



MAUREEN CLEAVE

“How Does a Beatle Live? John Lennon Lives Like This”

In February 1964, the Beatles, a British rock band, arrived in the United States for a series of television appearances on the variety program *The Ed Sullivan Show* and a short tour of concerts in New York City and Washington, DC. Already an immensely popular and successful band in their native United Kingdom and across Europe, from Germany to Sweden and France, the Beatles brought their popularity and success in Europe, labeled *Beatlemania* by the British press earlier in 1963, to America as the start of what was later termed the “British Invasion.” Numerous British bands followed the Beatles to success in the United States, notably the Rolling Stones. American bands such as the Byrds combined the influence of the Beatles with equally influential American artists like Bob Dylan to expand upon rock and pop music in the mid-1960s. Within only a couple years of the Beatles’ arrival in 1964, the band had also toured the United States three times, including a massive concert at New York City’s Shea Stadium in August 1965.

In the midst of the Beatles’ 1966 world tour, an American teen magazine, *Datebook*, published an interview between British journalist Maureen Cleave and John Lennon, one of the Beatles. The interview was part of a series Cleave completed with all four Beatles for the *London Evening Standard*; it was published in March 1966. Lennon compared the popularity of the Beatles with religion in the mid-1960s and commented to Cleave that the Beatles were “more popular than Jesus” based on their cultural success and fans’ “overzealous attention.” This comment went relatively unnoticed in the UK when first published but caused immense criticism and backlash in the United States when *Datebook* published the interview on July 29, 1966. Across the United States, some fans ignored the “sensationalism” surrounding Lennon’s comment, while others called for record burnings and radio boycotts. By mid-August, record burnings occurred in southern communities such as Birmingham, Alabama, and Longview, Texas, while the Ku Klux Klan picketed the only concert planned in a southern city (Memphis, Tennessee). Meanwhile, the Beatles themselves expressed other opinions on issues within American society, notably opposition to the Vietnam War.¹

1. Richard D. Driver, *That Was Me: Paul McCartney’s Career and the Legacy of the Beatles*, *For the Record: Lexington Studies in Rock and Popular Music* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023), 1–2.

On August 11, and again on August 12, 1966, at press conferences in Chicago, Lennon offered an apology for his statement, “If I had said television is more popular than Jesus, I might have got away with it. You know, but as I just happened to be talking to a friend. I used the word ‘Beatles’ as a remote thing—not as what ‘I’ think as Beatles—as those other Beatles like other people see us. I just said ‘they’ are having more influence on kids and things than anything else, including Jesus. But I said it that way which is the wrong way.”² As you read the following profile, consider the influence of popular music and popular culture upon American society and global politics in the 1960s. The Beatles, and John Lennon in particular, in addition to countless musicians, performers, and artists heavily influenced American society, global politics, and a counterculture that developed in the 1960s.

HOW DOES A BEATLE LIVE: JOHN LENNON LIVES LIKE THIS by
Maureen Cleave, from *London Evening Standard*, March 4, 1966. Reprinted
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It was this time three years ago that The Beatles first grew famous. Ever since then, observers have anxiously tried to gauge whether their fame was on the wax or on the wane; they foretold the fall of the old Beatles, they searched diligently for the new Beatles (which was as pointless as looking for the new Big Ben).

At last they have given up; The Beatles’ fame is beyond question. It has nothing to do with whether they are rude or polite, married or unmarried, 25 or 45; whether they appear on Top of the Pops or do not appear on Top of the Pops. They are well above any position even a Rolling Stone might jostle for. They are famous in the way the Queen is famous. When John Lennon’s Rolls-Royce, with its black wheels and its black windows, goes past, people say: “It’s the Queen,” or “It’s The Beatles.” With her they share the security of a stable life at the top. They all tick over in the public esteem—she in Buckingham Palace, they in the Weybridge-Esher area. Only Paul remains in London.

The Weybridge community consists of the three married Beatles; they live there among the wooded hills and the stockbrokers. They have not worked since Christmas and their existence is secluded and curiously timeless. “What day is it?” John Lennon asks with interest when you ring up with news from outside.

2. Maureen Cleave, “How Does a Beatle Live? John Lennon Lives Like This’ *London Evening Standard*, March 4, 1966,” in *Read The Beatles: Classic and New Writings on The Beatles, Their Legacy, and Why They Still Matter*, ed. June Skinner Sawyers (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), 86.

The fans are still at the gates, but The Beatles see only each other. They are better friends than ever before.

Ringo and his wife, Maureen, may drop in on John and Cyn; John may drop in on Ringo; George and Pattie may drop in on John and Cyn and they might all go round to Ringo's, by car of course. Outdoors is for holidays.

