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**MONOGRAPH**

**“THE INFLUENCE OF ORIENTAL PHILOSOPHY ON THE BEATLES.”**

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## **Summary**

The controversial decade of the 60s has always seemed interesting, a country in constant wars, the dissatisfaction of the youth against the old methodologies of their country and their system, and

how it led to big movements such as The Beat Generation in the 50s and The Hippie movement in the 60s.

How these movements in search of answers were open to experimentation with drugs and a positive receptiveness to other cultures from the East, how it sparkled into a discovery between the West and the East, at the same time in a way the US was fighting against the East in a way and would be doing so until the end of the Cold War. And what interested in particular was the music, how musicians would talk through their songs to the masses, working alongside these social movements. To see the different forms that rock acquired at the end of the decade and how it would lead to new genres in the decade of the 70s. But most importantly would let musicians express themselves in a way the never did before.

They talked about what happened around them and criticized what was seen right for their culture but for their eyes was something unethical that damaged our society. For this reason, the monograph is written about all of these, but in this case The Beatles will be taken as the main example, for the different facts available to the public through all these years and because of their importance in rock music it was decided to be a great example for the different changes of this decade and what it represented to rock music the exposure to Oriental philosophy while seeing so many unconformities around them, how it made them take a different view to their own work and decide to make something different.

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## Introduction

This monograph is centered in *Oriental philosophy’s influence on The Beatles*. It talks about how The Beatles through experimentation and reading of Beat texts and Hindu philosophy, developed into something never heard before, and into the most influential band of all time.

Its objective is to show the impact it had on the masses and in different bands that were impacted by albums made out of this new sound like “Sgt. Peppers Lonely Heart Club Band” or “Revolver”. Some of these artist are The Who, Donovan, and Pink Floyd, which followed this method of making open-to-interpretation lyrics based on Eastern philosophy.

For the purpose of this monograph, many studies were read and analyzed, in this case works from authors like Walter Everett were crucial to get to know deeper the changes The Beatles were passing through, and Hunter Davies, a recognized author who centered many of his works on The Beatles. And *The Album: A Guide to Pop Music’s Most Provocative, Influential, and Important Creations* was of great help in order to know more about the composition of many of the decade’s artists.

With the purpose of recompiling enough information of the time’s background, The Hippie Movement’s role in Oriental philosophy’s acceptance in America was included. And it also focused on rediscovering The Beat Generation’s influence on this movement and its importance for introducing Eastern philosophy to the American generation of the 50s. And how this factors were part of the influences for the US citizen new conscientization about the many occurrences that happened during the 60s, essentially about the Vietnam War.

The monograph is structured in three chapters, in which the first one is centered in the context of the time, talks about different movements like The Hippie Movement and The Beat Generation, and even has an introduction to Oriental philosophy. The second chapter centers in The Beatles’ change in lyrics and musical style opting for a blend of rock music with Oriental sounds, and with certain philosophical references into their songs. The third chapter is based around the different artists that followed these kind of methods to write their songs.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Oriental philosophy in the 60's**

#### **1.1 Introduction to Oriental philosophy**

Oriental philosophy is defined as the group of different philosophies which originated from East and South Asia, the main ones being Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indian philosophies. The most popular Eastern religions during the 60s were Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and Hinduism.

About Buddhism's main doctrines, John Powers (1995) says that "according to Tibetan Buddhists, the Buddha taught that one's present life is only one in a beginningless series of incarnations, and

each one of these is determined by one's actions in previous lives. These actions are collectively referred to as karma" (p 63).

Karma suggest that for every action a person makes, it will have a corresponding reaction, which means that if you do whether good, bad, or neutral things correspondingly will happen to you as well. Zen Buddhism follows the same beliefs as the other branches, but it diverges in that it is more concerned in a person's own spiritual state through meditation, so that people can reach enlightenment by the discovery of new perspectives. Tibetan Buddhism is more concentrated on the spiritual development of the person, and by this it can reach a state free from any obstructions. On the other hand, Hinduism is centered around certain values like honesty, to not cause harm to any living beings, patience, compassion, self-restraint. At the same time it appeals to universal truth and authority, and it also has a strong tradition of questioning authority through its texts.

