

# REVIEW | The Beatles and Fandom: Sex, Death and Progressive Nostalgia

*Richard Mills*

New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2020

ISBN: 9781501346620 (HB)

Mark Duffett

University of Chester

*m.duffett@chester.ac.uk*

In Jeff Lieberman's LSD-soaked 1978 disco horror film, *Blue Sunshine*, there is a slightly comic moment where two adult female friends are chatting casually with each other. One admonishes the other for her inability to let the Beatles go. Even before John Lennon's demise, it was as if his band had become part of collective memory: a symbol of both 1960s idealism and the baby boom generation's failure to embrace more 'adult' stresses of life in a turbulent economy. I had that moment from *Blue Sunshine* in my head as I examined Richard Mill's book, *The Beatles and Fandom: Sex, Death and Progressive Nostalgia*. I will open this review with some initial caveats. The first is that I know the author. He is a charming and insightful conversationalist; that comes through in this book. The second is that this journal's reviews editor approached me by saying that *The Beatles and Fandom* frequently quoted my research. He was not wrong: quotes or references to my own work appear on about ten per cent of its pages. After twenty years as a music fandom scholar, I am not sure whether to feel flattered or sue for plagiarism. The latter course of action would be unwise, however, as *The Beatles and Fandom* is much more original than a rehash of my book *Understanding Fandom* (2013). For a start, Mills interviewed about sixty other people, including leading Beatles scholars. He has also read widely about the group and its dedicated audience. What does he use all this research to say?

A good place to begin is with the front cover. The screaming 1960s concert goer who adorns it offers both a stereotype of Beatles fandom (hysterical Beatlemania), and forms a kind of haiku: a mesmerizing image that is simultaneously bursting with emotion yet frozen in the past. The image is symbolic and prescient: Mills builds his study around what he sees as a significant contrast between an unhealthy *mal*

*d'archive* (holding on to the past) and progressive nostalgia (looking back to look forwards). The book's cover and subtitle might suggest something more existential than mere fan excitement, and it is not surprising that *The Beatles and Fandom* mentions Sigmund Freud as early as its third page. However, Mills does not really use Freud as a way to generate further ideas. Instead, his chapters proceed as follows. The first examines letters to *Beatles Monthly*, and drawing on the work of Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1992) locates gleeful lashings of objectifying innuendo from female readers as an early act of women's liberation. In the next chapter, Mills tackles fan conventions. He suggests that all Beatles fandom, to some degree, is predicated on loss or death – the breakup of the group in 1970, plus the subsequent passing of John Lennon in 1980 and George Harrison in 2001 – but rather than loss being the alpha and omega of Beatles conventions, it forms the shared premise upon which fans build a living culture of bonding activities. In the next chapter, Mills examines three major paperback biographies. His basic thesis: because such books inevitably contain a certain degree of fan bias, Ian MacDonald's 1994 volume *Revolution in the Head* is superior to Hunter Davies' *The Beatles* (2009) or Philip Norman's *Shout!* (2005), since it is both more honest about that bias, and better at contextualizing the group in its psychedelic era. This section is followed by one on 'fanaticism' that examines the motives of John Lennon's killer Mark Chapman and Michael Abram, who attacked George Harrison in 1999. While both individuals had connections to Beatles fandom, Mills argues that, in a tragic case of *mal d'archive*, they have turned traumatic childhoods into repetition compulsions that they then projected on to unlucky members of the group. Next comes a section about various reworkings of the Beatles music and image on YouTube, followed by a parallel analysis of recent fanfic. Here, Mills defends mash-ups and slash as keeping a culture alive, rather than transgressing a tradition. Quoting an interview with Beatles audience researcher Candy Leonard, he notes that, back in the 1960s, girls were discouraged from forming bands, so one way for them to acceptably express their creativity was by writing about the Beatles. Mills then suggests that recent Beatles slash is, in effect, an extension of the proto-feminist ethos behind those earlier female fan contributions to *Beatles Monthly*. The two final chapters deal with a helter skelter of Beatles tribute acts and the emergent industry of Beatles heritage tourism, particularly guided walks.

The primary thesis of *The Beatles and Fandom* is that the bands iconic image has itself become a kind of giant myth, a spacious theme park which enables fans to make their own transformative cultural products. That makes some sense, but in its investigations, the book also has drawbacks. I am not simply talking about the choice of empirical subjects – *The Beatles and Fandom*, for instance, says surprisingly little about perceptions of Yoko Ono, chooses Michael Abram above Charles Manson, and focuses on the contributions of some joyously lustful *Beatles Monthly* contributors above fan club leaders or the dedicated exploits of Apple Scruffs. That is understandable: selection is inevitable. There are other, more pressing issues, however.

First – and this is not the author's fault – the book's publisher has gone with a tiny font and crammed the prose on to 44 lines per page (I pulled out another book at random for comparison, and found a more legible 34 lines per page).

