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Putting the Mockers On: The Rutles, The Beatles, Rock Biopics and Parody

Abstract

Many accounts of film genre reiterate a familiar narrative of growth to “classic” maturity and subsequent parody and/or deconstruction, and the biopic is no exception. However, rock music biopics have reversed this narrative, so that the genre begins in parody and only gets serious later. This is partly because rock and roll music began as parody, mainly by white people imitating African Americans, what is known as blackface minstrelsy, in which music and humour are necessarily (because of racism) mixed. In turn, the 60s rock counterculture took many of its cues from this untimely birth, appropriating African-American marginality in modes that were at once serious (concerns about authenticity) and ironic (mockery of Establishment values). This collision of opposites helps explain both the counterculture’s preference for documentary, especially of live performance, over Hollywood fiction, and its predilection for mockery of both (for example, mockumentary). As the single most influential proto-rock act, whose inventive wit and comic antics, rendered in newsreel, direct cinema, cartoon, and on record, were keys to their commercial and critical success, The Beatles were the perfect subjects for such ironic canonisation. Their filmic career highlights the intersection of documentary and comedy, as well as reality and fiction, via musical performance, a mode which can problematise documentary/comedy, and reality/fiction distinctions. In line with this argument, I have focused on key live performances from the Beatles’ career, and how they are parodied in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978) henceforth *The Rutles*, which doubles as the

first filmic biography of the Beatles and the first rock mockumentary. The Beatles' later career saw their public image shift from intentional to unintentional comedy, a shift mapped in the *The Rutles*, which gradually moves from parody towards satire. It is argued that *The Rutles* is open to a range of audience identifications and readings: it is at once a text for "true fans", a playful deconstruction of their investments, but also one with real-world reverberations (some of its predictions came true). In this sense, it is a "media savvy", peculiarly contemporary text that questions the priority of reality over fiction.

Keywords:

Beatles, biopics, popular music films, mockumentary, comedy, The Rutles, parody.

"It was all pretty silly. It was just like the Rutles really." George Harrison, responding to a question about the Beatles' career.¹

Introduction

Many accounts of film genre reiterate a familiar narrative of growth to "classic" maturity and subsequent parody and/or deconstruction (Metz 1975; Turner 1993). The biopic is no exception, having "gone from celebratory to warts-and-all to investigatory to postmodern and parodic" (Bingham 2010, 10). For biopic scholars like Bingham, conformity to this norm helps justify the biopic's credibility. I want to argue that rock music biopics have reversed this narrative, so that the genre begins in parody and only gets serious later. This is partly because rock and roll music began as parody, mainly by white people imitating African Americans, what is known as blackface minstrelsy, in which music and humour are necessarily (because of racism) mixed. In turn, the 60s rock counterculture took many of its cues from this untimely birth, appropriating African-American marginality in modes that were at once serious (concerns about authenticity) and ironic (mockery of Establishment values). This collision of opposites helps explain both the counterculture's preference for documentary, especially of live performance, over Hollywood fiction, and its predilection for mockery of both (for example, mockumentary). As the single most influential proto-rock act, whose inventive wit and comic antics, rendered in newsreel, direct cinema,

¹ "The Beatles talk about the Rutles." (n.d.). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVsmaNWn3zA>

cartoon, and on record, were keys to their commercial and critical success, The Beatles were the perfect subjects for such ironic canonisation. Their filmic career highlights the intersection of documentary and comedy, as well as reality and fiction, via musical performance, a mode which can problematise documentary/comedy, and reality/fiction distinctions. In line with this argument, I have focused on key live performances from the Beatles' career, and how they are parodied in *The Rutles: All You Need Is Cash* (1978) henceforth *The Rutles*, which doubles as the first filmic biography of the Beatles and the first rock mockumentary. The Beatles' later career saw their public image shift from intentional to unintentional comedy, a shift mapped in the *The Rutles*, which gradually moves from parody towards satire. It is argued that *The Rutles* is open to a range of audience identifications and readings: it is at once a text for "true fans", a playful deconstruction of their investments, but also one with real-world reverberations (some of its predictions came true). In this sense, it is a "media savvy", peculiarly contemporary text that questions the priority of reality over fiction.

The Rutles has a claim to being one of the first rock biopics. It is certainly the first Beatles' biopic, predating TV film, *Birth of the Beatles* [1979], *Backbeat* (1990) about the group's early days in Hamburg, and *Nowhere Boy*, a biographical film about John Lennon's adolescence (2007). The only other claimant, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), a quasi-documentary account of "a day in the life" of the group, is disqualified because the Beatles play themselves. This, their first feature film, along with *Help!* (1965), *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) and *Yellow Submarine* (1968) cover a wide range of filmic styles and genres, and became formative influences on how rock music was represented on screen (Neaverson 1997). Documentaries by or about the Beatles also significantly influenced fictional representations of the group. They begin with the Maysles Brothers' *What's Happening! The Beatles In The U.S.A.* (1964) (reissued on video in 1990 as *The Beatles: The First US Visit*), followed by *Let It Be* (1970), and the unreleased documentary by the band, *The Long and Winding Road*. *The Rutles'* makers had access to a rough cut of the latter, from which they lifted ideas and archival footage (it was finally released in 1995 as the *Beatles Anthology*, an eight-part "authorised" TV documentary) (Spitz 2013). *A Hard Day's Night* recycles much of *What's Happening!*, including the train, press conference, hotel room and nightclub settings and action, as well as now familiar Beatlemania tropes such as shooting inside a car surrounded by fans; and group members clowning on camera. Both films are organised around live performances (although only the documentary actually features live footage), and *A Hard Day's Night* also borrows its handheld, direct cinema style from the Maysles (Brockway 1969), simply transposing the setting from the US to

the UK and adding a thin plot about Paul McCartney's errant grandfather (Wilfred Brambell). Much of the latter film's comic zest derives from the documentary original.

