

# The Beatles: Is It Really British Culture?

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*I dedicate this essay to my great mentor, Professor Alun Davies.*

If you love the Beatles, where would you travel to experience the Beatles' history and culture? Many people will answer the United Kingdom because there are many famous destinations connected to the Beatles there. For instance, some people walk on the pedestrian crossing at "Abbey Road." Fans may visit Liverpool and take a photograph in front of the Beatles' statues, or maybe they will go to listen to the tribute bands of the Beatles in the Cavern Club. Wealthy fans might play "Imagine" on the white piano in the Lennon Suite at The Hard Days Night Hotel. When the day of depar-



Figure 0: The Beatles, Our World in 1967 photographed by Glen Craig from Paddle 8

ture comes, Liverpool's John Lennon airport will give tourists a safe flight. Fans would be satisfied with the trip and they would think that the UK is the Beatles. Indeed, there are significant facts to prove this to be true. In 1967, the Beatles starred in the first satellite broadcasting of "Our World" as the representative of the UK. Recently Paul McCartney sang "Hey Jude" in the opening ceremony of The London Olympics in 2012 as the key performer, which is still a fresh memory. Therefore, the Beatles are strongly connected to British culture in most people minds. However, has this ever been true? This essay challenges the connection between the Beatles and the UK culture, and argues that the culture of the Beatles was born out of globally interaction. The paper will support this claim by examining: The Nascent Beatles and Germany, The Quiet Beatle and India, and the Beatles' Global Mentality. The first section will discuss the influence of the Beatles' fashion and style, and the artwork of album covers by German artists. Secondly, George Harrison is often called the 'quiet Beatle.' Therefore, the essay will also explore how Harrison met Indian music, and how his music influenced the change from "Rubber Soul" to "Sgt. Peppers." Finally, I'll indicate how the Beatles changed with the spiritual meditation from India and diversified their music to the world.

## 0. Profile

The Beatles are one of the top British Rock bands, and they took an active part in the music scene from the 1960s to 1970s.

Their songs reached the top of the chart 27 times in both of UK and US. The number of members is four: John Lennon (vocal / the rhythm guitar), Paul McCartney (vocal / the bass), George Harrison (vocal / the lead guitar), and Ringo Starr (drummer). The major writers and composers are two: Lennon-McCartney. Before the Beatles appeared, individual singers, writers and composers were distinguished, so it was innovative for everyone to produce their own music like the Beatles. Also, they played rock and roll, rhythm and blues, and some ballads in concert more than 260 times. The Beatles are famous for first playing at an outdoor concert, which was held at Shea stadium. Many people would bought the tickets in spite of poor sounds due to the tremendous screaming by fans. In 1965, the Beatles were awarded M.B.E. from her majesty the Queen Elizabeth II because they contributed to the growth of the British music industry. The most popular song is "Yesterday" because there are more than 2,200 cover versions, and it has been recorded as the most covered song in Guinness World Records.

## 1. The Nascent Beatles and Germany

The first challenge to the Beatles as British culture is that the early Beatles were affected by two German artists that framed their styles - from their appearances to their artworks. Many people who esteem the Beatles thinks their music is full of the pure Britishness. Actually, the Beatles evolved in Germany, not in the UK. There is the famous quotation by John Lennon, 'I

grew up in Hamburg, not Liverpool.' (*Anthology the Beatles* 45) Moreover, there is a fact that the Beatles had an affection for Germany enough that they traveled there three times from 1960 to 1962.

The Beatles interesting Germany began in the early 1960s. In August in 1960, Allan Williams, the early Beatles' promotor, brought them a new job - a provincial tour overseas for the first time. Therefore, the members were supposed to go to Hamburg, western Germany. They got to play for approximately 6 to 8 hours in some clubs, such as the Indra and Kaiserkeller, and they had to avoid the fights between drunk sailors and youth that easily lost their tempers. One month later, the Beatles encountered the German artist couple, Astrid Kirchherr and Klaus Voormann who are influenced from the Beatles' looks to art in the album covers.

