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From soprano to barking dog : John Cage, the avant garde, and the counterculture, 1940-1975

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FROM SOPRANO TO BARKING DOG:
JOHN CAGE, THE AVANT GARDE,
AND THE COUNTERCULTURE,
1940-1975

An Abstract of a Thesis

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

Heather M. McAlpine

University of Northern Iowa

July 2016

ABSTRACT

John Cage's compositions, representative of second generation avant-garde music, are an integral part of any discussion of the sixties, and his work complicates parts of the counterculture historiography. While the political ideology that drives Cage's compositions fit many of the counterculture's aims, it has not been included in the historiography in its own right. The evidence suggests instead that his ideas, and those of the new avant-garde of which he was a part, were actually a piece of a consistent tradition that extended into the counterculture. Historians and musicologists have not done justice to Cage's long background of political ideas and behaviors that came to be associated with the counterculture. His influence on Yoko Ono and the Beatles has not been recognized.

More importantly, intersections can be traced between reactions to his avant-gardist compositions and reactions to cutting edge pop music icons, raising significant questions about the reality of the counterculture's actual co-optation. Separately, historians have identified the end of the neo-avant-garde and the co-optation of the counterculture as the late sixties came to an end, but when reactions to Cage's work are aligned with the life cycles of both, it suggests that parts of the counterculture were not moved into the mainstream at all but rejected and preserved instead by the elite intelligentsia of music hierarchy and by higher education perceived as liberal by the conservatism that would reassert its dominance in the eighties.

The strongest opinions for and against John Cage's avant-garde work were expressed while the counterculture was at its height, obviously polarized while it was

perceived as revolutionary and threatening to the hierarchy. As the commodified parts of counterculture permeated the social fabric and the co-optation of these less threatening ideals took place, reactions transitioned. Musicology took on an overall acceptance of his work as valid and ground-breaking, while the majority of the music community continued on with the harmony and aesthetic preferences it had prior to his work. The countercultural concepts of peace, globalization, and eastern thinking did not become mainstream ideals; instead, symbols which had been revolutionary were repurposed.

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This Study by: Heather M. McAlpine

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has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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TO THE “FAB FOUR”:
PATRICK, THE LEAD
JOEL, THE HISTORIAN
CHARLES, THE BEATLES SCHOLAR
AND
BLAKE, THE ONE WHO LEFT TOO SOON.
WITHOUT YOU,
THIS WOULD NOT EXIST.

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CHAPTER 1

CONTEXT

Historians and Thesis

On August 29, 1952 in Woodstock, New York, John Cage's silent piece "4'33'" was performed for the first time by David Tudor, virtuoso pianist. Tudor approached the keys, stopwatch in hand, and the 4 minutes and 33 seconds passed in complete silence. As Richard Kostelanetz, a fan and frequent interviewer described later, Tudor "silently deploy[ed] his arms three times in ways that suggest[ed] the work might have three distinct movements." As Cage later recalled of that premiere performance, "You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began patterning the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds..." While all of this was likely true, the *Pasadena Independent* in 1965 added that these sounds included "the footsteps of a few people walking out." Years later, Cage admitted that the audience "didn't laugh—they were irritated...and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry."¹

Ray Duncan of the *Independent Star News* referred to John Cage in 1964 as the "most intriguing and most infuriating composer in the world." Cage created his unorthodox compositions during a time that itself was marked by turbulence. Active protest and feelings of dissatisfaction were widespread, in great part objecting to a

¹ Kostelanetz, Richard. "Inferential Art," Columbia University Form XII, no. 2 (Summer, 1969), in John Cage. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970, 105-109; John Kobler, "Everything We Do is Music," *The Saturday Evening Post*, 19 October 1968, in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 1987), 65; "Experiment in Sound: Musical Event (?) in Modern Vein Opens Tonight," *Pasadena Independent*, 7 January 1965, 40; Michael John White, "King of the avant-garde," *Observer*, 26 September 1982, in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, (New York: Proscenium Publishers, 1987), 66.

concept and practice of government that had not stood up to the challenges presented by increased globalization of economy and politics. According to many at the time, these ideologies had failed to prevent two world wars. They were unable to block fascism and totalitarianism in Europe and Asia. They could not defuse the ongoing threat of nuclear annihilation. In particular, the breakdown of old policies of colonialism replaced by cold war concerns created unrest as fallout from shifting postwar world powers settled. The most conspicuous sign of dissent played out in Vietnam, as efforts to stifle a rebellion against colonialism resulted in brutal warfare that was rationalized as containment of communism. With all this upheaval, it is unsurprising that social conflict would accompany such widespread political changes, including a resurgence of the avant-garde; efforts at social change for marginalized groups such as women, homosexuals, and minorities; and the birth of the sixties counterculture.²

While musicologists have written at length about John Cage himself, historians have not done this deep level of research. Historian Thomas Hines has put together a narrative of Cage's early years in Los Angeles, discussing how his parentage and early tendency to reject technique would impact his later ideology. In particular, he speaks of Cage's tendency to find workarounds of musical skill requirements. Other historians have either mentioned Cage briefly or focused on the contexts that make his work popular. T. J. Jackson Lears addresses Cage's use of chance operations in music as a critique of a larger system of meritocracy which supported social and political hierarchy—by using chance to write composition, he effectively deskilled the music field

² Ray Duncan, "From Soprano to Barking Dog: Cage Captures New Music," *Independent Star News*, 27 December 1964, 55.

while undermining its structure. He notes that the extreme level to which Cage took his efforts often lost sight of this particular ideology, but this extremity was intended to “silence the self” and replace human “bipolarity with complementarity.” Since music was historically based on study and tradition, he was heavily resisted even while a specific group of music intellectuals credited his pragmatism and “American” thinking. In particular, Lears notes that this loss of the individual self showed Cage’s notion of divine influence—it matched “a fair, short summary of common Christian ideas about grace.” Finally, historians have addressed the specific gay culture emerging during the time, which was still divided by class and racial divides as well as disagreements about the public face of homosexuality. Cage never chose to come out as gay, but he was divorced and spent the last part of his life in a committed homosexual relationship.³

Much of Cage’s conceptual thinking echoes that of the sixties counterculture, described by some historians as a middle-class student movement of the postwar, Baby Boom generation. Politically, the counterculture has been seen as a democratic revolution which led to civil rights for woman and minorities and rebellion against the Vietnam War. The counterculture understanding of the world drew from postwar affluence, widespread availability of education, and an overall disillusionment with the world around them. From a stylistic standpoint, it was marked by resistance efforts

³ Thomas S. Hines, “‘Then Not Yet ‘Cage:’” The Los Angeles Years, 1912-1938,” in *John Cage: Composed in America* eds. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 75-92; Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 2-15, 275, 303-311; Betty Luther Hillman, “‘The most profoundly revolutionary act a homosexual can engage in:’ Drag and the Politics of Gender Presentation in the San Francisco Gay Liberation Movement, 1964–1972” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 1 (January, 2011), 156; for further discussion see Jonathan D. Katz, “John Cage’s Queer Silence; or, How to Avoid Making Matters Worse,” in *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, + Art*, eds. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 41-61.

against the “technocracy,” including recreational drug use, sexual permissiveness, retreats to perceived natural states, and religious conversion. As Jeremi Suri argues, “[e]xistential angst was...pervasive in the context of heightened promises about a better life, and strong fears about the political implications of social deviance.” Protest efforts were guided by both.⁴

Any discussion of the counterculture absolutely has to include a note on mass consumption. Lizabeth Cohen argues that the new postwar economy was based on a citizen consumer who fulfilled their political role by using their purchasing power. It included a concept of a capitalist free market that ensured equality and democracy through “aggressive government intervention.” The associated improved distribution and affordability was intended to create a greater quality of life. This new ideology reversed previous concepts—what seemed serious and grounded prevented citizens from taking on their new role, while things which seemed superficial and materialistic became tools of social transformation. Thomas Frank adds to this, noting that the advertising community learned new marketing techniques which would create associated group identities within this new order to “jump start the engine of change...that drove consumer culture.”⁵

⁴ Arthur Marwick, “The Cultural Revolution of the Long sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest, and Permeation,” *The International History Review* 27, no. 4 (December, 2005), 782-783; Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*. Anchor Books: Garden City, New York, 1969, 23-27, 154-156; Jeremi Suri, “The Rise and Fall of an International counterculture, 1960-1975,” *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 1 (February, 2009), 46-47.

⁵ Lizabeth A. Cohen, *A Consumers Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 358-359; Michael J. Kramer, “‘Can’t Forget the Motor City’: *Creem* Magazine, Rock Music, Detroit Identity, Mass Consumerism, and the counterculture.” *Michigan Historical Review* 28, no. 2 (Fall, 2002), 63; Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 24, 93-94.

Mass consumerism had a complex relationship with the counterculture. On the one hand, it was an object of resistance. Consumerism allowed people to assert individuality and reject the requirements of commercial mass society. Mass consumerism's concepts were a primary point of rebellion for the counterculture; as Frank describes, it was a "great symbolic foil against which the young rebels defined themselves," even while the existence of its rebellion proved mass consumption's importance. At the same time, the counterculture's growth was tied to commercial media attention. It is hard to determine where the line even lies between the two—its most important members were often celebrity millionaires, through whom the corporate media guided the counterculture. Advertising teams pitched products as rebellious, authentic, and individual, having learned that free love, protest, and youth drove consumption. The counterculture eventually permeated mainstream culture—it was co-opted and accepted due to non-threatening resistance methods, its path described by Frank as a "trajectory from adversarial to hegemonic." In fact, little value was given by the counterculture members to traditional methods of resistance—although behind that front, they used strategies based in that history. Even so, to the members of the counterculture, absorption and modification of their ideology was unwelcome.⁶

According to historians, the youth associated with the counterculture became part of a wide geographical body of protest. Their direct concerns were seen as less as a

⁶ Suri, "International counterculture," 47; Kramer, "Motor City," 48; Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 7; Cohen, *A Consumers Republic*, 11; Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 8, 27-28, 229; Marwick, "Cultural Revolution," 782; Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 8, 25-26, 118-119; Marwick, "Cultural Revolution," 800-805; Suri, "International counterculture," 46-47; Frank, *Conquest of Cool*, 8, 106.

revolution and more the exercising of their constitutional rights to address issues facing them: fear of nuclear annihilation, the destruction of the environment, and hope for peace. These expanded to include issues outside of their own class and race—increased ability to travel and government efforts to encourage young people toward responsible citizenship provided a circuit of travel that politicized a unified international youth culture. While the establishment used immigrant populations as scapegoats for the upheaval, the young tended to find solidarity with those at odds with postwar authority. In the United States particularly, these tensions would include race-specific efforts like Pan-Africanism—a cultural identity for the African diaspora; tensions between African intellectuals and primarily white financial resources over claims of “objectivity” that held bias against marginalized groups; and situations where conservative whites would use the draft as weapons against civil rights leaders. The female members of the counterculture would begin working through the issues that would later explode fully into the Women’s Movement. The national struggle over the use of “the Pill” and social changes stemming from that new freedom would begin to open new prospects. They left protest groups which relied on older gender definitions to gain legitimacy, and continued, in more autonomous roles, the activism stemming from earlier networks like Women Strike for Peace.⁷

⁷ Marwick, “Cultural Revolution,” 800; Adam Rome, “‘Give Earth a Chance’: The Environmental Movement and the sixties,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September, 2003), 542-543; Richard Ivan Jobs, “Youth Movements: Travel, Protest, and Europe in 1968,” *The American Historical Review* 114, no 2 (April 2009), 390; Jerry Gershenhorn, “‘Not an Academic Affair’: African American Scholars and the Development of African Studies Programs in the United States, 1942-1960,” *The Journal of African American History* 94, no 1 (Winter 2009), 44, 56; Jerry Gershenhorn, “St. Clair Drake, Pan-Africanism, African Studies, and the Politics of Knowledge, 1945-1965,” *The Journal of African American History* 98, no 3 (Summer 2013), 429; John Ernst and Yvonne Baldwin, “The Not So Silent Minority:

Historians discuss how the avant-garde in the twentieth century moved toward resistance as well. The earlier artists expressed alienation from modern social systems through innovation and efforts toward an ideal future. A breakdown of belief in the progress of humanity would move its focus to more localized struggles; the change from a single moral guideline to pluralist thinking diffused its goals. The new avant-garde expanded on ideas begun earlier in the century, taking artistic forms independent of this historical background. Art continued to become more abstract, with artists leaving both classical mastery and war-time propaganda behind. The Beat writers deviated from traditional forms and subject matter. Music composition, including Cage's work, moved away from harmony, tonality, and rhythm. The use of chance would be common to both movements—spread to United States by the 1910s, avant-gardists began to seek as Lears described, “happy accidents and lucky finds,” forcing what he termed the ‘perennially shockable bourgeoisie’ into engagement. Cage would embrace chance operations, but he did not do so for shock value—he was instead trying to break down hierarchy.⁸

John Cage was a founding member of the New York School of music, an offshoot of the New York School of artists which dated from the early 1940s. The New York School was primarily Abstract Expressionists who influenced Cage and others to apply their concepts to their chosen fields. They were members of the neo-avant-garde and

Louisville's Antiwar Movement, 1966-1975,” *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no 1 (February 2007), 127; Beth Bailey, “Prescribing the Pill: Politics, Culture, and the Sexual Revolution in America's Heartland.” *Journal of Social History* 30, no. 4 (Summer, 1997), 828; Ernst and Baldwin, “Silent Minority,” 117; Amy Swerdlow, “Ladies Day at the Capitol: Women Strick for Peace versus HUAC,” *Feminist Studies* 8, no 3 (Autumn 1982), 515-516.

⁸ Stuart D. Hobbs, *The End of the American Avant Garde* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Suri, “International counterculture,” 46; Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 21, 274-275.

thus held many of the earlier concepts; criticism of art as an institution and an objective understanding of the phases and processes of art. The military avant-garde was “an elite and expendable shock troop; the shock intended by artists was leaving all meaning out of their work. By association, the New-avant-garde situation changed as the shock value slowed. Once the avant-garde became accepted as art, the institutionalization removed a good deal of the surprise. The end of the original avant-garde was traced to over-saturation of the market for artistic fields.”⁹

These resistance movements would be set against the culture of control, what Lears called a “managerial consensus” that came to full power after World War II. Prizing conformity, hard work, and efforts to exert control over nature and otherness, it insisted on conformity to the ideal of a perfectly managed society. Historians trace its thought to a crisis of three iconic pieces of Nineteenth Century thought: a belief in an overarching moral authority, a historical narrative of forward-moving human progress, and an ongoing culture of genteel tradition held by cultural custodians. Even before World War I, cracks in this certainty of moral right opened from dissent by minority ethnicities, philosophical relativism, and other groups; their influence would begin to break down the innocent absence of guilt and doubt in Western culture’s authority. This

⁹ David Nichols, “Getting Rid of the Glue,” *Journal of American Studies* 27, no. 3 (December 1993), 341; Peter Burger, “Introduction,” in Peter Burger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, Michael Shaw trans. from *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 1974, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22,80, 57-58; Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the avant-garde*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 64-66.

had an enormous effect on the direction of international policy and led to further social upheaval.¹⁰

A clear symptom of this breakdown was challenges to western colonialism and the collapse after World War II of much of the Western Europe's colonial empire. The collapse was itself a driver of international political upheaval. Affordability issues for the new welfare state and costs of defense made it unfeasible to retain old territorial efforts. Countries would gain independence starting with India in 1947. Issues of human and civil rights would come to the fore, as prior concepts of ethnic superiority and imperial patriotism fell. This led to significant immigration from the former colonies, which suffered economic upheaval from the abrupt end to dependence on another country. Communication technology drove globalization and economies increasingly across territorial borders, local concerns taking precedence over previous understandings. Concepts that once determined loyalties such as the Cold War were no longer a factor, and anti-colonial conflicts escalated accordingly.¹¹

All this would end up feeding into the unpopular conflict that would, in many ways, define the period—the war in Vietnam, one of the most extensively examined parts of the sixties historiography. It was the cause that drove violence and demonstrations including the shootings at Kent State in 1970, the demonstration at the Democratic

¹⁰ Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 19, 239, 296; Henry Farnham May, *The End of American Innocence: A Study of the First Years of our Own Time: 1912-1917* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1959), 9-25; Lears, *Something for Nothing*, 7.

¹¹ A. J. Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization," *Past & Present* 200 (August 2008), 244, 211, 227; Jobs, "Youth Movements," 393; Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization," 216, 231, 242; W. Michael Weis, "The Twilight of Pan-Americanism: The Alliance for Progress, neo-colonialism, and Non-Alignment in Brazil: 1961-1964," *The International History Review* 1, no 2 (June 2001), 323-324

National Convention in Chicago, protests at universities like Berkeley, Columbia, or even Northern Iowa, and even demonstrations at campuses some perceived as more conservative such as North Carolina State. Tension between institutional churches, such as Catholicism, and conscientious objection would raise issues with the draft, and draft avoidance even led some areas to run an underground railroad for draftees trying to leave the country. Historians have shown that the war itself interacted with the cultural consciousness of the counterculture in unexpected ways. Even the most radical rock and roll protest songs could be used as ways to escape the conflict while reengaging with the patriotism and citizenship of authority.¹²

Jacques Attali has provided a definitive discussion of the intersections between music, economy, and politics, which heavily influenced Cage ideologically. He points out the illusion of hierarchy in the evolution of musical style and taste. This hierarchy, he argues, is an effort at authority and control, potentially leading to totalitarian regimes. His argues that noise is political: it interprets and controls history; allows for monitoring and silencing of dissent; creates ideals of harmony; and distracts from violence. The current state of music is repetition; artists are more well-known than their music, and their image is used as a process of unification and control. Additionally, a performance's success is determined by its closeness to the recorded rendition. Attali notes that both

¹² Marwick, "Cultural Revolution," 782; Christopher J. Broadhurst, "'We Didn't Fire a Shot. We Didn't Burn a Building': The Student Reaction at North Carolina State University to the Kent State Shootings, May 1970," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 87, no 3 (July 2010), 309; Helen M. Ciernick, "A Matter of Conscience: The Selective Conscientious Objector, Catholic College Students, and the Vietnam War," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 26, no 3 (Summer 2008), 34-35, 43; Ernst and Baldwin, "Silent Minority," 111; Michael Kramer, *Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the sixties counterculture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5-11.

rock and soul emerged as youth rebellion but were co-opted to control their underlying subversive tendencies. In fact, he notes that the last remaining bastion of true spectacle is politics, which is left by repetitive society as a device to retain calm among the masses.¹³

Finally, it is important to include the Frankfurt School, due to Cage's personal interaction with it. Created in June 1924, the "Institute of Social Research" in Frankfurt was the first academic program available that included Marxism, socialism, and the labor movement. Many of its assistants and doctoral students were actually communists. In the 1930s, some were forced to relocate due to the influence of the Nazis. They spent several years at Columbia University in New York. The theories of Theodor Adorno and Jurgen Habermas on capitalism and its associated concept of objectivity, or rationality, discuss areas of damage to life and totalitarianism. They argued that capitalism forces commodification in areas which do not translate well to monetary form, setting an "exchange value" which enforces a rationalized value judgment in these areas. Adorno in particular felt that this exchange principle was not actually rational at all, as it eliminated qualitative difference. He also carried these concepts into music and art. He stated that atonality was a rebellion against mechanized musical harmony, like art's reaction against the perfect replication of photography. He felt dissonance is actually more rational, since it forces the ear to recognize individual notes instead of only harmony. In the new music, "Nothing preestablished bars the composer from the sounds that he needs." Despite this concept, he advised that dissonance has received consistent negativity, a "source of hue

¹³ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Brian Massumi, trans., (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 10, 7, 87-88, 121, 85, 33.

and cry over intellectualism.” He noted that it was particularly resisted by a music industry which tried to retain its “Viennese Classicism” and “romanticism,” making them “objects of consumption for home decoration.” Adorno saw the new avant-garde art as its most advanced stage.¹⁴

Cage’s compositions, frequently used as representative of second generation avant-garde music, are an integral part of any discussion of the sixties, and his work complicates parts of the counterculture historiography. While the political ideology that drives Cage’s compositions fit many of the counterculture’s aims, it has not been included in the historiography in its own right. Instead, historians have placed it as an effect of change or a parallel artistic trend. The evidence suggests instead that his ideas, and those of the new avant-garde of which he was a part, were actually a piece of a consistent tradition that extended into the counterculture. Historians and musicologists have not done justice to Cage’s long background of political ideas and behaviors that came to be associated with the counterculture. Even his age questions the accepted idea that the driving force of the counterculture was the youth, especially with many instances of his influence on the musicians seen as the pinnacle of sixties counterculture.

