

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

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Abstract and Keywords

The conventional narrative of the Beatles’ history follows the group from their days as young club performers to early retirement from the stage in summer 1966, prompted by their growing dissatisfaction with the constraints of live performance. When, in 2009, the video game *The Beatles: Rock Band* was released, it seemed the group had been reborn as virtual performers after an absence of several decades. However, this chapter suggests the Beatles had already become virtual performers more than forty years earlier. Close inspection of their activities during the 1960s reveals there were numerous occasions on which the group participated in musical scenarios, through their movies, animated cartoons, and promotional films, that were in fact effective simulations of the conventional performer-audience encounter. The career of the Beatles as virtual performers thus began many years before their rebirth in the world of digital animation.

Keywords: mediatization, Beatles, television, movies, simulation, virtual, performance, audiences

□ □ narrative of the Beatles is one of the most familiar in popular music’s history. It tells us that after years of limited success in the clubs of Liverpool and Hamburg, the group became the most influential and successful musical force of the 1960s; its singles and albums were, and remain, the definitive soundtrack of the decade. Amid unprecedented scenes of global fan hysteria, the Beatles—as performers, songwriters, and recording artists—transformed conventional understandings of the strategic importance of popular music, and inspired generations of future musicians. However, after some fourteen hundred stage appearances, their growing discontent with the constraints of live performance led them to abandon it in the summer of 1966. The decision was prompted not by the exhausting routines of touring per se, but by the negative impact it had on their abilities as performers:

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

George Harrison: We got in a rut, going round the world. It was a different audience each day, but we were doing the same things. There was no satisfaction in it. Nobody could hear. It was just a bloody big row. We got worse as musicians, playing the same old junk every day. There was no satisfaction at all.

—Davies (1968, 232)

Evidence of the chaotic nature of those shows is visible in *The Beatles at Shea Stadium*, the TV documentary filmed during the group’s historic concert in August 1965. They run out onto the field, heavily guarded, to be faced by fifty-five thousand screaming fans who create a nonstop din so loud it is impossible for the audience to hear the music, or for the Beatles to hear themselves. Fans faint and swoon; some attempt to rush the stage and are carried off by police. At one point, John Lennon looks to the heavens and speaks in gibberish, presumably because he realizes that no one is listening; at another, he pounds the organ with his elbows, in the knowledge that whatever (p. 36) sounds are produced will remain unheard. Ringo Starr’s comments on the concert clearly regretted the lack of genuine contact between audience and performers:

What I remember most about the concert was that we were so far away from the audience [...] I like to have the audience right in my face. I like to have some reaction, something going on between me and them. It was just very distant at Shea [...] it was totally against what we had started out to achieve, which was to entertain, right *there*, up close.

—Beatles (2000, 187)

Following the Beatles’ final live performance, at San Francisco’s Candlestick Park in August 1966, the creation of their music took place exclusively in the recording studio, reaching its perceived summit with the release of *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* in 1967. After the group formally disbanded in 1970, the four Beatles pursued independent solo careers during which they returned, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to live concert performances.

In the decades that followed, the increasing availability of substantial quantities of previously unreleased audio recordings of the group—*The Beatles Live! At the Star-Club in Hamburg, Germany, 1962* (1977); *The Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl* (1977); *The Beatles Live at the BBC* (1994)—and video—*The Complete Ed Sullivan Shows* (2004); *The Beatles at the Budokan, Tokyo* (2007); *The Beatles at Shea Stadium* (2008)—provided a nostalgic record of its live history that was welcomed by contemporary audiences, but that unequivocally confirmed the performing career of the Beatles as a phenomenon of the 1960s. Thus, in 2009, when the video game *The Beatles: Rock Band* was released, it

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

seemed as though the group had been reborn as virtual performers after an absence of several decades. By allowing players to participate in instrumental and vocal performances of more than forty Beatles tracks, the game established a simulated form of interaction, in which the Beatles were reintroduced to the modern world as co-performers:

Meet The Beatles! Rock The World! Follow the legendary career of the Beatles from Liverpool to Shea Stadium to Abbey Road. Play drums, lead guitar, bass guitar and sing three-part harmony with up to three microphones. Feel what it's like to perform the Beatles' classic songs, on stage and in the studio.

—Harmonix Music Systems (2009, sleevenotes)

The game was received with huge critical acclaim. *The Guardian* drew attention to its aesthetic form, in which “clever montages detailing the different ages and visual identities of the band evoke a feeling of vicarious Beatles membership [...] the joy of playing along to Beatles songs is deeply infectious” (Boxer 2009, 2). Reviews also praised its employment of innovative technologies to present the “virtual Beatles” to diverse audiences, many of whom were born long after opportunities to see and hear the “real Beatles” had disappeared; the *New York Times* concluded that “by reinterpreting an (p. 37) essential symbol of one generation in the medium and technology of another, *The Beatles: Rock Band* provides a transformative entertainment experience [...] that will not only introduce the Beatles' music to a new audience but also will simultaneously bring millions of their less-hidebound parents into gaming” (Schiesel 2009, 1).