### **1.1.1 Context of the 60's Oriental philosophy movement.**

Oriental philosophy easily connected with the hippie cultural movement, due to the 60s counterculture necessity to seek answers to their questions, and openness to the point of the experimentation with unaccustomed things. This led them to drug abuse, with LSD becoming one of the most popular drugs because of its hallucinating properties. This drug caused an altered state of consciousness which some of them took as a way to open a person's perception. Adding this with the American government's decision to continue fighting at the Vietnam war, which brought so many losses, led people to search for peace. And therefore they understood Oriental philosophy and treated it as the answer they sought for.

The main factor in Oriental philosophy is that, even though "it is true that in the West gradually strove to achieve independence from religious root (...). In the East, however, the original affinity of philosophy with religion continued undisturbed right down to the present,(...)" (Hackett, 1979, p.13). This extract shows that Oriental philosophy was connected with religion, so in order to learn more about Eastern philosophy, people needed to follow the teachings of certain Eastern religions

such as Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. These events gave Oriental religions a reevaluation by Occidental society, to the point of driving The Beat generation and Hippie movement on their pursues

## **1.2 The Beat generation in Occidental Society's acceptance of Oriental philosophy**

The counterculture, or the hippie movement, began with the influence of a group of writers which were known as the Beat generation, who were unconformed by the current affluent and materialistic society of the USA. They wanted to dismantle control and conformity, by exploring oneself in order to increase one's consciousness, which is related to Buddhism, but they thought that it was possible through the help of psychedelic drugs which was a direct antecedent of the hippie movement. As sustained by Bruce Cook (1994): "When the hippies appeared on scene, even though they appeared to had come out of nowhere with no antecedents, in fact they were directly descended from the beats" (p.3).

Its way of reaching to the masses by retelling and reminiscence of their works, was not as effective as it later was for the hippies, whom with the aid of music groups were able to express their ideas. Another major contrast with the beats is that they had almost no political initiative, while the hippies were in its majority centered in the country's current political actions , and how its decisions affected many people's lives. In fact "the hippies weren't as docile as us, they posed their exigencies where we deposed ours by triplicated (...)" (Cook, 1994, p. 3).

### **1.2.1 The origins of Eastern philosophy's acceptance.**

Many unconformities from the young generations of the United States were key to Oriental philosophy's acceptance, due to the people's desire to change the country's current state and its values. They believed that they would find the answer for their doubts by searching and following different methods from accustomed. At the same time, the Beat generation and hippie movements were on the search of reaching enlightenment with the help of Eastern philosophy. This very same interest can be seen in some authors of the decade as it is notorious in Allen Ginsberg, who for the longest time wanted to travel to India in search of wisdom and came back to the US after 2 years of

stay in India (Cook, 1994). Which shows how important Eastern philosophy seemed to these new generations on their search for knowledge.

Many people, one of them being the psychologist Timothy Leary, he thought that with the use of drugs, a person could reach a higher state of consciousness, and if accompanied with meditation it could help people to feel united and to reevaluate their actions,. This and other facts mentioned before were the reasons Oriental philosophy was introduced into the American society underground culture. In some time later it would reach a main point on popular music due to its blend with musical lyrics.

### **1.3 The Foundation of Eastern philosophy in 60's music**

The constant expansion of the hippie movement across all the USA managed to include itself to the music of the era because of its influence in popular music. Naturally, the Oriental influence from the hippies expanded to the point of merging with rock which was getting more and more popular in the music industry. This fusion brought a major diversity to music by giving lyrics a deeper meaning, and driving musicians to touch more serious themes such as war, psychology, politics, existence, life and death. Bob Dylan was the main artist that started talking about these diverse topics , but it later turned into the mainstream when The Beatles began to treat these topics in their songs due to Dylan's influence on their lyrics. George Harrison was the first "Beatle" interested in Oriental culture and was willing enough to invest time in learning to play the sitar, which Harrison first recorded it in a song on Rubber soul, in the initial track: Norwegian Wood.

But this influence truly flourished in The Beatles' music with the creation of their 1966's album: Revolver.

This album and a prior single were the only new Beatles product released in 1966. But the recordings were stunning. Reflective of their reading of Timothy Leary, their own experiences with

LSD, and an exploration of Hindustani music and philosophy. Revolver was unlike any other rock album that had preceded it. (Everett, 1999, p.31)

A breakthrough sparked in rock music after that point, in which many bands tried this new approach to musical lyrics, by changing music as it was known in a large scale.

