

The Dearth of Studies on Collective Mass-Audience Reactions to Music

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Abstract

This brief paper repeats an appeal for researchers in behavioural science to mount contemporary studies of extreme reactions to certain kinds of popular music. Its history is touched upon, with the present author's solitary empirical study still set against a welter of opinions that have yet to be tested in 'real-life' research. In Shakespearean terms, 'there's the rub'.

Keywords: mass-audients reaction; over reaction; beatlemania

Introduction

From the dawn of civilisation, music has featured in bereavement, celebratory and ceremonial occasions that integrate communities. In common with specific beliefs, customs, dance, dress, and language, it contributes to an understanding of the present and the past, and sustains community hopes for the future.

In earlier times the performances would have been prominent on designated occasions within territorial limits. But the progression of exploration, cheaper travel, the cinema, radio, television, tape-recordings, compact discs, dvd and now hand-held electronic devices, has made such music available to anyone, everywhere, 'on demand'. Consequently, commercial entrepreneurs have become the latter-day tribal elders for the devotees of music divorced from tradition, but not from purpose.

Beginning in America in the 1950's, performers like Buddy Holly, Eric Clapton, and Elvis Presley, attracted fans to their concerts from far and wide. Regardless of cultural conventional and tradition, they held performances according to the climate, and availability of suitably large venues. Four working-class lads from Liverpool followed by inducing a specific audience reaction that came to be known as 'Beatlemania'.

Produced primarily by the drummer, as the group's name suggests, wherever the Beatles performed, their music brought hordes of teenagers to their feet in paroxysms of uncontrolled emotion – much to the dismay of their families, their communities and the authorities that feared a youth revolution was in the offing in those politically-unsettled years post-World War 2.

The authorities responded with firm measures intended to quell disruption in and around the concerts. Some in the Far East even had barbers at airports to trim the locks of visitors arriving with Beatle-length hair. The establishment and many a journalist used scurrilous epithets to express the disdain with which they viewed the music, the musicians, and the unruly followers.

In 1964, such a prevailing climate of anxiety and authoritarian over-reaction, it seemed opportune to mount a project to try to gather some facts during the Beatles forthcoming visit to Wellington, N.Z. The project was designed as an Honours Class exercise in Clinical Psychology as an exercise in applied research, and for that later it was especially commended by psychologists in Britain (cf. Taylor, 1992) – although still not replicated independently (Taylor, 2014).

The seminal study

Initially the plan was to make observations of people who displayed extreme reactions to the Beatles in strategic places such as the airport, outside their hotel, and at a concert, seek their co-operation for interviews later to provide demographic data, indicators of social conformity, patterns of personality, and measures of any prevailing clinical symptomatology they might have. An interview with John Lennon was to follow, plus attendance at a live concert to gain first-hand experience of the proclaimed maelstrom of disorder.

In practice the plan had to be changed, because the crowds were too crowded to allow the student-observers to move about freely to identify a sufficient number of potential participants, (with only 10 of the 85 identified keeping their follow-up appointments). However, because teenagers everywhere were substantially to the fore, on the advice of school-teachers, entire classes of respondents were recruited from a socio-economic spread of four colleges and another that trained teachers – giving a total of 336 participants aged between 15 and 20,

The results found Beatlemania to be primarily a reaction of adolescent females to the considerable direct and indirect musical, psychological, social and commercial pressures placed on them (cf. Taylor, 1966; 1968 for details). The most affected were younger, more gregarious, assertive, active, worrying, excitable and inclined towards emotional instability than their counterparts: but they presented no evidence of clinical hysteria, acute emotional instability, nor social deviance. Nor had any been sufficiently disturbed over the intervening weeks since the arrival of the Beatles to require professional referral.

At the concert, for nearly two hours before the Beatles appeared to cap the proceedings, two cavorting bands in turn raised noise-levels to fever-pitch against a dazzling pyrotechnical display of coloured lights. Finally, sustained pandemonium broke out from the fusion of the pulsating rhythmic beat, and the socio-cultural importance and emotional arousal of the music and lyrics

On interview John Lennon confirmed the significance of the beat and the emotional focus of the lyrics on the target group of adolescent girls. He attributed the reaction produced in Hamburg to Germanic family discipline (although in my view the same would not explain its occurrence elsewhere) (cf. Taylor & O'Leary, 2015).

Conclusion

The mass-audience reaction could be construed as reflecting a) a passing phase of personality development, b) the common need of every generation to seek independence from its forebears, and c).



The need to participate in the creation of a less hidebound and militant but more loving society. It remains for the study to be replicated by organisations with less modest resources and a wider range of appropriate procedures than those that were available when the original study was undertaken.

Conflict of Interest

The Author declared there is no conflict of interest

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