Mockumentary

This combination of feature film and documentary precedents points towards the fact that *The Rutles* is a mockumentary, "a fictional audiovisual text, such as a feature film or television program, that looks and sounds like a documentary" (Hight 2014, 515). It could be objected that a mockumentary is not a biopic, but it is not clear in this case where the distinction lies: like a biopic, *The Rutles* dramatises real events to create a biographical narrative; it uses actors to play the personalities concerned; it mixes history and fiction. Many biopics use documentary techniques, especially when the subject is a contemporary celebrity. The Maysles' documentary profoundly influenced how the Beatles were represented on film, and documentary, in turn, became the filmic form with which rock culture was most associated. Indeed, *The Rutles* inaugurated its own sub-genre - the rock mockumentary, for example *Bad News Tour* (1983) and *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), suggesting the conventional association of rock music with documentary, as well as the possibility of it being a joke: "In the movies, even straight pop history is usually parody in spite of itself" (Marcus 1995, 135). There are other reasons why popular music based films and TV confuse reality and fiction, and documentary and comedy, Andrew Goodwin remarking how "pop songs are often performed through a direct and/or first-person mode of address, thus breaking with the illusionism of the 'fourth wall' of naturalistic cinema and television" (1993, 17). This device is also used in news programmes and filmic comedy (Seidman 1981). Both music and humour can be seen as types of "play" which suspend the rules of *bona fide* communication (Morreall 2011). Thus, it seems plausible to link them. Further evidence arises from the racial history of popular music.

Blackface

Why would the rock biopic begin as parody? Rock music began at least partly as a white imitation of African-American culture - blackface minstrelsy. According to African-American critic Armond White, "some form of darkie [sic] mimicking has been the strongest musical tradition in pluralized American culture" (White 1990, 21). Eric Lott states:

in minstrelsy's cultural force, its racial crossings, and what the *New York Tribune* called its pleasing "insanity" (June 30, 1855), its emergence re-

sembled that of early rock 'n' roll. Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return. For an index of popular white racial feeling in the United States, one could do worse than minstrelsy... The tone and format of the early minstrel show, with its knee-slapping musical numbers punctuated by comic dialogues, bad puns, and petit-bourgeois ribaldry, should seem familiar to anyone who has seen American television's "Hee Haw" (2013, 5).

Lott highlights how minstrel performances combined music and humour. Imitation of African-American culture could be seen as parody, partly because of racism, which made a straightforward acknowledgement of influence impossible:

Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed— minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation, what Homi Bhabha would call its "ambivalence"... and what my title loosely terms "love and theft" (Lott 2013, 6).

Blackface was appropriation, exaggeration and distortion of an ethnic original. Even white racists could discern the appeal of African-American music, but only laughter could render that insight acceptable. Many of blackface's stereotypes endured into the early reception of rock and roll music, and influenced both dissenting and approving narratives. Early rock critic Nik Cohn wrote about Little Richard, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis Presley as 'a... flood of maniacs, wild men... laughing stocks in any earlier generation' (1996, 31). Forms like doo-wop, with its nonsense syllables, were particularly easy prey for parodists. According to rock critic Dave Marsh, the Diamonds' "Little Darlin'" (1957) parodied an original by the African-American Gladiolas. Marsh notes the all-white Diamonds "were hyped as college-educated" and that their versions "travestied R&B, which they viewed with dripping sophomoric contempt. But 'Little Darlin'" is so brutal that it transcends satire... the record's as unmistakably exciting as it is insincere... when the thrill's the thing, who gives a fuck about intentions?" (1999, 148). Marsh argues that not only was the record a hit, but that its teen audience didn't care if the version was satirical. "Squares never do get it. When they wanted to show their superiority to rock and roll... Joan Baez and Peter, Paul and Mary chose 'Little Darlin'" as the target of their mockery. Of course, they didn't do the Gladiolas' version, they parodied the Diamonds' parody, a fitting tribute to the relative aesthetic suss of all concerned" (1999 148-9). The underlying point was that in rock and roll, teen audiences made the decisions about which music was cool, and maker's intentions, parodic

or not, were of secondary importance.² Thus, it made little sense to think of rock and roll as evolving in the same orderly manner as film genre.