However, we suggest that closer inspection of the Beatles' activities through the 1960s reveals there were numerous occasions on which the group participated in musical scenarios that were, in fact, effective simulations of the conventional performer-audience encounter. In many ways, this may be a surprising assertion. Sarah Thornton's observation that “while authenticity is attributed to many different sounds, between the mid-50s and the mid-80s, its main site was the live gig: in this period, ‘liveness’ dominated notions of authenticity ... the essence or truth of music was located in its performance by musicians in front of an audience” (1995, 26) may appear to be at odds with our argument. However, we would suggest that even during their active career, audiences' perceptions of the Beatles' movies, animated cartoons, and promotional films were guided by their knowledge of the group as live performers: the authenticity and ultimate success of the virtual Beatles thus derived from that attributed to the performance history of their corporeal counterparts. In this sense, our argument ultimately is not entirely at odds with Thornton's, although our emphasis will be that the career of the Beatles as virtual performers began many years before their rebirth in the world of digital animation.

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

We understand the term *virtual performer* to refer to performers who are available to their audiences only as mediated representations, rather than in corporeal human form. Recent examples include the back-from-the-dead version of Tupac Shakur that performed at Coachella 2012, the three-dimensional animated cartoon “members” of Gorillaz, the video projection of Elvis Presley that forms the central attraction of the *Elvis Presley in Concert* touring production, the inclusion of the simulated character Aimi Eguchi within the Japanese girl band AKB48, and the virtual versions of Madonna and the Black Eyed Peas.¹ In cases where musicians perform both live and in mediated representational spaces (such as Madonna, the Black Eyed Peas, or indeed, any musicians who both make music videos and play live), their virtual versions supplement their live presence. In cases where the musicians are deceased or have decided not to perform live anymore, as is the case for the Beatles and Presley, their virtual versions become surrogates rather than supplements, the only form in which the artists remain available as performers.

Whereas the contemporary virtual versions of Tupac, Madonna, et al. are products of the Musion Eyeliner projection system, a digital technology that creates the illusion of live, three-dimensional presences, the Beatles could avail themselves only of analog media in constructing virtual versions who appeared on television and cinema screens long before they showed up via the videogame console. Of course, the rationale behind these strategies was not new. As exemplified by the career of Bing Crosby, who used a range of radio, film, and television appearances to supplement his concert performances, and Elvis Presley, who made twenty-seven films between his release from the U.S. Army in March 1960 and his return to live performance on the stage of Las Vegas’s (p. 38) International Hotel in July 1969, a partial or substantial reliance on mediated representations has long been a familiar option for many musicians. However, once the Beatles abandoned the stage forever, such representations were the only ones within reach of their audiences and, as such, introduced new elements into the relationship between the group and its fans.

From the mid-1960s onward, the group’s virtual surrogates included the Beatles as cartoon characters, in the ABC-TV series *The Beatles* (1965–1967) and in the feature film *Yellow Submarine* (1968); the Beatles performing in a series of promotional films made to accompany their singles from “Rain” (1966) through “Something” (1970); the Beatles as characters in their television film *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967); and the Beatles as themselves in the documentary *Let It Be* (1970), which includes the famous “impromptu” concert held atop the roof of Apple’s Savile Row headquarters.

By maintaining a virtual presence on such occasions, the Beatles not only could shore up their continued popularity and offer fans means of engaging with them other than their recordings, but were also able to maintain their status as cultural leaders and innovators;

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

thus *Magical Mystery Tour*, *Yellow Submarine*, and the television film of “All You Need Is Love” (1967) provide full psychedelic expression of the Beatles’ allegiance to the hippie counterculture. The various representations of the Beatles also have a general relationship first to the dissatisfaction with live performance that caused them to withdraw from concertizing and second to their status as global celebrities. For example, in the animated television series made and broadcast when the Beatles were still performing around the world, the problems caused by their nonstop touring schedule and their inability to go unrecognized were recurrent plot ingredients within their cartoon adventures. In later instances, such as the film for “Paperback Writer” (1966), the Beatles are seen performing, but alone, in a darkened studio, away from the screaming fans. Other representations, including those in *The Beatles*, *Magical Mystery Tour*, and the promotional films for “All You Need Is Love” and “Hey Jude” (1968), depict the Beatles enjoying the freedom to wander as they please or else maintaining an easygoing relationship with the public, neither of which was the case. In all their guises, the various virtual Beatles were in a position to relate to their fans as friends and colleagues rather than ravenous consumers, and shared a degree of liberty and mobility that the real Beatles, as celebrities, could not.

Cartoon Representations

Both animated screen versions of the Beatles were projects developed in response to demands that the Beatles themselves were unable or unwilling to fulfill. In 1964, during the group’s first North American tour, Al Brodax, head of the TV and Motion Picture Department at King Features, contacted the group’s manager, Brian Epstein, to suggest an animated television series, based around the music and perceived personalities of the Beatles. For Epstein, overwhelmed by rapidly spiraling demands for the Beatles to (p. 39) perform in territories around the world, the proposal presented itself as an opportunity through which mediated representations of the group might take the place of at least some of the nationwide tours and live performances that fans expected. From 1963 to 1966, the Beatles were engaged in a demanding schedule that included some five hundred concerts around the world, and the recording of twelve singles and seven albums. Consequently, a significant attraction of the series was that it required no additional physical involvement by the Beatles themselves; no new songs were needed, and their speaking voices were provided by two actors (Lance Percival and Paul Frees). In order to present recognizable versions of the group members, Brodax reproduced and exaggerated their individual characteristics as they had been projected in *A Hard Day’s Night* (1964):

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

John was the one with the wry sense of humour. Ringo was more of a clown. George was the gentleman who was also very much capable of a wry disposition too. And Paul was the ambassador of good will for the group, and the charmer, and the one that all the girls were running after.