Astrid Kirchherr is considered to be the first female photographer of the Beatles. Kirchherr's impact, especially for her appearance was spread to the Beatles. Astrid Kirchherr was different from other girls in 1960s in Germany. All the girls in her school were wealthy people and had the same style: 'a bundled hairstyle in which the ends of the hair are curled under the hair, wearing the white blouses, the black fully pleated skirts and the short jackets with an accessory made with pearls. Handbags must be made from leathers of crocodiles.' (Komatsu 100) On the other hand, Kirchherr was fond of black when she was young, and she never wore skirts, but rather always put on trousers. She blended in and became one with other

Mademoiselles at first when she entered the fashion design major of The trade and technical school called Fachschulen, but she developed her original style after she was given her own open car painted in bright sky blue: she got her blonde close-cropped hair, and started wearing the clothes for gentlemen.

The first person who was affected by Kirchherr was Stuart Sutcliffe. Kirchherr said, 'My boyfriend Klaus Voormann had this hairstyle and Stuart like it very, very much.' Since Kirchherr and Voormann fell in love, Kirchherr had changed him to look more fashionable. In early 1960s, hairstyles were uniform: Pompadour hardened with hair wax. 'He [Sutcliffe] was the first one who really got the nerve to get the Brylcreem out of his hair and asking (sic) me to cut his hair for him.' According to *Express*, after Kirchherr transformed Sutcliffe's hair, Harrison asked her to do the same for him. Lennon and McCartney held out for a little longer but eventually they had their hair cut in the same style while they were in Paris because there were a lot of existentialists that had such hairstyles. Astrid Kirchherr also influenced the way to photograph them. It



Figure 1: Self-portrait taken by Astrid Kirchherr from Pinterest

was notable that after the death of her new boyfriend, Stuart Sutcliffe. After that, Harrison and Lennon visited Kirchherr's house to recollect the days Sutcliffe lived, which was the opportunity that Kirchherr to take their photographs. She contributed to frame them in a cool manner with the skill called half-shadowed technique. (See Figure 2.)



Figure 2: Photograph taken by Astrid Kirchherr from beatlesource

Later, the photographer of the early Beatles, Robert Freeman, adopted this photo technique in their 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> album covers, *With the Beatles*, and *A Hard Day's Night*. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

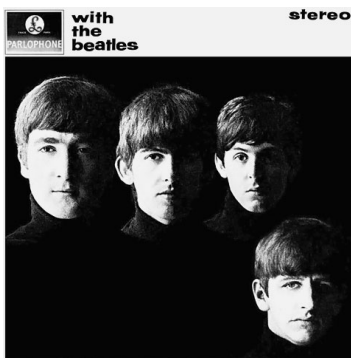


Figure 3: The 2<sup>nd</sup> album cover in *With the Beatles* taken by Robert Freeman

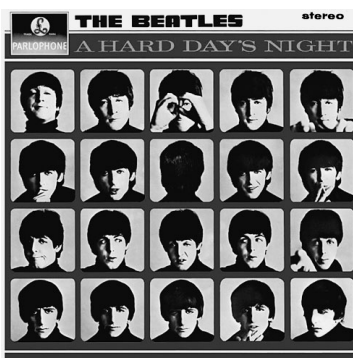


Figure 4: The 3<sup>rd</sup> album cover in *A Hard Day's Night* also taken by Freeman from the Beatles

Klaus Voormann also influenced the Beatles. Voormann had two jobs: an artist and a musician. Voormann worked as a graphic designer after dropping out of the graphic design major at Fachschulen. He also 'was given special education of classic music from his childhood.' (Komatsu 107) However, his interest changed from classic into jazz, and eventually to rock'n'roll. Evidence of this is that Voorman bought Sutcliffe's bass after he had quit the Beatles in 1961. It's natural that Voormann joined The Plastic Ono Band as the bassist organized in 1969. It was the 7<sup>th</sup> album, *Revolver*, when Voorman worked with the Beatles formally. The first draft of the album cover, designed by Robert Freeman, was supposed to be used; many the Beatles' pictures taken by Freeman were layered in a circular pattern. However, they rejected this first album cover because they thought it was uninteresting. As a consequence, Voorman accepted the offer to make the cover instead. Voorman drew all four members' portraits, and made several collages among their tangled hairs with pictures taken by Freeman from 1964 to 1966 in order to express the experimental music that deviated from their old

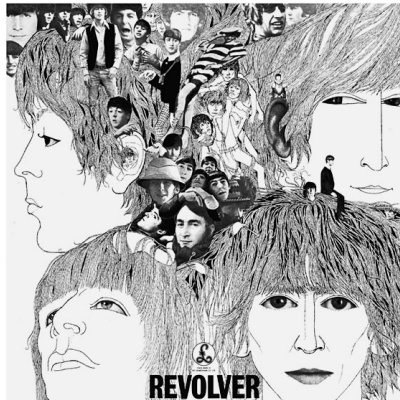


Figure 5: The most famous artwork by Voormann in the Beatles, *Revolver*, from Illustration Chronicles

style. (See Figure 5.)

