



## Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

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Volume 16  
Issue 3 *Fall 2007*

Article 1

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2007

# What Rock Reveals

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### Recommended Citation

Weis, W. Michael (2007) "What Rock Reveals," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 16: Iss. 3, Article 1.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol16/iss3/1>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact [iwumag@iwu.edu](mailto:iwumag@iwu.edu).

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# What Rock Reveals

**To understand the 1960s, students can learn much by listening to the music that defined the era.**

**Story by Illinois Wesleyan Professor of History W. Michael Weis**

Several years ago I began teaching a course I called “The Sixties: Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll?” I confess that the title was designed merely to attract student interest, playing off the cliché that the 1960s were mostly about hedonistic thrills and loud music. In truth, this course focuses on all the relevant topics of that era, from the Civil Rights Movement to the Vietnam War, with the idea that learning about those movements and struggles is fundamental to understanding America, then and now.

But a funny thing happened as got to know the students who had enrolled in the course. When I made reference to musicians and groups from the Sixties such as the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix or the Beatles, they would nod their heads with total recognition. I soon learned that many of them listened extensively to those great artists, as well as other, lesser-known Sixties groups.

What and how a society chooses to remember is enormously important. That we most associate the Sixties with sex, drugs, and rock and roll and not with that era’s social upheavals and political movements tells us a lot about ourselves. The post-World War II baby boom created millions of teenagers in the Sixties who swayed the politics and fashion of their day as no previous generation of youth had done. For those now middle-aged baby boomers, it’s hard to face the reality that precious few of the ideals they once championed have achieved fruition. Listening to the music of those times is more fun than contemplating the era’s shortcomings.

But if simple nostalgia explains the boomers’ obsession with classic rock, the music’s appeal to today’s students is harder to define. I know many of them find the current pop music scene to be mostly vacuous, but they have plenty of other eras and genres they could explore. The punk and New Wave genres of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the alt-grunge rock of the early to mid-1990s produced compelling music but do not hold the same fascination. For a time, I wondered if their boomer parents had exposed them to classic rock so much that it’s taken on the familiarity of a commercial jingle (which, in fact, many of the songs have become).

No, these students declared that there was an even simpler explanation: the music of that era was just plain great.

This past summer, *Rolling Stone* magazine commemorated its 40th anniversary with a look back at the year it was founded: 1967. In that year alone, the following albums were released: *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (the Beatles); *Are You Experienced?* (Jimi Hendrix); *Surrealistic Pillow* (Jefferson Airplane); *Disraeli Gears* (Cream); and debut albums from the Doors, the Grateful Dead, the Velvet Underground and Pink Floyd. That's just to name a few. These albums are undeniably great music, even if one knows nothing about the Sixties. But they are also great because they perfectly express the volatile, exciting era in which they were born.

Rock music provided more than just a soundtrack for the 1960s. It also provided an authentic voice for the baby-boom generation and became the dominant form of that era's creative expression. While some fascinating art, literature and films were produced in the Sixties, none have had rock music's lasting influence. Popular musicians assumed unprecedented roles as both leaders and commentators, which gives the golden age of rock and roll a certain timelessness.

After peeling away the layers of nostalgia, anyone who became a teenager in the Sixties can remember the true power of the music. To us, the biggest events in 1967 were not the wars in Vietnam or the Middle East, but the release of *Sgt. Pepper* and the dawning of the Summer of Love in San Francisco, where Janis Joplin, the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane created not just incredible new music, but also the promise of a new world and a better way of living.



**The Beatles' classic *Sgt. Pepper's* album acted as a soundtrack for the emerging counterculture during 1967's Summer of Love.**

Like countless others of that era, I joined a band in high school as the lead singer for Rhombus and Friends and aspired to be a rock star. I wrote lyrics to hundreds of songs, hoping to be my generation's Dylan or Van Morrison. Eventually, reality set in and other interests led to my current career with no regrets. But my adolescent belief that rock has the ability to change lives still lingers. Perhaps rock can save the world. I saw and felt firsthand that rock could heal, that it could help people feel and express themselves, that it could make us one and whole. I've experienced it at dozens of concerts. That is why the defining events of the counterculture were the big rock festivals such as Monterey and Woodstock.