—Somach and Sharp (1995, 221)

These personality sketches were reinforced by associated physical design templates based on photographs of the group, which were the foundation of the animation guidelines compiled by the series director and animator, Peter Sanders:

John: the leader of the group and in control of all situations. Paul: the most poised and stylish Beatle. George: loose-limbed and angular. Ringo: nice, gentle, but always rather sad-looking.

—Axelrod (1999, 28)

Thirty-nine half-hour episodes of *The Beatles* cartoon series were subsequently produced by King Features and initially broadcast on ABC-TV in the United States over three seasons in the autumn schedules of 1965, 1966, and 1967. Each program’s opening credits are followed by two separate cartoon adventures whose stories are loosely inspired by, and performed to, a specific Beatles track. The two cartoons are separated by a “singalong” segment in which the lyrics of two more Beatles songs appear on screen to accompany the relevant soundtrack, and the TV audience is encouraged to join in—to sing with the Beatles. At this point, the viewers are directly addressed by one or another of the cartoon Beatles. In a recapitulation of the traditional stage exchanges, the viewers are chided that “not everyone is singing properly,” urged to “do better next time,” and told to “get out your guitars, drums, tissue paper and combs, or anything else you’ve got.” These sequences supply the illusion of an authentic interaction between the Beatles and their fans through a simulated, if one-sided, conversation. In their blurring of actuality and artifice, they also recall the prerecorded interview discs distributed to radio stations during the group’s first visit to the United States, which allowed disc jockeys to interject appropriate questions to the Beatles at specified gaps in the recording, (p. 40) in order to mimic the discourse of a live, face-to-face interview (Rayl and Gunther 1989, 23).

Furthermore, many of the cartoon episodes are built around the premise of casual or unexpected personal encounters between the Beatles and their fans. On the beaches of Hawaii, in the jungles of Africa, on the promenade deck of a cruise ship, in a hotel in Transylvania, on the streets of London, New York, Tokyo, and Rome, the Beatles meet, talk, flirt, advise, and play with their fans, or alternatively are pursued by them. The very first episode, for example, featured “A Hard Day’s Night” (in which the Beatles take

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

refuge from a chasing crowd by retreating to a sinister castle) and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” (in which the group’s escape from eager fans takes them below the waves in a diving bell). Significantly, many of these adventures take place when the Beatles are visiting or performing in countries that, in reality, they never visited: Egypt, India, Norway. It is also interesting to note that among the songs “sung” by the group in the series are several (“Tomorrow Never Knows,” “Penny Lane,” “Strawberry Fields Forever”) recorded or released after the Beatles’ final live concert in 1966 and never performed by the Beatles on stage. Like the imagined visits, their inclusion also represents not merely a simulation but an expansion of the live Beatles, in much the same way that tribute bands such as the Bootleg Beatles and the Cavern Beatles knowingly override the inconveniences of historical fact to pursue “a sympathetic collusion, or suspension of disbelief, that allows audiences and performers to contribute to the fiction of a Beatles concert in the 21st century” (Inglis 2006, 131).

In 1967, Epstein and the Beatles were being pressed by United Artists, the film studio that had produced *A Hard Day’s Night* and *Help!* to honor the terms of the contract they had signed in 1963 by making their long-awaited third movie. For their part, the Beatles, newly retired from live performance, were reluctant to commit themselves to the rigors of filming. Buoyed by the popularity of *The Beatles* series, Brodax intervened to suggest that a full-length animated movie, produced by King Features and distributed by United Artists, might prove to be an appropriate solution. In *Yellow Submarine* (directed by George Dunning), the collarless Pierre Cardin suits, mop-top hairstyles, and cheerful good humor of *The Beatles*—all of which reprised the familiar, collective personae presented to the group’s fans through its numerous stage and television appearances in the early and mid-1960s—give way to two new characterizations. When called from the streets of Liverpool to embark on an underwater journey to the mythical world of Pepperland, the Beatles are four related, but distinct, individuals whose visual identities are assembled from a number of contemporary sources—Victoriana, military uniforms, floral patterns, psychedelic fashions, and assorted combinations of beards and moustaches. Once in Pepperland, the group set out to rescue the imprisoned Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. They (and we) find that its members are the Beatles’ Edwardian alter egos, imprisoned in time and space by the Blue Meanies, and known to the audience not through live appearances but from the album cover of *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

The movie’s closing scenes, in which the captives are released and the Blue Meanies vanquished, are largely constructed around notional forms of interaction between the (p. 41) Beatles and their cinema audience. During the performance of “Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” Lennon’s observation that “you’re such a lovely audience, we’d like to take you home with us, we’d love to take you home” is emphasized in speech

