

Jörg Helbig, Simon Warner (Eds.)

Summer of Love

The Beatles, Art and Culture in the Sixties

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Introduction: It Was Forty Years Ago Today

Jörg Helbig

Anyone unlucky enough not to have been aged between 14 and 30 during 1966-7 will never know the excitement of those years in popular culture. A sunny optimism permeated everything and possibilities seemed limitless. Bestriding a British scene that embraced music, poetry, fashion, and film, The Beatles were at their peak and were looked up to in awe as arbiters of a positive new age in which the dead customs of the older generation would be refreshed and remade through the creative energy of the classless young. (MacDonald 1995, 177.)

Thus describes the British music critic and author Ian Mac Donald (1948-2003) one of the most exciting periods in the cultural history of the 20th century. Albeit far from being a peaceful year, 1967 will probably always be remembered for Love and Peace, for Flower Power, and for the legendary Summer of Love, when a whole generation fostered the dream of a better and peaceful world themed "Make love, not war".

Apart from the Haight Ashbury district in San Francisco, the most important focus of pop culture in 1967 was the still Swinging London. In the mid-sixties, the latest trends in music, fashion and art originated from London. Fuelled by the international fame of designer Mary Quant and top model Twiggy, the *boutiques* on Kings Road and Carnaby Street set the benchmark of youth fashion. Also, London had become the domain of international artists like movie directors Richard Lester, Stanley Kubrick, Roman Polanski and Michelangelo Antonioni. But above all, London, and England in general, became associated with pop music. Top-ranking British rock bands dominated the charts worldwide, among them The Kinks, The Small Faces, The Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann, The Hollies, The Who, Traffic, The Moody Blues, Procol Harum, The Bee Gees, The Animals, The Tremeloes, and many more. Progressive and psychedelic sounds were provided by bands such as Cream and Soft Machine or by up and coming bands like Pink Floyd and Jethro Tull.

However, the epicentre of pop music still spelled The Beatles – although, during the first half of 1967, they were uncommonly absent from the public view. Britain's leading rock band had not released an album since *Revolver* and since their final live performance at San Francisco's Candlestick Park in August, 1966. Since they had stopped touring, The Beatles had only released the double-A-sided single "Strawberry Fields Forever/Penny Lane" in February, 1967, and not a few critics augured the imminent quietus of the Fab Four. It soon turned out they were utterly wrong.

When The Beatles finally released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* on June 1st, 1967, they single-handedly dwarfed everything pop music had created so far. The album was immediately recognised as a masterpiece of truly historic dimen-

sions. *Sgt. Pepper* was a cultural milestone with regard to music, studio technique and cover art. The Beatles' eighth official album topped the British charts for 27 weeks and still ranks among the top ten best-selling albums of all time. It was voted "greatest album of all time" by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 2003 and was invested as "most definite rock and roll album" by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2007.

In the summer of 1967 scarcely anybody could escape the fascination of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Says political scientist Langdon Winner:

In every city in Europe and America the stereo systems and the radio played, 'What would you think if I sang out of tune . . . Woke up, got out of bed . . . looked much older, and the bag across her shoulder . . . in the sky with diamonds, Lucy in the...' and everyone listened. At the time I happened to be driving across country on Interstate 80. In each city where I stopped for gas or food the melodies wafted in from some far-off transistor radio or portable hi-fi. It was the most amazing thing I've ever heard. For a brief while the irreparably fragmented consciousness of the West was unified, at least in the minds of the young. (Quoted in Stark 2005, 198-99)

Thus, after 700 hours of studio work, The Beatles had provided the soundtrack to the Summer of Love.

The Summer of Love in general and the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in particular inspired two international conferences, held in June 2007: The first was "A Day in the Life: *Sgt. Pepper* at 40", a one-day symposium celebrating the 40th anniversary of the release of the Beatles' album, organised by PopuLUs, The Centre for the Study of the World's Popular Musics at Leeds University, held on June 19th, 2007 in the School of Music, University of Leeds.

A broader cultural scope, ranging from pop music, poetry, film and television to general concepts of love, gender and youth culture, was covered by the second conference, "The Summer of Love – It Was 40 Years Ago: The Beatles and Popular Culture in 1967", a three-day symposium, held from 20-22 June 2007 at the Department of English Studies of the Alps-Adriatic-University Klagenfurt, Austria.

The organisers of these two conferences, Simon Warner and Jörg Helbig, respectively, have collected eighteen papers which are presented in this volume.

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- Stark, Steven D. 2005. *Meet the Beatles: A Cultural History of the Band That Shook Youth, Gender, and the World*. New York: HarperCollins.