For me, the truest avatars of this belief in rock's power to change lives were the Beatles, especially John Lennon. Born in 1940 in the tough seaport town of Liverpool, Lennon was raised by his aunt

and uncle. A poor student who was disruptive in class, Lennon had shaped his persona as a rebel with an off-beat, caustic sense of humor by his early teens. Like many other young Brits of the era, he was inspired by American rockers like Buddy Holly and Elvis Presley who expressed that

sense of rebellion through their music. Lennon joined the British skiffle craze, playing a blend of folk, blues and hillbilly music, and formed his own band, the Quarrymen, in 1957.

That same year, he met Paul McCartney at a church garden fête where the Quarrymen were performing. Impressed by McCartney's mastery of his guitar, Lennon invited him to join the group. The two bonded and began writing songs together. McCartney brought his younger friend, George Harrison, into the group, which eventually changed its name to the Beatles.

Playing gigs in Liverpool's Cavern Club and entertaining the rough crowds of Hamburg's red-light district, the Beatles honed their musical and performing skills. Only lacking a suitable drummer, they found one in 1962 when Ringo Starr was recruited. That same year, the group recorded their first single, "Love Me Do," written by Lennon and McCartney. The catchy tune made the British charts. More hits followed and, within a matter of months, they were a phenomenon in England.

The buzz about the band from Liverpool eventually crossed the ocean, and on Feb. 9, 1964, the Beatles made their first live American television appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Although it was the girls who screamed, everyone liked them. Young, charming and witty, they reached America just as the first wave of baby boomers turned 18. Their British accents and androgynous haircuts gave them an air of casual sophistication, safe and exotic at the same time, while their music shined with irresistible energy and fun. *The Ed Sullivan Show* appearance was a triumph, capturing the largest TV audience at that point in history and providing a much-needed release for Americans still mourning after the assassination of John F. Kennedy two months earlier.

By April 1964, the Beatles held the top five positions on Billboard's Top 100, a feat never duplicated. Less than a year later, their record sales had passed the 100-million mark and they became the first musicians to sell out sports stadiums worldwide. As their fame spread, the "Fab Four" became the most recognizable and beloved people on the planet, perhaps rivaled only by Muhammad Ali.

Unlike many pop stars before and since, the Beatles' success was never based on hype. Supremely talented musically and lyrically, the Beatles matured along with their youthful audience and seemed to be able to create or anticipate every new trend. In addition to their musical influence, the Beatles had a tremendous impact on attitudes toward fashion, religion, war, drug use and gender relations, among others. Moreover, this influence was global in scope, crossing racial, generational and political boundaries.

The Beatles' stateside popularity also sparked the British Invasion, as a wave of UK-based groups brought a European sensibility to American youth and made it easier for the entire country to accept non-American culture. At the same time, the music of these bands remained firmly rooted in American blues, country and gospel traditions.

This cross-pollination between cultures is a classic example of globalization. A term first commonly used by economists in the 1980s, globalization is a concept used to study and describe how technological, economic and cultural innovations and influences can spread across cultures in ways both positive and negative. My academic specialty is U.S. foreign relations, especially

relations with Latin America. Globalization is a key concept in understanding how those relations have evolved, especially in recent decades.

Part of what interests me about the Beatles as a scholar is how the process of globalization both influenced them and allowed them to influence so many others. There are many examples of this, which I teach to students in my course “The Beatles and Their World,” but one event in particular illustrates the point very well.

On June 25, 1967, the BBC television program *Our World* televised a broadcast incorporating material from 18 countries. The Beatles were to represent Britain with a new song, performed live.

More than 400 million people watched as Abbey Road studio was transformed into an English garden with thousands of flowers and balloons. An orchestra in black tie played the opening bars of “Le Marseillaise” to achieve maximum international effect. As John Lennon sang the opening verses to “All You Need is Love,” the camera panned to the Beatles, attired in paisley Nehru jackets, surrounded by dozens of adoring hippies and London’s “beautiful people,” some wearing placards, written large in many languages, urging everyone to love one another.