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

as well as song. When color, motion, and life return to the monochrome world of Pepperland during the group’s rendition of “All You Need Is Love,” the lyrics are on screen (in the style of the singalong sessions in *The Beatles*). When the Beatles themselves appear in a brief filmed sequence at the end of the movie, they address the audience directly, saying that “there’s only one way to go out—singing!” before the lyrics of “All Together Now” (in a multitude of languages) appear alongside the track itself. When released in 1968, the film gave audiences a belated opportunity to engage directly—if incompletely—with the Beatles, whose last live performance had taken place two years earlier. And in its implicit sentimentality and explicit optimism, it also employed at least some of the stylistic nuances that had defined the relationship between the group and its fans:

For all its drug-induced imagery, it presented the public with the cosy, safe and affable Beatles they knew and loved [...] As *The Daily Telegraph* nostalgically proclaimed, “the Beatles’ spirit is here, if not the flesh.”

—Neaverson (1997, 95)

Promotional Films for Television (1966-1968)

*The Ed Sullivan Show*² on the CBS network played a crucial role in promoting the Beatles in the United States. Although they had their first number-one single in Britain with “Please Please Me” in February 1963, and achieved enormous domestic stardom by the middle of that year, they had yet to make a significant impact across the Atlantic. Capitol Records, the Beatles’ American label, had been reluctant to release their material despite their success in the UK (Spitz 2005: 439–444). Finally, in late December 1963, Capitol released “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” backed—significantly—by a strong promotional campaign. Capitol Records is said to have invested between \$40,000 and \$100,000 in this campaign, the centerpiece of which was a special “Beatles Issue” of the *National Record News*, a four-page tabloid that was widely distributed to record retailers and fans alike to establish the major themes and tone of the Beatles’ introduction to the American market (Frontani 2007, 23–30).

At the beginning of February 1964, “I Want to Hold Your Hand” reached the number-one position on the U.S. charts. Although Americans had now heard the Beatles, they had had very few opportunities to see the group, who had not yet visited the United States. Sullivan had noted the group’s remarkable public impact on a trip to the UK in October, and booked them on his weekly television variety show, broadcast live from New York

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

City. Epstein famously obtained star billing for the group in exchange for (p. 42) a reduced appearance fee, and the Beatles appeared on the show for the first time on February 9, 1964. To say that this performance was historic would be a gross understatement: seventy-three million people tuned in, and the Beatles’ American career was decisively launched (Sercombe 2006, Frontani 2007). They appeared twice more on the program before leaving the United States (once live from the Deauville Hotel in Florida, and once in a clip filmed at the time of their first appearance), and performed live on the show again in September 1965.

The Beatles’ final contribution to *The Ed Sullivan Show* was in June 1966, when they performed two songs, “Paperback Writer” and “Rain,” on film. The clips had been shot the previous month and were intended to publicize the group’s new single in the U.S. market. The Beatles also appeared in an introductory sequence, filmed separately, in which they apologized for their absence and introduced the clips to Sullivan’s studio audience. This audience enthusiastically applauded the Beatles as if they had been there in person, thus creating the illusion of their presence for viewers watching at home, and simultaneously reinforcing the conviction that the filmed Beatles were surrogates for the real ones who had appeared on the same program so successfully in the past. Interestingly, David Frost would use an intentionally deceptive version of this gambit on his UK program *Frost on Sunday* in 1968 when introducing the Beatles’ film clip of “Hey Jude”:

To fake the illusion that the Beatles were appearing exclusively on his programme, live in the LWT (London Weekend Television) studio, David Frost came to Twickenham this afternoon and was taped on the “Hey Jude” set introducing the Beatles. First they scooted through a version of Frost’s long-established theme music (composed by George Martin and titled “By George! It’s The David Frost Theme”) and then Frost spoke into the camera, as only he can, saying “Magnificent! A perfect rendition! Ladies and gentlemen, there you see the greatest tea-room orchestra in the world. It’s my pleasure to introduce now, in their first live appearance for goodness knows how long in front of an audience, the Beatles.” There was, of course, no audience.

—Lewisohn (1992, 297)

The deceptiveness of Frost’s claim notwithstanding, the episode shows how the Beatles’ filmed television performances were framed, quite deliberately, as substitutes for live appearances. In addition, the simulation was so convincing that many viewers and critics wrongly believed that the group had indeed given a genuinely live performance to the studio audience; *Disc & Music Echo* reported at the time that Frost had “managed to get the Beatles and Mary Hopkin to appear on his TV show” (Sandercombe 2007, 244), and in

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

his historical review of the Beatles’ records, published in 1989, Dowlding states that “the song was performed live on David Frost’s British TV show in September 1968” (205).

It is significant that the clips for “Paperback Writer” and “Rain” were shown on U.S. television about three weeks before the Beatles embarked on their final concert (p. 43) tour of Germany, Japan, and North America in the summer of 1966. As suggested earlier, these television performances and their setting could not have been more different from the chaotic and hysterical circumstances that surrounded them on those tours. The clip for “Paperback Writer,” directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, was shot at Abbey Road studios, and shows the Beatles neither as crowd-pleasing showmen nor as the objects of crazed idolatry, but as working musicians. They perform sitting down, in a darkened and otherwise quiet studio, reflecting their current attitude to music making:

Though the Beatles had toyed with the concept of moving away from live performance ever since they had first entered a recording studio three years earlier, the group now began creating music to be heard only on record rather than in performance. “Coming into the studio was a refuge for them,” said George Martin, and the group began staying past midnight working on their records. “It was a time and place when nobody could get at them.”

