

Nostalgias and Anachronisms, Past and Present

by strannikov

The ineluctable, inexorable rush of time on the surface of Planet Earth can come as no surprise to anyone if we dare to believe our astrophysicists.

Earth continues to obey the rates of cosmic velocity it has observed for ages, aeons, millions and tens of millions and hundreds of millions of years, at least.

With whatever niggling variation across its billions of hurtling years (orbits retarded here, revolutions accelerated there), Earth with its Moon in tow zips around the Sun today at never less than 27 km/s. In the trail of the Sun, our planet spins around the disc of the Milky Way at no less than 200 km/s. In relation to the Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation, our galaxy itself barrels through the baryonic universe (still of unknown dimensions) at no less than 300 km/s. With our galaxy's membership in the Laniakea Supercluster, we fly between the gravity-repulsing void of the Dipole Repeller and the gravitational over-density lurking somewhere beyond or in the Shapley Supercluster at no less than 600 km/s. Thus is our lonely planet subject to cumulative velocities of about 370 km/s and probably more.

Thus does time fly and we with it.

Because time flies on the cosmic scale, curious things inevitably occur in local circumstances.

So it is the case: the transient historical phenomenon known as “The Beatles” commenced on 18 August 1962 with the able accession of Richard Starkey to the band's drum kit and ended on 10 April 1970 when Paul McCartney announced his departure from the group. The largest measure of this “recent” historical phenomenon

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is now closer in time to the beginning and ending dates of World War One (28 July 1914 to 11 November 1918) than to any moment occurring in the month of July 2022, even though Starkey and McCartney remain surviving former members of the group.

When the recording career of The Beatles ended in 1970, practically no one on the planet was listening to music fifty years old or more: no one was singing songs from the trenches of Flanders or Picardy, no one was humming tunes from the era of English music halls, no one was whistling music from the closing days of Western frontier saloons. No one was even listening to ragtime to speak of: its popularity would reprise again only briefly in 1974 as works by Scott Joplin (c. 24 November 1868—1 April 1917) became the (anachronistic) soundtrack to the movie The Sting, a moving picture itself set in the Chicago of 1936.

“The Beatles” as a contemporary historical marker in 2022 thus slips ineluctably, inexorably, and inevitably away. In mere moments their catalogue will be practically as temporally remote as Scott Joplin's, as contemporary as the tunes that emerged from Tin Pan Alleys of yesteryears, and in only a few decades Joplin and The Beatles will be deemed practically contemporary with each other, neither able to boast credible contemporaneity with whatever conditions Planet Earth greets at sunrise on the first day of the Twenty-second Century CE, viz., Saturday, 1 January 2101 (assuming, et cetera et cetera et cetera . . .).

That in July 2022 we continue to deem The Beatles as “contemporary” is largely a measure of how many octogenarians, septuagenarians, and sexagenarians continue to live, those continuing to live with memories that were being formed contemporaneous with the recording career of The Beatles. As such, nevertheless, it is somewhat odd how the musical idiom The Beatles (and their contemporary cohort of commercial celebrities modeling the conspicuous consumptions of nouveau riche entertainers) helped craft for popular music has endured across every succeeding generation to this present day: a novelty in the 1960s, the band's influence in studio techniques, instrumentation, and orchestration

(and conspicuous consumption) has lasted far longer and far stronger than Joplin's can credibly be said to've endured. A contrasting observation can be made with respect to the career of The Rolling Stones, who were among the popular musicians of the day at least occasionally giving fresh life to compositions of American blues artist Robert Johnson (8 May 1911—16 August 1938). "The blues" as a sub-genre of rock 'n' roll enjoyed its heyday from the mid- to late 1960s to its total eclipse by the mid-1970s, with only infrequent and brief reprises across the decades of popular music since.

Can it be a sign of planetary arrested development that the idiom of popular music called "rock 'n' roll" so well-wrought and so well-crafted by The Beatles (and so superbly marketed) should have continued to endure for this long, without any viable successor? If nostalgia is deemed the apotheosis of living memory, what triggering event(s) can possibly (and inevitably) displace rock 'n' roll? Has rock 'n' roll really become the eternal idiom for the popular music embraced by adolescents and juvenile adults? Is it actually possible for an idiom of popular music to endure for an entire century or more, decade after decade after decade after decade after decade?—and what, meanwhile, of perfectly worthwhile cultural markers in music, literature, art, or architecture that antedated the entire Twentieth Century? Surely something worth remembering existed on this tired, dreary Earth before the advent of our most recent nostalgias.

How much has America's continuous creation of its numerous commercial "Cults of Perpetual Youth" (ever presided over by chronological adults who continue to profit financially from their marketing and proliferation)—"the Fountain of Youth" surely qualifying as one of America's most captivating and longest-lived myths—or to what extent might the decades-long valorization of youth have contributed directly to American psychic anaesthetization (odd how commercial cults of youth are forced to rely on pharmaceutical contributions and cosmetic surgeries to maintain the illusions of life-long youth), affective infantilization

(odd how resistance to chronology and aversion to aging can contribute to persisting emotional immaturity and puerile impatience, with all the dread insistence upon immediate gratification and “authentic” impulsiveness of appetites), and cognitive stultification (odd how America's commercial cults of youth continue to preclude critical examination of their own industrial excesses, foster uncritical acceptance of the notions they roll out of their aesthetic factories, and perpetuate the innate inability to address critical challenge to such mindless valorization of youth, especially now that its most experienced practitioners and cult figures are themselves octogenarian devotees)? Surely such cultivated outcomes cannot be the mere outgrowths of habits and sheer momentum.

I've picked on popular music (contemporary and not-so-contemporary) here because music is the exemplary art of time and temporality: time and timing, their rhythms and tempos, are the very substance of music, and how long music continues to enjoy popular, enduring appeal is another aspect of its relationship to time and temporality. (I also question the extent to which popular music has become an artificial stimulant to affective response: recorded music since 1970 has attained “high-fidelity” status for almost every audience, and every note of melody and thump of rhythm and timbre of voice calculated to elicit affective response has seldom failed to directly stimulate our prized emotional states.) As long as we remain willing to say that seventy- or fifty-year-old popular music remains “music of our time”, who are we to disagree with ourselves? As long as we continue to listen to it and let it comprise at least part of the soundtrack of our fleeting lives, it has not been displaced.

I am not calling for or demanding its displacement, either: I'm only wondering out loud about its persistence and whether this persistence and the nostalgia it represents says anything to us that we are capable of hearing. At what point might a fifty-year-old novelty no longer sound new? In fact, I am also asking here whether “popular music” of whatever idiom can or should remain the dominant cultural expression generation after generation, decade

after decade—perhaps a relevant question in an era (and a decade) that may well be witnessing the advent of Runaway Technogenic Climate Change, whose dynamics and processes have been aggravated and stimulated in no small measure across recent decades (the lifespan of rock 'n' roll, someone could say) by the requisite expenditures of generated electric power with which turntables and tape decks and CD players, tuners and amplifiers, guitars and microphones, auditorium and arena sound and light systems, and headphones and synthesizers and studio mixing boards have all operated. To whatever extent our recorded musics feed and enliven our emotional lives, could it be that we have fed our affectivity with electric stimulation all the way into a new era where immediate cognitive application might in fact be required of us?

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