

ALTERNATE TITLE

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Today was the day the Sixties finally ended. There was no big send-off, no grand ceremony, just five or six people gathered in a lawyer's office in downtown Los Angeles to sign a few legal documents – documents that formally wound up the career of a once-world famous entity known as The Beatles. And thus the Sixties were concluded, because if a word can contain an entire decade of change and, dare it be said, revolution, then that word is “Beatles.”

For the first time since their final performance at Live Aid in 1984, all four Beatles were present in one room at the same time: Davy Jones, Peter Tork, Mickey Dolenz and Mike Nesmith. It is not known if the atmosphere was frosty or convivial: no cameras or recording devices were present by request of the band's manager since 1962, Brian Epstein. But, given the nature of remarks from all sides in recent months – and setting aside Nesmith's somewhat spirited comments from the stage at Live Aid – it seems likely that the meeting was brief and relatively friendly. As Jones told reporters just before the band's surprise 1980 appearance on Saturday Night Live, “We go back a long way.”

But 1967 – the year the current incarnation of the band was formed - was a long time ago, and there have been as many spats as hits in that time. Famously, the split between the “entertainers” – Jones and Dolenz – and the “musicians” – Nesmith and Tork – had initially led to a conflict that was more creative than disruptive, with each member of the group spurred on to create their own vision for the Beatles, but in recent years, worsened perhaps by the treadmill of touring and the spectre of drug use, the Beatles had become little more than a sort of traveling jukebox, churning out oldies no longer so golden to an audience that – like the band themselves – were more concerned about getting back to relieve the babysitter than partying like it was 1969.

There was only a small crowd of reporters gathered outside when the Beatles – or, as we must now call them, the “ex-Beatles” – emerged into the bright afternoon sunshine, but all of them were quick to note the words of the ever-quotable Nesmith as he stepped into a waiting limousine. The tall laconic Texan peered over his aviator shades and told the press: “I blame John Lennon for everything.”

It was a flippant remark, but one full of meaning for Beatles fans. Because it was Lennon who – along with bassist Paul McCartney – had formed the band and brought it to enormous global success in the mid-1960s. But the demands of success, recording fresh material and – most notably – touring had exhausted the original line-up to the point where they could no longer function as a group. Holed up in their mansion homes, the four Beatles took drugs, drank and tried to live normal lives, finding their new hermit-like solitude preferable to the rigors of the road.

At the same time as the band was enjoying its greatest success, a television series appeared on American TV screens. *The Monkees* was a cartoon-like blend of Marx Brothers' style comedy and Beatley music – but done the American way, with songs written not *by* but *for* the band. It was an immediate hit, as week after week, the four loveable young men appeared in every home in the West.

John Lennon enjoyed the show, fascinated by the way it took the Beatles' formula for success – a gang of cheeky scoundrels with distinct personalities, performing catchy songs loved by everyone from six to sixty – and ironed out the snags. There were no drugs here, no political comments, no weird musical experiments – and best of all, this band was tireless, appearing on TV screens every week in full color, as fresh as daisies. When, by chance, the Beatles met the Monkees in late 1967, Lennon voiced these sentiments to Dolenz, saying, "I wish we'd done it your way, then I'd never have to get out of bed." "Let's trade places," Dolenz said, more in jest than anything else. Lennon enjoyed the joke but said, "Nah, they'd never let us on kids' TV." Then, a moment later, inspiration struck. "Wait here," he said, "I'm going to get Brian."

Six months later, what began as a flippant remark had become a reality, and was announced at a press conference at London's Dorchester Hotel: the Beatles and the Monkees would not trade places, exactly, but the Monkees would become the "New Beatles", performing the Beatles' material, releasing albums as the Beatles, and fulfilling the Beatles' touring, movie and other duties. The original Beatles would take a back seat – they would, when needed provide songs for their replacements, but were otherwise free to pursue solo projects or follow Indian religions, write musicals and open furniture shops, according to their heart's desires.