With the growth of civil rights in 1960s US, blackface came to be regarded as shameful. By the 1970s it was a critical commonplace that, as music journalist Robert Christgau states, “rock is basically Afro-American music” (1973, 15). This convention is both acknowledged and mocked in *The Rutles*: reporter (Eric Idle) goes to New Orleans to discover “the black origins of Rutle music,” only to be told by a local African-American musician named Blind Lemon Pye that “everything I learned, I learned from the Rutles”. It is perhaps because the Rutles was originally a British project that they were able to get away with this joke, which surely would not have been acceptable from white Americans in the 1970s. This in turn suggests how white British musicians were extended license to “play” with topics and styles that were too charged for white America - they were also performing blackface, but once removed from the immediate climate of segregation, as noted by Simon Frith (1988). The Beatles were again paradigmatic in this respect.

African American influence was mediated into rock culture in complex ways, which may disguise the force of the original influence. Keir Keightley suggests: “rock historians have misinterpreted ... taste for African American music ... as overt “political” statements. Instead, white youth ... adopt this music as a sign of youth’s own, privileged difference, expressing ... their refusal of the mainstream” (2001, 125). Appropriation of blackness functions as symbolic marginality, which allows white youth to imagine themselves as an oppressed minority. This symbolic refusal could take many forms, one of which was humour. The following sections will discuss 1960s counterculture, its ideas about authenticity, its relation to film and to humour, and the relation of humour to popular music, as exemplified by the Beatles. The Beatles’ relation to UK comedy and comedy rock group the Bonzo Dog Band in turn led to the The Rutles. These points will help connect the earlier analysis of film genre and parody with more sustained engagement with the text of *The Rutles*, later in the essay.

The counterculture and authenticity

By the late 1960s, distinctive youth cultures associated with rock music were developing; one of the most influential being the West Coast counterculture (Roszak 1995). Growing up adjacent to Hollywood, the counterculture

² Similar to Umberto Eco’s concept of aberrant decoding. (1972). “Towards a Semiotic Inquiry Into the Television Message.” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 3. trans. Paola Splendore. University of Birmingham: 103–21.

was suspicious of filmic representations of itself, and attacked their accuracy, countercultural bible *Rolling Stone* deriding early rock biopic *The Buddy Holly Story* (1978) for not sticking to the facts of Holly's life (Flippo 1978). In the UK, ex-Beatle Paul McCartney responded to the biopic with his 1987 documentary *The Real Buddy Holly Story*. But the counterculture's concept of truth was part of a broader concern with authenticity.

Keightley (2001) claims that rock authenticity derived from the US folk revival's romantic collectivism, originally identified with African-American culture, but becoming more modernist/individualist as emphasis shifted towards rock musicians as auteurs and rock music as "serious" art. Rock authenticity was less about "truth" than about differentiating rock from other forms of mass-mediated popular culture, whether pop music or Hollywood (Keightley 2001). By the 1970s, the US popular music and film industries were structurally similar and closely intertwined - both based in Los Angeles, both with a similar recent history of independent production companies innovating and then gradually being bought up by a few large media conglomerates (Mundy 1999). However, the counterculture distanced itself from Hollywood "exploitation" films about popular music and youth culture, starting with 50s jukebox musicals like *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), which juxtaposed images of African American musicians with bawdy innuendos about white actress Jayne Mansfield (Mundy 1999); to lurid 60s representations of the nascent counterculture like *The Trip* (1967), *Wild in the Streets* (1968) and *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970), culminating in the road movie *Easy Rider* (1970), the exception that proved the rule - Hollywood and hippies generally did not mix (Hoberman 2003). The received wisdom was that Hollywood simply aimed to exploit popular music as a fad for maximum profit (Mundy 1999). Ironically, this proved to be true, in the sense that films were usually made because of music, rather than the other way round, even in cases like the Beatles and the Rutles, where the films proved to be lasting. In both cases, US business interest was in the music first. For example, *A Hard Day's Night*:

was initially envisaged by the American-owned company as little more than another low budget exploitation picture which would capitalize on the group's fleeting success with the teenage market and, more importantly, provide its record label with a lucrative tie-in soundtrack album. Indeed, as [producer, Walter] Shenson later revealed, the company was only interested in making a Beatles film "for the express purpose of having a soundtrack album" (Neaverson 1997, 40).

As we shall see, a similar logic played out in the case of *The Rutles*. Exploitation is not far removed from parody: the “impure” origins of rock films suggest that the genre operated by different rules to more “serious” genres.

Another alleged example of Hollywood inauthenticity was The Monkees. Modelled on the Beatles, the “manufactured” group fronted an eponymous TV series that debuted in late 1966 and became a huge hit with younger audiences. Once again, the music led the way, despite being viewed initially as an add-on - the TV show became popular on the back of record sales, not vice versa (Baker 1979). However, when the group revealed that they didn’t actually play on their records, there was a huge backlash (Christgau 1973). The rock counterculture condemned the group for its inauthenticity, conveniently disregarding the many instances of session musicians recording backing tracks for rock bands like the Byrds (Christgau 1973). But the heart of the matter was that the Monkees were perceived as a pop group that appealed to teenyboppers, and therefore a “sell-out” (Baker 1979). Also relevant was the fact that the show was knockabout comedy, which, although modelled on the Beatles’ films, was excuse enough to dismiss it. One of the many ironies of this situation was that *The Monkees’* originators, Bob Rafelson and Bert Schneider, became key players in the New Hollywood and its attempted rapprochement with the counterculture. Another was that the Beatles were fans, Lennon comparing the show to the Marx Brothers (Baker 1979).