In March in 1967, this album, *Revolver*, was nominated in Album of the Year in the Grammy Awards, and the jacket was awarded the Best Recording Package. Nowadays, many artists, including one of the most famous Japanese artists, GLAY, are imitating this design as an homage. Recognized by this achievement, Voormann joined the Beatles' project as their collage artwork again in 1996 as the series of "Anthology."

Besides Kirchherr and Voormann, Jürgen Vollmer should not be forgotten. He was also a photographer who became the first friend of the Beatles during the stay of Hamburg. Vollmer took their picture in Wohlwillstrasse 22, which 're-create the publicity shot taken by local snapper Jurgen Vollmer, who became a first friend of the band, in 1960. John Lennon posed in the doorway of Jäger-Passage 1 as three blurry figures walked past him in the foreground. Those figures are McCartney, Harrison and Sutcliffe. The photograph was unearthed years later and became



Figure 6: The latest Voormann's artwork in the Beatles, *Anthology*, from *Illustration Chronicles*



the iconic front cover of Lennon's 1975 *Rock'n'Roll* album.' ("How Hamburg changed the Beatles") (See Figure 7.)

In western Germany and Austria in 1964, the Beatles released their new singles: "Komm, Gib Mir Deine Hand (I Want to Hold Your Hand)" and "She Liebt Dich (She Loves You.)" Perhaps

these two songs were the love letters in appreciation of Hamburg, yet it might be impossible to say without the absence of the irony the Beatles resisted from the strong demand by EMI western Germany branch, Odeon records.



Figure 7: Lennon's album, *Rock'n'Roll* photographed in 1961 from wikipedia

## 2. The Quiet Beatle and India

The Beatles' music Harrison created with Indian instruments challenges the idea that the Beatles are British cultures. It is true that many fans estimates that people who surrounded the Beatles were nationalistic or proud of the UK. However, George Harrison, the 'quiet Beatle,' was ironic in his thinking of his nation. Evidence of this is on the 5<sup>th</sup> album *Rubber Soul*, and the 6<sup>th</sup> album *Revolver*. In his song of the former, "Think for

Yourself," the obvious content is about the girl who always tells optimistic lies, which Harrison gets tired and bored of, but there is a deeper meaning. According to Harrison, from his autobiography *I, Me, Mine* (1980), "'Think for Yourself' must be about 'somebody' from the sound of it - but all this time later, I don't quite recall who ... Probably the Government.'" (Harrison 88) He might have been tired and bored with the political commentary in the 1960s. Moreover, his political thinking was clearer when he made the song "Taxman" from the latter. This song is written directly to the government because the 1960s Prime Minister Harold Wilson from the Labor Party imposed a supertax of 95% on people who made a lot of money in order to maintain the social security schemes. The chorus of Lennon and McCartney, "Ha-ha, Mr. Wilson" and "Ha-ha, Mr. Heath," means Harold Wilson from the Labor Party, and Edward Heath who was the leader of the Conservative Party. In the 1960s, "British invasion" occurred, and numerous British bands, led by the Beatles, became popular in the US, so most young fans worldwide may have thought of the UK as a brilliant nation. Through his songwriting, perhaps Harrison wanted to tell listeners that the UK is not a dream country, but it's just an illusion. Probably he was not satisfied with his life in UK. Evidence of this is in the fact that Harrison lived in Switzerland later because he could avoid paying income tax from his birthplace. ("George Harrison: Living in the Material World" 2011)

By contrast, Harrison was enthusiastic about India from the time he met musician Ravi Shankar. The first encounter with

