

when every record that came in from London seemed more daring and more exciting than the last. You felt you were a living witness at the creation of something joyous and fine. Critic Leslie Fiedler once said, in an introduction to an edition of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, that you have to read those poems as though the year were still 1855, knowing what verse in general was then, realizing with delighted horror that "nothing less than the entire poetic tradition" was at stake, then going on to tell yourself, "Well, let the poetic tradition fry; this fellow is worth everything." That's the way it once was with rock, the way it is no longer, and the way it may never be again. The reasons?

1. *People have grown too used to excellence.* One of the things the British invasion brought us was a quality in song lyrics that had not been heard since Chuck Berry in his prime. They—and he—got away from the "hand-understand," "you-blue-true-do," and "above-love" syndromes. The Beatles, of course, excelled at it, first through Lennon and then through McCartney. At their worst, the new lyrics were combinations of self-conscious, artsy-craftsy proclamations of me-and-my-tortured-soul-in-Forest-Hills and the psychedelic drip. But at their best, they were (and still are) the New Poetry.

2. *The Beatles broke up.* Modern rock depended on the Beatles for artistic ideas, technique, and especially attitude. Their musical life style, which was a fusion of their separate personalities, was so rich and generous that armies of singers and rock bands were able to feed off it, and millions of people around the world could listen to it and get off on it. Among the things they introduced were classical string arrangements (*Yesterday*, *Eleanor Rigby*) and acid rock (*Tomorrow Never Knows* and most of "Sergeant Pepper"). They were the first rock group to use a sitar (*Norwegian Wood*), the first to use a gut-string, classical acoustic guitar (*And I Love Her*), the first to use what were instinctive classical compositional forms (*No Reply*), among the first to use a harmonica (*Love Me Do*) and to write "commissioned" songs for other artists (Rolling Stones, Cilla Black, Billy J. Kramer), the first to use weird minor-chord schemes (*I'll Be Back*), the first to glory in American rock oldies (*Roll Over Beethoven*, *Mr. Moonlight*, *Long Tall Sally*), thereby rejuvenating the careers of undeservedly forgotten American talents like Chuck Berry and the supreme Little Richard (he taught Paul how to whoop), the first to go into country music—courtesy of George and Ringo (*I Don't Want to Spoil the Party*, *Baby's in Black*)—and a

couple dozen other things. The Beatles either created them whole or were the first to remind the American public of what it had missed. As they drew into their seclusion of '69/'70, rock faltered. They were the Bach of rock. When the breakup became official, rock regretted it—while thinking it was strong enough to go on without them. In a way, it is; but in another, very important, way it isn't. Everybody needs a Daddy or a Momma; now we ain't got none.

3. *Too much of the audience is stoned all the damn time.* If you dismiss this reason, you are within your rights. It's a personal thing. Maybe some musicians *do* sound better if you're stoned while you're listening to them. But I have been to the late Fillmore many times, seen too many bad bands and mediocre singers given standing ovations by an audience of stonies who've been doping all day and polishing all night with Boone's Farm apple wine (in the last days of the Fillmore, you checked your brown paper bag at the door and wrote your name on it) to believe that the audience really knows or cares what it's applauding.

4. *There are too many really good musicians around.* (This does not contradict No. 3 above; think about it.) You can't know how brilliant anyone is, or get too excited about him, unless you're able to measure his brilliance against the lack of it in other groups and performers. Bill Haley in 1955 was revolutionary—as long as you could compare him with Gordon Jenkins and Kitty Kallen. Presley was as far away from Don Cornell as any teeny with her secret red underwear could possibly hope to get. The Beatles came in as a blessed, even sacrilegious, relief after Connie Francis and—who was it then, Neil Sedaka? These days we are introduced to a string of musicians who are technically or emotionally proficient—Al Kooper and Leon Russell, say—or writer-singers who are alternatives to Dylan and Baez—Kris Kristofferson and (shudder) Melanie. And there is the "sideman" problem: he who playeth on a record date with an Immortal becometh in his own right (or in the dispensation of *Rolling Stone*) a Star: David Bromberg, Billy Preston, and so on. Not that there is anything wrong with any of these people. The public has decided that it likes them, for one thing, and most of them are very good at what they do, for another. But it all comes down to the same thing in the end: with so many good or proficient singers and musicians around, what is there to get really excited about? What is really dangerous? Who kicks over the lamp? Who is the new Walt Whitman? Nobody.

To get back, then, to the unanswered question in