The counterculture preferred direct cinema, documentary representations of itself, which gave the appearance of being unmediated, for example Pennebaker’s Bob Dylan tour chronicle, *Dont Look Back* (1967). A series of concert films, mostly independently financed and made, followed - *Monterey Pop* (1968); *Woodstock* (1970) and *Gimme Shelter* (1970). By the late 1970s, New Hollywood film auteurs and their musical counterparts were linking up, as in Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Waltz* (1978), another concert film. The primacy of the concert film related to authenticity - “live” musical performance constituted the essential countercultural experience, proof that the musicians could play the music that they had recorded (or not, in the Monkees’ case) (Auslander 2023). A related idea was the counterculture’s suspicion of visual popular culture, especially TV; in contrast, the aural/oral experience of music’s “vibrations” was heard as more immediate and real (Willis 2014). This anti-visuality extended to many alternative 1980s artists eschewing music videos (at least for a while) (Goodwin 1993). But it perpetuates a Romantic view of music as authentic expression as opposed to the “mediation” of TV and film.

Humour and the counterculture

Although suspicious of Hollywood comedy (like *The Monkees*), the counterculture, from the guerilla theatre of the Yippies showering the New York Stock Exchange with dollar bills (Hoberman 2003), to Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters, favoured the "put-on" as a test to sort out the "heads" from the "straights" ("The Beatles were masters of the 'Put-on'", notes Hoberman [2003, 94]). Even the UK hippie movement was characterised by:

mockery of conventional modes of being. The carelessness, the openness, the androgynousness, the oddness of their actions, all highlighted the pomp and self-seriousness of the "straights". The "straights" could not penetrate appearances. They played out a cosmic joke seriously. They were like adolescents in a spiritual puberty, adopting the grave manners which they took to be those of maturity (Willis 2014, 129).

According to Theodore Roszak, a key countercultural insight concerned "madness in high places" (1995, xxxv), that is, the "insanity" of world leaders, and the techno-military-industrial worldview. Instead, the counterculture idealized fools, clowns and even children as figures who could reveal, intentionally or not, the machinations of the straight world (consider the Beatles' "Fool on the Hill" or their involvement with Dutch designers The Fool). Lawrence Grossberg states that 70s rock and roll culture was "serious" about "not being serious" - it characteristically balanced passionate commitment with studied, ironic indifference (1984, 233-4). Play was a countercultural characteristic - the hippie belief (derived from beatnik existentialism, which drew in turn from projections onto African-American culture like Mailer's "White Negro") was that life was a game played for kicks (in the Beatles' words - "nothing is real"). Process was valued over outcome, and humor as a form of play, of being in the moment, and as mockery of Establishment certainties. The Beatles pioneered this approach in their early press conferences, in which they continuously mocked what they considered obvious or "soft" questions: "Q: Why does your music excite people? Lennon: If we knew that, we'd form another group and be managers" (quoted from *What's Happening!*); "Q: Are you a mod or a rocker? Ringo Starr: Um, no, I'm a mocker" (quoted from *A Hard Day's Night*). In this sense, comedy possessed a potential for countercultural authenticity, although this was mediated by a number of factors, which included the relative positions of US and UK popular culture, and countercultural attitudes towards Hollywood.

The Beatles and comedy

In the UK, there was a history of linkages between comedy and popular music, exemplified by the Beatles, raised on the humour of *The Goon Show*, and whose producer, George Martin, had a background in recording comedy acts, which informed Beatles' tracks like "Yellow Submarine" (1966) (MacDonald 1994). The Beatles' impact in the US related to their "zany" British humour, which helped overcome US establishment snobbery about their music and hair-styles (Gendron 2002). This was epitomised in their films, especially *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), which combined direct cinema, UK kitchen sink realism with salty verbal humour (scriptwriter Alun Owen, although Lennon claimed that the group added quips of their own) (Wenner 1971). Surrealistic visual joke effects such as speeding up and reversing film came courtesy of director Richard Lester, who had directed former Goons in *The Running Jumping & Standing Still Film* (1959) and an innovative music film/comedy *It's Trad Dad* (1962) - pointing towards the fusion of realism and humour that eventually gave rise to rock mockumentary.

In turn, the Beatles harboured close connections with UK comedy; indeed popular music and humour were frequently linked to 1960s anti-establishment attitudes (MacDonald 1994). The 1967, skit-based TV comedy *Do Not Adjust Your Set* featured both future Monty Python members like Eric Idle and musical comedians the Bonzo Dog Band, including Neil Innes, the duo later originating the Rutles. The Beatles worked more closely with the Bonzo Dog Band than any other contemporary UK musical act (perhaps because, as a joke band, the Bonzos were not perceived as competitors). They were the only outside musical group to feature in a Beatles film (*Magical Mystery Tour*, where they performed their own composition "Death Cab For Cutie"). McCartney produced their UK hit, "I'm The Urban Spaceman" in 1968 (under the pseudonym Apollo C. Vermouth). The Bonzo Dog Band's own material, often comic or parodic, exemplifies how new styles of rock music begin as parodies - "Mr. Apollo" (1969), a song posing as an advertisement for bodybuilding, musically anticipated 70s glam rock, alternating between heavy metal riffing and Beatle-esque, acoustic-backed harmonies, extending to a lyrical spaceman allusion, the whole anticipating David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust. "Slush" (1972) with its sombre organ chords, plodding pace and repeated maniacal laughter is a clear anticipation of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973). Finally, "Tent"s (1969) propulsive double-time drumming and rock and roll saxophone arpeggios recall early Roxy Music, although the lyrics, "I'm gonna get you in my tent, tent, tent, tent, tent / Where we can both experiment," were far removed from Bryan Ferry's chic decadence. An-