Second, particularly in the book's first half, I found myself rather taking issue with its repetitive style and occasional lack of nuance. Key points are constantly repeated; oddly phrased sentences with missing words or spelling mistakes appear quite frequently; some of the concepts are used with a lack of precision or discernment. For example, parasocial interaction is never really discussed, but

becomes a kind of basic assumption: on page 69, Mills explains, “Beatles conventions are an arena where fantasy brings the band back together; in a sense most of the fan behavior in this book ranges from harmless fantasies such as conventions and fan fiction to the psychotic reactions of Chapman and Abram.” Quite what makes conventions “harmless fantasies” is unexplained, but on the next page readers are told that they are “a fora where fans resurrect the dead in their heads through a sophisticated social network which is affirmed on the visual [consuming iconic images].” What it means to “resurrect the dead” or for that matter the definition of “a sophisticated social network” is also at issue here. Such fuzzy phraseology seems to put its finger on things, but nevertheless, still needs a bit of deciphering. Equally, as well as critiquing mass culture ideas, at one point the book says, “Pop stars and religion are wedded because of mass hysteria” (p. 55). *The Beatles and Fandom* evidently does not follow a cardinal rule of academic writing: say everything once, in full, in one place, then move on. For me at least, this encircling approach culminated with some repetitions of large quotes: the same passage appears on pages 8 and 134; a different quote on both pages 125 and 127; and another on pages 122 and 126. I would like to imagine this was some kind of deliberate didactic strategy aiming to make readers think more carefully about what it means to recycle the past – and it may be.

A third, and perhaps as important issue, is that *The Beatles and Fandom* gives fan studies a ‘Fab’ makeover without fully considering counter-arguments to the ideas it presents. This is magnified by the fact that some chapters, particularly the one on YouTube, rarely address their examples in great depth. Most of what Mills offers are now standard ways of treating the subject matter in fan studies. Consider the book’s central thesis. To say that reliving the past is bad, but moving on is good, seems to align or perhaps conflate political and psychoanalytic issues. What is more troublesome is that the border between progressive nostalgia and *mal d’archive* might be more arbitrary and not as firm or clear cut as claimed – in a sense Mills has to spend part of each chapter actively negotiating the distinction.

Such points may seem negative, but they are open to interpretation. They are also more than balanced by the book’s positive aspects. I have pointed out what for me are some immediate downsides, but there are many good things to say about *The Beatles and Fandom*. They include the frequent moments in which Mills excels in the clarity of his prose. These often come when he is discussing empirical details of Beatles fan culture, such as the kaleidoscopic range of tribute acts who appear at Beatles Week. I also loved the way he wrote clearly and insightfully about Ian MacDonald’s *Revolution In The Head* and its project to evoke the spirit of the 1960s as a form of social resistance. Mills definitely has a talent for literary appreciation and that comes through in some of the best passages of his text.

As well as that moment in *Blue Sunshine*, as I was reading *The Beatles and Fandom*, my mind kept pondering Karl Marx’s famous 1852 dictum from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” *The Beatles and Fandom* acknowledges these circumstances, as much in relation to young women making history as “men”, but Mills seems more optimistic than Marx in the context of that acknowledgement. For the mid-1960s Beatles, the transmitted circumstance in which Beatles fans made history in *Beatles Monthly* was that manager Brian Epstein decided to replace the group’s quiffs and black leather with mop-tops and Pierre Cardin suits. He styled them as wholesome for pop domination: to allow female fans room to make exuberant, lusty overtures about

the band as if they had arrived at their own conclusions. This complicates both mass culture interpretations (that fans were exploited) and proto-feminist transformative ones (that the girls actively appropriated the Beatles). We therefore need to find theory that will help us fully discern what context and agency has meant in each historical period. Unfortunately, *The Beatles and Fandom* does not offer a strong enough historical frame to get further along that road. I recommend Douglas Brode's 2006 book *Elvis Cinema and Popular Culture* for a more detailed vision of how gender and courtship ideas changed, almost month by month, in the first half of the 1960s. Rather than surveying fan scholars, using something like Brode's exacting historical frame of analysis to understand the *Beatles Monthly* contributions here might have done wonders.

Ultimately, the thesis that the Beatles' individual and collective celebrity image forms a kind of festive space within which fans can indulge in transformative work perhaps misses something else that is equally important. Music fandom is itself a generalization encapsulating a vast array of experiences and empirical realities. This locates the term as an abstraction or role; something equivalent to musicianship or similar terms. 'Fandom' itself forms a kind of theme park or playground that fan scholars can remake in their own image. It has become a Rorschach test for the concerns of an academic environment shaped by grant-friendly buzz words like 'participation' and 'wellbeing'. To his credit, in the book's conclusion, Richard Mills carefully acknowledges his own ethical stance and explicitly discusses his opposition, for example, to the snobbery that has dismissed Beatles fandom as an epiphenomenon which has obfuscated our view of the greatest group in pop history. Although I have expressed a few misgivings about Mills' book, what I can honestly say is that I found it hard to put down. On such grounds, *The Beatles and Fandom* is absolutely recommended reading for Beatles researchers and music fandom scholars.

## References

### *Bibliography*

- Brode, D. 2006. *Elvis Cinema and Popular Culture*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Davies, H. 2009 (1968). *The Beatles*. London: Ebury Press.
- Duffett, M. 2013. *Understanding Fandom. An Introduction to the Study of Media Fan Culture*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ehrenreich, B. and Hess, E. and Jacobs, G. 1992. Beatlemania: Girls Just Want to Have Fun. In L. Lewis. Ed. *The Adoring Audience*. London: Routledge: 84–106.
- Hebdige, D. 2013 (1978). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- MacDonald, I. 2008 (1994). *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles Records and the 1960s*. London: Vintage.
- Marx, K. 1852. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte: Chapter 1*, 2006. Available at : <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> Accessed 18 Sept 2020.
- Norman, P. 2005 (1981). *The Beatles in their Generation: Shout!* London: Fireside.

*Videography*

*Blue Sunshine*. 1978. Dir. Jeff Lieberman, Ellanby Films.