Even more importantly, intersections can be traced between reactions to his avant-gardist compositions and reactions to cutting edge pop music icons, which raise significant questions about the reality of the counterculture’s actual co-optation. Separately, historians have identified the end of the neo-avant-garde and the co-optation

¹⁴ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, Michael Robertson, trans. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 34, 140, 146; Deborah Cook, *Adorno, Habermas, and the Search for a Rational Society*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 27, 10, 49, 96, 12.

of the counterculture as the late sixties came to an end, but when reactions to Cage's work are aligned with the life cycles of both, it suggests that parts of the counterculture were not moved into the mainstream at all but rejected and preserved instead by the elite intelligentsia of music hierarchy and by higher education perceived as liberal by the conservatism that would reassert its dominance in the eighties. The strongest opinions for and against John Cage's avant-garde work were expressed while the counterculture was at its height, obviously polarized while it was perceived as revolutionary and threatening to the hierarchy. As the commodified parts of counterculture permeated the social fabric and the co-optation of these less threatening ideals took place, reactions transitioned. Musicology took on an overall acceptance of his work as valid and groundbreaking, while the majority of the music community continued on with the harmony and aesthetic preferences it had prior to his work. The countercultural concepts of peace, globalization, and eastern thinking did not become mainstream ideals; instead, symbols which had been revolutionary were repurposed.

CHAPTER 2

CAGE

Composition and Reaction

Early in his career, where the historical record really begins to discuss his work, John Cage was a composer accompanist. Even at this time, he was starting to work with concepts later attributed to the sixties counterculture, but his ideas were based in the avant-garde which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1937, for instance, he showed early signs of his lifelong effort to distance himself from traditional music. In a talk given in Seattle, he stated, “inventors of electrical musical instruments have attempted to imitate eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, just as early automobile designers copied the carriage.” Following up on his criticism of this inability to break traditional process, Cage chose instead to use objects as instruments. While he noted in 1976 that this was because he “didn’t have a cent,” it allowed him early on to create an individualized, recognizable motif that garnered attention for his work. While this concept was new to the music field, this actually echoed the ideology of found art in avant-garde circles. In particular, Cage was known for prepared pianos, instruments fitted with “bamboo, weatherstripping, and nuts and bolts of all specified sizes and makes,” which altered notes into percussive tones when certain keys were pressed.

Even during these beginning years, Cage claimed he was fighting for “emancipation” for music from traditional form restrictions, and this fight was taken to a resistant public who’s experience of music was anchored firmly in tone and harmony. The critics questioned even his earliest methodology. Regarding his 1942 “The

Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs,” a piece in which the pianist knocks on various parts of a closed piano while a vocalist sings eerily above it, Richard Barnes recalled in 1966 that it was a “quite conventional percussion score.” He wondered why Cage even chose to “use a piano” at all. In 1941, James Pence with the *Chicago Daily News* reviewed the work, and he advised that “a girl in the audience had characterized his music as ‘perfectly terrifying.’” Yet while some expressed discomfort, Cage was already catching the attention of listeners who had no clear attachment to traditional music—as Pence related, ‘It’s better than Benny Goodman,’ said one man in the audience, who had previously announced that ‘Bach bores me.’”¹

From the outset, there was significant positive response to his work, particularly where he resided in New York City. Richard Kostelanetz attributed this positive response, not to overall levels of mass acceptance, but instead to his “manag[ing], in 1943, to present, at the Museum of Modern Art, the crucial concert that initiated his reputation as an adventurous figure on the New York musical scene.” This was somewhat overstated; he also received support in intellectual circles. This is reflected in Virgil Thomson’s review from the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1945. “John Cage,

¹ Ellsworth Snyder, “Chronological Table of John Cage’s Life,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1970), in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 37; John Cage, “The Future of Music: Credo,” talk given to Seattle Arts Society, 1937, in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 3; John Cage, *For the Birds* (Salem, N.H.: Marion Boyars Inc., 1976), 74; “Living Theater Gives Concert of Moderns,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1952, 34; John Cage, “Four Statements on the Dance,” *Dance Observer* (1939), in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 87; John Cage, “The Widow of Eighteen Springs,” Excerpt from Manuscript (1942) in Lauriejean Reinhardt, “John Cage’s The Widow of Eighteen Springs,” Moldenhauer Archives, The Library of Congress, available from memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/moldenhauer/2428121.pdf; Richard Barnes, “Our Distinguished Dropout,” *Pomona Today*, July 1966, in John Cage, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 50; James Pence, “People Call It Noise—But He Calls It Music,” *Chicago Daily News*, 19 March 1942, in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 61-62.

whose recent compositions made up the program of a concert given yesterday afternoon at the New School for Social Research, is already famous as a specialist in the use of percussive sounds...The concert was a delight from every point of view.” In early recognition of his impact, he received a grant from the Guggenheim in 1949.² These positive responses, of course, did not mean that Cage intended to rest on his laurels.

In the late 1940s, he began to threaten the acceptance he had received. Instead of sticking with his percussive music style, he brought more radical avant-garde concepts and philosophical ideas into his compositions. He took an interest in eastern philosophy, studying Zen Buddhism with Dr. Daisetz T. Suzuki at Columbia University. He began to apply ideas from the artists known as the New York School of Abstract Expressionists and became a founding member of the New York School of Music. His writing became more political, including references to nuclear war, freedom of thought, and anarchism, which hinted that his experiences at the New School of Social Research had made an impact. In a comment strongly reminiscent of Jacques Attali, he wrote that a composer had an opportunity to “supply another structural means, just as in a bombed out city the opportunity to build again exists.” Finally, he began operations of chance in earnest after 1950, using the I Ching to decide on the direction of his composition and lectures. This conscious effort to bring the earlier avant-garde into his pieces would have an immediate impact on his mainstream popularity.

² Richard Kostelanetz, “Introduction,” in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 4; Virgil Thomson, “Expressive Percussion” *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 January 1945, 71-73; Snyder, “Chronological Table,” 38.

The reception of his music changed drastically and began to resemble responses to earlier radical changes in the art world. A writer for the *New York Times* expressed his listeners' discomfort, describing audiences as "weary and confused" with music that "could barely be apprehended." While they referred to parts of the performance as "enchanting," they also noted that "sounds alone do not make music: organization and emotion do." Reactions such as these questioned if his work was musical composition at all, as it did not include "the essentials of music." It is here that the historical record shows similarities to the first avant-garde; as he began to rebel against expectation and form in earnest, so too did audiences begin to strongly object to him doing so.

As Cage moved further away from recognizable, comfortable outcomes, these issues intensified and descriptions of him changed. The *Monroe Morning World* in 1950 advised that "In every phase of endeavor are found individuals who cannot remain satisfied in accepted lines of work, noting that "Such an individual is John Cage, a research composer." Clearly, observers no longer felt that he could remain, without qualification, a composer—he had simply deviated too far from recognized sound and intention. The media even changed how they discussed his followers; the *New York Times* in 1952 described them, not as music aficionados, but as "those one might see reading at the Public Library." Far from seeking harmony and tone, Cage was looking for freedom of thought for both himself and, quietly, for that of his listener. Underlying

his use of chance was an effort to remove prescribed understanding and values from his compositions.³

Cage's long-distance friendship with European composer Pierre Boulez, a fellow avant-gardist, resulted in a significant amount of correspondence which gives a friendly insider's look at this reception from the perspective of someone else working on the new music. In January of 1950, Cage referenced Olivier Messiaen's performance in New York: "Messiaen was here;--I love him for his ideas about rhythm. Almost everyone was against him because of his half-religious half-Hollywood spirit." He declared that he was starting a society of like-minded individuals, amusingly named "Capitalists Inc. (so that we will not be accused of being communists)." The only guidelines were that the person had to have "destroyed not less than 100 disks of music or one sound recording device [and] everyone who joins automatically becomes president." Boulez in April responded slyly that a certain critic was "scandalized" by his article, "in advance, because he never read it." The gentleman in question clearly lacked experience with Cage, as he then asked Boulez, "Where are you trying to get to?" Boulez's response was predictably avant-garde: "Nowhere." So used to being led to predetermined destinations by music, the critic simply had no idea what to do. Boulez became an emotional defender for

³ Snyder, "Chronological Table," 37; John Cage, "Forerunners of Modern Music," *The Tiger's Eye*, March 1949, in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 63-64; Snyder, "Chronological Table," 38; David Nichols, "Getting Rid of the Glue," *Journal of American Studies* 27, no. 3 (December 1993), 341; "Ajemian Presents John Cage Works," *New York Times*, 8 March 1950, 3; John Cage, "Diary: Audience 1966," Opening statement on panel *The Changing Audience for the Changing Arts*, May 21, 1966 in New York City, in John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 51; "Musical Coterie to Present Study of John Cage During National Music Week Here," *Monroe Morning World*, 7 May 1950, 20; "Concert Blended with a Rehearsal," *New York Times*, 13 October 1952, 25; "Boulez '2D Sonata Heard in Premiere," *New York Times*, 18 December 1950, sec. Amusements, 35.

Cage's work in Europe, noting in 1950 that a critic "was making out that your music was be-bop." He described how he was "crimson with rage, and I threw the worst insults I could think of." He added, "faced by such bullshit, you don't discuss, you just insult." Again in 1951, he added that "I have not heard your Imaginary Landscape. But I have already defended it on the radio here." According to Boulez, another radio guest "said it was stupid, typically 'American' etc." which "made my ears very hot." It should be noted, however, that even Boulez would never accept Cage's inclusion of chance operations.⁴

On May 10, 1951, Cage moved forward with the first of his most divergent pieces, testing his audience's patience even further. It was received, unsurprisingly, with a distinct level of frustration. In "Imaginary Landscape, No. 4," a piece which featured 12 radios used as instruments, Cage had 24 performers, two at each machine, adjust volume and frequency to match an instructional score modified to reflect timing for the dials. The *New York Times* answered everyone's first question about this choice: "that is right, radios." Cage wrote later about the composition that he'd "had a goal, that of erasing all will and the very idea of success" from the piece, clearly undermining any attempt at critique, a philosophy which, if anything, just increased his critics' frustration. He related in his diary in 1966 that "Virgil Thompson told him, 'You can't do that sort of

⁴ John Cage, Letter to Pierre Boulez, 17 January 1950, in trans. and ed. Robert Samuels, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 48, 50-51; Pierre Boulez, Letter to John Cage, before April 1950, in trans. and ed. Robert Samuels, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56; Pierre Boulez, Letter to John Cage 30 December 1950, in trans. and ed. Robert Samuels, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88; Pierre Boulez, Letter to John Cage December 1951, in trans. and ed. Robert Samuels, *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113.

thing and expect people to pay for it.” The critics agreed completely. Not only were they disinterested in his lofty goal of subverting their years of experience understanding music, but they stubbornly tried to move forward with a critique suited to traditional composition. Charles Shere in the *Oakland Tribune* noted that the “audience broke up at hearing a Mozart quartet in the midst of static and noise.” Instead of looking for intent in the process, he blamed an “inescapable” disconnect between Cage and his audience. A writer for the *The Musical Quarterly* advised that “one aspect of the work’s failure to communicate must be laid at the composer’s door.” They advised he had “too many low amplitude dynamics.” Cage responded to these criticisms by stating that “contrary to what people had expected (and to what each person reports), the radios did their job that evening quite satisfactorily.”⁵ It was clear that Cage was testing the very concept of what was understood as music. He would soon turn it on its head.

Cage acted on his most famous, or infamous, inspiration in 1952, surpassing anything he’d previously done. A sometime avant-garde artist in his own right, he was so struck by a new idea in Abstract Expressionism that he conceived of a piece that would fully break from the music hierarchy and any possible concept of value judgment. After viewing Robert Rauschenberg’s completely white and black paintings, which were intended to enforce subjective response in the viewer, he conceived of a silent piece, “4’33”.” David Tudor performed it in August, and in some minds, this was Cage’s last

⁵ John Cage, “Imaginary Landscape, No. 4,” Excerpt from Score (Media Art New, 1951) database on-line, available from www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/imaginary-landscape-4/; “New Music,” *New York Times*, 6 May 1951, sec. Arts & Leisure, X7; Cage, *For the Birds*, 169; Charles Shere, “Saturday Critic: ‘You Call That Music?’” *Oakland Tribune*, 8 April 1972, 23; Henry Cowell, “Current Chronical,” *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXVIII (January, 1952), in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, 94-105 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 97; Cage, *For the Birds*, 169.

straw. As noted earlier, his reputation never entirely recovered. In his mind, however, the piece was the epitome of his efforts to allow random chance to bring all noise into composition. Unfortunately, the actual response did not agree with him, and it was seen as the epitome of the ridiculous.

Cage had released himself from his prior boundaries, however, and he made ongoing efforts to break into new areas. He began using tape music for scores. He encouraged performer input and improvisation, giving performers instructions like “Where impossibilities are notated (of any kind), the pianist is free to use his own discretion.” To remove his own authority as composer, he directed that “Any amount of this music may be played or not.” At times, he even removed himself from the entire performance, insisting on working behind a table while his pieces were performed. He took a tour of Europe with Tudor, recalling that “When I played in Europe in 1954, as late as then, David Tudor and I were thought to be idiots.” As a second thought, he changed that description to “clowns.” Through all of this, though, he still remained consistent in his drive toward music without hierarchy.⁶

With the break from anything that might have been even accidentally construed as traditional music, it is no surprise that frustration and lack of understanding intensified in the reviews, both by critics and even some of his fans and students. Paul Hertelendy, a critic for the *Oakland Tribune* in 1968, went so far as to personally attack Cage, calling

⁶ Snyder, “Chronological Table,” 38; John Cage, “31’57.9864 for a pianist,” score (New York: Henmar Press, 1954) quoted in Christopher Shultis, “Cage and Europe,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nichols, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 33; Snyder, “Chronological Table,” 38; John Cage, “Conversation with John Cage” Interview by Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 17.

him as only an “iconoclast” with no wider intentions. He referred to Cage as the “royal jester of the avant-garde,” and described him as “a likeable boy 55 years of age without any dangerous signs of musical genius.” Kyle Gann, a former student of the composer, noted that even Cage’s supporters were ambivalent at best about his developing form. He wrote that “Many composers claim to prefer the early works and not care for the later ones; hardly anyone will say the opposite.” Even Cage himself was aware that he was missing critical audience engagement. In 1961, he expressed frustration that many critics gave up “saying ‘experimental.’” He described how they would “either move to a halfway point and say ‘controversial’ or depart to a greater distance and question whether this ‘music’ is music at all.” It stretched to reviews of his classes from former students; in 1964, Dick Higgins noted that his classes rarely shared Cage’s “fascination with the various theories of impersonality, anonymity, and the life of pieces outside their perceivers, makers, or anyone else.” Cage summed up his opinion of the issue in 1968, saying they had simply “missed the point.” He may have been onto something; it was these very theories through which he was trying to express his political ideology.⁷

Of course, this did not stop him from continuing his efforts to use his music to effect change; he simply tried harder to explain his process, and by association, the ideology underlying his actions. In a lecture in London in 1954, he told attendees that “If one feels protective of the word ‘music,’ protect it and find another word for all the rest

⁷ Paul Hertelendy, “Games Musicians Play,” *Oakland Tribune*, 14 May 1968, 19; Kyle Gann, “No escape from heaven: John Cage as father figure,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nichols, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 244; John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, 7; Dick Higgins, *Postface*, (New York: Something Else Press, 1964), in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 124; Kobler, “Everything We Do,” 65.

that enters through the ear. It's a waste of time to trouble oneself with words." Cage felt that he was opening his audience's minds to sounds they had learned to ignore with societal conditioning. This concept of breaking down created, and staunchly defended, hierarchy between noise and music was perhaps Cage's most subversive idea. To quote Jacques Attali in 1977, "When Cage opens the door to the concert hall to let the noise of street in, he is regenerating all of music: he is taking it to its culmination. He is blaspheming."⁸

Cage's compositional criticism of societal hierarchy would later be expanded to include written political rhetoric. He was so intent on his message coming across accurately, that he even responded directly to criticism. He wrote to critic John Henry Lang in 1956, questioning a reference to Cage's work as a "stunt." He wrote that he objected to Lang "declar[ing] my works, even those that seem patently conventional to me... 'preposterous as art.'"⁹ It is here where he mentions one of his most intriguing concerns:

I gather that you find me concerned with shocking the man on the street. However, my work is almost characterized by being insufficiently exciting. I do not know whether you attended the first and only performance of... *Imaginary Landscape*... Everyone stayed... for my work was programmed at the end... I had advised against this... The majority of the audience expected an uproarious joke, which 'never came off'... I have never gratuitously done anything for shock.¹⁰

⁸ John Cage, "45' For A Speaker," Lecture for Composer's Concourse in London, [October 1954], in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 186; Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 1985, reprint, Minneapolis: the University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 134.

⁹ Cage, Letter to John Henry Lang, 117.

¹⁰ Cage, Letter to John Henry Lang, 117.

Based on his background as an avant-gardist, this is an apparent deviation from prior behavior and ideology, since shock value had been an effective method of garnering attention. Cage, however, clearly shared the negative opinion of shock value as the critic. He insisted instead that he had serious valid underpinnings of his art, instead of the artist using shock value to obtain commercial success.

Just prior to the end of sixties, comparisons to the counterculture became direct and frankly undeniable; even Cage himself began discussing them more openly. In 1957, he addressed a convention of music instructors, noting that validating his music “seems at first to be a giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for the musician, the giving up of music,” which he felt led to “one see[ing] that humanity and nature, not separate, are in this world together.” This clear reference to a return to nature was absolutely in keeping with tenets of the counterculture. He specifically addressed efforts to exert human control over nature, a duality which the counterculture perceived as an underlying cause of human conflict. He described how in his work he had attempted to “give up the desire to control sound, clear his mind of music, and set about discovering means to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for manmade theories or expression of human sentiments.” Often, he described how he went “out in the woods and revived.” He even called out mass consumerism in 1967, when he wrote that “many artists have appeared as willfully irresponsible members of society. Where traditionalists demanded the latest models for home appliances, automobiles, etc., they ridiculed the

newest forms of art.”¹¹ It would be hard to express this point any better than by sharing this excerpt from a presentation he made in 1961, which already showed hallmarks of post-modern concepts of humanity lacking control over nature:

Right here you have it: Is man in control of nature or is he, as part of it, going along with it? To be perfectly honest with you, let me say, I find nature far more interesting than any of man’s controls of nature...Not all of our past, but the parts of it we are taught, lead us to believe we are in the driver’s seat. With respect to nature. And that if we are not, life is meaningless. Well the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as the ultimate meaning.¹²

The counterculture reflected in reviews of his work also, with clear references to youth culture and drug use. These reviews tried to place Cage within the movement, despite his age and his so-called countercultural ideology that actually dated back to the 1930s. Marion Mauk in the *Independent Press Telegram* in 1963 expressed a direct reference to the youth culture in her review of “Imaginary Landscape No. 4.” She noted if “12 radios playing different stations” seemed “like 5 o’clock bedlam in the family room,” then “chances are that the modern experimental music is out of your usual orbit. Maybe you’re just too old.” An interesting observation, considering the composer would have been considered out of this age range. Joe Pehrson added that “While none of these records are destined for even the higher numbers on the popularity charts, they do reflect

¹¹ John Cage, “Experimental Music,” address to Convention of Music Teachers National Association, Chicago [Winter 1957], in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 8; John Cage, “Composition as Process,” talk given in Darmstadt, Germany, [September 1958], in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 22; John Cage, “Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?” talk at Evening School of Pratt Institutes, Brooklyn. [January 1961], in *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 211; John Cage, “McLuhan’s Influence,” essay, 11 January 1967, in *John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 170.