other point in common was the art school background of many UK musicians of this generation, resulting in a playful, experimental attitude, encouraging multimedia work (Frith and Horne 1987). The 60s British “US Invasion”, although spearheaded by music, was continued and extended through edgy UK humour like Monty Python, which had a similar countercultural appeal to rock music.

The Rutles’ transatlantic genesis

The Beatles continued to be involved in satirical, vaguely countercultural film projects throughout the late 1960s - Lennon appearing in Richard Lester’s *How I Won The War* (1967), while Starr co-starred with Peter Sellers in *The Magic Christian* (1969) and with Frank Zappa in *200 Motels* (1971).³ These were transatlantic collaborations - US money and cinematic expertise added to British music and stars, following the precedent of *A Hard Day’s Night*. A stream of British acts followed the Beatles to the US, reintroducing America to its own (especially African-American) music, their exoticism and novelty giving them cultural and commercial cache. British comedy, like Monty Python, gained a foothold in the US though non-profit channel PBS and its irreverence and absurdity became especially popular with the counterculture. Gradually the US developed its own alternative TV comedy, *Saturday Night Live*, nurturing comedians like Bill Murray, John Belushi, Dan Akroyd and Gilda Radner, who would also appear in *The Rutles*.

Meanwhile, in the UK, Eric Idle pursued a solo project, *Rutland Weekend Television*, a skit series for BBC2 in 1975, with Neil Innes providing music. The show’s budget was miniscule and Innes came up with a cheap idea - a pastiche of *A Hard Day’s Night*, by a Beatle-like band, christened The Rutles, after the programme name (Cregan 2008). Innes had spent much of his later Bonzos career fashioning Beatles pastiches such as “Don’t Get Me Wrong” and “Fresh Wound” (1972), and came up with “I Must Be In Love” for the skit. The programme aired in the UK to negligible response; however, once again music led the way, via a BBC Records compilation, *The Rutland Weekend Songbook* including the Rutles track, which was picked up by Marty Scott of Jem Records, who imported UK music to the US. “I was into Python. I was into the Bonzo Dog Band... anything coming from England went through Jem Records... it was something cool” (quoted in Womack 2019, 275). Idle did a US press tour to promote the record and appeared on *Saturday Night Live* amid a frenzy of speculation about a Beatles reunion. Innes comments: “Someone in America was offering... [the

³ Zappa and the Beatles definitely affected each other - Zappa’s 1967 album *We’re Only In It For The Money* parodied *Sgt. Pepper*, and Zappa’s combination of music and parody was the US equivalent of the Bonzo Dog Band.

Beatles] \$20 million each for getting together for 20 minutes, and there were running gags... on *Saturday Night Live*" (Interview with Neil Innes, 2019). These gags included an offer of \$3000 if the Beatles would appear on *SNL*. Innes says: "They used it an excuse as to why Eric was hosting the show one week, 'cos [Eric] said he could get the Beatles together" (Cregan 2008). The skit ran thus:

Lorne Michaels (*SNL*): About two weeks ago I got a long-distance phone call from Eric Idle... saying that if I would let him come over and host the show he would bring the Beatles with him... I agreed and ... sent him the... \$3000... 20 mins ago the film arrived... only it's not the Beatles, it's the Rutles (Cregan 2008).

Innes comments: "So they showed the Rutles clip... and the mailbag was enormous, people were even sending albums with Beatles crossed out and Rutles instead" (Cregan 2008). Michaels then talked NBC into financing a programme on the Rutles, to be directed by *SNL*'s Gary Weis. Idle wrote the script: Innes played John Lennon (Ron Nasty), Idle Paul McCartney (Dirk McQuickly), while the parts of George Harrison (Stig O'Hara) and Ringo Starr (Barry Wom) were taken by Ricky Fataar and John Halsey. Meanwhile, Innes composed a series of musical parodies, based on the Beatles' musical development. These were recorded by a band that was relatively authentic to the film cast - only Idle's parts were performed by someone else (Ollie Halshall).

A true fake

Although a mockumentary and a fiction, the success of *The Rutles* was predicated, ironically, on its authenticity. The parody was also a faithful and detailed recreation of the Beatles' career and music (Covach 1990). In this way, it remained "true" to its audience, while also being a joke. For Linda Hutcheon, postmodern parody can be read as "signaling ironic difference at the heart of similarity and as an authorized transgression of convention" (1988, x), similar to the "licenced transgression" of comedy (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 4). "Authenticity" is thus less a matter of factual accuracy than fidelity to style: "The mock-documentary form is used within this film... to recreate an audience's public experience of the group, to parody the mediation of the myth, rather than to uncover its origins" (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 102). They were helped in this regard by the Beatles themselves, George Harrison participating in the production (appearing as a reporter in one segment), and giving access to archival footage, which appears in the film, and is faithfully matched by Weis. Lennon also endorsed the film (Cregan 2008).