They watch films, they play rowdy games of *Buccaneer*³; they watch television till it goes off, often playing records at the same time. They while away the small hours of the morning making mad tapes. Bedtimes and mealtimes have no meaning as such. "We've never had time before to do anything but just be Beatles," John Lennon said.

He is much the same as he was before. He still peers down his nose, arrogant as an eagle, although contact lenses have righted the short sight that originally caused the expression. He looks more like Henry VIII than ever now that his face has filled out—he is just as imperious, just as unpredictable, indolent, disorganized, childish, vague, charming and quick-witted. He is still easy-going, still tough as hell. "You never asked after Fred Lennon," he said, disappointed. (Fred is his father; he emerged after they got famous.) "He was here a few weeks ago. It was only the second time in my life I'd seen him—I showed him the door." He went on cheerfully: "I wasn't having him in the house."

His enthusiasm is undiminished, and he insists on its being shared. George has put him on to this Indian music. "You're not listening, are you?" he shouts after 20 minutes of the record. "It's amazing this—so cool. Don't the Indians appear cool to you? Are you listening? This music is thousands of years old; it makes me laugh, the British going over there and telling them what to do. Quite amazing." And he switched on the television set.

Experience has sown few seeds of doubt in him: not that his mind is closed, but it's closed round whatever he believes at the time. "Christianity will go," he said. "It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first—rock 'n' roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary. It's them twisting it that ruins it for me." He is reading extensively about religion.

He shops in lightning swoops on Asprey's these days and there is some fine wine in his cellar, but he is still quite unselfconscious. He is far too lazy to keep up appearances, even if he had worked out what the appearances should be—which he has not.

He is now 25. He lives in a large, heavily panelled, heavily carpeted, mock Tudor house set on a hill with his wife Cynthia and his son Julian. There is a cat called

3. Board game, first produced in 1938 by Waddingtons, the object of which was to sail a ship to Treasure Island and collect enough treasure to win.

after his aunt Mimi, and a purple dining room. Julian is three; he may be sent to the Lycée in London.⁴ “Seems the only place for him in his position,” said his father, surveying him dispassionately. “I feel sorry for him, though. I couldn’t stand ugly people even when I was five. Lots of the ugly ones are foreign, aren’t they?”

We did a speedy tour of the house, Julian panting along behind, clutching a large porcelain Siamese cat. John swept past the objects in which he had lost interest: “That’s Sidney” (a suit of armour); “That’s a hobby I had for a week” (a room full of model racing cars); “Cyn won’t let me get rid of that” (a fruit machine). In the sitting room are eight little green boxes with winking red lights; he bought them as Christmas presents but never got round to giving them away. They wink for a year; one imagines him sitting there till next Christmas, surrounded by the little winking boxes.

He paused over objects he still fancies; a huge altar crucifix of a Roman Catholic nature with IHS⁵ on it; a pair of crutches, a present from George; an enormous Bible he bought in Chester; his gorilla suit.

“I thought I might need a gorilla suit,” he said; he seemed sad about it. “I’ve only worn it twice. I thought I might pop it on in the summer and drive round in the Ferrari. We were all going to get them and drive round in them, but I was the only one who did. I’ve been thinking about it and if I didn’t wear the head it would make an amazing fur coat—with legs, you see. I would like a fur coat, but I’ve never run into any.”

One feels that his possessions—to which he adds daily—have got the upper hand; all the tape recorders, the five television sets, the cars, the telephones of which he knows not a single number. The moment he approaches a switch it fuses; six of the winking boxes, guaranteed to last till next Christmas, have gone funny already. His cars—the Rolls, the Mini-Cooper (black wheels, black windows), the Ferrari (being painted black)—puzzle him. Then there’s the swimming pool, the trees sloping away beneath it. “Nothing like what I ordered,” he said resignedly. He wanted the bottom to be a mirror. “It’s an amazing household,” he said. “None of my gadgets really work except the gorilla suit—that’s the only suit that fits me.”

He is very keen on books, will always ask what is good to read. He buys quantities of books, and these are kept tidily in a special room. He has Swift, Tennyson, Huxley, Orwell, costly leather-bound editions of Tolstoy, Oscar Wilde. Then there’s *Little Women*, all the William books from his childhood; and some unexpected volumes such as *Forty-One Years in India*, by Field Marshal Lord Roberts, and *Curiosities of Natural History*, by Francis T Buckland. This last—with its chapter headings

4. The Lycée Français Charles de Gaulle, a primary and secondary school in South Kensington, London, run by the Agency for French Teaching Abroad.

5. IHS appears on many Roman Catholic crucifixes; it is an ancient abbreviation for the name Jesus.

"Ear-less Cats," "Wooden-Legged People," "The Immortal Harvey's Mother"—is right up his street.