Indian music was during the group's 2<sup>nd</sup> film, "Help!," which has a scene in an Indian restaurant. In the sequence of its scene, many Indian musicians play Indian instruments: 'sitar, flute, tabla (the Indian twin drums), ghunghroo (a musical anklet of many small metallic bells tied to the feet of Indian dancers), tanpura (a long-necked plucked string instrument), and possibly a dilruba (a bowed musical instrument) and surbahar (bass sitar) to play a Beatles medley called another "Hard Day's Night.'" Lennon says in the documentary *The Beatles Anthology*, 'George was looking at them,' which was the good timing for Harrison to have become interested in the sitar. Harrison used a sitar for the first time in one of the Lennon-McCartney songs, "Norwegian Wood," on the 5<sup>th</sup> album, *Rubber Soul*, which has no essence of India but one of the oriental factors such as "I notice there wasn't a chair - I sat on a rug." On top of this, Harrison did not have a sitar teacher and was playing in his own way at the time. 'I hadn't really figure out what to do with it.' Harrison continues, 'It was quite spontaneous: I found the notes that played the lick. It lifted and it worked.' Even if it was a small step in the direction of Eastern music, "Norwegian Wood" became the first song using a sitar in western pop music. ("50 years of Beatles in India")

In 1966, the Beatles released the 6<sup>th</sup> album, *Revolver*, which included the first "Indian" song "Love You To." This song has 'a Hindustani classical structure' called "raga" --- 'a slow introduction' called alap which is played freely like ad-lib, 'followed by the main tune (gat) in a middling tempo' called madhya laya

'and ending' with a jhara' which means that a quicktempo fades out on the sitar. 'This song is without doubt a path-breaker in its uncompromising adherence to a form of music that was alien to Western pop.' ("50 years of Beatles in India")

The advance between these two songs: "Norwegian Wood" and "Love You To" is considerable, especially Harrison's skills of playing a sitar. Most listeners will be impressed, and think the latter is also played by Harrison. However, according to Peter Lavezzoli, he wrote in his book *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, 'For the recording, players from the North London Asian Music Circle were hired, including an uncredited sitarist who played most of what was once attributed to Harrison.' In spite of the fact that Harrison did not play, he learned from the standard of playing with the Indian music circle, which stood out later when he met his teacher Ravi Shankar.

Although he had little practice playing a sitar, he had already found his master in early August in 1965 through an introduction from his friend, David Crosby, who was an American folk rocker with the Byrds in the 1960s. Harrison notes, 'I'd kept hearing the name of Ravi Shankar. I heard it several times, and about the third time it was a friend of mine who said, "Have you heard of this person Ravi Shankar? You may like the music."' (*Anthology*, the Beatles 196) Ravi Shankar is a legendary Indian sitarist. Actually, it was two months later that Harrison finally got to meet him. The place was not in India, but in Bath, for Shankar had a performance with a violinist. Shankar said in the documentary film "Raga" in 1971, 'It is strange to see pop

musicians with sitars. I was confused at first. It had so little to do with our classical music. When George Harrison came to me, I didn't know what to think. But I found he really wanted to learn. I never thought our meeting would cause such an explosion, that Indian music would suddenly appear on the pop scene.' Thusly, the pure relationship between the master and the pupil through the bond of the music had begun, which culminated in "Within You Without You" from the 7<sup>th</sup> album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

In his pinnacle Indian song "Within You Without You," Harrison played the tanpura and the sitar with Indian musicians that played the dilruba, swarmandal (an Indian harp) and the tabla. However, Harrison would not make this the pure Indian music, and he added the Western spice: the orchestra of violins and cellos. Plus, he comments on this song; it is the typical pop song for him. This song is 'Crusing between the 4/4 of a (rhythm cycle called) teentaal and 5/4 of the (rhythm cycle called) jhaptaal.' As well as composing, the lyrics stood out as relating to Indian culture. These lyrics are derived from Indian



Figure 8: Harrison and his mentor Shankar from *Rolling Stones*

philosophy --- 'And life flows on within you and without you' which argues there is no eternity in life of the world. This notion was criticized severely by narrow-minded reviewers at the time, but this song achieved to represent a variation on Indian music.

### 3. The Beatles' Global Mentality

Indian culture and spirituality had an impact on the Beatles music directly, but it also opened their minds to other possible influences, and led to more globalization of their music; that is the third point to challenge to the notion of Beatles as British culture. The argument that culture affected Harrison is described above, but he is not the only one who was influenced by Indian culture. John Lennon was also influenced by Indian music. 'Lennon too was an ardent admirer of Indian music --- just listen to *Tomorrow Never Knows* or *Across The Universe*' ("50 years of Beatles in India") The former song, for example, is considered by many to be an example of psychedelic rock, but this song was inspired by *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* adapted by Timothy Leary though Lennon had never read it. Lennon said "Lay down all thought, surrender to the void," and all that s\*\*t which Leary had pinched from *The Book of the Dead*.' (*Anthology* the Beatles 209) George Martin also notes in *Anthology*, 'For "Tomorrow Never Knows" he [Lennon] said to me he wanted his voice to sound like the Dalai Lama chanting from a hilltop, and I said, "It's a bit expensive, going to Tibet." Lennon continued, 'With "Tomorrow Never Knows" I'd imagined

in my head that in the background you would hear thousands of monks chanting. That was impractical of course, and we did something different. I should have tried to get near my original idea, the monks singing. I realise now that was what it wanted.' Paul McCartney was also interested in Indian culture, especially-meditation. According to Anthology, McCartney said:

"Yeah, well, it's great to be famous, it's great to be rich - but what's it all for?" So we were enquiring into all sorts of various things, and because George was into Indian music, the natural thing was to ask: "Well, what is this meditation lark?" - 'and after we met Maharishi and thought about it all, we went out to Rishikesh.'

Before the Beatles and their families went to Rishikesh in 1968, Harrison and his wife had already become involved in Indian culture and Hinduism. The first introduction of Maharishi was from Harrison's then-wife Pattie Boyd. 'In February 1967, George Harrison's wife, Pattie, became intrigued after attending a lecture on TM at Caxton Hall in London. She informed her husband, who was developing his own interest in Indian culture.' ("A Life in Focus") On August 24<sup>th</sup> in 1967, Harrison got the ticket to hear Maharishi's lecture. 'On August 24<sup>th</sup>, all of us expect Ringo attended the lecture given by Maharishi at the Hilton Hotel. I [Harrison] got the ticket. - I had got to the point where I thought I would like to meditate' (*Anthology the Beatles* 260) According to the article from *The Independent*, In February 1968, the Maharishi invited the Beatles to spend three months at his ashram in Rishikesh, about

150 miles from the capital city of India, Delhi. 'We were really getting away from everything.' Lennon spoke, 'I was in a room for five days meditating. I wrote hundreds of songs.' (*Anthology the Beatles* 281) 'The three songwriting Beatles became prolific, and some of their output related to what they were being taught - For example, Paul McCartney "Mother Nature's Son."' ("A Life in Focus") However, after going back to London, all the songs after 1968 had a global outlook that began with their interest in Indian spiritualism and music.

This new global outlook can be seen in several songs post-1968. For instance, one of the McCartney songs, "Back in the U.S.S.R" was written during the stay in Rishikesh. The content of this song is that the man is looking forward to landing in the Soviet Union with the joy of the Soviet culture in the plane. However, the process of making this song is the parody of "California Girls" by the Beach Boys, an American pop rock band, and even the title of it is a parody of "Back in the U.S.A." by Chuck Berry, who is a legend Rock'n'Roll. Another example is in Harrison's song, "The Inner Light" released in 1968. The lyrics are especially notable. There are the facts that he made alternative sentences from the English translated poem of Laozi who is an ancient Chinese philosopher, when he wrote this song. In Harrison's autobiography, "*I, Me, Mine*," he says about the changing his second verse:

In the original poem, the verse says "Without going out of my door, I can know the ways of heaven." And so to prevent any misinterpretations - and also to make the song a bit



longer - I did repeat that as a second verse but made it.  
"Without going out of your door / You can know all things  
on earth / Without looking out of your window / You can  
know the ways of heaven" - so that it included everybody.

Moreover, the songs from 1968 are notable because of the collaborations with foreign artists. After that year, the atmosphere of the group was strained; everybody wanted to quit the Beatles, so George Harrison suggested letting some guest players join in the recording sessions in order to divert the group's tension. This is evident in the comments by Ringo Star, 'I think everyone was getting a little tired of us by then. Because we were taking a long time and there were many heated discussions going on. About life. About everything.' (*Anthology the Beatles* 318) Harrison also commented on Eric Clapton's collaboration in *Anthology*, 'It's interesting to see how nicely people behave when you bring a guest in, because they don't really want everybody to know that they're so bitchy. This happened back in the "White" album when I brought Eric Clapton to play in "While My Guitar Gently Weeps." Suddenly everybody's on their best behaviour.' Harrison also suggested adding the melodious play of the black keyboard player, Billy Preston, in the "Get Back" session in 1969. McCartney also had a high opinion of him. 'Billy was brilliant - a little young whizz-kid. We'd always got on very well with him. He showed up in London and we all said, "Oh, Bill! Great - let's have him play on a few things." He continued, 'It might helped us all behave better with one another on the sessions.' (*Anthology the Beatles* 318) The most famous and most

controversial artist that collaborated with the Beatles is a Japanese avant-garde artist, Yoko Ono. After the encounter with Lennon from 1966, their relationship developed gradually. It is after the meditation in India in 1968 that the connection was more remarkable. The song made by Lennon and Ono, "Revolution No.9" was on the "White" album.