With the possible exception of Elvis Presley, The Beatles were the first popular music act whose career was extensively documented on film and much of the screentime of *The Rutles* is taken up with re-creation - for example, a Cavern appearance, filmed in black and white by Granada TV on 22 August 1962 (but not broadcast at the time). Famous as the earliest live footage of the Beatles, it consists mainly of front-on shots framing the entire group performing to camera, intercut with close-ups of the audience. The song is "Some Other Guy", a cover the Beatles did not release until 1995. Innes' pastiche, entitled "Goosestep Mama", recreates the energetic early Beatles' style, while sneaking in a reference to Nazism. This alludes to the Beatles' early career in Hamburg, as well as Lennon's habit of taunting audiences with Nazi salutes and verbal jibes, something he continued throughout the group's career (Baker 1982; Lewisohn 2013). It is carried through *The Rutles* via Chastity, Nasty's girlfriend, who fills Yoko Ono's role, which will be discussed below. Nazi parodies were also a staple for the Monty Python cast - John Cleese, in particular. A connecting point between comedy and the counterculture was that both could tackle taboo subjects by treating them ironically, a practice which reached its culmination in punk rock's use of the swastika, but which also opens both to charges of moral relativism, discussed below (Hebdige 1979).

"Live" performance

The Rutles apparently confirms its countercultural authenticity by referring continually to the Beatles' iconic live performances: the Cavern in 1962, the Royal Variety Club performance of 1963, the 1965 Shea Stadium concert (at the time, the largest live audience in history); the 1967 TV broadcast of "All You Need is Love"; and the 1969 *Let It Be* rooftop concert (*Let it Rot* in *The Rutles*). But given that many of these live performances were also originally TV appearances, they blend imperceptibly with non-synchronised footage such as the *Hard Day's Night*-style fast-motion antics of "I Must Be in Love", or the "I am the Walrus" pastiche "Piggy in the Middle" (based on the *Magical Mystery Tour*). These are more like music videos, but strike the audience as "real" because they are true to the style of the originals. Indeed it can be argued that music videos as a form (pioneered by the Beatles) are characterised by a blurring of the fiction/documentary distinction - combining non-fiction techniques such as direct address and documentary-style live performance footage with surreal cutaways and montage (Goodwin 1993). In this sense, mockumentary has its origins in *A Hard Day's Night*, which mixed documentary techniques (and, as we have seen, "real" settings and events) and synchronised live performance with music video style artifice, such as non-

narrative, montage sequences. An example is early in the film when the group perform ‘I Should Have Known Better’ on a train. The set-up is that the group are playing cards; the music fades in, apparently non-diegetic for the first 30 seconds, at which point shots of the card game are replaced with synchronised, apparently diegetic shots of singing and playing. This freedom from narrative convention is also characteristic of film comedy, where narrative continuity can be suspended for comic effect - in this case, the transition has been signalled by the group’s witty banter and slapstick, and by a surreal shot in which they appear outside the moving train window to taunt an uptight commuter.

The (televised) 1963 UK Variety Club performance was the occasion of Lennon’s notorious incitement to the Establishment audience (including Princess Margaret and the Queen Mother) to “rattle your jewellery” (Norman 1981, 191). In *The Rutles*, the joke is more directly about the female Royals: “This song is dedicated to a very special lady: Barry’s Mum.” The Beatles’ irreverence connects them to the early 1960s UK satire boom: their Northern accents and demeanour rub against Southern Establishment values (Ringo yells “Southerner” at a policeman in *A Hard Day’s Night*), while also being a generic device (Liverpool was famous for its “Scouse humour” and comedians: Ken Dodd, Arthur Askey, Jimmy Tarbuck, The Scaffold, Tommy Handley).⁴ The Shea stadium film, appended to Ron Howard’s 2016 documentary *The Beatles: Eight Days a Week - The Touring Years*, is sent up in *The Rutles* as “Che” stadium, “named after the Cuban guerrilla leader, Che Stadium” and by Mick Jagger, who comments, “They were miles away, you couldn’t see ‘em... you couldn’t hear anything.” Jagger humorously casts doubt on the authenticity of the performance, “Is it really the Rutles? It might be somebody else.” The sequence plays complexly on audience knowledge and expectations, alluding to countercultural hero, Che Guevara, and presenting a real rock star, Jagger, as a documentary participant. Given the much-publicised contrast between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones (“The Beatles want to hold your hand, the Stones want to burn down your town” [Tom Wolfe]), it is comically apt that Jagger should be casting aspersions on the Beatles’ (Rutles’) authenticity. The appearance of real rock stars throughout the film, playing themselves or fictional roles (Paul Simon, Ron Wood, George Harrison) adds cultural cache, further enhanced by them being “in” on the joke. Their presence can be understood both as sincere and ironic, emphasising how *The Rutles* has it both ways - both laughing at and with pop culture.