¹² John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings*, ed. John Cage, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 194-195.

a growing interest, particularly of younger people, in modern classical music and the pop-art sound.” Hertelendy expressed further concern after a concert at Mills College. “After all this audio-visual claptrap was swept away, one nagging thought recurred: Now that Mills has gotten high on Cage, can any antidote convert these addicts back into useful members of society?” He added that the performance at Mills “broke up only when actor-electronicat Cage finally ran out of his 86 proof sustenance.” As the societal concept of the counterculture was made concrete, his ideas were attributed to that movement.¹³

There were still ongoing negative views of Cage’s work, but they would take a somewhat different direction—and they showed surprising social acceptance. Cage described an incident in 1963 that showed new hesitation. “When the New York Philharmonic played my *Atlas Eclipticalis*,” he recalled that “the lady sitting next to my mother was particularly violent.” He described how after the performance ended, “Mother turned to her and said ‘I am the composer’s mother.’ The lady said ‘Good Heavens! Your son’s music is magnificent!’” Joan Retallack described the reaction of the audience in 1965, which was now very ambivalent: “Over half the audience left early, a considerable number exiting during the last piece.” She described how at the second performance, “the audience became even more restless” and “stomped out angrily, shouting their disgust over their shoulders.” However, Richard Barnes implied that people were intrigued, even aware ahead of time, of the eccentricities of his

¹³ Marion M. Mauk, “Are We Ready for John Cage?” *Independent Press Telegram*, 16 June 1963, 6; Joe Pehrson, “Plink Toot It’s John Cage,” *Mass Media*, 18 March 1969, 7; Hertelendy, “Games Musicians Play,” 19; Paul Hertelendy, “1968—Music’s ‘Year of the Chameleon,’” *Oakland Tribune*, 29 December 1968, 105.

performances: “By now John Cage is notorious, or famous. His pieces have such an air of novelty.” Terms like “novelty” or “notorious” showed fascination missing in most of the earlier criticism. Barnes even quoted “Herbert Bruin, whose ideas about composition could hardly be farther from Cage’s” as saying “‘with what he says and what he does, either he’s a composer or he’s an idiot. And—and—he’s a composer.’ Pause. ‘His great big goofy smile.’” Even such colorful dislike still gave Cage credit as a composer of music.¹⁴

Of course there would still be issues of taste. Barnes’ particularly illustrative example noted that during one performance, “somebody left a microphone on [and] there was a blast of feedback that was, to me, just past the threshold of pain. John Cage and David Tudor clearly thought it was beautiful.” Joe Pehrson described “‘Variations II’ as David Tudor “vainly trying to put his model train back on the track” in an effort “to make some type of sense from this seemingly atonal gibberish.” Clearly his reputation preceded him, as not all of these concerns were even expressed after the fact. The *Pasadena Independent* wrote that “A musical event will occur in Pasadena tonight, but that is all almost anyone knows about it.” They continued, stating only, “This much is certain, something will take place twice.” Significantly, the old questions of musicality were missing.¹⁵

¹⁴ John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 69; Joan Retallack, “Introduction: Conversations in Retrospect” in *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music*, ed. Joan Retallack, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xvi; Richard Barnes, “Our Distinguished Dropout,” *Pomona Today*, July 1966, in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *John Cage*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 49, 54.

¹⁵ Barnes, “Dropout,” 54; Joe Pehrson, “Plink Toot It’s John Cage,” *Mass Media*, 18 March 1969, 7; “Experiment in Sound: Musical Event (?) in Modern Vein Opens Tonight,” *Pasadena Independent*, 7 January 1965, 40.

Cage's support base solidified along with this new validation. Joan Retallack recalled from her first experience with Cage in 1965, that "When the performance was over, literally shaking with excitement and fright, I went backstage." She described how it "had been the most stunning, puzzling experience of dance and music I had ever had." Higgins remembered clearly from his class time, that "The best thing that happened to us in Cage's class was the sense he gave that 'anything goes.'" This observation described positively Cage's very loose teaching style. Duncan Ray, to whom credit goes for the line about Cage's music including everything "From Soprano to Barking Dog," noted that he was "commended by the National Academy of Arts and Letters 'for having extended the boundaries of musical art'" in 1964. Students at Iowa's Luther College in 1966 spent three months "sticking nuts, bolts, screws, erasers of every size, and plastic between piano strings" to hold "An Evening of John Cage," a recital of his music. Richard Kostelanetz called him a "serious philosophical intelligence, Cage continually relates life to ideas, and vice versa." He referred to Cage's "thinking [as] both integrated and continually developing."¹⁶

As the 1960s came to a close, and certain ideas and styles of the counterculture became accepted in the circles of the musical elite, there was far less negativity found in criticisms to Cage's music—along with new discussions of the politics of his ideas. Critics had transitioned to "explain[ing] how silence functions in [his] music" or "how he

¹⁶ Joan Retallack, "Introduction: Conversations in Retrospect," in *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music*, ed. Joan Retallack, xiii-xlvii, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), xvi; Higgins, *Postface*, 124; Ray Duncan, "From Soprano to Barking Dog: Cage Captures New Music," *Independent Star News*, 27 December 1964, 55; "Nuts, Screws, Bolts, in Luther Piano Concert," *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, 17 April 1966, 62; Kostelanetz, "Introduction," 3.

goes about ensuring maximum randomness.” In fact, they had even begun to explain the underlying concepts beneath his eccentricity, describing how Cage embraced “Anything goes,” while rejecting “Do what you please.” As he described, Cage “accomplished, among other things, is to demonstrate that these are not equivalent.” His message, however, was still not entirely recognized—understanding that he encouraged this fluidity did not necessarily equate with recognizing the effort to undermine the basic understandings of music and hierarchy. Instead, the music field preserved randomness as a definitive characteristic of Cage’s music. Ironically, Cage’s efforts to remove his leadership role as a composer simply became part of the ideology the music world attributed to John Cage; essentially, they considered his anti-authoritarian tendencies important because he was considered a musical authority.

Objections to his music became humorous anecdotes of people outside the mainstream, such as discussions of his piece “33 1/3,” which was an audience participation piece with 24 empty turntables, 300 records, and no chairs.¹⁷

When we first presented it . . . it very quickly became obvious to each member of the audience that, if they wanted a little music, they would have to produce it themselves...there was actually a rather elderly man who was visibly bothered by hearing so much music at the same time...he began to go around the room taking off the records...he couldn’t take two steps before someone put on another record!¹⁸

¹⁷ Frank Kermode, “Revolution: The Role of the Elders,” in ed. Ihab Hassan, *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 96; Louis Mink, “Art Without Artists,” in Ihab Hassan, ed. *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 79-80; John Cage, “Premiere Performance of John Cage’s ‘33 1/3,’” recording, November 12, 1969, On-line database, available at www.archive.org.

¹⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 169.

Charles Shere did a piece in 1972, when Cage turned 60, addressing this change in attitude toward the composer. “Sixty years old and he’s still the *enfant terrible*, the wild-eyed revolutionary of the music world...Or so people generally think...Actually, it would be hard to find a more soft-spoken revolutionary.” He mentioned more mainstream musicians, noting that “When John Lennon and Yoko Ono produced one of the landmarks of tape-collage music, their Cage-influenced ‘Two Virgins,’ they lost a lot of ground with their pop-oriented followers.” Clearly, this does not imply a comfortable move of the concepts into mainstream, despite accepted ideology of ideas associated with the counterculture being co-opted. Shere himself, expressed no concern over remaining disagreement, again showing a certain relative attitude, suggesting that “If it’s your bag, go and enjoy. I’ll be there, because I like it. If it bothers you, stay home.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Shere, “Saturday Critic,” 23.

Politics and Influences

John Cage's political critique and mindset encompassed nearly everything that the counterculture would eventually come to protest and represent. As he wrote in 1973, he considered these ideals more important than his compositions. "It would become necessary to concentrate my attention on world improvement, to eliminate from my mind all thoughts about art."²⁰ This is not that surprising when his politics are viewed from the perspective of his artistic struggles working within the avant-garde. In his diary in 1969, he quoted a conversation he had with fellow composer Iannis Xenakis:

I asked what was wrong with the USA...He...said, 'Too much power.' Put 'em who threaten possessions and power together with 'em who offend our tastes in sex and dope. Those who're touched, put 'em in asylums. Pack off old ones to 'senior communities,' nursing home. Our children? Keep'em prisoner, babysitter as warden. School? Good for fifteen to twenty years. Army afterward. Liberated, we live in prison. No this, no that. Kill us before we die!²¹

It was easy to find Cage's perspective as an avant-garde artist within his political writing. Later in life, he expressed that "the future of music [is] playing new experimental works in Africa'n'Third World generally, [the] future of art displayed before us everything." He then referenced "The junk with which we litter both our streets and all the places in nature beautiful enough to attract us"; a clear reference to humanity's lack of care for the environment and its perceived division from nature.²²

²⁰ John Cage, "Forward," in John Cage, *M: Writings '67-'72*, (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), x.

²¹ John Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1969," in John Cage, *M: Writings '67-'72* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 78.

²² John Cage, "Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1973-1982," in John Cage, *X: Writings '79-'82* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 161.

Cage's ideas were certainly radical. In 1968, he advised that humanity needs “(we've got them) global problems to find global solutions.” He compared it to music, noting that “Problems connected to sounds were insufficient to change the nature of music.” Clearly referencing “4'33,’” he advised listeners “had to conceive of silence” and “of anarchy.” He quoted a letter from James Tenney, fellow composer, stating, “What's required...is radical eclecticism...More power to Fuller...to revolutionary guerrillas...to Christian pacifists...to flower children...to hippies...acidheads...beatniks, diggers and provos...to the militant blacks...to those who keep asking questions.” He wrote in a pamphlet series in 1967 describing society as an “impersonal space,” as what each “individual does, his actions enliven the total picture. Anarchy (no laws or conventions) in a place that works. Society's individualized.”²³ This positive outlook on anarchy certainly supports the earlier idea of Cage being a soft-spoken revolutionary.

In support of this individualism, Cage provided a list and contact information of communes in his diary, “places where Americans live who've given up dependence on power and possessions.” He expressed concern that even there, the same inclination toward leadership and hierarchy was still in existence: “communes're filled with gurus, needing (not having) others 'to guru.’” He noted that “teaching's part'n' parcel of [the] divisive society we're leaving.” Discussing those in power, he wrote that “It's probably no more than ninety-nine people who don't know what they're doing. They're involved

²³ John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 166-167; John Cage, “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) 1967,” *Great Bear Pamphlet Series*, Summer 1967, reprinted in John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 161.

in high finance. Fascinating form of gambling.” Of course, the more he expressed these politics, the more attention he gained from those in authority. In 1968, he received a letter from a prospective employer with a form advising he needed to sign an agreement to not “overthrow the government.”²⁴

Along with this radicalism, he included the simply ways in which people were already working against the culture of authority on their own. He listed out instances of anarchy in the current society. “On our highways, the general speed is in excess of the limit. In supermarket express check-out lanes limited to those having eight or ten items regularly serve customers having more,” “Tax evasion,” and “Non-payment of taxes. July ’67 racial riots in New Jersey ended by removal of police from disturbed areas.” Instead of expectation of revolt, he advised, “Our minds are changing from the use of simple, critical faculties,” which he considered “a courageous seeing of things in movement, life as revolution. History is one revolution after another.” He again referenced a natural state of anarchy: “But we live from day to day: revolution is going on at this moment.” He felt that the important thing was not destroying society or trying to fix it, but instead to update it to what people were already doing. “World-enlightenment” would be “Not a victory, just something natural.”²⁵

He was particularly moved by the ideas of R. Buckminster Fuller, referencing environmentalism, global thinking, and resource division. Fuller discussed humanity’s

²⁴ John Cage, “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1969 (Part V),” in Ihab Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 12, 18; John Cage, “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) Continued 1969 (Revised),” in John Cage, *M: Writings ’67-’72* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 3-25; “Cage, Diary 1968 (Revised),” 5.

²⁵ Cage, “Diary (Revised),” 20; Cage, “Diary” *Great Bear*, 158; Cage, *Year from Monday*, 166-167.

“ignorance of being aboard a spaceship of such beautiful design and equipment as to be able to regenerate human life on board for perhaps more than two million years” and their actions based on “fantastically shortsighted ways.” He pointed out in a fair assessment that “man can only last for a very short time unless he makes very important changes in his behavior.” Fuller expressed frustration that “all our great governments are organized and as yet operate on the *only-you-or-me; not-both-can-survive-basis*.” Having attended a talk by Fuller, Cage noted that the “first thing Bucky said was that the young people sitting around the table need sufficient intelligence to run the world.” Amusing to hear from the normally positive Cage, he said he “was skeptical. They looked like a bunch of hippies with some older oddballs thrown in.” Ironically, he expressed this opinion in a class held by Fuller, who is noted for writing that there are “myriad different equally erroneous opinions of humanity,” referring to them as “lethally divergent religions and ideologies—every one of them based on fundamental misconceptions and incomprehensions of the realities of the universe.” Even with his skepticism, Cage continually referenced Fuller in his work, in 1973 writing that humans were “now closer to four than three billion. Not so long ago the world was called a global village. Buckminster Fuller calls it spaceship earth. Every one of us is on it.”²⁶

Cage was particularly vocal in his writings about the expanding globalism of economy and politics that he saw around him. He included a quote from John McHale in 1968, expressing the “interdependence of all nations,” including airlines and

²⁶ R. Buckminster Fuller, “Man’s Changing Role in Universe,” in Ihab Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 208; Cage, “Diary Part V),” 20; Fuller, “Man’s Changing Role,” 213; Cage, “Forward,” xiii.

telecommunications, which stopped “attempts at unilateral action based on imaginary sovereign autonomy” that were “no longer operable in the real world.” He wrote in an article about Jasper Johns in 1964 that when “anyone speaks of patriotism, it is nowadays global: our newspapers are internationally inclined.” He wrote of David Sarnoff, who had predicted “instant universal voice communication [and] instant television, instant newspaper, instant magazine, and instant visual telephone service.” He rightfully noted that “the development of such global communications system would link people everywhere.” Having been influenced by Eastern thought for years, he made certain to bring it into his writing, noting that “with the printing press, the airplane, telegraphy, and nowadays, Telstar, the distinctions between Occident and Orient are disappearing. We live in one world.” He quoted a US State Department talk in Honolulu, where they called the Earth a “global village whether we like it or not,” and they called war “part of dying political-economic structures.” Clearly, Cage was fully engaged with the idea of an international movement, interestingly even mentioning the one world concept, a guiding principal of John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s later peacenik period.²⁷

His globalization ideology, despite his claims made to the contrary, was friendly to Communist thinking, so it is not surprising that he received some attention from the Establishment. He wrote in 1973 that he was “deeply touched” after reading an “account of the material and spiritual changes in Chinese environment, technology, and society

²⁷ Cage, “Diary 1968 (Revised),” 21; John Cage, “Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas,” *Jewish Museum Catalog of the work of Jasper Johns*, 1964, reprinted in John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 77; John Cage. “Diary 1965,” in John Cage, *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 19-20, 4.

[and] cheered by the news that one-fifth of the world's population were 'fighting self-interest' and 'serving the people.'" He discussed reading Mao's writings, noting approval of his rules for conduct: "among persons of occupied land: to assist them with their work, to care for their well-being and property." He even shared a story from Jumay Chu, a dancer who had visited China. While there, she asked a factory worker if he was happy, and Cage noted that the man "didn't understand her questions. He was doing his work as part of China's work; he was one person in the Chinese family." He felt he could reconcile individualized behavior with communist ideology. He even related a story where he was asked about the television coverage of Nixon in China and advised that he agreed when the taxi driver told him that "They play The Star-Spangled Banner better in Peking than they do here in the USA."²⁸

With this focus on global subjects, it was only natural Cage would weigh in as conflicts arose—his involvement with the avant-garde was something that already lent itself toward questioning military force and colonialist tendencies. He expressed concerns on the conflict over Palestine, after speaking to Jewish friends who he claimed "didn't make good sense," when asking him "After ages of suffering, aren't you glad we finally have a little success?" Cage thought their "Israeli-Arab situation's hopeless." He suggested instead that their technology be shared; he was told that the "Arabs wouldn't let'em." It seemed clear that he had a different idea than much of the mass media, sympathizing like Christopher Dobson in his book about the conflict. "They were occupied countries" having lost autonomous rule to Western Europe, seeing "the great

²⁸ Cage, "Forward," x-xi; Cage, "Diary 1973-1982," 161-162.

wealth of the oil fields which they regarded as their birthright going into the pockets of the Western Oil Companies and a few feudal sheiks.”²⁹

When he referenced Vietnam, Cage did not pull any punches whatsoever. He included information in his diary about the “lazy dog (a bomb containing ten thousand slivers of razor-sharp steel),” adding that in a densely populated area, “one hundred million slivers of razor-sharp steel have fallen in a period of thirteen months. These razor darts slice the villagers to ribbons.” He described how young women in the cities were “forced into teams of prostitutes...The Saigon government forced literally tens of thousands of young girls into camps for U. S. troops.” He did not flinch from pointing out what he thought to be the reason for the conflict, reprinting a quote by President Eisenhower in 1953: “If Indo-China goes, the tin and tungsten we so greatly value would cease coming. We are after the cheapest way to prevent the occurrence of something terrible—the loss of our ability to get what we want.” Placed alongside the descriptions of carnage and horror, it is sobering that he also added, “The tin and tungsten that we’re in Vietnam to get are resources we no longer need. While our backs were turned, technology changed. [The] USA has nothing to fight for.”³⁰

He even addressed neo-colonialism directly in Puerto Rico. He wrote that “The United States has turned Puerto Rico into a kind of Los Angeles, a place where there is

²⁹ Cage, *Diary* (Revised), 5; Christopher Dobson, *Black September: It's Short, Violent History*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1974), 20-21.

³⁰ Cage, “Diary” *Great Bear*, 159-162; President Dwight Eisenhower, 1953, quoted in Cage, John Cage, “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) 1967,” *Great Bear Pamphlet Series*, Summer 1967, reprinted in *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), 161-162.

no public transportation to speak of...Fumes. Accidents.” He stated bluntly, “What American industry decided...Puerto Rico would be one of its consumers...[and] shouldn’t import anything from any other country. The function of the governments...is to see to it that what industry wants is what happens.” He noted that this was not beneficial to Puerto Rico, as “Shoes’n’clothes made in Puerto Rico are exported to [the] United States. What isn’t sold there goes up’n’price and then goes back.” He described how once they had developed a dependency on the United States, it would be very difficult for them to return to autonomy, even if that were an option. “People there’ve forgotten life’s like...People’n Puerto Rico who still have jobs don’t have them for five days a week, just for four...Those who work in hospitals stay at home for half a week. Patients get along by themselves.” He noted in his diary in 1968, “When Gandhi was asked what he thought of Western Civilization, he said ‘It would be nice.’”³¹

He was clear that he felt this was not restricted to Puerto Rico, either. He wrote that American advisors had suggested to the Brazilian government that more money could be made with soybeans than black beans, despite them being a “staple diet in Brazil...” This did not last, however, when the “price paid for soybeans’n Chicago slumped. Brazilians [are] now standing in line to buy black beans imported at outlandish prices.” His criticism of these policies was harsh. He wrote that “Americans...automatically barge in wherever there’s a sign of cheap labor. We’re all over Latin America. We don’t speak Spanish or Portuguese. Our exploitees don’t speak English. Now they speak with bombs hoping someday we’ll understand.” It is clear

³¹ Cage, “Diary 1973-1982,” 156,158-159, 162, 167.

where his opinion lay—he shared this in 1967: “U.S. citizens are six per cent (*sic*) of the world’s population consuming sixty per cent of world’s resources. Had Americans been born pigs rather than men, it would not have been different.” He additionally advised, likely from personal experience, “Finding one of them acceptable, people say, ‘You’re not like an American.’”³²

These arguments, typical to Cage, were well thought out, and at times, clearly called back to his postwar youth. “Nuclear weaponry’s [a] rational adjunct to internationalism. Each nation’s married to industry. Industry’s polygamous. Each nation’s selfish...International world’s schizophrenic...Power politics was its cause. Holocaust.” His solutions were global. “There’s no longer time to correct things first here and then there, say’n Puerto Rico today, South Africa tomorrow, later’n Israel or Salvador. Whole thing’s wrong. Beginning of future if there is to be one is making [the] world a single place.” He wanted to go back to a more natural state, “the use of faeces...to enrich the earth (economy, no refuse). Starting over again from the point of human well-being...new ecology. The enjoyment of ‘dirt.’” He shared the hope in 1973 that “To us and all those who hate us, that the U. S. A. may become just another part of the world, no more, no less.”³³

To understand fully the background of Cage’s politics and to provide context for the importance of the change in reactions to his work, it is useful to trace the colorful

³² Cage, “Diary (Revised)” 5; Cage, “Diary 1973-1982,” 167, 158-159; Cage, “Diary” *Great Bear*, 145.