—Stark (2005, 181)

Although they would continue their established practice of dressing identically when playing live (different outfits were designed for each tour; those for the 1966 tours featured elegant, wide-lapelled black jackets and high-collared white shirts), here they are more individual in their dress. McCartney and Lennon are in shirtsleeves, Harrison and Starr wear jackets, but not the same jacket. The Beatles seem to be relaxed and to enjoy each other’s company: jokily, they are all wearing sunglasses in a dark room. In short, the virtual Beatles represented in this film were able to construct and control the circumstances of their performances and the terms under which they were presented to an audience in ways that their corporeal counterparts could not, and the contrast is striking: quietude, privacy, and intimacy replace the noise, exposure, and need to maintain distance from their hordes of fans that characterized the Beatles’ onstage life. In fact, McCartney had (somewhat surprisingly) signaled the group’s preference for the recording studio as early as 1963: on the first of the Beatles Christmas flexi-discs, distributed free to fan club members from 1963 to 1969, he revealed:

We like doing stage shows because it’s great to hear an audience enjoying themselves. But the thing we like best is going into the recording studio to make new records [...] what we like to hear most is one of our songs taking shape in a

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

recording studio, and then listening to the tapes afterwards to hear how it all worked out.

—Flexi LYN492

The live broadcast of “All You Need Is Love” in June 1967 again presents the Beatles as being in command of the context in which they performed to a much greater extent than was possible on public stages. This performance may be unique in the annals of rock music; not only was it part of *Our World*, a live global television broadcast achieved through satellite hookups and, according to BBC publicity, “linking five continents and bringing man face to face with mankind, in places as far apart as Canberra (p. 44) and Cape Kennedy, Moscow and Montreal, Samarkand and Soderfors, Takamatsu and Tunis” (Lewisohn 1992, 259), but it was also the recording session at which the song was recorded. Although certain tracks were recorded ahead of time, and some judicious editing and overdubbing added later, the bulk of the track was actually recorded during the broadcast (Everett 1999). The six-minute segment, directed by Derek Burrell-Davis, maintains the studio setting used for “Paperback Writer”; it again shows the Beatles at work, playing in a direct, professional manner, and depicts a scenario in which the creation of music is the central activity. In keeping with the countercultural mood of 1967, the group also indulged in a healthy dose of psychedelic spectacle for its performance of “All You Need Is Love.” The Beatles are not dressed identically, but they all wear colorful, loose-fitting satin and brocaded jackets designed by the Dutch collective the Fool (whose merchandise the Beatles would begin showcasing in their Apple Boutique later that year). The studio is suffused with banks of flowers and balloons; McCartney even has a red flower tucked behind his left ear. During the song’s long coda, figures wearing sandwich boards displaying the words for “love” in many languages appear, walking around the crowded space in a parade that is greeted by a fall of artificial snow.

All of this reflects the Beatles’ embrace of, and role in, the hippie counterculture of “the Summer of Love.”³ In addition, a crucial aspect of the performance is that they are positioned in the middle of a crowd, with spectators seated next to them and behind them. Children and adults, friends and spouses of the Beatles, including Jane Asher, Eric Clapton, Beatles biographer Hunter Davies, Marianne Faithfull, Pattie Harrison, Mick Jagger, Gary Leeds of the Walker Brothers, Keith Moon, Graham Nash and his wife, Keith Richard, and members of the production crew, are all in close proximity to the Beatles as they play and record, and all are invited to clap and sing along. It is as if the Beatles are seeking to recreate the easy intimacy they experienced in the Cavern at the start of their career, and to enjoy the sense of being part of the audience, of playing for people they knew and with whom they could be comfortable. Although the image of participation created was also fully in tune with the communitarian ethos of the psychedelic underground, it was nevertheless a simulation of community that implicitly included the

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

untold millions watching the global broadcast, and that would have been impossible for the Beatles to have experienced outside the highly controlled conditions of a recording studio.

The television performance of “Hey Jude” (also directed by Lindsay-Hogg) that premiered on *Frost on Sunday* recapitulates the image of the Beatles performing in the midst of a supportive crowd. The clip begins with a very tight shot of McCartney’s face as he sings at the piano, and most of the shots in its first half are close-ups of individual Beatles or medium shots that show them interacting pleasurably with one another as they play and sing. As in all of the television performances discussed here, the suggestion is that we are eavesdropping on the group at work. Midway through the clip, however, as the song’s verses yield to the long, repeated chorus that makes up its second half, the camera pulls back abruptly to reveal that the Beatles are surrounded by a crowd of around three hundred mostly young people, positioned even closer to the musicians than in “All You Need Is Love,” and singing and clapping along. As Stark notes, “The Beatles’ video of ‘Hey Jude’—with the group singing the endless (p. 45) coda surrounded by dozens of ordinary people—once again highlighted the collective nature of the counterculture they still purported to lead” (Stark 2005, 249). Even more than the group’s contribution to *Our World*, the clip creates the impression that not only are the Beatles very comfortable in their intimate relationship with the audience, but also the people around them are truly collaborating with them in singing the song. As the chorus goes on and the crowd swarms around the Beatles, distinctions between musicians and audience become less and less clear. The Beatles have effectively reestablished the proximity with their audience they had lost in years of playing at stadiums and other large venues, and seem to be in their element.