### **1.3.1 Famous artists influenced by The Beatles' change.**

Even though Revolver was the first album to truly incorporate these aspects, at the time it wasn't seen as remarkable, but instead their album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, following its predecessor's steps was well-received by the media and the public. This great reception for the album was followed by a number of responses from its contemporaries, from which stood out Jimi Hendrix's cover of Sgt. Pepper Lonely Hearts (song), and the Rolling Stones' album titled Their Satanic Majesties Request, Jefferson Airplane with its album Bathing at Baxter's and the Beach Boys' album Pet Sounds, these were some of the many works that initiated as a result of The Beatles' innovation.

## Chapter 2

### Changes in The Beatles' lyrics based on Oriental philosophy

#### 2.1 Songs from The Beatles' early stage

During the decade of the 60s, popular music was in its vast majority framed by love songs, and The Beatles were no exception. The Beatles' first albums are greatly focused on the theme of love as can be seen in songs such as "Love Me Do", "Can't Buy Me Love", "Please Please Me", "No Reply" and many other songs following the same pattern. Their music was openly influenced by rock and roll artists like Buddy Holly, The Beach Boys, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Elvis Presley, which were the popular rock artists during their childhood. These artists' impact on The Beatles can be noticed by their early style during their initial recordings, using this 50s style rock and roll and later developed into a less rough sound, leading to a more clean, polished style.

The recurring theme in their songs, love, varied from the cheerful moments of young love in "Hold Me Tight" to the sadness caused from rejection in "Not A Second Time", "The Beatles early lyrics were direct, innocent, joyful celebrations of adolescent love, almost thoughtlessly perpetuating pop conventions" (Everett, 1999, p.14). As said, they didn't give much thought to it, they just wanted to play their music and top the music charts.

##### 2.1.1 In-depth lyrics process.

The Beatles' early musical material was centered on selling their singles and albums, so their themes were meant to make teenagers feel related, and playing catchy rhythms to raise the youngsters' attention. As written by Hunter Davies (1974): "Words mattered for both of them, though not so much in the early days and in the early songs, when they were following the formula of the time. It was tune that mattered most" (p. 6). During this first period, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, being the main composers in the group, they composed their songs together and in the event of one of them reaching the dreary songwriters' block, the other would take over and complete what was necessary; this way the song was completed by them both.

## **2.2 Songs influenced by Eastern philosophy**

The lyrics of their songs during this time were drastically referencing some Oriental philosophy works when Harrison started to get interested in Hindu music to the point of learning sitar with Ravi Shankar, an illustrious sitar player, and later got into Eastern philosophy. While at the same time in 1965, McCartney fell into underground pop culture, having the chance to meet writers such as William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg from the Beat generation (Everett, 1999). In fact on January of the same year, he helped musician Peter Asher, art critic John Dunbar, and writer Barry Miles to open an Indica Bookshop oriented for the youth, meaning that he was really invested in the decade's different subcultures, including the Beats. These are the antecedents of songs such as "Love you to" known for its Hindi influence, and "Tomorrow Never Knows" for its heavily Buddhism-influenced lyrics.

### **2.2.1 In depth lyrical process.**

The Beatles began to have a more thorough reflection on their music; they wanted to condense in a song the literature they were interested in, all of these philosophical thoughts that interested them. One of the most evident examples is the song "Tomorrow Never Knows" which considers different ideas from *The Psychedelic Experience*, written by Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, was an interpretation of The Tibetan Book of the Dead, known as the Buddhist guide to nirvana. This book

discusses about how they believed that with the help of psychedelic drugs, a person could eliminate ego and with yoga-based instructions this could be done by anyone. The song almost quotes exactly one of the instructions in the manual “turn off your mind, relax and float downstream”. This moment states their focus on the lyrics of the songs rather as much as the rhythm,

(...) The words were written before the tune and there was no getting away from the fact that the words were very powerful. So all four boys were anxious to build a tune and a backing which would be as strong as the actual lyrics. (...). Neil Aspinall (as cited in Davies, 1974, p.28)

And from this album, they focused their attention on the songs’ lyrics and experimentation in their tracks as their main characteristic.

### **2.3 What does this change meant for The Beatles’ music?**

The Beatles left behind their search for fame, and preferred to concentrate more on the songs’ lyrics as a way to express themselves into a more artistic view of music, by expressing their thoughts on things that were not talked about before in pop or rock music. As Mr. Walter Everett (1999) has said on the topic: “These sounds accompany newly demanding poetic texts that explore levels of consciousness other than simple wakeful awareness” (p. 17). They started talking different themes from what was used to in that decade, along with experimentation in musical recording, making the Beatles to initiate a new musical wave that would not fear in trying new things out of the commonly used.

