

2nd Opinion: Beatles, brains, beauty of Christ

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Sunday evening, Feb. 9, 1964, 7 p.m. CST, CBS Network, “The Ed Sullivan Show”— a snapshot in time 52 years ago that shook American culture in every direction imaginable. The Beatles. And I was there!

Not in Sullivan’s studio, but tucked safely inside middle-class suburbia, Dallas. As a third grader, chatting with my parents and best friend, my dad asked me to adjust the aluminum foil-tipped rabbit ears on our 13-inch, black-and-white Philco TV to get ready for something we knew not what.

When the show was over, my friend, Eddie, and I looked at each other curiously—we just knew! Eddie repeated the classic ’60s mantra “Neat!” over and over. Even my parents liked it. Weeks later, my mates and I strummed our cardboard guitars under the carport, wearing Beatles wigs from Motts Five & Dime and lip-synching to friend Ricky’s 45 “I Saw Her Standing There” spinning on a “high-fidelity” record player. With tiny speakers straining to project the raucous music, the neighborhood girls came to watch in droves—as fun as it gets! But when older guys on the block started a garage band with real instruments, that was that. “There are places I’ll remember, all my life....”

What music does ...

But this isn’t about the frenzy of Beatlemania, or a baby boomer’s nostalgia run amok, nor even a diatribe about sex, drugs and rock ’n’ roll as if preaching on a Haight-Ashbury street corner. Instead, it’s about what music does to the brain and how lives and destinies are set in motion as a

result.

From the musical ditties of the heretic Arius teaching his followers Scripture, to Gregorian chants, to the Baroque, Classic and Romantic eras, on up to the 20th/21st centuries' multitude of musical -isms, everybody loves a good tune. And if you've ever wondered why, it's because your brain essentially is hardwired for the mystery of music itself. A divinely bestowed gift, music somehow transports us to sensory places we've never been, to musical worlds musicians so easily conjure up for us. But how does it all work?

Well, a lot of thinking has gone into this. Daniel J. Levitin's fascinating read *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* relates to us how music is far more than melody, harmony, meter and key. Tone, pitch, rhythm, tempo, contour, timbre, loudness, spatial location and reverberation must be accounted for to explain music's sweeping, transgenerational hold on the human psyche. Yet the brain puts all these components together for us as "neurosonic mappings" arrive from the eardrum. Every part of our brain and ears work together to create a musically coherent representation, even incorporating the emotional responses we feel as we hear some wistful song by a favorite artist.

At bottom, it's your brain making you like the music of the Beatles or Debussy, Queen or Prince, Porter Wagner or Smokey Robinson, Tony Bennett or Van Halen, George Beverly Shea or Skillet, Duran Duran or Kanye West, Taylor Swift or Shrillex. You get the picture.

Compelled to one or the other

And it's fascinating to think about how our immaterial aspects somehow network with our material brains, in turn compelling us, it seems, to like one musical genre or particular instrument's timbre over another, one

artist's voice or particular song better than another. (Compare "Norwegian Wood" to "Maxwell's Silver Hammer"!) Nobody can explain this in toto, not even Levitin. But there's a spiritual connection somewhere, worthy of investigation.

What's the point? Precisely this: The world changed that night 52 years ago. Saddened by JFK's assassination three months earlier, the timely arrival of John, Paul, George and Ringo charmed and spell-bound the nation, something sociologists say the American people sorely needed. But the four young performers never could have guessed the sway they'd wield on Western culture as musical futures began unfolding rapidly.

A missionary friend once asked what it was like to watch the Beatles that night. I answered, "A paradigm shift took place, one greater than 9/11." He was surprised, but I really meant it. Not equal to what open violence against the West can do; rather, in terms of reaching the minds and hearts of generations to come with messages so often antithetical to Christian faith.

Game changers

Simply put, the Beatles were game changers, and the scores of musical genres and sub-genres soon to be birthed provide ample evidence. And worldview changers to boot, as the youth of the mid- to late '60s pursued freedom, hope, happiness, change and revolution, all based on the faulty activism of a throng of influencers (yes, hippies!) with little concern for the Christian teachings many held so dear.

Think of it this way: Since our brains are so geared toward the love of music, what better means was there at the time than to unleash a veritable suite of worldvewish stuff upon the world, accompanied by sounds that delighted and mesmerized even as the lyrics led us astray with soul-

breaching wisdom, so-called?

And the pragmatic endgame? Young people today who don't even know who Jesus is, living and dying by the lyrics their clever cultural idols set to music, their brains oblivious to the claims of the Way, the Truth and the Life upon their existence. "Just give us a song to live by, not some religious message we hate to hear!" The Apostle Paul was right—transforming our minds is key to everything. For too many, though, music is their god.

Remember the Fab Four serenading us with "All you need is love"? Well, guys, you were on to something there, but if your collective genius had been inspired to voice what true love is, if your matchless talents had chronicled the riches God's children possess in Christ, the beauties inherent to knowing him supremely, you'd have forged your path "across the universe" in ways far more enduring.

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