These filmed performances suggest that despite their ultimate rejection of touring and concertizing the Beatles never lost interest in performing for the public. However, they had to find ways of doing so that were tenable in the wake of Beatlemania. The creation of virtual Beatles who performed only on television and could have a close and communal relationship with the audience in the safe and controlled space of the studio, a relationship that was no longer available to the “real” Beatles in the “real” world, offered a solution.

Magical Mystery Tour and Let It Be

The Beatles’ film career began with two movies in which they were required to play fictional variations of their true selves. Although distinguished by, respectively, an

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

unusually inventive screenplay, and a distinguished cast, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* fell within the conventional parameters of popular music movies: faced with a series of comic obstacles, the stars manage to overcome them, while finding time for a number of musical interludes. *Yellow Submarine*, as discussed earlier, substituted animated versions of the same Beatles across a range of fantastic locations. However, the group's two other movies represented considerable departures, in form and content, from this preferred pattern. In different ways, both gave their audiences opportunities to *accompany* the Beatles rather than simply *watch* them: first, as fellow passengers on a surreal coach journey, and second, as invited guests in the intimate confines of the recording studio.

In the wake of Epstein's death in August 1967, the Beatles accepted McCartney's idea, mooted several months earlier, that they should write, produce, and direct their own movie. The semi-improvised *Magical Mystery Tour* built on the idea of a Sunday charabanc (bus) outing—a familiar event in British working-class communities through the 1950s and 1960s, before the era of mass car ownership. The film and its music open with a clear invitation to join the Beatles on their adventure:

Roll up! Roll up! Roll up for the mystery tour!
Roll up—and that's an invitation
Roll up—to make a reservation.
The magical mystery tour is waiting to take you away!

—John Lennon and Paul McCartney, “Magical Mystery Tour”

(p. 46) From that point on, the premise of the entire *Magical Mystery Tour* project remains focused on the audience's sense of involvement and participation alongside the Beatles. In the twenty-four-page book containing the two-disc EP released to tie in with the film, the invitation is repeated:

AWAY IN THE SKY, beyond the clouds, live four or five
Magicians [...] If you let yourself go, the Magicians will
take you away to marvellous places. Maybe YOU'VE been
on a MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR without even realising it.
Are you ready to go? SPLENDID!

—*Magical Mystery Tour*, Parlophone MMT-1

This simulation of interpersonal dialogue continues in the book's strip cartoon, which asks readers “Have you EVER seen so many people IN ALL YOUR LIFE?” and declares “I won't tell you the MARVELLOUS and AMAZING things which happen in the tent, BUT I WILL TELL YOU IT IS MAGIC!”

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

The coach takes the Beatles, their fellow passengers (who included some of the group’s friends and a number of fan-club members), and the viewers to a series of venues and activities: an army recruiting office, a sports day at a disused aerodrome, a strip club, a ballroom. The scene in the strip club is especially distinctive for its presentation of the Beatles not as performers but as spectators: Lennon and Harrison are in the front row to watch stripper Jan Carson’s act to the accompaniment of the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band’s performance of “Death Cab for Cutie.” Apart from mimicking an episode in the Beatles’ own career when they were backing musicians in a strip club in Liverpool’s Upper Parliament Street (Smith 1963, 10), the scene presents an alternative perception of the Beatles by removing them from their normal position as onstage musicians, and relocating them as audience members who watch and listen to the entertainment in the company of others.

Throughout the film’s fifty-five minutes, there are repeated and direct conversations with the audience: while selling tickets to Ringo Starr, Lennon’s voiceover promises viewers “the trip of a lifetime”; when describing the magicians’ home, he urges the audience to “come with us now”; at the end of the film, he reminds us “that was the Magical Mystery Tour. I told you. Goodbye.” And in its re-creation of the traditional passenger singalong that always brought such coach tours to an end, the enthusiastic communal singing of immediately recognizable songs like “Toot Toot Tootsie,” “The Happy Wanderer,” “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling,” and “When the Red Red Robin” offers audience members the chance to add their voices to those of the Beatles in a nostalgic finale.

In *A Hard Day’s Night*, *Help!* and *Yellow Submarine*, the Beatles appear as themselves and are therefore, to an extent, differentiated from the audience. In *Magical Mystery Tour*, there are no references to their status as Beatles, and of the six new songs in the film, only two are performed diegetically: “I Am the Walrus” by the group, “Blue Jay Way” by George Harrison alone. Instead of seeing them merely as musicians, the audience is also introduced to them as coach passengers and wizards. As a result, “the viewer’s perception of (p. 47) the group is constantly blurred by a series of dramatic and non-dramatic paradoxes which partially obscure any single and coherent image of the Beatles as a pop group” (Neaverson 1997, 68). Given the lack of a clearly defined boundary between “us” and “them,” it thus becomes plausible to enjoy the simulated interactions offered to the audience as it boards the coach with the Beatles, for what was accurately described in the *New Musical Express* as “a journey into a fantasy land where anything happens” (Drummond 1968, 3).