#### **2.3.1 The public’s acceptance.**

The Beatles were always on the spot of attention, were successful and their works were always expected for the young generations in all of America, but after leaving behind their commercial image and caring more about their studio works, people got attracted by their authenticity and effort in what they started creating since 1966, and “By the summer of 1967, notions of The Beatles as artists and counterculturalists, and of their artistic supremacy, were central to the image and would

remain so to the breakup of the band in 1970” (Frontani, 2007, p.16). Which shows how they related to the youth’s social movements of the time.

### **2.3.2 The media critic.**

Their social acceptance was possible due to the Rolling Stones’ depiction of The Beatles as youth leaders, which because of the magazine’s popularity among counterculturalists and the young, reason by which it was even more promoted their image as role models for the new youth.

## Chapter 3

### Artists which were influenced by The Beatles' works

#### 3.1 Contemporary artists

The Beatles as a widely-known band, they have had a lot of influence for many bands that came after them, they represented a landmark for rock music. But they also inspired their contemporary artists, and it can be noticed by the way rock artists rapidly started changing at the end of the decade, thanks to the different perspectives in which they started giving to their creations. In this chapter, few examples of bands are shown to evidence the change rock music suffered during this time, how rock music started to expand even more than it had done, lyric-wise as in musical structure. This chapter talks about some of rock music's most famous artists of the 60s and their changes in music.

##### 3.1.1 The Who.

The Who, one of the most iconic 60's rock bands, in 1969 released their masterpiece "Tommy", a rock opera conceptual album written by their guitarist, Pete Townshend. The album follows the fictional story of an autistic kid called Tommy and the series of events that happen through his life. The use of Indian philosophy as a lyrical guide helped the album reach a high philosophical value, in which Townshend states that the hero had to be deaf, dumb and blind so that it would reflect the limitations in our own perception (Everett, 1999). Very likely due to its following of Meher Baba's work, a spiritual Indian master who influenced on his compositions for years. He was able to do this by using his teachings as an inspiration for his musical works. During the process of creation for this album, "Townshend and recorded home demos in McCartney-like auto-multitracking. Taking a page from Indian philosophy." (Everett, 1999, p. 95). These method was very similar for the one the Beatles used for their "Revolver" album, this is one of the most clear demonstrations of the Beatles'

influence on contemporary musicians. Interesting enough, both “Tommy” and “Revolver” were among their most acclaimed works.

### **3.1.2 The Rolling Stones.**

The Rolling Stones are one of the most famous rock bands of all time. In their beginning years they followed The Beatles’ steps, and later started to develop the harsh style from which they are characterized, inspired by the old blues and later from many different styles. Months later of “Sgt. Pepper Lonely Hearts Club Band” they released an album very similar in style called “Their Satanic Majesties Request” in which they also got into psychedelic rock, with the influence of certain African rhythms, although it is not much of a similar theme without them following Indian philosophy, it is still notorious the influence they absorbed from the fusion of different music genres. The reason of this combination was Brian Jones, the guitarist of The Rolling Stones, which was a multi-instrumentalist due to his search for new sounds. Even though in the beginning it had a mixture of different reactions even in the group, it has gained popularity in the following decades because of its critique.

### **3.1.3 Pink Floyd.**

Pink Floyd is one of the main bands of psychedelic rock, and in fact since their initial creations, their experimentation with sounds and different style-blends are present since their early days. With Syd Barrett, the band’s leader of the time, and his use of open-to-interpretation lyrics, in *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, Perone (2012),

In the song “Chapter 24”. Songwriter Barrett turns to the style of the Hindustani music that was all the rage in the English rock world in 1966 and 1967. The piece utilizes an Indian sounding scale. (...) The piece conveys the idea of a Zen-like state of being in which one must be willing to surrender control of one’s life to chance (...). (p. 190)

This album from 1967 is one of the most important albums of rock, being one of the main influences of 70s rock. And one of the first concept albums, reason from which it is regarded as one of the most influential albums of the decade.