³³ Cage, “Diary 1973-1982,” 167; Cage, “Diary” *Great Bear*, 160; John Cage, *M. Writings '67-'72*, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

reactions toward the artistic tradition of which he was a part: the avant-garde which predated him by several decades. It can be traced back, according to some sources, to the Impressionists, which for purposes of this paper fit in based on descriptions of the public reactions to their work. Specifically, the *Charleston Gazette* in 1926 chose to include “the outburst that arose in artistic Paris many years ago over the work of Corot, Millet, and Delacroix in France, of Turner in England” in an article about reaction to Cubism. They described how this same “outburst...turned its fury upon the exponents of Cubism and modern Impressionism” after the turn of the twentieth century.³⁴

If there is disagreement about including the Impressionists, there is none about placing Dada in the early avant-garde. The *Canton Daily News* put it plainly in 1921, clearly just as confused about Dada as critics were later about John Cage’s radios: “What is Dada? Who are the Dadaists? Where? — But at least that is possible to explain—they are in Paris...the rumors which have trickled over to London have caused howls of derision.” They described it as “a literary movement...[which] attacked Paris with lunacies, jibes, and insulting ironies” until it “capitulated.” Frank Kermode in 1971 wrote that Dada “began...during the First World War, and in the violence...and expansions of its programs it learned much from the war. It ‘spat in the eye of the public.’” He recognized that it “condemned art for being recognizable by such formal canons and types. It went a long way toward desacralizing the arts, which had been for some time looking more and more like religions; and for the first time...it created confusion between objects of art and jokes.” He stated that “they invented the

³⁴ “Impressionists Defend Cubism from Attack of Conservative Artists,” *The Charleston Gazette*, 4 April 1926, Section 2, 1-2.

Happening, randomness as a policy, found art, and much else.” This should sound familiar; it is clear background for what would inspire Cage’s music years later.³⁵

Describing Dada was challenging due to confusion, not only from its audience, but actually from its own creators. One of its founders, Richard Huelsenbeck, described “Dadaism, and its children—Surrealism and other artistic isms [as] a publicity stunt conceived in an attempt to attract customers.” They tried “ballyhooing (you Americans have a gift for inventing just the right word!)” advising that they presented “Mlle. Denise Leroux as a mystery woman under the meaningless name, Dada.” This effort earned them time in a Swiss jail cell, because they were unable to give them a solid, authoritative concept of “the meaning of ‘Dada’” when asked. In fact, according to Huelsenbeck, the term “Dadaism” itself was actually invented by the newspapers, and the group including Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, and Emmy Hennings “loved every moment of it.” Cage most certainly would have approved of this random occurrence, but he would have criticized their dependence on shock value.³⁶

Efforts to capitalize on this notoriety led them to expand their initial success to other areas. Huelsenbeck described a meeting with his co-conspirator Hans Van Arp, who “shoved me up to an easel where a painting stood.” He described the work as “all lines and curves,” with a matchbox glued to the canvas. He advised, “I did not know

³⁵ “‘Dada’ Coming from Paris but America May Prefer to Stick to Nut Sundaes,” *Canton Daily News*, 20 February 1921, 15; Frank Kermode, “Revolution: The Role of the Elders,” In Ihab Hassan, ed. *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 92.

³⁶ “‘Dada’ Coming,’ 15; Richard Huelsenbeck and Peter Whitney, “I Easily Hoaxed the World’s Highbrows!” *Albuquerque Journal*, 21 March 1937, 31.

what to say.” His response only increased Van Arp’s excitement: ‘If you do not understand, no one else will, either, Richard. I am not sure that I understand myself, but that is nothing. But this...this is Dadaism!’” His plan was simple and effective. “It will worry all the good, respectable burghers of Zurich; they will protest, hold meetings, [and] report us to the police.” Not only was he excited about the attention, but he added, “If we are arrested again, we will be reported in all the papers; we will be famous!”” The movement expanded to poetry, music, and dancing under the guidance of Tzara, who “was exceedingly enthusiastic about the commercial possibilities of the school.”³⁷ According to Louis Mink in 1971, ““Early Dadaists created found poems by cutting words from newspapers, shuffling them in a bag, and drawing them out blindly one by one.” This level of chance, while imperfect due to efforts to achieve some semblance of sentence structure, would be the groundwork upon which later chance operations would be built.³⁸

Huelsenbeck was nominated as the person to assist with the understanding of Dadaism, a role that would be echoed years later as Cage tried to explain his theories. Huelsenbeck described how “two elements entered particularly into the paintings and other forms of art which the first Dadaists produced: the element of primitiveness, and the element of their dream.”³⁹ More importantly, he discussed Dada in terms expressed above by May: the end of nineteenth century thought. Tzara advised that “Dada means

³⁷ Huelsenbeck and Whitney, “I Easily Hoaxed the World,” 31.

³⁸ Louis Mink, “Art Without Artists,” in Ihab Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 78.

³⁹ Huelsenbeck and Whitney, “I Easily Hoaxed the World,” 31-32.

nothing... exactly enough progress, law, morality and all the other fine qualities which so many intelligent people have discussed in so many books to come finally to this ...let us try for once not to be right.”⁴⁰ According to the *Canton Daily News*:

Tzara...says that Dada is also disgust. ‘Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada—abolition of all hierarchy and social equation set up by our valets—Dada; abolition of the memory, Dada; abolition of the prophets, Dada; abolition of the future, Dada; liberty, Dada—Liberty; Dada, Dada, Dada, howling of irritated colors. Interweaving of contraries and of all the contradictions of grotesques, of inconsequences; life.’⁴¹

In short, Dada’s efforts to breakdown these structures clearly impacted Cage’s later work.

With this as a basis, it is probably not surprising that reactions were often strongly negative to Dada, especially in pre-World War II Berlin. Despite the volatile political situation, Dadaists chose not to back away from conflict. As recalled by Huelsenbeck in the *Port Arthur News*, “During the Weimar convention...[Johannes] Baader stationed himself high in the gallery...at a climactic point in the speech of...the chairman, he hurled a mass of Dada leaflets down to the floor.” He described the scene as “autumn leaves over the heads of the bewildered delegates.” Baader was arrested and later released, but his antics had consequences—Huelsenbeck claimed they were actually in danger. He related how before a lecture, “A young, beautiful girl...shouted: ‘Dada is an impudence! These madmen intend to attack the German culture, which our soldiers are dying to defend!’” Shots were fired, and men from the audience threatened him. More seriously, he claimed that “Hitler clamped down on Dadaists as enemies of German Art,” and he was repeatedly arrested for his relationship with what was seen as a decadent art

⁴⁰ “Dada Coming,” 15.

⁴¹ “Dada Coming,” 15.

form. Eventually, he advised that the “Revolution temporarily put an end to the activities of the secret police—or rather, changed altogether the character of those whom the police were anxious to seize.” Even then, however, he was forced to flee Berlin. The original Dada, Leroux, came to him after becoming a spy and warned him to expect “a campaign of arrests against...Dadaists—and particularly yourself. They suspect you of treason against the state.”⁴²

In France, however, Tzara was holding exhibitions and recitals, finding “many converts, including Louis Aragon and Andre Breton.” According to Huelsenbeck, “The Parisian movement kept itself more free from political implications than that in Berlin, and perhaps for this reason it survived longer.” As Louis Mink, critic, explained in 1971, “the notion that nothing is a work of art unless it is produced by someone whom we could call an artist, however neophyte...is a game between aesthetician and artist...”⁴³ He described that “In Duchamp’s view...he created not a new object but a new thought toward an object.” This was clearly an early attempt to deskill and democratize the arts, the cause John Cage would take up again in the 1950s.

Dada was taken seriously by the art world, and it had an ongoing cultural impact. Joseph Stella described, in terms that would eventually characterize the counterculture, that “Dada means having a good time...But it is a movement that does away with everything that has always been taken seriously. To poke fun at, to break down, to laugh at, that is Dadaism.” Marcel Duchamp, who helped bring Dada to the United States,

⁴² Richard Huelsenbeck, “Today: More Surprising Revelations About the Stunt That Started Dadaism and Other Artistic Isms the Intelligentsia Take Seriously,” *Port Arthur News*, 21 March 1937, 45.

⁴³ Huelsenbeck, “Today,” 45; Mink, “Art Without Artists,” 76-77.

advised the *Canton Daily News* that “the Dadaists say that everything is nothing; nothing is good, nothing is interesting, nothing is important...It is very contradictory. Anything that seems wrong is right for a true Dadaist.” This reflects later descriptions of the impact of mass consumerism on politics. Duchamp was known for his Ready-Mades, infamously having “turned a porcelain urinal upside down, signed it ‘R. Mutt,’ and submitted it...to the Society of Independent Artists” who promptly “rejected it, having its own answer to the questions ‘If not, why not?’” Clearly anything went in Dada far before John Cage ever held a class.⁴⁴

Building on Dada’s concepts, the avant-garde tradition moved forward as Aregon and Breton began Surrealism, creating the form made famous by Salvador Dali. Huelsenbeck advised that they left “Dadaism and published the Surrealistic manifest, which marked the birth of that same Surrealism which today agitates Europe and America.” In 1939, Lillian Vergara of the *Lincoln Nebraska State Journal* described “Various reactions greeted the arrival of the iconoclastic art, but in between the extreme cries of “superb” and “monstrous” the comment most frequently heard was, “It’s enough to drive you mad!” She noted that this was not said seriously. Huelsenbeck noted that Surrealism only became very successful once “that shrewd master of publicity and salesmanship, Salvador Dali, joined the movement.” The *Syracuse Herald* in 1936 said that it was “an immense improvement on its predecessor, Dada, as the chatter of an imaginative child, an amiable drunkard or a mildly and benevolently insane person is

⁴⁴ “Dada Coming,” 15; Louis Mink, “Art Without Artists,” in Ihab Hassan, ed, *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution*, (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971),74.

preferable to shrill spitefulness in a sick, spoiled, ill-bred child.” They called it “absurd,” but still “good-tempered, like an extravagant good dream in the corners of which lurk perhaps just a little sly malignity and corprology; some faint order of decay.” They even suggested that “‘Alice in Wonderland’ has been called Surrealism by orthodox Surrealists. They described “The fur teacup and saucer” as “disarming and likable.”⁴⁵

The increased acceptance given to Dali’s exhibitions in Paris, London, and New York in the late 1920’s established the current ‘rage’ for the ‘art of the subconscious,’ as it is defined by its chief exponents.” However, comments about it causing madness were apparently not far off base, as Vergara noted that “according to the scientists, sadism is the very foundation of Surrealism, noting how its “human forms are distorted and mutilated almost beyond recognition” In short, she felt that “Surrealistic art portrays the subconscious thoughts of man.” In fact, Surrealist principles were used in torture chambers in the Spanish Revolution, prompting Lillian Vergara to write that “the torture of human beings which flourished throughout the ‘civilized’ world during the Middle Ages and which from that time until recently has been more or less confined to savages, now achieves the status of a fine art.”

Vergara seemed, however, to have strong feelings already about impact on mental health of social change generally, including “discordant noises of civilization, the jangled tempos which have accompanied man's progress—even our literature and our music and our art— have all contributed to the mental frazzle which is man's heritage today,”

⁴⁵ Huelsenbeck, “Today,” 45; Vergara, Lillian, “When Modern Art Goes to War It Dips Its Brushes in Nightmare and Stark Madness,” *Lincoln Nebraska State Journal*, 17 July 1939, 5; Huelsenbeck, “Today,” 45; “Surrealism,” *Syracuse Herald*, 17 December 1936, 22.

noting that even “hours of relaxation are filled with maddening eccentricities.” She included the writings of “such erratic authors as Gertrude Stein and James Joyce,” “the harsh cacophony of jazz,” and “the madness of Surrealism and all its distortions. The mental breakdown is almost inevitable.” Hints of the rationalization described by the Frankfurt School appeared often within Surrealism.⁴⁶

A related area of modern art, Cubism similarly received negative reviews, with further objections to the emotional response it worked to create in its public. As a writer for the *Charleston Gazette* related in 1926, Cubism was “forced to bear the brunt of the attack on Modern French Art.” The writer noted that it had “more opponents than any other attempt at freedom of expression. One of these objectors, “a man in the Louvre [protested] violently,” yelling that “All I know is what I like, and I can find no beauty in this jump of maniacs.” Portrait artist Dmitri Vail even brought up God: “I do not think it possible to improve on the various forms of life as created by the Almighty, despite the fact that many well-known artists today feel that they can improve on nature.” It would have been difficult for him to have expressed his opinion any more clearly, as he wrote, “Far be it from my own personal point of view to express the slightest appreciation for some of the modernistic so-called art,” while giving a layman’s version of Cubism and Futurism, which he advised included “a definite time factor into cubism, the fourth dimension of space.” Granted, he was in a position to be threatened, and he added “artists must exert themselves to the utmost to do just in their portrayal of even the most commonplace scenes and events in our daily lives.” Common to these criticisms would

⁴⁶ Huelsenbeck, “Today,” 45; Vergara, “Stark Madness,” 5.

be the denial of categorization as Art, which Cage experienced as his own compositional radicalism approached these levels of divergence.⁴⁷

Cage's insistence on his creative process and lack of traditional concepts was consistent with Cubism. Referred to as "modern Impressionists" in 1926 in the *Charleston Gazette*, the newspaper added that a Cubist "feels that realism adds nothing to the aesthetic value of a work of art," that they are "doing the work of a real poet, of a real creator." This opinion was grounded in a basis of the scientific natural world. "They claim that one really never sees what one thinks one sees. There has been built up to the brain a series of optical illusions," mentioning how in nature "An object is of a certain color because it reflects rays of light of that color." According to the article, Cubists were "ahead of the times," and its artists felt "that most people are not educated up to the appreciation of its beauty yet."⁴⁸ John Cage would later take on the role of educator to ensure that ignorance of concept did not prevent understanding of his work.

That same gentleman in the Louvre showed that this concern had a basis in reality, flatly stating, "I don't know what Cubism is, and I don't want to know." Ignace Jan Paderewski, a famous Polish pianist, responded to an interview question about Cubism in 1913 with this: "Ah cubism I do not understand, cubism in painting—or in music." He described it as an effort to "try to replace art by tricks." He stated very clearly that "Real art means real effort. There are some people who do not like effort."

⁴⁷ "Impressionists Defend Cubism from Attack of Conservative Artists," *The Charleston Gazette*, 4 April 1926, Section two, 1; Dmitri Vail, "Vail Explains, but Fails to Approve, Modern Art Forms," *Corpus Christi Times*, 17 November 1941, 3-b.

⁴⁸ "Impressionists Defend," 1.

He added that he felt it was primarily “protests of strong ideas, rebellion against the accepted order. The ideas are not new.” However, he felt the reactions were: “Now, with our tolerance, people say what they like without fear of punishment.” Vail, however, at least admitted a clear understanding of the concepts. “Cubism, especially in its greatest master, Picasso, is more or less static. It takes from its models, lines and planes which are laid on the canvas, not in a naturalistic order,” but instead with a “degree of distortion which intensifies emotion.” He added that “Cubism as such is not supposed to be regarded as a puzzle to be worked over,” but instead to create “the emotional reaction.” Clearly, he did not find this to be a valid concept, and his feelings echo the music traditionalist’s attitude toward Cage.⁴⁹

The new avant-garde, and John Cage’s philosophies, grew out of these roots, but the return of the avant-garde overall was not always seen as positive. Hayden White in 1971 wrote that “The avant-garde of this century envisions the possibility of [the] world hierarchy...finally dissolved” due to “material scarcity” no longer being “a tragic inevitability.” He added that they rebelled against “the organization of reality into relationships of subordination and domination.” However, he criticized how “the avant-garde art of our time [attacks] civilization,” as he felt it could lead to a totalitarian society. He went so far as to claim that the avant-gardists were “indulging in a luxury that is either insane in its motivation or criminal in its intent.” In situations where this

⁴⁹ “Impressionists Defend,” 1; Ignace Jan Paderewski, quoted in “Love of Poland Rivals Music in Heart of Paderewski,” *The New York Times*, 12 October 1913, 3; Vail, “Vail Explains,” 3-b.

perceived logical end had not occurred, he attributed its failure to Western science which had prevented emotional manipulation of the populace.

This was not a singular instance of the avant-garde being accused of causing totalitarianism; conservative Robert Conquest in the *New York Times* in 1970 referred to “Ninety-nine percent of American art and literature” as “worthless.” He claimed that there were “ten thousand more ‘artists’ and ‘writers’ than there ought to be,” and that “When someone tells me (as someone has) that to move an object within a person’s field of vision [is performing] an artistic act, he is talking nonsense.” He added that it was “in a dialect with which we have been drearily familiar for 60 years.” He associated avant-gardists with the counterculture, calling them “lunatic sects” that had a “good deal in common with such degenerate phenomena as scientology, flying-saucer lore, Reichian psychology and all the fads of hippy culture.” The lack of order in these things clearly threatened Conquest, concerning him that it left the society open to totalitarianism. He actually quoted a member of the Nazi regime: “‘In a higher sense the young are always right,’ as Baldur von Schirach, head of the Hitler Youth, once said.’”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Hayden White, “The Culture of Criticism,” in Ihab Hassan, ed., *Liberations: New Essays on the Humanities in Revolution* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 67-8, 62-63; Robert Conquest, “The American Psychodrama Called ‘Everyone Hates Us,’” *New York Times*, 10 May 1970, 92-93.