The Beatles’ last film was the documentary *Let It Be* (1970), which reinscribed the performer-audience distinction challenged in the television films for “All You Need Is Love” and “Hey Jude,” and erased in *Magical Mystery Tour*, while furthering a sense of

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

intimacy with the Beatles. This time, however, the effect of intimacy is created through the way the film affords the viewer a fly-on-the-wall perspective on the Beatles as working musicians. The group agreed to be filmed because United Artists felt that the brief appearance in the postscript to *Yellow Submarine* was not sufficient to meet its contractual obligation. Footage was shot in January 1969 on a sound stage at Twickenham Film Studios rather than in the authentic studio environment the Beatles found comfortable, and showed the group embroiled in the personal conflicts that would lead to its dissolution within a year.

It is interesting to compare the movie with the other notable studio documentary of the era, *One Plus One* (also known as *Sympathy for the Devil*), the film Jean-Luc Godard made with the Rolling Stones in 1968. Although shooting of the Beatles film (directed, like several of its short promos, by Michael Lindsay-Hogg) began just two months after the release of *One Plus One*, the contrast in mood and momentum could not be greater. Stephen Glynn describes the Stones’ film as “the record of a rebirth, a successful reversion to origins in a burst of creative energy” but characterizes the Beatles’ film as “an unsettling and sad *cinema-vérité* chronicle of the decline and disintegration of a musical collective” (2013, 147–148). Whereas the recording studio had previously figured in the Beatles’ television films as a safe, calm space in which they could make music untrammelled and relate to their audience on their own terms, the simulated studio in *Let It Be* is a site of conflict and unrest. One ill-tempered exchange between McCartney and Harrison over the latter’s guitar playing aptly typifies the hostility within the group:

□ □ □ □ □ I always hear myself annoying you. Look, I’m not trying to get you. I’m just saying, “Look, lads: the band. Shall we do it like this?”

□ □ □ □ □ Look, I’ll play whatever you want me to play. Or I won’t play at all, if you don’t want me to play. Whatever it takes to please you, I’ll do it.

—Sounes (2010, 237)

Arguably, however, the Beatles’ fractious behavior only intensifies the feeling of intimacy in the film. We may be seeing the Beatles at their worst, but we are still seeing the Beatles—and in a closer, more revealing light than ever before:

For the first time on film, such unvarnished moments unveiled the Beatles’ genuinely human personalities, albeit after years of interpersonal strain. As Lennon later (p. 48) recalled, the release of *Let It Be* “would break the Beatles, you know, it would break the myth. That’s us, with no trousers on and no glossy paint over the cover, and no sort of hope. This is what we are like with our trousers off, so would you please end the game now?”

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

—Womack and Davis (2006, 107)

In effect, the audience is encouraged to eavesdrop on the Beatles at work with a “voyeurism which is a fascinating, if at times painful, experience [...] one finds oneself squirming with a sense of guilty embarrassment as the Beatles expose the open wounds of their relationships for public consumption” (Neaverson 1997, 111–112). The film’s intended objectives were to reduce on screen the distance between musicians and audiences in a way that would have been impossible in the physical world, and to provide audiences with insights into the recording and performing process not accessible through conventional record consumption or concert attendance. However, by the time of the movie’s release in May 1970, the Beatles had announced that their career as a group had ended. The status of *Let It Be* thus immediately changed from an additional vehicle among many through which audiences might experience the Beatles to the final opportunity to experience them in any form.

Let It Be famously ends with the Beatles performing on the rooftop of their Savile Row offices in what would be their last public performance. The Beatles at the start of 1969 were tentatively contemplating a return to live appearances, and there was a plan that the film should end with a concert of the new material on which they were seen to be working. However, a lack of agreement within the group about the logistics of an actual performance could not be resolved, which led to a fairly spontaneous decision to simply perform unannounced on the roof. This lack of publicity guaranteed that the Beatles’ first live appearance in two-and-a-half years would not generate the level of excitement that would undoubtedly have greeted a normal concert. Indeed, as shown in the film, the people in the street below either paused to listen silently and respectfully, or simply moved on.

At first blush, it may seem that this event should be understood as a concert by the Beatles rather than a chapter in the story of the virtual Beatles. However, the rooftop performance represents another solution to the perennial problem the Beatles confronted through the 1960s: how to perform for the public without enduring the difficult and unsatisfactory conditions of live performance they experienced under Beatlemania. Furthermore, the rooftop performance was not a concert—at least not in the usual sense—as it did not have, and was not intended for, a concert audience. Although it is true that those who happened to be on Savile Row at the time were privileged to witness the final live performance by the greatest rock band of the 1960s, it is equally true that the Beatles were not performing for them. Lindsay-Hogg explains: “You were at a Beatles concert with nobody up there except yourself. And probably because they didn’t have the burden of an audience, they really did play for each other” (Doggett 2011, 64). The group’s press officer, Derek Taylor, makes a similar point: “It was not insignificant that they chose a rooftop, their own private rooftop, out of reach and for the most part (p. 49)

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

out of view, to do their last show together” (Doggett 2011, 64). In this sense, the Beatles were only nominally performing in public. Even though the rooftop was technically a public space, they were unable to see the passersby below and were not performing for them. As McCartney put it, “We were playing virtually to nothing—to the sky, which was quite nice” (Beatles 2000, 321).

