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Our Teens Get the Message from Song Lyrics

IN OUR ELECTRONIC '60s, records are more apt to be the voice and expression of youth than novels and plays. I realize it anew whenever I talk with teens about the Beatles' new album, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band." Ideas start flying. Philosophy, poetry, religion—everything from nursery rhymes to the Bible—come into the conversation.

We may take off on what the Beatles are up to with this new album, which includes George Harrison's Indian sitar sounds. "Maybe it's a big put-on," a high school boy, a senior, says. "I sort of think it is. You know, the album cover with Alice in Wonderland and Snow White and that row of marijuana plants, with the Hindu image worked in."

A high school junior, a girl, says: "The whole world is putting us on today. It's a thing people do. Like the government, for example." And a sophomore girl adds: "Anyway, the Beatles have gone on beyond the drug thing, if they ever did experiment with it. Their current interest in Hindu mysticism, yoga, and all that would rule out drugs."

They all know who Ravi Shankar is—one of India's leading musicians on the 19-string sitar—and that George Harrison studied with him for six weeks. They know how Shankar is steeped in yoga and discipline and spiritual exercise and that he doesn't like to see drug-using hippies lead the lives they do. Some of them even quote the Swami Satchidananda of the Integral Yoga institute at 500 West End av. in New York. The swami does not approve of psychedelic drugs; he believes that they enslave the conscious mind and that, instead of expanding the mind, they can shatter it.

The Listener Finds His Own Meaning

In conversations with a dozen teens, 16 thru 18, I find they believe the "Lonely Hearts Band" music has a new, exciting sound, but, more than that, it touches the changing, fiftful moods of adolescence today in a world of constant change.

"Above all," a college freshman says, "the lyrics fit in with our search for meaning in a pretty complex world. They use drug-oriented words that the hippie uses—the most obvious being the title. 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,' that spells out LSD—but the interpretation of such songs as 'Day in the Life' actually puts down the drug user. It shows him as indifferent to the violence and tragedy in life."

A girl says: "It puts down the person who is just going about his life, business as usual, too. Shows him as hypocritical or unaware."

One student thinks that "it makes you feel special to understand these lyrics. It's like good poetry that way." They all mention other pop artists who have a "personal vision" and "a poetry that communicates." Most often mentioned, besides the Beatles, are Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel, who may mention Tolstoy and Tinker Bell in the same song.

The Lyrics Are Now

Ronald Birsra from Berwyn, freshman at Northern Illinois university at De Kalb, went over most of the selections from the Beatles' album with me. We went off on English music hall comedy with the catchy beat of "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" Ronald decided it was the ultimate in looking beyond for a generation noted for its "now" complex.

We talked of how teens often regress to childhood fantasy, nursery rhymes, and spontaneous fun and romping when we came to "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and the wonderful "girl with the kaleidoscope eyes," the "tangerine trees and marmalade skies," and "the rocking horse people eating marshmallow pies."

The title "A Little Help from My Friends" brought out the growing trend among young people to form closely knit

groups—affectionate groups—with things in common. "Friends are in vogue, sort of tribal units with someone coming in or flowing out, boys and girls together," Ronald said. "Some pair off, but not so much. More likely you'll have a couple, a girl, and two boys. That's a status quo group today. Whoever has the money pays. It all balances out. It's good."

This 18-year-old agrees with the other teens that "She's Leaving Home" is a narrative about the un-understanding between the parents and daughter who leaves a note and goes away to marry someone "from the motor trade." The parents' attitude sounds like many of the letters I receive when they chant like a Greek chorus: "sacrificed most of our lives," "gave her everything money could buy." And the daughter is typical of many Party Line callers who talk about wanting to be on their own.

"Within You and Without You" talks of the space between us all and how love could save the world. Ronald believes that it has religious overtones, and this thought led us into a discussion of the search for meaning in this generation. Of course, there's one line in this song that's inspired by the Bible—"We were talking, about the love that's gone so cold and the people that gain the world and lose their souls. . . ." Jesus says in the book of Mark, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

In every group of young people, the biggest vote is for "A Day in the Life" from this Beatles album. Its psychedelic sounds that swirl upward mean different things to different people, according to their varying moods. Some feel it's the mushrooming cloud and final bursting of the big bomb. Others talk of "oneness"—the moving together of people, as Chardin forecasts in his "Phenomenon of Man." As a whole the album harmonizes with youth's search for meaning.

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