CHAPTER 3

BEATLES

Avant-garde and Fab Four

The neo-avant-garde further developed the concepts and values of the earlier avant-garde, and they went on to be adopted by the counterculture. In White's essay on criticism in 1971, he advised that the new "consumers...deny the claim to extraordinary authority in the determination of what may count as legitimate," a demographic comprised of "pop, youth, body, drug, or nonlinear" members. American psychologist Dr. Timothy Leary, in an interview with Geoffrey Giuliano described how "in the 1960s, the ancient methods of virtual, visionary exploration became a global phenomenon because of electronic communication," which "really created a global movement for the first time." This mix of old and new, traditional and hip, provide a window into the progression of avant-garde protest through the vehicle of the counterculture.¹

While going into a full discussion of the musicological influences on pop music would be far beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to narrow down the narrative to a representative source, just like choosing John Cage as the face of the neo-avant-garde. The Beatles seem to be a particularly good choice, noted by biographer, friend of McCartney, and co-owner of the Indica Gallery, Barry Miles as "the first group to make rock 'n' roll an art" and "to examine the whole spectrum of modern music, to see what was happening in other musical forms and incorporate any ideas." Several biographical

¹ White, "Culture of Criticism," 57; Dr. Timothy Leary, Interview with Geoffrey Giuliano, Los Angeles, 1996, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews* (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 225-226.

sources have advised the difference in the experience of stardom that began with them; their sheer following and cultural impact were a new standard against which fame would be measured. This was very evident after John Lennon's tragic death in December of 1980—their impact was expressed keenly by staff members of *Playboy* in their published copy of the final interviews of Lennon. G. Barry Golson in 1981 wrote that “To Sheff, and other people in their twenties, Lennon represented a symbol beyond music or pop mythology,” calling him “the artist who refused to give up, whose music and lyrics and life cut through the post-sixties torpor.”² He spoke of his own feelings, adding:

To me, and to those of us in our thirties and early forties, he was family. He was the brilliant brother who did it all—created great music, achieved unparalleled success and fame, played along the cliff edges of drugs and sex and self-destruction—then talked with compulsive honesty about it, sometimes foolishly, often painfully, but always returning home to share what he learned.³

The Beatles represented the full extent of the counterculture. Referencing the youth demographic, John McCormick wrote in 1969, that “THE BEATLES, God bless their pointed heads, is one group I have never been able to stomach.” He referred to himself as “The Establishment,” and advised that he would thus “give way to the younger set in their likes and dislikes.” As Albert Goldman, English professor and sometime biographer of John Lennon, wrote, they were in the media for drug use: “Once Lennon's faith in acid had been confirmed, [h]e set about proclaiming the new gospel in an inspired composition that would flash like a beacon to the burgeoning counterculture.” They were again in the media when they publically declared the end to that usage, even if it didn't

² Barry Miles, *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now* (New York: Henry Hoalt and Company, 1997), 330; G. Barry Golson, “Foreword,” in G. Barry Golson, ed., *The Playboy Interviews of John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, (New York: Playboy Press, 1981), vi-viii.

³ G. Barry Golson, “Foreword,” vii.

necessarily reflect reality: “The Beatles, represented by Paul McCartney, announced that they were renouncing drugs,” to “offset the wave of bad publicity.” There was huge backlash “when Paul told *Life* that he had experimented with LSD.” In an interview with reporter Larry Kane, who followed the Beatles for their 1964 and 1965 American tours, disk jockey Scott Regen referenced their global attitude as “they started moving toward a different sound, moving toward Eastern spirituality.” Harrison and Lennon began protests of Vietnam; Lennon would consistently come out against the Establishment. Holly Hanson from the *Sunday Daily Herald Suburban Chicago* quoted producer Steve Levine’s summary in 1980: “In 100 years, someone will probably be able to look at the Beatles’ music chronologically and get a good feeling of what people in that age group were thinking.” She described their lyrics as “a historical memoir of the era.” She advised that the Beatles’ greatest sociological achievement, “was their ability to galvanize and give form to an entire generation.” Their ability to represent the counterculture, to be its voice, makes the Beatles a good gauge of interactions with and changes to the counterculture’s music.⁴

The Beatles first influences from the avant-garde came through Brian Epstein and Paul McCartney. Epstein’s music interests were described by Tony Bramwell in 2005 as “fairly universal.” He remembered that he was “keen on Pierre Boulez, a classical piano player who also composed some very avant-garde pieces. Boulez became conductor of

⁴ John McCormick, “McCartney Mystery,” *Oxnard Press Courier*, 28 October 1969, 17; Albert Goldman, *The Lives of John Lennon*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 237, 326; Scott Regen, interview with Larry Kane, in Larry Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005) 232; Steven Levine, quoted in Holly Hanson, “Beatles helped shape new culture for ‘60s teens,” *The Sunday Daily Herald Suburban Chicago*, 14 December 1980, Section 3, 2; Holly Hanson, “Beatles helped shape new culture for ‘60s teens,” *The Sunday Daily Herald Suburban Chicago*, 14 December 1980, Section 3, 2.

the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic.” Boulez, of course, was also the close friend and sometime co-conspirator of John Cage. As McCartney wrote in 1997, even though “John’s ended up as the one that’s the avant-garde,” he had been the first to really get interested “actually quite a few years before he’d [John] ever considered it.” He was often in the company of Barry Miles, who he said would “turn you on to Burroughs and all that. I’d done a little bit of literature at school but I never really did much modern.” When there was finally an opportunity for the Beatles to spend some time off, McCartney noted that he then “finally had time to allow myself to be exposed to some of the stuff that had intrigued me for a long time [such as] artists’ experiences and that kind of culture, and inquiring culture.” These influences had an impact, as he noted, “it was nice for this to leak into the Beatles stuff as it did.” While the historical record has generally credited the cutting edge music influences to Lennon, McCartney pointed out that it was he who “helped start Indica Bookshop and Gallery where John met Yoko.”⁵

McCartney’s exposure to the avant-garde began during the three years he lived in girlfriend Jane Asher’s family home. As described by Albert Goldman, the Ashers were “a lively middle-class family with a fund of general knowledge and a keen interest in the arts.” According to Barry Miles, John Dunbar, friend of Jane’s brother, “was his initial conduit [into] the London avant-garde scene.” As Miles described, McCartney “was introduced to a demi-monde of writers, jazz musicians, and junkies.” It was actually at

⁵ Paul McCartney, “Programme for 1989 World Tour,” reprinted in Barry Miles, *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 232; Paul McCartney, “Interview with Paul McCartney,” Interview by Barry Miles, in *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 221; McCartney, “Programme,” 232.

Miles's place that McCartney first heard *Indeterminacy*, John Cage's 1959 album. In addition to this recording, they attended a performance of "John Cage's leading disciple in Britain [was] composer Cornelius Cardew." Miles noted that in early 1966, "Paul first heard Cage's theories put into practice."⁶ Barry Miles described the experience as eye-opening for McCartney:

A musical happening was already in progress when Paul, Miles and Sue finally found the unmarked basement room at the Royal College of Art...In addition to conventional instruments there were tape recorders, signal-generating equipment, electric tools, drills and electric toys which were allowed to run loose or to vibrate in a controlled environment such as a steel tray...There was no division between performers and audience, all sounds constituted part of the piece being performed, whether they originated from the members of the group or the audience of a dozen or so people sitting on the floor....Paul didn't find the performance musically satisfying, but neither did the participants, who said afterwards that it was not a good evening.⁷

That being said, McCartney recognized that he had experienced something valuable.

After the performance, he told Miles, "You don't have to like something to be influenced by it."⁸

The beginnings of McCartney's own avant-garde work began in experimentation with prepared tapes and tape loops. While living with the Ashers, he purchased used Brenell tape recorders, maintaining an impromptu studio in the attic. Barry Miles pointed out that John Cage and William Burroughs had been using tape montage since the late fifties, and "Paul had access to Burroughs's tapes through Miles and Ian Sommerville, the tape engineer who made most of them." Basing his efforts on their example, in his

⁶ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 228; Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 211.

⁷ Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 237.

⁸ Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 237.

afternoons he worked with diverse compositions such as those of Nat King Cole, Ravi Shanker, and Beethoven. He recalled that this was concurrent with the time he was “known as the cute Beatle, the ballad Beatle or whatever,” while “John was the cynical one, the wise Beatle, the intellectual. In fact, at that time it was wildly in reverse.” Albert Goldman, while clearly overstating, did support this stance in some sense, noting that “While Paul was sucking up culture from the London theater and cinema, as well as the art galleries and concert halls,” Lennon was only interested in “expensive toys and the same boys who had shared his childhood.”⁹

Some sources, however, imply that this was overstated, as evidence suggests there may have been significant collaboration between Lennon and McCartney, even in these early days, in including avant-garde influences. Regarding “Rain” in June 1966, Lennon told an interviewer, “That’s me again, with the first backwards tape on any record anywhere.” He clarified that “there was that record about ‘They’re coming to take me away, haha,’” but he noted that “it’s not the same thing.” Even Barry Miles in McCartney’s biography wrote that “The fragment of a live BBC broadcast of *King Lear* that was included at the end of “I am the Walrus” was based on Cage’s random radio performances.” It was included after McCartney told Lennon about the process. Frederic Seaman, a close friend of Lennon, agreed with this assertion in 1995, expressing that “John knew the Beatles had taken the art of rock in the studio to unprecedented heights [using] 1940s technology,” describing how “it was he who dared go beyond the established boundaries, and it found a market.” He called Lennon “really the great

⁹ Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 218, 331; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 215.

experimenter.” Interestingly, even before personal experience with John Cage, Lennon was including his limited avant-garde conceptual framework in his pieces.¹⁰

McCartney often gave credit directly to Cage and the avant-garde. This included a 24 bar section of June 1967’s “Day in the Life,” as McCartney related to Miles, “I wrote it down like a cooking recipe.” He told the musicians that “There are twenty-four empty bars; on the ninth bar, the orchestra will take off, and it will go from its lowest note to its highest note.” He described how “It was just a period of time, an arbitrary length of bars, which was very Cage thinking. I’m using his name to cover all the sins, but that kind of avant-garde thinking came from the people I had been listening to.” He brought up years later, when discussing his transition to painting, how he’d always had an interest in “random principal.” He brought this into his paintings, referring to their style as “exploring the accident,” hearkening back to the original concepts of the avant-garde.¹¹

For the most part, none of the Beatles created entire songs based on the avant-garde, but there were two instances in which they did. Paul McCartney created the first fully experimental piece. “Carnival of Light was fourteen minutes long, with “no rhythm,” “no melody,” and “Indian war cries, whistling, close-miked gasping, genuine coughing and fragments of studio conversation.” He advised in an interview with Mark

¹⁰ John Lennon, quoted in “Watching Rainbows: Lennon on the Music,” in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 37-39; Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 331; Frederic Seaman, Interview with Geoffrey Giuliano, Lockport, New York, November 1995, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews* (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 210.

¹¹ McCartney, Interview with Miles, 326-7, 331; Paul McCartney, Interview with Wolfgang Suttner, September 1994, December 1995, in *Exposure and Influences in the Paintings of Paul McCartney* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000), 32, 49.

Ellen of the Rocking Vicar website that he was asked “by Barry Miles - you know, who did my book *Many Years From Now* - and he asked me to do it for this event at The Roundhouse called *Carnival Of Light*, so that's how it got its title.” He described the final result as “in the Stockhausen / John Cage bracket...John Cage would be the nearest.” McCartney, for his part, loved it. “It’s the coolest piece of music since sliced bread!” He claimed to like it “because it’s the Beatles free, going off piste.”¹²

McCartney received negative feedback for the piece immediately. Mark Lewisohn related to Geoff Emerick that “‘Carnival of Light’ took up the majority of the 5 January session, and [producer] George Martin said to me, ‘This is ridiculous, we've got to get our teeth into something more constructive.’” Paul McCartney verified this, adding, “It was up for consideration on The Anthology and George vetoed it.” McCartney recalled it was “very avant garde—as George would say ‘avant garde a clue’—and George did not like it ‘cos he doesn’t like avant garde music.” Clearly, however, in order for him to hold that opinion, it meant that the avant-garde was already in their circle. The other fully avant-garde Beatles song was more well-known, but there is some question of whether it should really be counted as a Beatles creation. Often it is credited to Yoko Ono.¹³

¹² Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 308; Paul McCartney, “Interview with Paul McCartney,” Interview by Mark Ellen of the Rocking Vicar website with Paul McCartney, 2002, access provided online at <http://www.beatlesbible.com/songs/carnival-of-light>.

¹³ Mark Lewisohn, quoted in Geoff Emerick. *The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions*, access provided online at <http://www.beatlesbible.com/songs/carnival-of-light/>; McCartney, Interview with Mark Ellen, online; McCartney, Paul, Interview with John Wilson, quoted in Vanessa Thorpe, “Forty years on, McCartney wants the world to hear ‘lost Beatles epic,’” *The Guardian*, (15 November 2008), access provided online at <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/nov/16/paul-mccartney-carnival-of-light>.

Albert Goldman described in his book, that McCartney “was now up to his banjo eyes in the avant-garde.” While popular memory credits the Beatles’ turn to avant-garde to Lennon, according to Goldman, he “was still proclaiming himself an ‘anti-intellectual,’ regarding the new directions in which Paul was leading the band with profound distrust.” Tony Bramwell supports this in his biography, “One would have expected that it would have been John at galleries and events, but it was Paul who was immersing himself in all things weird, wonderful, and new.” Bramwell was party to the specifics of experiments in the Ashers’ attic and added that McCartney was using “some of the electronic gadgetry” to mimic earlier avant-gardists, setting up “a Stockhausen sound of layers of Beatles overlaid on Beethoven.” This began to be noticed outside their inner circle; by 1969, critics wrote that the Beatles had “abandoned trying to be perfect.” Their album, *The Beatles*, was credited with “purposeful little slips at the end and beginning of many of the songs. Some of the songs, such as ‘Wild Honey Pie,’ sound like they were ad libs which they decided to leave on the tape.” This inclusion of purposeful random points clearly reflected a move from commercialized perfection to something subversively accidental.¹⁴

That subversion was also played out in their public image. Due to the influence of producers and managerial staff, the early Beatles often were encouraged to keep their politics as neutral as possible. However, they were already working against the established hierarchy within the boundaries that were set for them to guarantee their mass

¹⁴ Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 218, 220; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 284; Tony Bramwell, *Magical Mystery Tours: My Life with the Beatles* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 178; “Record Review,” *Commerce Journal*, 13 March 1969, 12.

appeal. This was particularly true of John Lennon. Pauline Sutcliffe, sister of the original Beatle Stuart Sutcliffe, recalled of him in 2006, “All the political stuff in the seventies” reflected “the anarchic spirit that would manifest as an adolescent.” She claimed that “he was clearly anti-establishment from the very beginning.” Press officer Tony Barrow concurred with this assessment, describing Lennon’s “anti-war, anti-establishment views” as “part of that pattern originating with the school days of Liverpool.” Reporter Larry Kane witnessed an incident which he felt provided the clearest glimpse of this “anti-authority streak and outright scorn for the rich and powerful.” Manager Brian Epstein tried to negotiate a special deal with wealthy promoter Charles O. Finley which Lennon promptly declined. Even after the third request, Lennon refused on behalf of the band. In this situation, Kane noted that Lennon was “willing to serve as the ‘front man’ for controversy,” describing how “Lennon’s disdain of the establishment had begun in school, continued all his life, and manifested itself in this moment of confrontation with the American millionaire.”¹⁵ This resistance, though subtle, was already beginning to crack open the Beatles image.

The Beatles found ways to resist the hierarchy’s support of ingrained racism, early on, using their media opportunities to support inclusion. In 1964, during an official interview intended for syndication, Larry Kane asked Lennon and McCartney about the show in Jacksonville which rumor suggested was going to be segregated. According to Kane, they both became “visibly angry and defiant. They vowed they would not play to a

¹⁵ Pauline Sutcliffe, Interview with Larry Kane, in Larry Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 107; Tony Barrow, Interview with Larry Kane, in Larry Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005, 117; Larry Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 163-164.

segregated house.” The day before they actually played the show at the Gator Bowl, a photograph was taken of Lennon in the pool with The Exciters, a black female singing group. When “people who thought racial segregation was the real law of the land” complained, Lennon used the opportunity to speak out against racism. Kane also noted that when John Lennon made the controversial comment about the Beatles being “bigger than Jesus Christ” in 1966, the government of South Africa, a bastion of early Beatles support, banned all Beatles songs.” He speculated that “John’s public opposition to apartheid in South Africa no doubt contributed to the government’s decision.”¹⁶

Of course, the disagreement with the Vietnam War would be one of their prime focuses for protest. Lennon told Larry Kane in an interview that “Even during the Beatle days, I tried to go against it and so did George.” It was here that Brian Epstein tried to convince them not to get involved, or in Lennon’s words, he “tried to waffle on us about saying nothing on Vietnam.” However, he and George Harrison determined that they would take the matter to the public on their own terms and decided that “next time, we’re going to say we don’t like that war and we think we should get right out.” As he advised, “it was a pretty radical thing to do, especially for the Fab Four.” As Kane wrote later, “Our wartime debate continued over the years. John was so far ahead of the curve. History will show that his aggressive anti-war theme was launched years before other celebrities.” Kane believed that “his opposition was certainly in place by the 1965 tour.” During one conflict-laden interview, Kane compared fighting “to save the world from Hitler and Japanese colonists” to saving “Southeast Asia from dictatorial communism.”

¹⁶ Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, 228, 143, 116.

Lennon responded heatedly that his metaphor was “rubbish,” asking him, “How can you compare? Really.” Kane added that “Lennon used almost every one of the Beatles’ news conferences on the 1966 tour to lament America’s escalating role in Vietnam,” but claimed that “his rhetoric on the war” was “largely ignored by the media.” He also pointed out that this activism accelerated further as his relationship with Yoko Ono progressed. However, he was very clear that Lennon “was a peace poet before Yoko came along. But she played a major role. They were partners in peace and fit very well into the New York anti-war scene.”¹⁷

Once Yoko Ono became involved, John Lennon truly overtook McCartney as the Beatles’ representative to the avant-garde. In order to understand this development, it is necessary to discuss the major impact of Yoko Ono on the Beatles. To be clear, the Beatles history has not always been terribly kind to her—depending on the source, opinions on her ability and involvement vary wildly. It is necessary to read the source material very critically. That being said, her background is so strongly tied to Cage that it is fair to see her as the strongest connection between the Beatles, John Cage, and the wider avant-garde. Even with differences of opinion, a clear idea of her influence is revealed in the historical record.

Yoko Ono had extensive contact with John Cage. According to one biography, Ono was exposed first to Cage and serial music during her education at Sarah Lawrence. She married pianist Toshi Ichiyanagi, who gave her access to many well-known contemporary musicians. Albert Goldman traced these connections; Ichiyanagi’s

¹⁷ Lennon, *Lennon Revealed*, 109; Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, 115, 113, 118-119, 121.

acquaintance with fellow pianist David Tudor led he and Ono to their first meeting with John Cage. The Ichiyanagis began visiting Cage's seminars in New York at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. While he was Cage's student, Ichiyanagi was given a job as a rehearsal pianist for Merce Cunningham.¹⁸

Based on this exposure, Ono determined she would become an avant-gardist. She began collaborating with La Monte Young, creator of "minimalism," and according to Goldman, became an "impresario." She held multiple avant-garde performances at her apartment "in late 1960-1961. Pronounced 'incomparable' and 'equal to anything ever done in Europe' by John Cage, these shows featured a whole coterie of subsequently famous artists." Ono's biography claimed that these "culture vultures" included Richard Maxfield, a protégé of Cage, Angus McLise from The Velvet Underground, Frank Stella the painter, and architect George Macuinias. As her biographers note, this "led to Yoko's surfacing as frequently as rocks in the stream at correlated activities, and instigating some of her own." These included working with recording and overdubbing of tape.¹⁹

Ono returned to Japan in 1962, but this did not remove her from the avant-garde scene. Depending on the source, either the Ichiyanagis arranged for Tudor and Cage to visit Tokyo, or the duo came to visit Japan themselves. Goldman deviated further and even claimed that they were invited by a third party, Hiroshi Teshigahara. Regardless of which order of events is accurate, all the sources agree that her husband was asked to

¹⁸ Albert Goldman, *The Lives of John Lennon* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 260.

¹⁹ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 260; Alan Clayson, Barb Jungr, and Robb Johnson, *Woman : The Incredible Life of Yoko Ono* (New Malden, GB: Chrome Dreams, 2004), 30,140, Goldman, *John Lennon*, 261; Clayson, Jungr, and Johnson, *Woman*, 30, 141-142.

assist with the piano at these performances. According to *Woman*, Ono participated and co-created the Tokyo Fluxus scene. Tony Bramwell, however, claimed that she was intended to be an interpreter who “inveigled herself into the performances and was photographed lying fully stretched on the piano in high heels and cocktail dress, her long hair dangling, while Cage played.” Albert Goldman advised that “Yoko was the ticket taker, but she found ways to assert herself in performance.” However, he also admitted that they employed “a number of Japanese musicians and Yoko Ono,” so it seems likely that she was included in the performances. Again, the stories differ, but photographs exist of her “above the stage in a chair....and....on her back atop the piano.” These disagreements aside, even own biography, described her impact as somewhat limited. “Her poems, paintings and ‘operas’ were second-billed to recitals by John Cage on, not so much a tour of Japan, as a string of one-nighters.” In fact, they added that “blink-and-you’ll-miss-’em references to Yoko in reviews centered on Cage were disparaging at best.” They even called her “a plagiarist, reliant on gimmicks.”²⁰ After that visit, life in Japan was no longer a good fit for Ono. After spending time under psychiatric treatment, her future second husband Tony Cox visited her in the ward and eventually convinced her to leave Japan with him.