Although the rooftop setting saw the Beatles playing in public once again, it enabled them to do so under conditions that replicated those of the television films, particularly “Paperback Writer,” or others in which they are seen simply playing together, such as “Revolution” (1968). In all of these cases, the primary audience for the Beatles’ performances was the Beatles themselves. The television or film viewer enjoys a privileged glimpse into their private act of music making in a setting that permits the Beatles to focus on their playing and on each other, and the viewer to focus on their music and performance. As Derek Taylor implies in the quotation reproduced earlier, this required the maintenance of a safe distance between the Beatles and their audience, a distance often achieved, as discussed, by the creation and deployment of virtual surrogates to perform in their places. To the extent that the Beatles did on this occasion technically perform in public—in the flesh—the rooftop concert is distinctive. Their intended (and principal) audience was not the crowd of unseen passersby on the pavements of Savile Row, but those who would experience their performance later on the movie screen, as a performance by the virtual Beatles.

Conclusion

The relationship between the Beatles and their audiences provides, in surprisingly obvious ways, a concise distillation of their career. From the small but loyal followings they established in the clubs of Liverpool and Hamburg, through the ecstatic theater audiences of the British package-tour concert circuit, to the beginnings of “stadium rock” signaled by their appearance at Shea Stadium in 1965, and their eventual withdrawal from all live appearances, the conditions and contexts in which the group and its fans encountered each other charted the development of popular music itself in the 1960s.⁴ After the group had ceased touring, Harrison admitted:

We probably loved The Cavern best of anything. We never lost our identification with the audience all the time. We were playing to our own fans who were just like us [...] It was just spontaneous. Everything just happened.

—Davies (1968, 108)

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

But as the Beatles rapidly outgrew the local venues of Merseyside to embrace the new routines of financially lucrative but musically unfulfilling national and international tours, their sense of identification with an audience disappeared. Spontaneity gave way to calculation, closeness gave way to separation. As the physical dimensions of their performances changed almost beyond recognition, new ways had to be found to satisfy the ever-increasing demands for more and more concert appearances around the world. Initially, the alternative modes of presentation they found were logical and pragmatic additions to their conventional performances, but over time—particularly after their live career ended—they became substitutions rather than supplements. (p. 50)

Although the terminology of the “virtual performer” had not yet entered the musical vocabulary of the 1960s, how the Beatles sought to manipulate their status as performers was an effective prototype of strategies adopted by many others during and after the digital revolution. The introduction of *The Beatles: Rock Band* may seem to presage a new era in the group’s career, but we have argued that important elements of the group’s current “virtual” status were grounded in their employment of pre-digital practices. The technologies with which virtuality is conventionally associated are certainly new; but the intent with which the group’s virtual presence was pursued and interpreted has been a distinctive component of the mutual awareness of the Beatles and their audiences for several decades.

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Notes:

(1.) A holographic version of Madonna made a guest appearance with Gorillaz at the 2006 Grammy Awards ceremony. The virtual Madonna interacted with the band members, who appeared as three-dimensional cartoons. Holograms of two members of the Black Eyed Peas, Fergie and Taboo, appeared in holographic form at the NRJT Music Festival in 2011. The two figures danced and sang but, at the end of the performance, suddenly pixilated and fell to the ground in the form of a cascade of small cubes.

(2.) The *Ed Sullivan Show* was a television variety show that ran on the Columbia Broadcasting System from 1948 to 1971. Sullivan presented a wide variety of acts that included vaudevillians and acrobats, stand-up comics, and all manner of musicians, including the popular artists of the day. Sullivan has long been credited with playing a significant role in introducing the Beatles to the United States by booking them on his program. Besides the Beatles, the rock artists who appeared on the program included Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, and the Doors. In the latter two cases, the program’s producers asked the artists to change lyrics they felt referred either to sex or to drug use. The Stones complied; the Doors did not.

(3.) The Summer of Love was an idea promulgated by leaders of the growing hippie community in San Francisco to ward off the potential problems surrounding the influx of young people into the city that began at the start of 1967. The inaugural event was the Human Be-In staged in Golden Gate Park on January 14. Attended by thirty thousand participants, it showed that the hippies had coalesced into a self-conscious and definable community. Faced with the prospect of fifty thousand young people flocking to the Bay Area during the summer (it turned out to be closer to a hundred thousand), community leaders sought to create a spirit of peaceful cooperation.

(4.) Although the Beatles’ concert at Shea Stadium is often cited as a predecessor to Arena Rock, a phenomenon associated with the 1970s, it was not the first instance of a rock concert staged at a sports venue. The event often nominated as the first rock concert, disc jockey Alan Freed’s Moondog Coronation Ball, took place at the Cleveland Arena in 1952, and Bill Haley and the Comets, along with LaVern Baker, performed at the Sports Arena in Hershey, Pennsylvania, in 1956. The Beatles themselves played at the Washington Coliseum in Washington, DC, during their first trip to the United States in 1964.

“Nothing Is Real”: The Beatles as Virtual Performers

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