⁴ Handley appears on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*.

The 1967 “All You Need Is Love” sequence is recreated fairly faithfully, the comedy arising from Innes’ song “Love Life”. The title plays on the contrast between the original’s utopianism and the 1960s sexual revolution, identified with the “liberated” lifestyles of pop stars, sensationalised in the press (which initially targeted the more risqué Stones, though Lennon became a target via his adulterous relationship with Yoko Ono). The lyrics “Make up your mind, in your own time” mimic the ambiguity of the original’s verses: “Nothin’ you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time, it’s easy” - Lennon’s lyrics were becoming surrealistically non-committal if not nonsensical, which gave rise to misinterpretations both humorous and sinister. The Beatles’ unprecedented fame, combined with countercultural questioning of Establishment values and the impact of hallucinogens on youth culture (and the Beatles themselves), was producing cultural confusion. Ian MacDonald argues that once the group stopped touring, a lackadaisical mood of “stoned sloppiness” started to pervade their work (1994, 206). This connected to the group’s self-deprecating attitude to their own stardom - increasingly, they were sending themselves up, intentionally or not. An early example was *Magical Mystery Tour*, rendered in *The Rutles* as *Tragical History Tour*. The group presumptuously directed and edited the film themselves, producing what MacDonald claims was unconscious satire: “The Beatles’ ‘aimlessness’ in this project was partly satirical, gently embarrassing the ‘great British public’ on its most bloated day of the year” (1994, 205). The film debuted in the UK on Boxing Day 1967, to widespread outrage. It marked a transition in the Beatles’ career - they had always been comedians, but were now starting to become a laughing stock (partly a media backlash - press coverage up until 1967, in the UK at least, was entirely positive, no journalist wanting to upset the gravy train: “You were writing in self-defence” [Norman 1981, 185]). Harrison’s sudden interest in Indian culture and Lennon’s adultery were widely ridiculed in the popular press, which pandered to racist stereotypes (Norman 1981).

Many of Lennon and Ono’s “events” such as the bed-in for world peace and their flirtation with Bagism (appearing in public in a bag) were regarded as jokes, Lennon stating, “we’re willing to be the world’s clowns,” if it would help causes like world peace (Riley 2011, 455). Arguably, *The Rutles*’ makers struggled to parody events that were already self-parody - Ono’s 1967 film *No. 4*, which consists entirely of human bottoms, becomes “A Thousand Feet of Film”, with the soundtrack being “You Need Feet” by Bernard Bresslaw, (a comic parody of Max Bygraves’ “You Need Hands”) a top 10 UK hit in 1958. The use of this novelty track could suggest that there were some aspects of Lennon and Ono’s career that were beyond Innes’ power of parody. Similarly, the representation of Yoko Ono as a Nazi suggests that the film’s makers struggled to find a way to represent her,

given that she was subject to racist abuse - the character of Charity indirectly projects racism onto herself, a somewhat disingenuous strategy by the film's makers. But given that Nasty is also associated with Nazism (as was Lennon, who even terms Nazis Nasties in his book *In His Own Write* [1964]), it also suggests how the counterculture's willingness to go to extremes, and the Beatles' lackadaisical relativism, invited not only satirical response but real and tragic consequences:

the Beatles made a substantial contribution of their own to amoral meaninglessness with the 'random' lyrics and effects which adorned their later work; and just as this backfired on them in the form of the 'Paul is dead' hysteria and Lennon's death at the hands of a demented fan in 1980, so the playful relativism of the 'flower power' summer of 1967 produced its own nemesis in 1968-9 in the shape of acid-crazed extremists like the Motherfuckers, the Manson Family, the Molotov Cocktail Party, and the Weathermen. The sad fact was that LSD could turn its users into anything from florally embellished peaceniks to gun-brandishing urban guerrillas (MacDonald 1994, 17).

There is a satirical bite in the latter sequences of *The Rutles* that is lacking in the first part of the film. It is aimed not only at the Beatles but at the counterculture generally, exemplified by the "Paul is dead" conspiracy theory, which is recycled in *The Rutles* as Stig (the quiet one) seeming to have been silenced permanently:

Several so called "facts" helped the emergence of this rumour: One: he never said anything publicly. Even as the "quiet one", he'd not said a word since 1966. Two: on the cover of their latest album, "Shabby Road" he's wearing no trousers, an Italian way of indicating death. Three: Nasty supposedly sings "I buried Stig" on "I Am The Waitress"... Four: on the cover of the *Sgt. Rutter* album, Stig is leaning in the exact position of a dying Yeti, from the *Rutland Book of the Dead*. Five: if you sing the title of "Sgt. Rutter's Only Darts Club Band" backwards, it is supposed to sound very like, "Stig has been dead for ages, honestly." In fact, it sounds uncannily like "dnab bulc ylno srettur tnaegres," palpable nonsense (quoted from *The Rutles*).

