norm. They were not just a popular group adored by a large fan base. They were an international obsession. It got to the point where The Beatles felt as if their music was being completely overlooked and unappreciated. Thousands of screaming teenagers had filed into concert venues around the country, and at each place, fans screamed so loud that it was actually impossible to hear the music. This became a huge deterrent for The Beatles toward the end of their touring days since they began to realize that their music was suffering at the expense of their screaming fans. The Beatles recognized that their music would not get better in a manufactured tour routine, and thus, stopped touring and gave up mass publicity for the sake of their music. Although they had enjoyed the collective adoration for a brief time, each Beatle started to feel he was overlooked as an individual artist. It was time to end Beatlemania and become a band people adored for their music, not just their image.

Works Cited

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