There was some discontent at first – Monkees, and Beatles, records were publicly burned in a few football stadiums – but when the new Beatles album was released in 1967, the doubters were quelled. Alternate Title was half Lennon and McCartney songs, and half tried and tested Brill Building material, and the songs, with the musical backing of the famous Los Angeles "Wrecking Crew", were superbly recorded and performed. With every song performed during the next seasons of *The Monkees* TV show – now renamed *Meet The New Beatles!* - Alternate Title was an instant, guaranteed worldwide hit. (Critics of the album bemoaned its conservatism and lack of experimentation; in answer, we direct the reader to the recently-emerged 'Rich Man' demos by the original Beatles, which are full of squalling sounds, backward tape experiments, sitar drones, drug-fuelled lyrics and over-use of sound effects inspired by Lennon's beloved Goons, a 1950s British radio comedy act).

Soon, the New Beatles were even more popular than the old: so popular, in fact, that the "new" tag was dropped to avoid confusing young fans. In a world where Woodstock, Viet Nam protest, the death of Jim Hendrix and Janis Joplin, *Hair!*, hippiedom and the drug-related arrests of various Rolling Stones suggests that rock music was turning into a form of commercially-sanctioned anarchy, The Beatles offered a different vision of popular music: where craft and care walked hand in hand with melody and optimism. All We Need Is Love, the Beatles sang in the summer of 1968, and they were never more right.

As other bands faded and collapsed The Beatles rode out the 1960s, waving farewell to the Doors, the Stones and other acts who never made it out of the decade. And if their fifth movie, 1972's *Head*, hinted at dissent in the band (Davy Jones famously dismissed it as "hippy nonsense"), then that axe was firmly buried at 1973's Concert For Viet Nam when the band premiered its new single, *Imagine*, and brought President Nixon on stage for the chorus (Nixon's vocal, gruff and tuneless, was thankfully excised from the live version for all releases, as was Nesmith's grunted, "I got three words to say to Richard Nixon, and two of 'em are 'Richard Nixon'").

The 1970s saw the Beatles accused of becoming a band for young marrieds, songs no longer for the new generation but "the Pepsi Generation": yet singles like *My Love* and *Maybe I'm Amazed* (both featuring Dolenz' best vocals to date) showed that they could

both adapt to changing time and beat the competition at their own game. And the band's success was not harmed by two compilation albums – even if the “Red Album” showcasing the band's early years with Lennon and McCartney was nowhere near as successful as its companion “Blue Album”, with material from the new Dolenz, Jones, Nesmith and Tork era: it was almost as if the first incarnation had been Tipp-Exed out of history.

But all good things come to an end and with unchallenged success comes, perhaps, complacency. After spending six months recording 1977's bloated triple album *Goin' Back* – a set of overlong, overblown remakes of 1960s classics – the Beatles were cowed by the bad reviews (“Last Train To Cokesville” sneered the punk-obsessed NME) and took a long break. By the time they returned with 1983's *Skinny Ties 'N All*, music had moved on and so had even the new wave and power pop bands who'd loved the Beatles *and* the Monkees. MTV was the thing and, as Nesmith admitted at the time, “We missed the heck out of that boat.”

Then there was Live Aid. If Wembley Stadium had had a roof, the roar of the crowd would have torn it off. The years slid off the band, and the audience, as the Beatles' ten minute set brought the past back in a mist of nostalgic tears. As Dolenz crooned *The Porpoise Song*, as Tork goofed around during *Bib Bop*, as Nesmith movingly reminded us why we were there, and as Jones led the audience through an emotional *Let It Be*, the world and the Beatles reconnected for the last time.

So we shouldn't be too sad that the Beatles have gone. They left us a fine legacy – 17 albums, six movies and nine seasons of classic TV – but, more than that, they helped to make the world we live in. They brought harmony where there was dissonance, love where there was hate – and melody where there was discord.

Put simply, they were the Beatles.

For Jules Gray