Beatles' music and album covers were scanned by fans for evidence of McCartney's demise: his bare feet on the cover of *Abbey Road* were interpreted as a symbol of death, as was his turning his back on the rear cover of *Sgt. Pepper*; the fadeout of "Strawberry Fields Forever" was said to include Lennon saying "I buried Paul" and reversed vocals on the *Sgt. Pepper* inner groove were subject

to endless speculation (Norman 1981). The real world actions of fans and members of the counterculture, like those of the Beatles, were now the stuff of public ridicule - the counterculture, which had mocked the straight world, now found itself the butt of the joke, as did the Beatles. But the joke became real in 1980, when Lennon was murdered by a deluded fan - imparting to the "Stig is dead" sequence a mordant irony unintended by its makers. Even Greil Marcus, one of the leading rock critics, registered some alarm over The Rutles' skewering of the greatest idols of their age:

Pop life comes to seem like a joke the postwar generation have played on themselves ... The Rutles dropped themselves into every memorable incident in Beatle history, which meant that ten years of pop history were covered on the premise that the real thing had been ... a cosmic sham ... My God, I thought, had I – and virtually everyone I knew - put so much of myself into so little? (Marcus 1995, 134-5).

Certainly, not all the Beatles were amused by the film - McCartney was stung by Idle's caricature of his eager-to-please public persona (Cregan 2008). As the most commercially successful Beatle, he was subject to regular put-downs in the 1970s rock press (Murray 1991). Idle's caricature reflected to some degree contemporary agendas in the popular music field, just as the film's satirising of the counterculture also reflects contemporary media attitudes towards hippies, who were widely lampooned. More broadly, parodying the Beatles had consequences for the Rutles' makers, many of which would have been funny if they had not been real. For example, Innes was sued by ATV Music for plagiarism - although the Beatles mostly enjoyed the film and even collaborated with Innes, they did not own their own publishing and could not control the publisher's actions ("Interview with Neil Innes" [2019]). This outcome is anticipated in *The Rutles*: "In 1970 Dirk sued Stig, Nasty and Barry; Barry sued Dirk, Nasty and Stig; Nasty sued Barry, Dirk and Stig, and Stig sued himself accidentally". As Hutcheon (1988) suggests, in postmodern parody, rather than art imitating life, life imitates art. Suing the Rutles provided a spectacle in which the Beatles appeared to be suing themselves.

But rather than insist on any one reading of the text being definitive, what is demonstrated here is how mockumentary allows many possible readings. It is a text that addresses a "media-savvy" audience, and it is certainly possible to argue that the kind of reflexivity that characterises mockumentary was anticipated in the counterculture, with its oscillation between passionate belief and ironic disengagement. Mark Andrejevic (2003) discusses how late (digital) capitalism is marked by a complex relationship between the promise of participatory inter-

activity and productive surveillance (how global capitalism harvests and sells the information from user interactions). The viewing subject is in a playful relation to the medium, aware that (s)he is being lied to by a medium that repeatedly reminds him/her of this fact: “To say ‘I am lying’ is to tell the truth about not telling the truth and is thus both true and untrue,” which applies specifically to mockumentary and more generally to comedy (Bishop 2013, 81).

Conclusion

I have argued that the genesis of the rock biopic was a highly contested field, given countercultural perceptions of Hollywood “exploitation” of popular music and youth culture. But such attitudes were also attempts to position rock music outside the commercial mainstream. In fact, as both the cases of the Beatles and the Rutles prove, their music was indeed a commodity which US film producers aimed to exploit. But the critical success of these ventures meant that the films were perceived as authentic, regardless of their commercial nature. Paradoxically, the authenticity of the Rutles (and possibly even the Beatles) was premised at least partly on their status as parodies, an insight mediated by their shared Britishness. In other words, their playful but knowing approach to media and society endeared them to their audiences far more effectively than painstaking fidelity - a fidelity of style more than content. The Beatles repackaged African-American-inspired rock and roll for American audiences, a form of mimicry which was becoming untenable for white Americans. The Beatles’ British status granted them liberty to perform a homage to African-American roots, underlined by their witty and irreverent personae which helped endear them to US audiences, while also echoing blackface parody in a more acceptable, apparently novel, because exotic, form. The thread of allusions to Nazism was one example of how rock’s relation to racism was remediated in both *The Rutles* and in rock culture.

At the same time, documentary footage of the Beatles helped establish direct cinema as the preferred form of representation for rock culture, and performance as the preferred content, whether music or comedy (the two modes having much in common - both forms of play that flirt with fictive/real distinctions), and this combination of sincerity and mockery became characteristic of the counterculture, and predictive of the media-savvy audiences of late capitalism. *The Rutles* is a text that is true to the styles of mediation in which the Beatles were articulated and that arose from both groups’ common background, which mixed comedy and music freely. But the realisation of *The Rutles*, as with the Beatles, depended on a broader context of reception - on US audiences and institutions whose readings of the texts (Beatles or Rutles) were instrumental to their critical

and commercial success, while also becoming subject matter for the parody itself, which is as much of the audience as of the group(s). It is possible then to read *The Rutles* both as a work of affection and even “nostalgia” (Womack 2019) while also recognising that for some audiences and in some respects, its satire of the counterculture and of credulous fans was quite incisive. And that, in postmodern fashion, some of the text’s ironies - as in *The Rutles*, the Beatles did end up suing themselves - predicted real world events.

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