

THE LONG AND WINDING
ROAD FROM BLAKE TO
THE BEATLES

NINETEENTH-CENTURY MAJOR LIVES AND LETTERS

Series Editor: Marilyn Gaull

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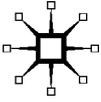
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PREFACE

This book originated in an experience that Sigmund Freud would have called “uncanny.” While reading through William Wordsworth’s and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s groundbreaking *Lyrical Ballads* one afternoon some fifteen years ago, I started hearing Beatles songs in my head. When I read a poem by Wordsworth, I heard McCartney songs; and when I read one of Coleridge’s poems, I heard songs by John Lennon. Investigating this strange incursion of two-hundred-year-old poems into twenty-five-year-old pop songs led me to the question of the relationship between high literary culture and mass pop culture. Are poems the distant ancestors of pop songs? If so, how was that influence transmitted? More important, is popular music capable of fulfilling the cognitive and aesthetic functions previously reserved to self-consciously “high” art, like the Wordsworth and Coleridge poems that had raised in my mind specters of Beatles songs?

Like many of my generation (I was born in 1958), I have a significant personal stake in answering these questions, for my introduction to the magic of poetry—of language rhythmically arranged—came through pop music. Along with some 72.9 million other Americans, I witnessed a seminal moment in the poeticization of pop music when I saw the Beatles’ first appearance on the Ed Sullivan show on February 9, 1964. As I grew older, the love for the Beatles I felt for the first time that night remained undimmed as I found my way to the rich poetic tradition of the land from which they hailed. But not until that afternoon a decade and a half ago—when I heard “Mother Nature’s Son” playing in my head as I read Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud”—did my vocation (professor of English literature) finally overlap with my avocation (Beatlemaniac).

Writing a book that takes the Beatles seriously as poets requires, to a certain degree, adjusting one’s definition of poetry so that it includes pop music. Thanks to the Beatles, this adjustment is not as arduous as it might have been five or six generations ago. Nevertheless I should make it clear from the outset that the definition of poetry from which I proceed is more *functional* than *formal*. If Beatles songs

can evoke the subtle, philosophically complex poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge, it is because both poem and song *do* the same thing: make meaningful utterances that people can use to help them negotiate the intellectual, moral, and emotional questions and problems with which life inevitably confronts them. To a far greater degree than other pop music stars of their time, the Beatles were serious about manifesting in their songs this ideal of functional poetry. Even as songwriting novices, capable of nothing better than “Love Me Do,” the Beatles sensed the personally expressive potential of the pop song. By striving to establish the primacy of the singer/songwriter as the dominant model of pop artistry, the Beatles helped give the pop song the literary respectability it commands today.

Another problem with writing about the Beatles as poets is the impracticability of quoting their words. Like literary poetry published after 1923, pop songs are copyrighted, and may not be quoted without permission. And since “fair use” is limited to a small percentage of the work quoted, the rule of thumb for quoting from pop songs is not to use more than two or three consecutive words. The careful reader will notice that in this book I refer to Beatle songs by title, and occasionally paraphrase their contents, but never quote more than three words in a row. Permission to reprint Beatles lyrics—as should be obvious to anyone who thinks for a moment about how lucrative their catalogue continues to be to the copyright holder—is tightly controlled and breathtakingly expensive. For *Across the Universe*, Julie Taymor’s 2007 musical film about the 1960s, Revolution Pictures paid Sony/ATV Music \$8.25 million for the rights to perform thirty-three Beatles songs (Martin Lewis, “Sony Exploits its Beatles Catalog,” *Variety*, September 6, 2007). Were this book about any other poeticized pop musicians, however, the inability to quote their work would make a book like this impossible to follow. The Beatles’ songs are so familiar, however, and so thoroughly written into the fabric of contemporary culture, that quoting them verbatim is scarcely necessary. Anyone reading this book who wishes to peruse the Beatles’ lyrics will be able easily to find them, if not recall them immediately from the store of his/her own memory.

Through nearly forty-five years of listening to and loving the Beatles and their poetic ancestors, I have accumulated many intellectual debts. First of all, I owe a debt of gratitude to Jennifer Wiegert, who as a researcher demonstrated astonishing diligence and enthusiasm throughout this project, and without whose help I can’t imagine this book could have come about. My editor Marilyn Gaull has not only generously provided encouragement and assistance, but has also

served as the model of committed, responsible scholarship to which I try to live up. My wife Ann and children Sarah, Hannah, and Joshua—the Fab Four in my life—have helped in more ways than I can count, not least of which in enduring, without complaint, Beatles songs endlessly playing in our little house. Others, too, some of whom I haven’t seen in years, helped me to write this book by sharing my love for the Beatles: being played a part in bringing this book into being. I want to thank Eddie Washkin, who taught me how to play “Mother Nature’s Son” and “Get Back,” and with whom I spent many happy hours teasing the meaning out of Beatles songs. The most important of these Beatle buddies, though, is Mark Stanley, to whom this book is gratefully dedicated. When I couldn’t have been more than six years old, and he couldn’t have been more than ten, he tried—without success—to teach me my first guitar chord. That was an act of generosity motivated by Mark’s authentic enthusiasm for the Beatles, a feeling that calls out, in every Beatlemaniac, to be shared. Mark’s spontaneous, genuine admiration for John, Paul, George, and Ringo touched me when we were childhood neighbors. With this book, I hope to honor not only the Beatles’ ability to inspire that kind of admiration, but also the acts of kindness and love—like Mark’s struggle to get my recalcitrant fingers to make the shape of a D chord—which their optimistic, life-affirming music naturally generates.