



Red Square; White Album: The 'Atomic' Backbeat to the End of the Cold War

Politics

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It's true, I'll use any excuse to get back to where I once belonged...back to the Sixties. Especially, if I can hear, again, as if for the very first time, "those balalaikas ringing out...back in the U.S.S.R." Lyrics, incidentally, from the first song on the first side of the 1968 self-titled double album 'The Beatles'; known to millions, around the world, simply, as the "White Album."

This particular occasion, not at all prompted by the 50th Anniversary release of the "White Album" at the close of last year, but by a recent 7DNews

Opinion piece I wrote that touched upon the birth of the World Wide Web in 1989. A signal year, in every respect, as it was also the year that saw the first crumbling of the Berlin Wall, and saw and heard UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and US president, George Bush, and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, all declare that, after 40 years of dread uncertainty, the Cold War had finally come to an end.

Of all of them, it was Mikhail Gorbachev's name that resonated with me the most. He, who, in the early 1980s, first introduced the concept of "Perestroika" that called for major reform within the Soviet Union's ruling Communist Party; he, who also formulated the official policy of "openness to reform" or "Glasnost" as we all then, happily, learned to call it.

For people's spirits really did lift, the world over, when the Berlin Wall finally came down. It was seen, at the time; certainly, by this Pollyanna-like, cock-eyed optimist; as a vision of a new possibility; one, perhaps, even worthy of standing alongside the works of such Russian visionaries as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Pasternak, and Solzhenitsyn. Such was the swell of worldwide hope for a brave new Russia; brave new world. But as the old saying goes: "If you want to make God laugh, make plans." As events, most assuredly, didn't turn out the way most people had hoped they would.

A good time for me to return to the release of 50th Anniversary edition of the "White Album." And do bear with me, here, as there's a little more history to touch upon before we get back to the U.S.S.R. and Mr. Gorbachev. For as a veritable avalanche of record reviewers of the newly audio-enhanced "White Album" all pointed out, the double-album was recorded and produced midway through 1968, arguably, one of the most tumultuous years of the latter half of the Twentieth Century. The overall consensus being that The Beatles' epic creation reflected all the political chaos, darkness and disquiet of the time. All of which, all agreed, gave the "White Album" an extraordinary resonance and relevance for today.

1968 saw massive student protests in Paris and London. The civil rights leader Martin Luther King was shot dead in Memphis, Tennessee. The US Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was shot dead in Los Angeles. Warsaw Pact tanks rolled into Prague. The following week, the Democratic National Convention, in Chicago, was marked by excessive and extreme violence. The 'Tet' Offensive ended in Vietnam. The Ba'ath Party seized power in Iraq. And, as if to cap it all, "the Troubles" began in Northern Ireland. Not that we knew to call them that, at the time.

All the chaos of the times, including the spectre of bloody revolution, reflected in the seemingly random way the "White Album" jumbled together wildly diverse elements of music and subject matter and song. Many of which made little or no attempt to rhyme or make any sense. Least of all match any expectations of what a Beatles' album should be like. All of which 'chaos' also pointed, unerringly, even if we didn't know it at the time, to the band's looming break up and demise.

Which begs the question: Were The Beatles merely reflecting the chaos of the times or were they being openly political. And, if they were, did they in turn have any real effect on politics in Britain or the rest of the world?

Clearly, The Beatles were never a serious political force in the traditional sense, but then again as everything they said or did helped expand young peoples' awareness of new social and cultural possibilities, they were a socio-political force, of sorts. How could they not be? Especially, when the group became more and more involved and, later, became completely identified with the counterculture and its brave new nascent ideas.

The Beatles were, unquestionably, the voice of the New Generation and harbingers of the brave new world to come. Which, inevitably, made them a force to be reckoned with, on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet even with all that The Beatles were never overtly political; their core message was really only ever: "All you need is love." Even in, 'Revolution', the opening track on

side four, of the album, John's lyrics in response to popular calls for political uprising in the US and Europe, he expressed sympathy for change, but expressly ruled out violence as means to achieve it: "When you talk about destruction; don't you know that you can count me out."

True, after The Beatles disbanded and his marriage to Yoko Ono, John did become a political activist or, rather, an active pacifist, and used his popularity and notoriety as an ex-Beatle to advance numerous issues. John and Yoko making world headlines with their performance art "baggism" and "Bed-In For Peace" semi-political media events and later Plastic Ono Band 'Live Peace' concerts. Followed hard on by a worldwide campaign of giant billboards proclaiming: "War Is Over! If You Want It." erected in 12 major cities including New York, Hollywood, Toronto, and London. Timely advice back, then: even more, timely, now.

The two spoke out against the Vietnam War, when they moved to New York, in the early 1970's, and began openly to sympathise with a number of 'radical' political personalities and left-wing groups, even providing financial support by appearing and playing at various 'benefit' concerts. All, very much to the concern of then US President Nixon who feared the peace-loving ex-Beatle might one day call for the youth of America "to rise up in armed protest." Which, of course, then led to increased involvement by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and other Federal agencies. And the US government then actively began seeking ways to deny John Lennon his permanent resident 'green card' status and have him deported from the country. A case John and Yoko fought with magnificent tenacity. The US Court of Appeals finally overturning the deportation order in October 1975.

So while it's no exaggeration to say The Beatles truly were a global phenomenon, they were never really a serious political force, other than, perhaps, in the countries behind the "Iron Curtain" where their music was 'officially' banned. The hard rocking, 4/4 thudding, "atomic" backbeat; so much a part of The Beatles' Mersey-sound; a uniquely provocative force.

As, indeed, events proved, when the 'Berlin Wall' finally came down after nearly three decades. The daunting tank controlled, land-mined, barbed-wired, machine-gun swept edifice hadn't at all been an effective barrier against the music and message of The Beatles.

Russian journalist and music critic Artemy Troitsky puts it this way: "The West spent millions on undermining communism but it had much less impact than The Beatles. The Beatles, Paul, John, George, and Ringo have done more for the fall of Communism than any other western institution. They alienated a whole generation of young, well-educated, urban Soviet kids from their communist motherland."

Russian author and Beatles' fan Yury Pelyushonok, now living in Canada, says much the same: "The Beatles were considered the big capitalist threat during the Cold War. You could bring Rolling Stones albums into the country, later on, but not The Beatles. You know why? I think it's because The Beatles were an event. The Rolling Stones were a rock band; but The Beatles were the cultural event of our century."

Sentiments that make my balalaikas start ringing out; I don't know about you. It's only fitting, then, that I leave the last word to ex-General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev who said, tellingly: "More than any ideology, more than any religion, more than Vietnam, or any war, or nuclear bomb, the single most important reason for the diffusion of the Cold War was...The Beatles."

"Da... Da... Da!"

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