

Pop Music (Economic Therapy)

William Eaton

Zeteo is Reading

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In memoirs published decades later, the Beatles producer George Martin recalls meeting with the band members in 1962 after they auditioned for him and his colleagues. Martin did not think the Beatles' songs were very good, but, chatting with them afterwards he happened to ask if there was anything that they themselves did not like. To which George Harrison replied: "Well, there's your tie, for a start."

Legend has it that this was the turning point. Harrison's impish, gently anti-establishment remark, and subsequent jokes and wordplay by John Lennon and Paul McCartney, led Martin to think that he should sign the band to a contract for their wit alone, and even though he didn't think much of their music. (N.B.: The memoirs themselves are also a commercial product, a "spin-off" or form of "brand stretching.")

I once proposed to a friend, a professor not of marketing but of political science, that it would be interesting to learn more about the business behind the selling of the Beatles and how business demands shaped the music. As regards Martin, my sense is that while people often recognize that he played a major role in the Beatles' sound, they do not realize, and do not want to realize, how major this role was. Most of the Beatles' orchestral arrangements and instrumentation were written or performed by Martin. It was his idea to put a string quartet on "Yesterday" and a piccolo trumpet solo on "Penny Lane." Similarly with "Eleanor Rigby," "Strawberry Fields Forever," and the famous orchestral climax to "A Day in the Life," the organs and tape loop for "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" and so forth.

This is just on the music side, what about the mop-top haircuts and tailored, collar-less suits? The selling of gently anti-establishment wit. The screaming girls. And so forth and so on. These were not Martin's doing, but rather the doing of businessmen. (I have read that more

than 80 percent of “new products” are in fact “brand extensions”—baking soda repackaged as toothpaste, *Playboy* spawning *Playboy* clubs, Oprah becoming a magazine.)

We need also to view this the other way around: without a good deal of stretching, let’s call it, the music itself might not have been enough for us. In his article on “Advertising: the magic system,” the English culture critic Raymond Williams writes:

It is impossible to look at modern advertising without realizing that the material object being sold is never enough: this indeed is the crucial cultural quality of its modern forms. If we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we used things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance. Beer would be enough for us, without the additional promise that in drinking it we show ourselves to be manly, young in heart, or neighbourly.

Similarly, we might say, that—in order to buy as many records as we did, and to feel the euphoria that we did—we needed to feel that in listening to the Beatles we were part of something new and revolutionary, leaving our parents and all their limitations in the dust.

My friend didn’t want to discuss any of this. To borrow two famous lines from Yeats: “I, being poor, have only my dreams; . . . Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.” My friend had grown up in the Sixties with the Beatles and inspired by them (as I was too). My friend’s position was that The Beatles were great artists, that was all.

But if we want to understand our lives under consumer capitalism, we need to think about and investigate not only what we have bought, but also how it has been sold to us. Freud and his successors have focused our attention on the events and importance of our earliest years, and I believe we have been able to learn a great deal about ourselves thanks to this focus, and even if this has come at the cost of a loss of innocence. It is past time that we devoted equal attention to the business of pop culture (and of fine art). Along with our psychotherapists, we might have a phalanx of “economic therapists,” let’s call them, to help us understand not only our buying and selling, but also our relations with the job market, employers, landlords, and so forth.

On a recent vacation I took along two books about pop music: Ruy Castro’s *Bossa Nova: The Story of the Brazilian Music That Seduced the World* and Steve Overbury’s *Guns, Cash and Rock’n’Roll: The Managers*. Although I am a fan of *bossa nova*, I did not find Castro’s book very informative or engrossing, and I was similarly non-plussed by Overbury’s work. Read in combination, however, these books did call my attention to one aspect of the pop-music business. This aspect is not likely to surprise *Zeteo* readers, but I hope that it at least serves as a reminder that the pop-music business, like many another, is rather divorced from

any idea of good music. Or, “good” is simply saleability, and this can be negatively defined: If “I,” the businessman, and of a somewhat older generation, don’t like the music, it’s saleable. It’s saleable because it does not—or seems not to—share the values of the previous generation. Again, the persistent virtue—the feeling sought—is leaving in the dust our parents and all their limitations (the limitations of human existence and of life under capitalism).

“Calling out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat?”

“We are stardust, we are golden, and we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

The breakout hit song of the *bossa nova* craze was João Gilberto’s recording of “Chega de saudade” (on the flip side of which was “Bim-bom”). “Chega de saudade” (rough translation: “enough longing”) had been recorded in Rio but needed to be sold to the most powerful directors of pop-music sales in São Paulo. Castro recounts the legend: When the song was played for one of these managers, he smashed it and said, “This is the shit they’re sending us from Rio!” The second manager’s reaction was more or less the same.

As with Martin and the Beatles, this lack of appreciation for the music *may* have been the sign that it was going to be a hit with the younger generation. It was certainly an indication of *how* the music was going to be sold to the younger generation. “Boring old squares would be up in arms,” Castro writes. And, with any luck, you might say, or as, say, in the case of Elvis Presley, a controversy could be caused, and this would lead young people to buy the records.

In his chapter on the Rolling Stones’ legendary manager Andrew Loog Oldham, Overbury recalls Oldham’s various efforts to bring out the worst in the band’s members and to glamorize the least infractions, from getting caught peeing in public to looking bored (like any self-respecting adolescent male) before making an appearance on a popular TV show. “By the time I got through planting all that negative publicity,” Oldham is quoted, “there wasn’t a parent in Britain that wasn’t repulsed by the very sound of [the Rolling Stones’] name.”

It should be noted that back in the nineteenth century French artists and poets began to find ways of selling works that *épatés la bourgeoisie*—shocked the respectable classes. It should also be noted that as a youth Gilberto had listened intently to American popular music and had developed his “new beat” on the basis of what had sold previously.

As I noted previously, the anecdotes and thoughts recorded here are not likely to surprise *Zeteo* readers. What I have wanted to stress above all is that if we want to understand our

lives under consumer capitalism, we need to explore rather further how what we are buying is being sold to us..

Credits & Links

Raymond Williams, [**Advertising: the Magic System**](#), originally a chapter in Williams's *The Long Revolution*, 1961.

[**Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven**](#) is a poem by William Butler Yeats. It was published in 1899 in his third volume of poetry, *The Wind Among the Reeds*.

“Calling out around the world, are you ready for a brand new beat?” is a line from “Dancing in the Street,” a Motown song written by Marvin Gaye, Ivy Jo Hunter, and William "Mickey" Stevenson. In 1964 it became the hit song of the group Martha & the Vandellas.

“We are stardust, we are golden, and we've got to get ourselves back to the garden” are lines from Joni Mitchell’s “Woodstock,” 1970.

“Chega de saudade” was composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim, with lyrics by Vinícius de Moraes.