### **3.1.4 Donovan.**

Donovan is a mid-60s folk singer-songwriter. He is one of the main representants of the 60s psychedelia. In 1967, just a year later of Revolver, in his album “A Gift From a Flower to a Garden”, is a very nature-centered album, it talks about the beauty of the nature and the world around, which follows a notion very close to the hippie movement of the decade, but it also goes into in-depth psychological context of the characters in the songs, which goes closer to The Beatles’ new methodology for song lyrics. He even uses in one of the album’s songs, “Starfish-On-The-Toast” he uses strophes structured very similarly to haikus, a Japanese form of poetry, which demonstrates Donovan’s interest and closeness to the Asian culture and its traditions. The album also has philosophy-centered songs as “The Tinker and The Crab” which is a celebration of the mundane and at the same time, of freedom of the norms of society (Perone, 2012). But at the same time many of his songs represent freedom, many of them also implicitly refer to loneliness.

### **3.1.5 The Beach Boys.**

The Beach Boys was one of the most popular bands of the early 60s, They were the main representants of Surf music and were known for their diverse range of voices and polished chorus in rock and roll music. When the “Rubber Soul” came out (an album from The Beatles), Brian Wilson, the leader of The Beach Boys, became surprised by the originality of the album and decided to make an album like it. The result of Wilson’s effort to surpass that album was “Pet Sounds”, in which he tried a simplistic approach to the album that would fit The Beatles’. Even though the album was more focused on the sound, there is also a notorious difference in comparison to previous albums, the album’s theme treated a couple that was falling apart, instead of the stereotypical album made out of singles treating love, this album treated the different thoughts that

went through both the man and the woman about their relationship falling apart. From this standpoint, there was an evolution of the group's lyrical work, expanding to the character's psyche, while coming with happy rhythms, the theme was the opposite, reaching a state of bipolarity by the album's approach to the topic.

### **Conclusion**

- By situating The Beatles as the main participant in the changing process of rock music during the 60s, they were analyzed in their approach to music during the different stages of

their career and because of their popularity they were the ones that expanded masses' perception to rock music and Oriental philosophy. Reason from which the hippies started accepting Eastern spiritual gurus and followed them because of the similitude of their goals, to teach people about the importance of peace and respect between everyone. This was in part something the band followed and wanted to show to the world through a wider perception of the world, a realization of what was happening at their surroundings which they thought Eastern philosophy would lead to.

- This ended up inspiring a whole generation of musicians to give a message through music, and without Dylan's participation by supporting the changes of the country by his music wouldn't have been possible, after all he was the one that invited them to look further for the lyrics and to write about their own feelings and ideas which its result was The Beatles talking about their recent interest in Oriental philosophy and their ideas about the different events around them.
- But it was not until they started to be interested in Oriental culture that they were inspired by the contrast between these two cultures in which The Beatles seriously arranged the lyrics and what they wanted to say through their work. And the originality of their work and profundity called out the masses attention, receiving great critic and the media's attention. Their importance was such that they influenced many of their contemporary musicians to delve into Eastern philosophy and experiment through their own means, giving rock music a more rich diversity in sounds and to mix rock with other styles of music.
- This are the various reasons from which The Beatles are known as the most influential band of all times, and they are inalienable from the 60s musical aspect, they are the reason for rock music's diverse genre thanks to their constant experimentation in sounds and without them rock music would not be what it is today.

### **Recommendations**

- In order to have a better understanding of the monograph topic as it is about rock music and the influence it has taken of Oriental philosophy, I encourage you to listen to some of these albums and listen to the lyrics, the sounds they are using, to be conscious of what they make you feel, after all it is a form of art we are talking so you have to try to

understand the creators' beliefs through their works and try to feel the same they were feeling while singing these songs.

- As this was a monograph limited to the topic of The Beatles, you could go and search for the influences of other artists that were important at this time like Bob Dylan, or Jimi Hendrix to see what inspired them and have a further look to the minds of the different creators during that time.
- Another recommendation in the case you are interested in the cultural and social changes during this decade, you could investigate about the Beat Generation and the Hippie Movement which are crucial to see what were the changes during this time in the US, and see the goals of the young generations and their disapproval of the current state their country was in.
- Perhaps, you want to look for more information about some of the ideals present in Oriental philosophy, in that case research about some of their main school mentioned in this monograph, such as Buddhism and Hinduism which could let you find by yourself the reasons from which the 60s movements were inspired.
- You can compare the music of The Beatles by listening some of their songs before the album "Revolver" and then hearing this album to see the differences. Remember you can always see the original material by yourself in the references in order to get your own conclusions about this topic.

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