The Beatles collaboration with a Japanese artist, Yoko Ono, and a German photographer, Astrid Kirchherr, made it clear that the Beatles were opened to international influences on their music. Some people say that Ono is the person who broke up the Beatles:

'It could be argue that the visit to India created disharmony rather than harmony for the Beatles, but there were many other factors causing tension within the band, including John Lennon's love for the Japanese artist Yoko Ono, who could be seen as an alternative spiritual leader for him.' ("A Life in Focus")

However, the central discussion is that the relationship between Lennon and Ono is the repetition of the relationship between the former member of the Beatles, Stuart Sutcliffe, and his lover Astrid Kirchherr. With the description of Lennon's relationship with Ono, there are some common points between these two relationships. Firstly, these were international relationships, which is needless to say. Yoko Ono is Japanese and Astrid Kirchherr is German. It was clear that these two men were open to intercultural relationships. Secondly, Ono and Kirchherr were artists that inspired their boyfriends. Ono and Kirchherr had a

common philosophy, existentialism, which was born in Germany from 1815 and spread to Paris. Yoko Ono had a long wavy hair was all dressed in black just like Juliette Greco who is a devotee of the bohemian fashion of some intellectual people of post-war France, and she wrote the message which was the predecessor of her famous artwork's book, "Grapefruits," which was impressed with a bohemian group in Sarah Lawrence College which admired existentialists (Clayson *WOMAN* 40) On the other hand, she read books on Juliette Gréco and existentialism, and she always put on a black high-necked sweater which formerly writers and the young men wore for discussion of the philosophy. Finally, Both Lennon and Sutcliffe felt strongly enough about their relationships that they chose to separate from the Beatles. In the play of "Backbeat," there is a scene of singing "Love Me Tender" to Kirchherr by Sutcliffe, which their mood gets a little colder. Certainly, John Lennon dedicated his several songs of the Beatles to Ono: "Don't Let Me Down" and "I Want You (She's So Heavy)." According to the article in *Express*, 'In the summer of 1961, Sutcliffe quit the Beatles after being offered a scholarship to the Hamburg College of Art and the couple travelled to Liverpool to meet his family in advance of the marriage.' Lennon also married Ono and was focused mainly on The Plastic Ono Band from 1969 after finishing the virtually final album, *Abbey Road*. In 1969, moreover, Paul McCartney married Linda Eastman, which is common with two couples. She is not British and she is a photographer, a sort of artist.



Figure 9: Lennon and Ono from Wikipedia



Figure 10: Kirchherr and Sutcliffe from *Express*



Figure 11: McCartney and Eastman from Pinterest

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the culture of the Beatles was created through interacting globally. Firstly, the Beatles evolved in Germany (Hamburg), not in the UK. Secondly, the Beatles are connected closely not to Nationalism but to post-colonialism, especially Indian music. Thirdly, their music included diverse influences, and thus rejected pure Britishness. Curiously enough, all the

members did not hesitate to adopt other cultures, which is interesting considering Britain's former imperial status. The Beatles were excited by a hedonistic atmosphere of the defeated nation, and they got interested in an exotic culture from the post-colonized nation, Lennon and even McCartney fell in love with women who were of another culture, and were different from others. The essential point of this matter is an attempt to be different. The leader in any field must stand out and embrace new things and be innovative. They should perform the role of introducing new ways of thinking as a pioneer of a new world.

The Beatles' embrace of global influences can be seen in many artists that followed. One artist that has a career similar to the Beatles is American pop singer Madonna. Her careers began in 1980s, but her more important works appear from around 2000s. She has joined the Jewish events and learned Kabbalah that is the religion of the Jewish people. During her tour named "Re-Invention Tour," she sang John Lennon's "Imagine," and she hoped for world peace. She gathered money in her charity and donated to developing countries, and they adopted 4 black children. She made several songs from other cultures: "Isaac (Israel)," "Spanish Lessons (Spain)," and "Medellin (Colombia)." Although the type of music is different, the spirit of from the Beatles is apparent. The spirit of cross-cultural interaction shall remain in the top of the pop.

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