This performance became the visual and musical embodiment of the communal message the Beatles preached, proclaiming their philosophy of universalistic love, and thus can be used to discuss the goals and beliefs of the counterculture. But the performance also highlights crucial components of globalization. The telecast, via a connection of communication satellites, signaled a technological breakthrough as the first event seen simultaneously by the entire world. It was no accident that the Beatles were chosen to make this historic event. No one had done more to create a single global youth culture or to make rock and roll the world’s music than the Beatles. Indeed, the telecast came just three weeks after the release of *Sgt. Pepper’s*, an album which one critic wrote in 1967 had brought about a “unity of the Western Civilization not seen since the Congress of Vienna,” and which *Rolling Stone* magazine recently listed as the most important and best album of all time.

Even past the death of Lennon, who was gunned down by a crazed “fan” in 1980, and Harrison, who died in 2001 after a long battle with cancer, the Beatles’ influence lives on. In 2001, a hits collection, *The Beatles 1*, topped the charts for several weeks. In 2006, their music got the Vegas treatment when Cirque du Soleil’s extravaganza *Love* became an instant sensation. This year, an album of Lennon covers — including tracks by Green Day and the Black Eyed Peas — was



**Weis (left) stands in front of a projection of the Rolling Stones in concert. The Stones were among the biggest of the British Invasion groups covered in a May Term class on the Sixties taught by Weis. (Photo by Marc Featherly)**

released, with proceeds donated to Amnesty International's campaign to end the Darfur genocide.

That the music of the Beatles and Lennon is being used to draw crowds to a Las Vegas stage and to raise awareness about a terrible humanitarian crisis speaks to its amazing versatility and relevance. In fact, no other musicians have ever come close to achieving the impact of the Beatles, and it's impossible to understand the 1960s specifically or pop culture in general without a long discussion about them.

But Lennon himself would likely agree that rock's impact on the so-called revolutionary 1960s, and the conservative reaction that followed, was ambiguous at best. Something was happening, but few knew what it was, to paraphrase a famous Dylan lyric. Rock music both reflected and served as a voice for change, but also at times countered radical movements in favor of the status quo. In his song "Revolution," Lennon sang that it was more important to "free your mind instead" of pushing for social and political change. Such sentiments sowed the seeds of the "me generation" that led to the decline of liberalism and, with it, the ideals of tolerance and equality which the Sixties counterculture espoused. It really is not a "long strange trip" from John F. Kennedy's "ask what you can do for your country" to George W. Bush's "go shopping or else the terrorists win." Rock helps us to see that. And, in a crucial way, maybe the most lasting song of the Summer of 1967 wasn't the Beatles' hippie anthem "All You Need is Love," but "Baby, You're a Rich Man," also penned by Lennon.

I sometimes find myself wondering if the 1980s would have been a less regressive time had John Lennon lived, but that's another "what if" game that historians shouldn't play. Although a conflicted and tormented man, Lennon struggled for peace and love, and he was willing to admit mistakes and change his mind — traits that we sorely need today.

As I and millions of others of my generation grieved his death, almost as if he were a family member, we were also mourning the loss of hope and light that he and the other Beatles brought with them in their journey. Realizing that the songs of Lennon and the Beatles continue to live on helps restore that sense of hope in me. If my students can listen to their music and imagine a better world, then maybe the promises made during that long-ago summer may yet be fulfilled.

*About the author: Professor Weis has taught at Illinois Wesleyan since 1988. He specializes in U.S. foreign relations, recent U.S. history and Latin American history, with a special interest in Brazil. Weis is the author of Cold Warriors and Coups d'Etat: Brazilian American Relations, 1945-1964 and more than a dozen articles on U.S.-Latin American relations. He is now researching the impact of rock music on globalization, as well as the history of the inter-American system.*

*Weis was presented the Student Senate's "Teacher of the Year" award in 1991 and the University's Dupont (now Pantagraph) Award for Teaching Excellence in 1997.*