Things would not work out as well in New York as the two may have hoped, even though Tony Cox was no stranger to Cage. To start, Tony Bramwell related that “Tony Cox had a criminal history in America, going back to before he met Yoko. He had mixed

²⁰ Clayson, Jungr, and Johnson, *Woman*, 141-142; Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 245; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 262, 271; Clayson, Jungr, and Johnson, *Woman*, 34.

in John Cage's circles." In fact, according to Bramwell, "he was said to have stolen Cage's car and changed the registration, although no charges were ever filed." When the two returned to New York, they began to try to break into the avant-garde scene. According to Goldman's narrative, they were "singularly unsuccessful." He described the aggressive tactics used to try to gain traction for Ono's art, fighting "an innate difficulty in popularizing [her] Concept Art. By definition, it was intangible." Inspired by Marcel Duchamp's "witty surrealist proposals," his "Directional Art [which] dealt in whimsical conceits," her art did not lend itself to money-making. According to Albert Goldman, she offered "everyone she met a legal-size sheet of paper headed 'ONO'S SALES LIST.'" He also repeated claims of plagiarism and lack of originality, noting that she was "always copying someone's art." To try to move past these monetary failures, at least according to some sources, Tony Cox would try to push the force behind Ono's interaction with the famous Beatles.²¹ Again, Goldman's description was not verified directly, so some of the more controversial of these claims may have been overestimated; that being said, his claims about Concept Art make sense.

Considering this background, it is somewhat understandable that her entry into the world of the Beatles was met with resistance and bad attitude. When Tony Bramwell began his story of Lennon and Ono's 1966 meeting in London, he called Ono an "artist of mass destruction." He went on to say that "she should have come with a warning stuck to her, like a cigarette packet, because gradually, inch by inch, she intruded into our lives." Lennon's first reaction was far less than positive; after catching a clip of her work on the

²¹ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 244; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 262, 277, 278.

BBC, he told Bramwell the next week that she was “a raving nutter.” Albert Goldman weighed in, adding that “Yoko always liked to play her John Cage card.” All the sources agree that she first came to Paul McCartney to request a manuscript for John Cage. There is some disagreement about Barry Miles claim that it was a gift for Cage on his fiftieth birthday; it is certain that she assisted him in document collection for *Notations*, because his book includes a manuscript copy of “The Word.” In response to her request, however, McCartney “suggested—not without a certain malicious humor, according to Miles—that she would fare much better with his mate John, who was very keen on anything avant-garde.” As he knew of John Lennon’s feelings towards the avant-garde, it was clear he did not intend for her to obtain assistance at all.²²

In the end, it was actually Tony Bramwell who was given the task of dealing with Yoko Ono. McCartney had been exposed to Ono’s work at a performance art event at the Royal Academy; after that performance, she started coming over to his house. He told Bramwell, “There’s this woman, a Japanese artist [who] keeps on making demands.” He listed how she had asked for “old song lyrics” and “money to put on an exhibition” He mentioned that “she’s a friend of Miles and John Dunbar,” and claimed that “she met Brian [who] said he’d book her.” He described how they met and added that he did not feel her show was art. However, Bramwell claimed that “London was very experimental at the time and we didn’t want to lag behind.” Thus they booked her at the Saville on an

²² Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 171-172; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 285; Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 272; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 285.

artists' night along with a Fluxus troupe. Due to mediocre response, they determined not to book her again.²³

According to Bramwell, however, Ono was not interested in being shut down. Bramwell attributed it, as he would do with most of her decisions and actions, to the need for money. "She needed to hook a big fish," describing how she had thrown herself into[her]Fluxus-style self-promotion." He added again that "none of it earned any money." This left her and Tony Cox in a precarious situation. It is impossible to verify, but Bramwell detailed how after "out-staying their welcome in the homes of a series of acquaintances. [They] were living hand to mouth in an empty flat they couldn't afford." He claimed this was a repeat situation, which "had ensured she had nowhere to return to in New York." Ono continued trying to gain attention to her unconventional work, interrupting a Soft Machine concert one night by having the lights shut down and using a microphone to tell "everyone to touch the person next to them." She was "kicked off" the stage, but McCartney still described her Happening to Lennon. Ono soon had reason to move her attentions fully to Lennon; Bramwell wrote that with all these stories of McCartney's avant-garde experiences, "the old sense of competition kicked in and [Lennon] started dropping by galleries as well. In this way, he came to bump into Yoko again."²⁴

Tony Bramwell mused later that "if we'd all said, 'John, she's bloody awful...' he would have realized, and maybe Yoko Ono would never have happened. But we all

²³ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 172-173.

²⁴ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 174-178.

covered it up. We all told him she was good.” He reflected that “In retrospect, we are all to blame for Yoko’s artistic rise.” Regardless of that possibility, all sources agree that it would eventually be through sheer persistence that Ono’s work would find its way into the world of the Beatles. Lennon, for his part, was ignoring her as much as he could. He told Bramwell that she was “incredibly pushy,” but finally, through contact with Barry Miles, she convinced John Dunbar and Peter Asher to use her work for the first exhibition of the Indica Bookshop and Gallery. It opened on November 7, 1966; the Indica was, to remind, the sometime project of Paul McCartney.

Despite her claim on the show, Ono did not make any of the artwork—according to Bramwell, she contracted the work to art students from the Royal Academy. To further her efforts with Lennon, again this cannot be confirmed, Bramwell claimed that she told Dunbar that “John Lennon said he might come to the exhibition. Why not ask him to a private preview? He’s a millionaire, he might buy something.” True or not, Bramwell pointed out that Lennon received so few invitations from people that he trusted, that when Dunbar called him, he agreed right away.²⁵ From this visit would spring the massive changes that came from the relationship between Yoko Ono and John Lennon.

According to Lennon, his visit to the Indica was one of several visits to experience avant-garde art shows. As he told Jann Wenner, “I got word that this amazing woman was putting on a show the next week, something about people in bags, in black bags, and it was going to be a bit of a happening and all that.” On the preview night, he

²⁵ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 175, 178, 340-341.

visited and wandered through the gallery, where he found “an apple on sale there for two hundred quid; I thought it was fantastic—I got the humor in her work immediately.” At the time, he advised he was not well informed about avant-garde art, but he was amused to see that it would be “two hundred quid to watch the apple decompose.”²⁶

According to Lennon, he met the artist on the insistence of John Dunbar, who advised her that Lennon was a good patron. Ono handed him a card that “said ‘breathe’ on it, one of her instructions, so I just went [pant].” They first connected over her work “Painting To Hammer A Nail In.” Ono had setup a block to hammer nails into and refused to let him use it prior to the show’s opening. She agreed finally to allow him to do so for five shillings, and he responded “Well, I’ll give you an imaginary five shillings and hammer an imaginary nail in.” At that point, he recalled that they “locked eyes and she got it and I got it and that was it.” From then on, John Lennon was on board with Yoko Ono’s work, and through her, the neo-avant-garde of John Cage.²⁷

²⁶ John Lennon, quoted in Jann S. Wenner “Lennon Remembers,” access provided at <http://www.beatlesbible.com/1966/11/07/john-lennon-meets-yoko-ono>

²⁷ John Lennon, “All We are Saying,” interview with David Sheff, access provided at <http://www.beatlesbible.com/1966/11/07/john-lennon-meets-yoko-ono>.

Ono-Lennons and Politics

The transition from McCartney to Lennon as the face of the avant-garde in the Beatles really began with the inclusion of Yoko Ono. Lennon is credited with the well-known avant-garde Beatles piece, “Revolution 9.” Described by Goldman, it “commenc[ed] with the long fade-out to ‘Revolution 1’ [and] superimposed on the basic track [is] a whole series of tape loops and cassette sounds culled from EMI’s tape library.” On top of this, a “weird-sounding voice” repeatedly says “Number nine!” Despite the best efforts of the other Beatles and George Martin, they failed to convince Lennon not to release the song; it ended up on their album, *The Beatles*, better known as “The White Album.” According to Barry Miles, some of their resistance was because “Revolution 9” was “probably more of a Yoko Ono record than a Beatles track, though it has some similarities with ‘Carnival of Light.’” He felt it was very much based on Cage’s work. This supports his claim that it was influenced by Ono; she spent a great amount of time with the composer. In fact, Miles speculated that the song “would probably have been on a John and Yoko solo album like *Two Virgins* had it been recorded a little later.” Goldman agreed with his opinion, noting that it was “strongly reminiscent of John Cage’s work in the early Fifties.”¹

Descriptions of the piece sound very familiar to the Cage enthusiast. Dennis Sandage of *The Capitol Times* wrote in 1968 that “‘Revolution 9’ begins with the deep voice of a host speaking into a PA system in a night club, ‘number nine...,’ moves

¹ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 375; Brian D. Boyer, “Myth from Pepperland.’ Bizarre Riddles Producing Rumors of Beatle’s Death,” *Charleston Daily Mail*, 22 October 1969, 7; Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 483; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 375.

toward some strange music taped backwards, and somewhere you hear a crowd yelling.” From the beginning of the song, it includes random and ambient sounds in the composition. Reviewers added that the “song employs the difficult technique of audio collage.” Barry Miles, however, wrote that “It is hard to see how the track related to revolution...since it is the type of sound collage that avant-garde poets and composers had been making for the previous twenty years.” He then called into question its professionalism, adding that “It sounds very much like a home tape.” In expected form, Miles ended with a subtle dig at Yoko Ono.²

As descriptions of the song echo those of Cage’s experimental music, so too do the reviews reflect some of the same reactions. Dennis Sandage told readers that “It’s less easy to say whether [the fans will] know it is one of the most devious put-ons in recording history.” In fact, he noted that “If this writer had the mind of a censor, he’d censor this latest Beatles album for corrupting the morals of the culturally naïve.” That being said, critics at least recognized their intent. Sandage softened his condemnation, noting that they “once again one-upped, or perhaps ‘unupped the great American media message, inserting biting commentary on the culture disguised as children’s songs: the key may well lie in Revolution 9.” He advised that the Beatles were clearly “experimenting with subtly new forms of communication—the likes of which may soon make the record album in America the equivalent of the paperback book.” He also clearly approved in some way, as he added, “To protect themselves from those disk

² Dennis Sandage, “The Beatles’ New Album Again ‘Un-Ups’ the Media,” *The Capital Times*, Madison, Wis., 11 December 1968, Green Section, 1; “Record Review,” 12; Miles, *Paul McCartney*, 483.

jockeys who like to play Beatles Music out of context, thus convincing too many listeners that the Beatles ‘aren’t revolutionary,’ the public is invited to hear the unprintable ‘Revolution 9.’” His recognition of the intention behind the piece aligned with the similar new understanding by the mainstream sources of Cage’s underlying ideology.³

“Revolution 9” was just the starting point of Ono’s influence on Lennon. Her exhibition on July 1, 1968 would be the first recognized collaboration between them, and Tony Bramwell advised that Lennon found the entire experience terribly frustrating. He described how Ono “came into Apple and waylaid John, asking him for “the money.” When he did not immediately engage her on the prospect, Bramwell claims that she threatened the “destroy herself.” In response to this emotional blackmail, Lennon agreed to fund her project. Again this is only found in Bramwell’s material, but he stated clearly that Lennon “still simmered with rage” at having his hand forced. Ono, on the other hand, wasted no time in capitalizing on the situation. She sent out a press release in both their names. Whether his story was true or otherwise, Bramwell did the filming for the July 1 exhibition, “You Are Here.” He noted that “the exhibition was billed as John’s but he didn’t contribute a thing, it was all Yoko’s.”⁴ This would really signal, however, the beginning of their collaborative work together.

Ono and Lennon released their first LP, *Two Virgins*, on November 11, 1968 into a commercialized public that was clearly not ready to lose part of Lennon to the avant-garde. It did not help, of course, that many people knew the record had been created

³ Sandage, “Beatles’ New Album,” 1.

⁴ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 236-237, 276.

while Lennon's current wife was away on a trip; she returned to find that her marriage was over and Lennon had a new relationship. Albert Goldman, of course, was particularly harsh in his criticism of their album, stating that it was "as devoid of art and substance as the Beatles' album was overflowing with both, this soiled air filter would hardly have been noticed but for its astounding cover." The cover in question had nude photos of Lennon and Ono. Lennon took credit, but Goldman observed it was a convenient repeat of magazine spreads of Ono and her previous husband Tony Cox. In an interview with David Sheff for *Playboy* shortly before his death, Lennon recalled that "It was insane! People got so *upset* by it—the fact that two people were naked." When advised it had come across as an effort at shock value, he responded that the idea was "ridiculous."⁵

Ridiculous or not, Sir Joseph Lockwood of EMI Records shared the reaction of the public, which in some ways matched anything that the avant-garde had received. According to Albert Goldman, Lockwood asked the two, "What's the purpose of it?" Yoko's response, that it was "art," did not relieve his concerns. Instead, he responded, "Well I should find some better bodies to put on the cover than your two. They're not very attractive. Paul McCartney would look better than you." Lockwood's reaction was actually relatively calm all things considered—the record ended up needing to be sold in a plain brown paper sleeve after being seized in the United States for pornography. Goldman recalled, "public opinion in Great Britain, where the Beatles had always been

⁵ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 375; John Lennon, interview with David Sheff, in G. Barry Golson, ed. *The Playboy Interviews of John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, (New York: Playboy Press, 1981), 176.

adored as four charming innocents” was stunned negativity. “The fans were invited to examine in the raw the simian-looking Yoko and the beat-looking Lennon. The effect was one of shock and revulsion, followed by a universal ‘Yuck!’”⁶

Things progressed, and the two married in 1969; Lennon got more deeply involved with avant-garde art. Gary Tilley, one of his many biographers, noted that “When he married Yoko Ono, John Lennon made a conscious decision to make his life his work of art.” Tilley described this work in avant-garde terms: “improvised, controversial, and heedless of tradition,” describing their “messy encounters with authorities [and] vitriolic attacks from critics and the public.” He did credit them, however, with “the strength of being authentic.” In some ways, this was Lennon going back to his early years in art school, but this time he was fully engaged. In 1970, he and Ono presented “‘BAG ONE’,” Lennon’s “formal entry into the art field.” As described in the *Georgetown Megaphone*, “BAG ONE [was] a series of fourteen lithographs executed by Lennon and depicting scenes, in spontaneous figurative drawings, from the marriage-adventure of the artist and his recent bride, Yoko Ono.” Of course, his Beatles-related popularity with the mass media overrode the actual exhibition—they made sure to include that he “actually began his career as an artist, rather than as musician-composer with THE BEATLES, for which he has received wide recognition.” Ono was given credit for her first book, *GRAPEFRUIT*, but noticeably it was credited to “Mrs. Lennon.” Clearly the media was unwilling to give Ono a leading role in Lennon’s move to the avant-garde.

⁶ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 376-377.

The two moved to New York City in 1971 and began their campaign, as Albert Goldman wrote, “to take over the New York avant-garde,” although he claimed it was a “publicity campaign designed to persuade the public that...’artists like Yoko, not the Beatles, were the true visionaries.” He noted that Lennon found her film *Bottoms* “a hilarious confirmation of ...Yoko as an unrecognized genius.” Ono was clearly prolific during this time; according to her biography, she “ran a course similar to the one once hosted by John Cage at the New School for Social Research.” She continued to share Cage’s ideas as well; at the opening address for an exhibition in 1971, she shared a classic Cagean concept: “You don’t need talent to be an artist.” Additionally, shortly before Lennon’s death, she would note that “Everything that comes out of us is beautiful.” She described how “We’re taught that you have to sing a certain way. But I think everything that comes out of us is beautiful because we’re human.”

Even with the criticism of Ono, their rare public appearances met with success. According to the *Robesonian*, when they held a show at Madison Square Garden in 1972, fans were “packed in concert to see the former Beatle.” Clearly the mass media and commercialized culture that had absorbed the counterculture by this time were still very much on board with Beatlemania. The concert was described as “bedlam” and the “Mood at the Garden was one of love and involvement as the performers donated their services.” The two worked on “Imagine” as a team, with lyrics inspired from Ono’s book. According to Denny Somach, “Yoko had a lot to do with writing that song.” However, when they tried to publish it under Lennon and Ono, the publishers rejected it. They claimed it was a ploy to prevent losing an addition fifth-percent of publishing, and

they flatly refused to put her name on it.⁷ Considering the hype around Lennon's Beatles past and issues with acceptance for Ono, it is equally possible they were trying to screen out Ono's influence on Lennon or prevent any possible impact on record sales by a second party.

Lennon began to use phrases and concepts reminiscent of John Cage as his time with Ono lengthened. In June 1970, he declared that "We are moving towards complete freedom and nonexpectation from audience, musician, or performer. And then, when we've had that for a few hundred years, then we can talk about playing around with patterns, bars and music again." He added that these patterns had been in place for "thousands of years." Lennon and Ono began an audience involvement piece with the "Plastic Ono Band," a group of constantly changing musicians. He described their first advertisement, which included "the page from the telephone book and said 'You are the Plastic Ono Band.'" He advised he had fans writing in to ask if they could be the guitarist. At one point, the two even sent the "machines that played the records" to fill in at a press opening when they were in a car accident.⁸ With Lennon acting outside of his previous pop star role and taking on the controversial avant-garde, it was no surprise that

⁷ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 504, 320; Clayson, Jungr, and Johnson, *Woman*, 50; Yoko Ono, excerpt from the opening address for the exhibition at Everson Museum of Art, 9 October 1971, in Alan Clayson, Barb Jungr, and Robb Johnson, *Woman: The Incredible Life of Yoko Ono*, (New Malden, G.B.: Chrome Dreams, 2004, 31; Yoko Ono, interview with David Sheff, in G. Barry Golson, ed. *The Playboy Interviews of John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, (New York: Playboy Press, 1981), 89; "Lennon, Yoko Present 'One-To-One Concert,'" *The Robesonian*, 10 December 1972, 9; Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, 228; Denny Somach, *Meet the Beatles Again*, quoted in Larry Kane, *Lennon Revealed*, (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 228.

⁸ Gary Tilley, *The Cynical Idealist: A Spiritual Biography of John Lennon*, (Wheaton, Ill: Theosophical Publishing House, 2009), 160; "John Lennon and Yoko Ono to Exhibit," *Georgetown Megaphone*, 6 February 1970, 3; John Lennon, Interview June 1970, quoted in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 235; Golson, *The Playboy Interviews*, 176-177.

the critics and the public would object vociferously and what appeared to be an outright challenge to the social hierarchy of the time.

In an unexpected twist, however, instead of criticizing Lennon or his new musical performances, they directed their backlash at Yoko Ono. In 1973, David Marsh said as much in the *Anderson Herald*. They called her “the most famous oriental entertainer,” performing in the western hemisphere, “half of the most notorious show-biz couple,” and “possibly the most vilified woman since Eve, or at least Eva Braun.” He advised that concert attendees “had probably come as much to gawk as to listen, [now] that she no longer caterwauls, no longer screeches.” Geoffrey Giuliano stated that “The only thing that affected her concerts was her complete, innate inability to sing on key and people not wanting to buy tickets to hear her crucify John’s songs.” He also suggested that “No one ever made any more money off John Lennon than Yoko Ono!” Critics would be equally harsh later; the *Logansport Pharos Tribune* in 1980 stated bluntly, “We wait for six years for a new John Lennon album, and when it arrives, it’s got Yoko Ono all over it.” They went on, adding, “dammit, let’s have pure unadulterated Lennon, and let Yoko Ono put her babblings on her own albums. But, of course, everybody knows Yoko Ono albums sink like the Titanic.” They referenced her gender in condescending and overt ways to undermine her contribution: “seven mostly forgettable Yoko Ono tunes, including one with her having a lusty (simulated?) orgasm.” He described how “Lennon is magnificent,” but added that it was “obvious” Ono “wouldn’t be recording if she wasn’t Mrs. John Lennon.” Bill Gray even said that Lennon “spoiled” his performances when he “brought Yoko. Mrs. Lennon may be the genius that John keeps insisting she is.