He approaches reading with a lively interest untempered by too much formal education. "I've read millions of books," he said, "that's why I seem to know things." He is obsessed by Celts. "I have decided I am a Celt," he said. "I am on Boadicea's⁶ side—all those bloody blue-eyed blondes chopping people up. I have an awful feeling wishing I was there—not there with scabs and sores but there through reading about it. The books don't give you more than a paragraph about how they lived; I have to imagine that."

He can sleep almost indefinitely, is probably the laziest person in England. "Physically lazy," he said. "I don't mind writing or reading or watching or speaking, but sex is the only physical thing I can be bothered with any more." Occasionally he is driven to London in the Rolls by an ex-Welsh guardsman called Anthony; Anthony has a moustache that intrigues him.

The day I visited him he had been invited to lunch in London, about which he was rather excited. "Do you know how long lunch lasts?" he asked. "I've never been to lunch before. I went to Lyons the other day and had egg and chips and a cup of tea. The waiters kept looking and saying: 'No, it isn't him, it can't be him.'"

He settled himself into the car and demonstrated the television, the folding bed, the refrigerator, the writing desk, the telephone. He has spent many fruitless hours on that telephone. "I only once got through to a person," he said, "and they were out."

Anthony had spent the weekend in Wales. John asked if they'd kept a welcome for him in the hillside and Anthony said they had. They discussed the possibility of an extension for the telephone. We had to call at the doctor's because John had a bit of sea urchin in his toe. "Don't want to be like Dorothy Dandridge,"⁷ he said, "dying of a splinter 50 years later." He added reassuringly that he had washed the foot in question.

We bowled along in a costly fashion through the countryside. "Famous and loaded" is how he describes himself now. "They keep telling me I'm all right for money but then I think I may have spent it all by the time I'm 40 so I keep going. That's why I started selling my cars; then I changed my mind and got them all back and a new one too.

"I want the money just to *be* rich. The only other way of getting it is to be born rich. If you have money, that's power without having to be powerful. I often think

6. Celtic queen (d. 60 or 61 CE) who led an unsuccessful uprising against the Roman Empire in ancient Britain.

7. American actress (1922–65), best known as the first Black woman to be nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actress. She actually died of an accidental overdose, but she had sustained a minor bone fracture a few days before her death, and common perception at the time was that a splinter had entered her food and traveled to her heart, killing her.

that it's all a big conspiracy, that the winners are the Government and people like us who've got the money. That joke about keeping the workers ignorant is still true; that's what they said about the Tories and the landowners and that; then Labour⁸ were meant to educate the workers but they don't seem to be doing that any more."

He has a morbid horror of stupid people: "Famous and loaded as I am, I still have to meet soft people. It often comes into my mind that I'm not really rich. There are *really* rich people but I don't know where they are."

He finds being famous quite easy, confirming one's suspicion that The Beatles had been leading up to this all their lives. "Everybody thinks they *would* have been famous if only they'd had the Latin and that. So, when it happens it comes naturally. You remember your old granny saying soft things like: 'You'll make it with that voice.'" Not, he added, that he had any old grannies.

He got to the doctor 2¾ hours early and to lunch on time but in the wrong place. He bought a giant compendium of games from Asprey's but having opened it he could not, of course, shut it again. He wondered what else he should buy. He went to Brian Epstein's⁹ office. "Any presents?" he asked eagerly; he observed that there was nothing like getting things free. He tried on the attractive Miss Hanson's spectacles.

The rumor came through that a Beatle had been sighted walking down Oxford Street! He brightened. "One of the others must be out," he said, as though speaking of an escaped bear. "We only let them out one at a time," said the attractive Miss Hanson firmly.

He said that to live and have a laugh were the things to do; but was that enough for the restless spirit?

"Weybridge," he said, "won't do at all. I'm just stopping at it, like a bus stop. Bankers and stockbrokers live there; they can add figures and Weybridge is what they live in and they think it's the end, they really do. I think of it every day—me in my Hansel and Gretel house. I'll take my time; I'll get my real house when I know what I want.

"You see, there's something else I'm going to do, something I must do—only I don't know what it is. That's why I go round painting and taping and drawing and writing and that, because it may be one of them. All I know is, this isn't it for me."

Anthony got him and the compendium into the car and drove him home with the television flickering in the soothing darkness while the Londoners outside rushed home from work.

8. That is, the Labour Party of the United Kingdom, as opposed to the Conservative and Unionist Party, commonly known as the Tories.

9. The Beatles' manager (1934–67). *Miss Hanson*: Wendy Hanson, Epstein's secretary.