Possibly, if he keeps heavily hyping her, someone might believe it.” He added that “Yoko can’t even remain on key.”⁹ This clear rejection of Lennon and Ono’s efforts to overtly rebel against the Establishment does not support the idea that co-optation of the underlying concepts of the counterculture occurred.

While it is possible to look on this as disgruntlement with her avant-garde influence and actual ideas, there are some reviews which spoke highly of her solo work in that role. She was described as being “well known in avant-garde circles in both Japan and the U.S. as a leading proponent of the post-John Cage school of creation in music and movement.” Reviewing *GRAPEFRUIT*, Brenda Ackley from the *Lumberton Robesonian* noted that “the avant-garde Yoko introduces herself through her work, and is very thought-provoking in doing so.” Ono was quoted stating that her ‘works are only to induce music of the mind in people’, and according to the review, “this she does.” Ackley’s descriptions were very positive, noting that “it’s easy to ‘label’ them avant-garde, far-out, even crazy, but in today’s world its art, creativity—although mostly it’s Yoko Ono.”¹⁰

As such, it seems clear that the response to her was most likely just related to John Lennon. Reviewing the evidence suggests that it may have been a mix of her

⁹ David Marsh, “Yoko Ono—Western Hemisphere’s Oriental Superstar,” *Anderson Herald*, 21 November 1973, 7; Geoffrey Giuliano, Interview with Dr. Leila Harvey and Julia Baird, Manchester, 1986, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 188-189; “Records,” *Logansport Pharos Tribune*, 14 December 1980, 28; Bill Gray, “Lennon let his followers down,” *The Detroit News*, 10a, in Jon Weiner, *Gimme Some Truth: The John Lennon FBI Files*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 121.

¹⁰ “Final Experimental Concert Here Set by Miss Yoko Ono,” 1969, reprinted in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 3; Brenda Ackley, “The Book Corner: ‘I’d Like You to Meet Yoko Ono,” *Lumberton Robesonian*, 20 February 1972, 7A.

interaction with the Beatles themselves, Lennon's apparent acceptance of it, and the media and public's unwillingness to give her credit for Lennon's avant-garde work. Paul McCartney recalled in an interview with Barry Miles, "When she referred to the Beatles, she called them 'Beatles': 'Beatles will do this. Beatles will do that.' We said '*The Beatles, love.*' He expressed frustrated that "she even took the personal pronoun off us, you know?" Goldman described how "She made it clear from the start that she was not going to join the other members of the entourage." Instead, "she was going to be in it, as close to center stage as possible." He claimed that "when John lowered his butt onto the narrow perch of a piano stool, Yoko butted in on the same unaccommodating roost." At one point, she had an easel set up next to the music stands" and "had the nerve to offer the band suggestions."¹¹ While Goldman's claims are not always verified, this same frustration was expressed in all the biographies written by the group's inner circle, and it consistently was misogynistic and racist in its terminology and verbiage.

The couple later claimed Ono had been treated unfairly. Lennon in 1980 explained "this idea the Beatles were some kind of thing that shouldn't step outside of its circle, and it was hard for us [he and Ono] to work together." He objected to the concept of "some wondrous magic prince from the rock world dabbling with this strange Oriental woman." That being said, as could be expected, Goldman disagreed entirely with Lennon's assessment of their actions, writing that "The Beatles actually let Yoko get away with murder because they were afraid of provoking John." Ritchie Yorke seconded this opinion, describing in 1984, "That's not to say, however, that John didn't impose her

¹¹ Paul McCartney, Interview with Miles Barry, in Miles Barry, *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, (New York: Henry Hoalt and Company, 1997), 492; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 385-386.

presence on them. He certainly did.” In fact, he supported Ono: “It wasn’t Yoko’s idea to try and snuggle up to the Beatles...John wanted to demonstrate his independence from the Beatles in a very practical way.” Frederic Seaman also agreed, noting that “the Beatles knew they were really finished, musically. There were no real frontiers left to explore. Personally, they were all at each other’s throats.” He felt that “Yoko gave John an excuse to leave the Beatles.” Ono recalled in 1973 that she “felt very guilty because I thought: If John had done this on his own, people would have accepted it. And John thought: if Yoko had...people would have accepted it.” She expressed that “The objection from the underground [was what] disturbed us.” By 1973, however, the vitriol had settled enough for critics to advise that her newest album was “pretty good.”¹² Despite that apparent calm, she still would never be given full credit for her clear influence in bringing Cage and the avant-garde to the Beatles and the counterculture.

As important as the music and art were for the Ono-Lennons, so was maintaining media visibility for their ever-present political causes which also echoed much in John Cage’s writing. As Tony Bramwell put it, “I think what led John into believing that he had a right [to speak about peace] was that people took his opinion seriously in any subject, whether it was jelly babies or the bomb.” Lennon summarized his “ultimate political belief” as, “We all need more love. But I found that being political interfered with my music. I’m still a musician first, not a politician.” He expressed frustration that as the Seventies began and the sixties counterculture moved fully into the mass consumer

¹² Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 6-7; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 386; Ritchie Yorke, Interview with Geoffrey Giuliano, Toronto, 1984, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 216; Seaman, Interview with Geoffrey Giuliano, 211; Marsh, “Oriental Superstar,” 7.

culture, “everybody was starting to say the sixties was a joke, it didn’t mean anything, those love-and-peaceniks were idiots. And I was trying to say: ‘No, just keep doin’ it.’” According to Lennon, he and his wife continued with efforts to “change the apathy of young people,” expressing how it was “infiltrating everywhere.” They perceived that the youth “think there is nothing worthwhile to do and everything is finished.” Their efforts were made “to change their minds.”¹³ As will be seen, their ideology was not unfamiliar to a reader of Cage, but only the most shallow pieces of their political ideology would be retained by the mass consumer culture after the end of the sixties.

From working against Vietnam, advertising for peace, and taking on the culture of authority, the couple was known for using the limelight to draw attention to social concerns, even though the public would not always engage with their actual political ideology. Lennon responded to a reporter questioning this method in December 1969 by stating, “We don’t think people have tried advertising before.” As he noted, “The product sells, and we believe in selling, you know.” As Ray Brock wrote in 1970 for the *Charleston Gazette*, “Lennon and wife Yoko have embarked on a series of diverse stunts, gimmicks and seemingly outlandish ploys. They have gone to bed in public, distributed acorns to world leaders,” and “formed the most improbable pop musical group ever.” He told readers they weren’t, in fact, dealing with “John’s mental breakdown under the mesmerizing influence of his wife.” Instead, they were using “the shock techniques of

¹³ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 341; Lennon, *His Own Words*, 79; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 180; Lennon, *His Own Words*, 98.

Madison Avenue in order to put their message across through the mass media,” shock techniques which could be traced right back to the avant-garde.¹⁴

Their first real effort to advertise for peace was with the Bed-Ins. After leading the press to believe they were going to experience a different part of the honeymoon entirely, the newly married Ono-Lennons spent several days in pajamas with the press. Lennon, in an interview at the Montreal Bed-In, told reporters, “We’re not condemning anything. We’re just saying, how about thinking of something else?” He advised them that “violence begets violence.” At the Amsterdam Bed-In, they directed their concerns to those who were seeking violent revolution, telling the media that the two of them were “aiming towards the youth. We are appealing mainly to people with violent inclinations for change.” They impressed on their audience that any violence was counterproductive: “all the violent revolutions have come to an end, even if they’ve lasted fifty or one hundred years. The few people who have tried to do it our way, unfortunately, have been killed, i.e., Jesus, Gandhi, Kennedy, and Martin Luther King.” Before the Bed-In in the Bahamas, they advised that they felt their actions were just one instance of the kind of protest they were encouraging. “Inspire the kids into protesting in a nonviolent way. We think violence begets violence, and the establishment knows how to fight violence, but they don’t know how to fight candy.”¹⁵ Lennon advised them that it wasn’t even something that required any degree of fame:

¹⁴ John Lennon, Press Conference, Toronto, December 1969, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 84; Ray Brock, “It’s no mental breakdown: Lennons just use ‘Mad Ave’ style,” *Charleston Gazette*, 7 February 1970, 8.

¹⁵ Lennon John, Interview, Bed-In Press Conference, Montreal, 1969, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 72; Interview,

We just want to tell them here's an instance of how to protest by staying in bed. Everyone says, "Well, that's all right for you, staying in bed," but what we did the first time was give up our honeymoon—anybody could do that. If some old woman up in Lancashire did it and announced it to the local press before we'd done it, all the local press would say, "What the hell," and go down to see what this freaky old woman is doing, and that's the best argument against people saying, 'It's all right for you two.'... We're giving people incentive to do something for peace.¹⁶

Outside of the Bed-Ins, they still used their press conference opportunities to share their message of peace, using real-life examples where violent revolution failed. In Toronto in December 1969, Lennon brought up the Nazis. "It was all our responsibility, it wasn't just the Germans. The Germans say, 'Oh, it was all Hitler,' and the world says, 'Oh, it was the Germans,' etc., etc. It was *all* our responsibility." Lennon discussed the failure of revolution of Russia in 1969, stating that "Russians had their revolution and it was [against] oppression, poverty and all that--and look at Russia now." Again, he made the point: "you have a violent revolution, the guns reign, you shoot the others--that's if they don't get you--and you get power." He then expressed bluntly how "the people who hold on to (*sic*) it are the ones who usually carry the gun." Lennon compared the conflict to the car industry: "There is all this talk about the Germans and Japanese—the 'other' is doing it to us."¹⁷

Bed-In Press Conference #2. Amsterdam, 1969, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 51; John Lennon, Interview Pre-Bahamas Bed-In Press Conference, London, 1969, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 99.

¹⁶ Lennon, Pre-Bahamas, 99.

¹⁷ Lennon, Toronto, 1969, 84-94; Lennon, *His Own Words*, 81-82; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 45;.

Lennon expressed shortly before his death, “We ain’t buying this. We’re not going to draw children into a situation to create violence—so you can overthrow *what?*—and replace it with *what?*” He noted that it was “all based on an illusion, that you can create violence and overthrow what is and get communism or get some right-wing or a left-wing lunatic. They’re all lunatics.” He advised that this was his intention in the song “Revolution,” which he advised “was mine. The lyrics stand today. They’re still my feeling about politics.” He wanted to “see the *plan*...Don’t expect me on the barricades unless it is with flowers. I want to know what you’re going to do *after* you’ve knocked it all down.” Ono summarized their stance in their 1980 interview for *Playboy*: “the point is you’re not going to change the world by fighting.”¹⁸ This attitude was, in fact, very much countercultural, working against a social ideology which respected and even fetishized violence.

With all this conversation about peace, it is really no surprise that they also included much discussion of political globalization. As Lennon shared with David Sheff, “I mean, we can *pretend* we’re divided into races and countries and we can carry on pretending until we stop doin’ it. But the reality is that this is one world and it is one people.” Sheff shared in the introduction to the interviews with the Ono-Lennons that this concept was a big focus of their last album together. “John and Yoko had recorded the chorus [of] ‘ONE WORLD, ONE PEOPLE,’ over and over again as a possible ending to [their final] album.” He advised as he watched them record, “John looked up quite pleased with the mix of soulful black choir wailing over Yoko’s eccentric, high-pitch

¹⁸ Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 97, 158; Ono, *Playboy Interviews*, 91.

vocals with their Oriental accent. Lennon said, ‘Here must be the world’s first Japanese gospel song.’¹⁹ Clearly, this sort of positive globalization did not move into the accepted mainstream culture.

Underlying all the above, of course, was their resistance to the concepts and priorities of the culture of authority. In 1969 at the press conference for the moon landing, Ono told the media that she hoped “the Americans don’t start getting aggressive and feel imperialistic about this even and try and colonize the moon, which they usually do. They make a colony of anything they get their hands on.” Lennon in a press interview called out those who followed the Establishment’s authority in 1971, noting that they had “cars and tellies, and they don’t want to think there’s anything more to life.” He expressed concern, however, that “They should realize the blacks and the Irish are being harassed and repressed and that they will be next.” He added, “We’ve got to start all this from where we ourselves are oppressed,” and “constantly put before them the degradation and humiliations to earn what they call a living wage.” As he told Larry Kane in 1969, “I may be a violent person inside but I want peace in the world.” He told him, “You gotta remember: the establishment is just another word for evil.”²⁰

Lennon particularly objected to the tendency to try to find a father-figure in politics, the logical endpoint to life in a culture of control. He told a press conference in 1969, “I just believe that leaders and father figures are the mistakes of all the generations

¹⁹ Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 16; David Sheff, “Introduction,” in *The Playboy Interviews of John Lennon and Yoko Ono*, (New York: Playboy Press, 1981), xii-xiii.

²⁰ John Lennon, Press Conference, London, 1971, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 139-140; Lennon, *Lennon Revealed*, 112, 32.

before us, and that we can't rely on Nixon or on Jesus," calling such reliance "a lack of responsibility that you expect someone else to do it." He added, in disturbingly prophetic terms, "It's, 'Oh, he must help me, and if he doesn't help me, we kill him, or we vote him out.'" He told Sheff in 1980 that "leaders is what we *don't* need. We can have figureheads and, we can have people that we admire," but he stated again that "leaders is what we *don't* need." He related this need to be led to totalitarianism, stating, "The idea of leadership is a false god." He described how "people are expecting [leaders] to do something *for* them." He blamed this tendency to follow for the movement towards totalitarianism, adding that "they are the ones who didn't understand any message that came before," and that "they are the ones that will follow Hitler."²¹

Yet the Ono-Lennons did not stress ending the Establishment with upheaval any more than Cage did; instead they also spoke of changing it naturally. In that same press conference in Toronto, Lennon claimed that they were "aiming at youth," because "they will be the Establishment." Ono added, "The old people will come around too, if all the young are watching...if there's a Hitler in this world...we're hoping this time we can stop him...because all the youth is watching, and it's very difficult for Hitler to operate." To obtain this connection to the young, Lennon said he tried "to be as natural as possible," since "many members of the public are gullible to politicians." He said this was due to their image, the "family, the dog, and a whore on the side, church on Sunday."

²¹ Lennon, Toronto 1969, 93; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 17.

He added that it was “the politicians’ way—youth certainly doesn’t believe it anymore.”²²

Lennon’s rhetoric against the Establishment led to repeated issues with the government of the United States. After his flirtation with the revolutionary politics and a conviction for marijuana, he was monitored by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. This is not surprising considering his frequent denouncement of authority, and consistently the couple found themselves at odds with the Establishment. They released “Imagine” as an “anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalist” song, and it was accepted, as Lennon noted in 1971, because it was “sugar-coated,” by which he meant less overtly revolutionary. However, he advised the same message given straight was too real—‘Working Class Hero’ and ‘God’ were banned from the radio. They also banned “Cold Turkey,” stating that it was promoting heroin. The two dealt with a court case over Ono’s daughter while fighting the FBI’s efforts to deport Lennon for his political ideology. He fought back, releasing into the media commentary about government efforts at control: “We must always remember to thank the CIA and the army for LSD. They brought out LSD to control people.” He never did back down from this ideology.²³

In short, the Ono-Lennons politics in many ways reflected efforts to undermine hierarchy, much in keeping with the goals of avant-garde protest. In 1970, Lennon told reporters that “They knock me for saying ‘Power to the people’ and say no one section should have the power. Rubbish.” He instead noted that “‘The people’ means everyone.

²² Lennon, *Toronto 1969*, 90-91.

²³ Lennon, *His Own Words*, 98; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 181, 184, 93.

I think everyone should own everything equally.” Lennon and Ono expressed concern with society’s tendency to ignore the message, choosing instead, “when bad news comes, [to] shoot the messenger. When good new comes they worship the messenger.” He added that “it’s always some big guy in the sky. And if they’re dead, that’s really good.” He impressed that “I can’t wake you up. *You* can wake you up. *I* can’t cure you. *You* can cure you.” In short, he claimed that the Beatles and the sixties message was “learn to swim. Period. And once you learn to swim, swim.”²⁴

²⁴ John Lennon, Press Conference with John Lennon, London 1970, in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 136-138; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 106, 109-110.

CHAPTER 4

INTERSECTION

Avant-garde and Counterculture

One can trace significant intersecting points between the Beatles and John Cage; in doing so, it is possible to show where the avant-garde intersected and guided the more counterculture. When we see the Beatles deviate from their prescribed mold, it can be viewed as rebellion within the counterculture ideology, but it is just as often rebellion against it. Since it is so difficult to find the dividing line between mass consumerism and the counterculture, alignment with mass media-based ideals was often placed on the Beatles rather than created by them. Yet instead of seeing an expected co-optation of the Beatles into the mainstream at the end of the 1960s, we see a firm break from each other and, especially in Lennon's case, from the commodified counterculture. If they truly were the leaders of the counterculture, it does not make sense that they would leave it when it became most accepted. Instead, they remained tied to the ideals of countercultural revolution which were not accepted into the mainstream culture.

Early on, the stylistic concepts of the counterculture and its driving consumer forces worked to mold the Beatles into a prescribed form. Goldman's views were a very good example of the mass media's insistence on them being the chosen face of the counterculture. Viewing their situation in hindsight, he claimed that "the truth is that the public imposed its fancies on the Beatles far more successfully than they could ever impart any idea to the world." Instead of describing their enormous impact on the public and the music scene, he described the "ironic fate of the pop star. Not so much a

communicator or creator as a trigger or target for mass hysteria.” As this target, the Beatles were definitely in a limelight of success, but Goldman believed that once they found it, they were “seized and controlled by it so completely that [they came] to feel like its slave[s].” This is verified by the historical record: concerns with security, their carefully groomed images, and a need for a semblance of privacy would often restrict them to their hotel rooms. At one point, McCartney even felt pressured to call an end to a drug habit, which for some of the band, never really went away.¹ In their early years, he may have had a point.

According to Goldman, this impacted Lennon the most, and it was Lennon who would receive the worst of his often retaliatory writing style. He described how he felt “Lennon succumbed to the enticements of commercial success. Rather than work to bring the public around to his vision, he adapted himself to the tastes of the mass audience,” deciding to “impersonate a character that was basically his opposite.” Lennon told him, “We sold out, you know. The music was dead before we even went on the theater tour of Britain,” adding “That’s why we never improved as musicians. We killed ourselves to make it.” According to Goldman, Lennon had very distinct and conflicted perspective on his time as a Beatle, “arguing one time that going commercial had given him his ‘freedom’—precisely what it had cost him—and insisting another [that] he never really submitted to the commercial yoke,” pointing out how he would “unbutton his

¹ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 215.

collar and pull his tie askew.” Whereas he would eventually be the one to leave this role most abruptly, for a long time he enforced his own ties to this false image.²

Their image was a key part of their success to a public that was ambivalent about the counterculture—the mass media frenzy that was the Beatles’ reality often made it challenging to retain their own ideology. Lennon described the process of creating their image as the work of Brian Epstein in December 1961, noting that “Brian was trying to clean our image up. He said we’d never get past the door of a good place.” He recalled he asked them if they could “possibly manage to wear proper trousers.” That being said, they were still allowed to individualize, but only within a strict framework. He added that “he didn’t want us suddenly looking square. He let us have our own sense of individuality.” Goldman compared them to Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, stars the Beatles had themselves idolized, describing how the next generation of “charismatic hero” became tied to the expectations of their fans. In their case, however, the fans in question were not what they expected; far from the “sophisticated New York audience,” it was “a lot of little girls from New Jersey with braces on their teeth” with “no idea of style or taste.”³ While they would gain acceptance in the art and intellectual circles, it would not be until this control was broken and they moved into later albums such as *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour*.

The most overt and upsetting outcome of these unbending expectations was part of the comparison that led to Lennon’s eventual death by the hand of a religious fanatic.

² Goldman, *John Lennon*, 143; John Lennon, quoted in Albert Goldman, *The Lives of John Lennon*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 144.

³ John Lennon quoted in Rearch Marchbank, ed., *John Lennon In His Own Words*, (New York: Quick Fox, 1981), 25-26; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 170, 192-193.

At one point, Lennon expressed concern that they seemed to be taking the place of, or at least being comparable to, Jesus and religion. He, of course, intended it as social criticism of the importance of their mass culture image, but the fallout was massive. He described how former fans “started burning our records,” calling that “the real shock, the physical burning.” He was upset that “I’d created another piece of hate in the world” in “something as uncomplicated as people listening to records and dancing and playing.” Even years after the breakup of the Beatles, the perceived ideal of who they were, referred to as “Beatlemania mystique,” would still be described by Stephen Ford in the *Sikeston Daily Standard* as “a national epidemic.” He referred to it as “The malady of a generation unwilling to grow up.”⁴

Lennon recalled of his experience around 1961 that any effort to deviate would result in backlash: “the fans tried to beat me into being a Beatle or an Engelbert Humperdinck, and the critics tried to beat me into being Paul McCartney.” He echoed this thought shortly before he died, noting that fans had still continued “Bring-Back-the-Beatles,” adding that “people want Ted Kennedy to be John Kennedy, and the people who used to be the Beatles to be the Beatles.” Lennon was clear, however. “With the Beatles, the music is the point. Not the Beatles as individuals.”⁵

To try to get out of this prescribed ideal, and to in some way to reconcile his feeling that he had not earned the situation they found themselves in, Lennon often stressed that it was not skill that had given them their place. According to Albert

⁴ Lennon, *His Own Words*, 59; Ford, Stephen. “Requiem for a Beatles hoax.” *Sikeston Daily Standard*. 7 December 1975, 10.

⁵ Lennon, *His Own Words*, 14; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 23, 108.

Goldman, “Lennon believed that anybody could be famous—and not just for fifteen minutes. Though in one humor he might describe himself as a genius, when he got on the opposite tack, he would treat his gifts dismissively.” He often said that that his wife should be famous, since it was a “wholly irrational condition.” He asked David Sheff, “Why not you? Why don’t you start right now and get yourself as famous as the Beatles? It’s quite easy if you want to work twenty-four hours a day and keep smiling and dancing for ten to fifteen years.” He absolutely refused at these times to consider it earned, as he noted “What’s talent? I don’t know. Are you born with it? Do you discover it later on?” As far as the music, he advised that “All music is rehash. There are only a few notes. Just variations on a theme.” When asked by *Playboy* if he listened to his own music, he responded, “Are you kidding? For pleasure I would never listen to them. When I hear them I just think of the session,” particularly “The eight hours of mixing ‘Revolution 9.’”⁶

To this point, Lennon echoed John Cage’s claims against his own musical ability, which had led Cage to decry musical skill years earlier. Lennon told David Sheff in 1980 that “After all this time, I don’t have any idea what...a harmonic is.” He noted that “you can just stick a few images together, thread them together” and “call it poetry.” According to Goldman, “Lennon claimed that by avoiding music lessons, the Beatles preserved the integrity of their imaginations,” but Goldman, in expected form, made the claim that it simply “betray[ed] his characteristic fear of being sucked in the normal

⁶ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 503; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 79; Lennon, *His Own Words*, 45; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 73, 47.

world by absorbing its lessons.” According to McCartney, they used to “call everything a middle eight, even if it had thirty-two bars or sixteen bars,” not understanding “the significance of the word ‘eight.’” In fact, in 1980 Lennon stated that he *could* have continued being a craftsman, but I am not interested in being a craftsman.”⁷

On top of the Beatles’ argument against valid musical skill guidelines and commentary suggesting that they believed their hierarchical standing was false, there is much in the historical record that questions them truly leading the counterculture, particularly in its stylistic underpinnings. Goldman claimed that Lennon recognized early on that Elvis had success as a working-class hero, and this led to him creating certain parts of a proletariat identity while in England, although this does not entirely align with Elvis’s transformation into glamour and glitz. He described how “Aunt Mimi was horrified the first time she heard her carefully reared ward speaking like a dock worker.” When she asked what he was doing, Goldman claimed that Lennon “rubb[ed] his fingers together greedily and lisp[ed] ‘Money! Money!’” When they went to the United States and discovered the different fan base in that country, they “became a junior high rock opera full of jealous tantrums and lonely signs and breakups and makeups.”⁸ Far from creating the identity of the counterculture, the early Beatles seemed to change themselves to follow its preferences.

Some of their most well-known interactions may have been actually scripted ahead of time. While this was not verified, again, by other sources, Goldman claimed

⁷ Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 50, 156; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 74; McCartney, *Paul McCartney*, 177; Lennon, *Playboy Interviews*, 7.

⁸ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 193, 195.

that when Lennon told an audience, which included the Queen of England, that they should shake their jewelry, the “gag was carefully scripted, as were many of the quips the Beatles uttered ‘spontaneously.’” He again quoted Lennon’s Aunt Mimi, who, when someone asked her about Lennon’s image, responded, “Working-class hero, my eye! He was a middle-class snob!” Accordingly, they tried to adapt their act to “conform with their perceived image.” Despite it being completely different than their actual group culture, they still managed to change to an innocent portrayal of youth once they got to the United States. They truly did manage to attune to a younger audience, but this audience was not being led by them in any real way. Goldman wrote of the “famous shot” of “the Beatles having a pillow fight in their bedroom.” He advised this was led by the media, who had “transformed this group of hard-rockers into the very picture of what every little girl most wanted.” He described them as wanting Walt Disney and Saturday morning cartoons while throwing tantrums for their “teddy bears,” the Beatles.⁹ Obviously this reads in a very misogynistic way, but regardless of this claim being further substantiated, it was in keeping with Epstein’s efforts at image control and the counterculture’s known ties to the mass media.

Their beginnings of drug use and Eastern spirituality also were influences that came from outside the group. As noted by Tony Bramwell, “The Beatles didn’t take acid when they were in the studio, but earlier in that year John had managed to take some accidentally. Perhaps influenced by Pink Floyd.” Their meeting with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi was arranged by Paul’s girlfriend and business manager Yanni Alexis

⁹ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 170, 194.

Mardis in an effort to get the Beatles off drugs. “Magic Alex,” claimed “that his brand of magic, Transcendental Meditation, was far more powerful than drugs. On a whim, John, Paul, and George, their entourage of women and Paul’s brother, Mike said they would go.” Even if they did not provide a guideline at all, their fans just added their own—not unlike reactions to earlier avant-garde work. Goldman speculated that, “*Sgt. Pepper* was released into a cultural climate hot and fecund with fantastical ideas and beliefs. The hippies inspired by their yearning to recover the imaginative core of life, sat pondering” the artwork, seeing “precisely what lay uppermost in their minds: the currently fashionable doctrine of death and rebirth.”¹⁰ Again, these ideas simply cannot be traced in the evidence as originating with the Beatles, although the outcome of the influences was new.

Additionally, it is important to address detractors of Yoko Ono’s background with the avant-garde, as much disagreement exists about how important of a source she was to the Beatles’ and Lennon’s avant-gardism. According to Goldman, clearly one of the negative sources, Ono claimed that “she had invented Concept Art, the Happening, Minimalist film, Flower Power, and, as a cofounder, Fluxus, the most way-out art movement since Dada.” While his attitude toward her reflected a backlash against her that tried to deny her autonomy and power both in her art and her relationships, he provided verification of her claim that she was denied credit. Goldman added that it was “by a cabal of homosexual artists,” but it’s very clear that he was a part of the issue as well, with frequent references to her race and gender. He claimed she felt they “resented

¹⁰ Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 199-200, 215; Goldman, *John Lennon*, 304-305.

the fact that the greatest mind among them belonged to an Oriental woman.” In 1973, she told the *Anderson Herald* that in the early 1960s, there was ‘a whole avant-garde vocabulary, and I didn’t fit into that,’ since “using voice wasn’t considered cool.” Tony Bramwell advised that when asked about Ono: “To tell the truth, I don’t really know.” He recalled that some critics “gave her favorable reviews, [and] you’d find yourself wondering if you were an intellectual failure, unable to spot the hidden value.” Poet Diane Wakoski told Goldman that she “resented her calling her very bad and silly writing ‘poetry’” and she stated that she thought she was a “hustler, not artist. This, because she earned her living as a model, seemed to go to bed with all the men around.” Most importantly, she felt that Ono “never seemed to sacrifice much for her ‘art.’” He advised LaMonte Young had been kinder, however; he simply said she was “‘success-oriented’ and worked primarily for ‘recognition.’”¹¹

Much of this tries to undermine the idea that Ono was a great source of avant-garde thought for the Beatles, often by making gender assumptions and downplaying the level of direct cooperation with Lennon. Unfortunately, as far as the historical record goes, it has been painfully successful. As noted earlier, it was often a case of sour grapes; most of the more emotionally charged opinions were never substantiated outside of the interested parties. Taking a further look at her situation, however, this actually implies that she has a more substantial claim to influence. This is important, because of her long-standing training by Cage—in many ways, inclusion of Ono into the Beatles timeline is

¹¹ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 500; Yoko Ono, quoted in David Marsh, “Yoko Ono—Western Hemisphere’s Oriental Superstar.” *Anderson Herald*, 21 November 1973, 7; Bramwell, *Magical Mystery*, 340; Diane Wakoski, quoted in Albert Goldman, *The Lives of John Lennon*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 262; LaMonte Young, quoted in Albert Goldman, *The Lives of John Lennon*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 262.

inclusion of Cage, and the avant-garde, into the counterculture itself. The ideas that the Beatles added into their songs were outside of her field, so anything she did to influence them would have been ground-breaking on both fronts.

First of all, much of the criticism of Ono was for lack of originality, an argument that is historically often found in places where women try to break into areas previously denied them. To the untrained eye, her use of concepts from Cage or other Avant-Gardists would be a big concern. However, in her particular field, particularly when looking at John Cage, it is important to realize that he considered each of his own compositions to be partly his, partly the performers, and partly the audience's. He had spent a lot of time teaching his students to find places where they could use random chance and eccentric situations to gain audience engagement. Note his reaction to having his car stolen—he did not seek to press charges. Settled within the very concept of the neo-avant-garde is that each performance could not possibly be an exact recital of a previous one, and the piece itself was far less important than its impact on the inner workings of the audience. Therefore, there is already a process guaranteeing originality, just by virtue of her work being random or found art. John Cage would likely have approved were he asked.

Oddly enough, the ways in which the media screened out Ono is another avenue to a possible greater avant-garde influence on the Beatles, particularly on John Lennon. Often Ono expressed that she was consistently fighting assumptions about her ability to lead as a woman and to create in a primarily masculine world and to be autonomous in her efforts. She often spoke of having to fight both her identity as a female and an Asian-

American, and once she married a superstar she was further yet from gaining credit for her impact on their cooperative art, politics, and music. The change to the ownership of the song “Imagine” is particularly intriguing—if the record company overtly one time used the concept of “objective” decision-making to eliminate her name due to monetary rights, the question then comes of how much of Ono’s influence we have actually missed due to editing for business or marketing purposes. Or even more likely, this may show a bias in the entire historical record against Ono—once one looks for it, there is a multitude of ways in which mass culture undermined their efforts, from gender implications of Lennon remaining at home with their son to Ono’s efforts at inclusion in Lennon’s recording sessions with the Beatles. Since we only have the records that survived, this leaves questions of just how far history may have deviated away from the truth of her influence. There was definitely gain for certain parties to exclude her—including the media itself, who gained far more traction with Lennon than they ever would with Ono.

After the band’s breakup, Lennon himself did much to undermine the idea that they were actually leading the mass consumer culture. Goldman claimed that “John set to work with a vengeance.” He described how Lennon described the tours as “drug-debauched orgies,” calling The Beatles’ authorized biography “bullshit,” and McCartney “as a scheming, self-aggrandizing show-biz hustler.” He called the fans “an ugly race,” and the hippies “uptight maniacs” who were just “wearing peace symbols.” According to Goldman, he felt that he had accomplished nothing. “Nothing happened except we dressed up. The same bastards are in control. They’re doing exactly the same things, selling arms to South Africa, killing blacks on the street, people [in] poverty.” He was

quoted as saying, “Whatever wind was blowing at the time moved the Beatles too.” He claimed that “the Beatles were in the crow’s nest,” but “we were all in the same damn boat.” Less controversially, Holly Hanson in 1980 interviewed Gerry Levine, a music critic, who put forth this same idea, noting that “society sort of handed the Beatles the leadership in whatever cultural revolution was happening,” claiming that “They made us less ethnocentric, [and their] rebelliousness appealed to teenagers.”¹² This spoke to a reality where a mass media image provoked inspiration, but it does not support the theory that they were influencing the progress and direction of the counterculture. Instead, when Lennon tried to guide it towards more revolutionary efforts, he was rejected or, at the least, undermined by fans who wanted him to remain in known roles.

Politics was the easiest place to verify that there was no clear line showing leadership of the society through a co-opted counterculture. In particular, the Ono-Lennons were, according to Goldman, “radically ambivalent about radicalism.” This is supported by the historical record—when asked by *Newsweek* in 1980, Lennon replied that his earlier politics were “phony, because it was out of guilt. I’d always felt guilty that I made money, so I had to give it away or lose it.” He said he was a “chameleon, I became whoever I was with.” He specifically called out one of the revolutionaries from the time, adding, “When you stop and think, what the hell was I doing fighting the American Government just because Jerry Rubin couldn’t get what he always wanted—a nice cushy job.” They received resistance from the media at the time, who were not

¹² Goldman, *John Lennon*, 473; John Lennon, quoted in “Square Circle: Lennon on the Beatles,” in Geoffrey and Brenda Giuliano, *The Lost Lennon Interviews*, (Holbrook, Mass.: Adams Media Corporation, 1996), 33; Hanson, “Beatles helped shape,” Section 3, 2.

convinced that they really believed in their cause. At the Toronto press conference, a reporter told Lennon that “There are people who know that a protest movement doesn’t involve chauffeured cars and sending back medals you despised in the first place,” and he called Lennon a fake. Lennon responded, “The publicity the Biafran publicity department got was worth about a quarter of a million pounds. If I gave every penny I’ve got, then I’ve got nothing.” He was very upset, claiming that “They don’t care how you do it as long as you get them some attention.”¹³ While it is clear that later they would become truly political, it is important to note that their ideology was countercultural, but it was not the ideology that was retained by the society itself. In actuality, Lennon’s version of peach—anti-authority, natural, and non-hierarchical—was that of Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and even of John Cage, all of whose ideas predated the sixties.

That being said, it is important to note that while the Beatles were being molded by the commodified counterculture, then they were, like mass consumerism itself, more of a marketing team until they pressed further into the roles of revolutionary. Not only were they keen on gaining popularity, but they had a team of managers and producers behind them, and a media that was incredibly engaged in the counterculture because of its proven success in selling products. As such, it makes absolute sense that they would be looking always for new experiences to bring to the table, and that experiences would be brought to them looking for a fast track into popularity. They included so much that was counterculture into their music: drug use, Eastern spirituality, protest against war, fights

¹³ Goldman, *John Lennon*, 374; John Lennon, Interview with Barbara Graystark, *Newsweek*, September 29, 1980, access provided at <http://www.beatlesinterviews.org/db1980.0929.beatles.html>; Lennon, Toronto 1969, 109-110.

for peace, and rebellion against authority. Most of this was discovered through outside channels, although verifiably the counterculture was taking part in the specific ideology with which it had been credit. However, that still leaves a pretty significant vacuum in the current historiography as to the background for the revolutionary counterculture ideas. I believe that John Cage and Beatles give us two primary clues to find the connection, this missing link.

First of all, it was pointed out by Goldman that the Beatles based their image in Britain on Elvis. He noted that there was a continual line of generational 'heroes', such as Frank Sinatra and Elvis, along with music, dancing, and culture specific to that generation. This line still continues in generational ideology today. This shows a tradition of original youth movements that was not specific, nor new, to the sixties, although the size and influence of the counterculture were of particular note. That being said, with the sheer numbers of children born during the postwar Baby Boom, a demographic that is referenced in current day media due the impact that its size is going to have on the Social Security program, the size of the counterculture should surprise no one. Add in the new technology and breakdown of national borders which has been well-documented and which allowed these young people to reach across boundaries of space and culture, and it suddenly makes sense that the counterculture would exist exactly when and how it did.

As to the specific characteristics of the counterculture itself, it seems that historians have really already identified their basis. Multiple times it has been said that they were working out of traditions that came before them while rebelling against

whatever they chose to call it at the time: the Establishment, the hierarchy, or the entrenched authority. It seems likely that these ideas came exactly from where they started, from a long tradition of revolutionary avant-garde thinking that can be traced back to before the turn of the century. It is such a coincidence that so very much of what is associated with the counterculture was experienced by Cage first through his avant-garde roots, that it is almost beyond the scope of believability to claim that these ideas somehow came out on their own in the 1960s. Each successive generation today, at least, seems to think their parents and grandparents have no idea what they're experiencing; with so much we now consider to be postmodern social behavior having started during the twentieth century, it stands to reason that the counterculture also was part of that experience.

This can be broken down one step further by looking at the specific ideals of the political side of counterculture. The avant-garde covered many of them: political protest, disillusionment with militarism, and removal of the focus on so-called serious conclusions. Sixties memory would certainly hold that the movement toward free love was new and not avant-garde. I suspect, however, that this had more to do with the availability of birth control and the early rumblings of the Sexual Revolution more than anything else. Even the Beatles literature suggests more than once that the girls were suddenly more willing once they had "the Pill." Early historians of the sixties did not yet have women's historians on which to fall back. It is completely conceivable that this conclusion may not have been the first to their minds when the counterculture concept

was in its infancy. It is likely that it would have just been included with counterculture ideology.

These concepts, along with a fantastic, motivated marketing scheme and a wealth of already known forms of enjoyable rebellion and escapism, was enough to bring the counterculture to life. The timing works out very well—the original “death” of the avant-garde as their ideas turned inward and away from overt forms of protest allowed it to become palatable to a younger crowd who did not have the same experience as the previous generation with worldwide warfare and economic struggle. The concepts themselves never completely went away—artists like Cage were fully versed in this past history. As pointed out by May, many of the very same things that caused upheaval during the sixties began earlier in the century—race, poverty, moral relativism. As these issues came to the fore, it seems to just make sense that the same forms of rebellion would also rise, newly labeled for a new, larger demographic. The sixties nostalgia tends to want to see the period as a completely free-standing occurrence of rebelliousness and protest, but there is much that ties it to earlier resistance. It is important to recognize that the media gained much from isolating the sixties from its past.

Additional support for the idea that the counterculture’s revolutionary ideas remained on the fringe can be found in the absolutely disturbing resurgence today of the circumstances of the sixties. If things are caught within the repetition described by Attali in his discussion of music and politics, then the same frustrations have the possibility to lead yet again to a similar desire for totalitarianism, in response to the fear of chaos discussed by Adorno. As Lennon would put it, society has a desire for a father figure to

protect the masses from economic woes, immigration, the Other now represented by homosexual individuals, and race. By association, then, we'd expect to see a younger generation led by a set of radical adults who do not wish to follow the establishment through roads which have failed in the past. We'd expect to see young people finding new ways to communicate, driven by new technology, which make it nearly impossible to police the flow of information across national borders. The parallels fit too well—we are absolutely seeing this again—once we look for them. It would seem that John Cage's political criticisms stand today as well as they did in the sixties.

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