

Llandrindod Wells & District U3A Lecture Meeting November 2018

The Beatles: Overrated or Pioneers? – Kevin Russell

Report by Clive Barrett

Chairman Berwyn Woolnough welcomed everyone especially the new members, and commented on the large attendance because extra chairs were brought into the room. He then gave a number of announcements including a new French Conversation group to be formed early next year. He also appealed to those members interested to assist with the Christmas Tree Festival at Holy Trinity Church, and the cinema group.

Berwyn then introduced the guest speaker Kevin Russell, husband of former U3A treasurer Mary Russell. His talk was illustrated cleverly with the playing of some of their lesser known, but nevertheless influential records was entitled “The Beatles - Overrated or Pioneers?”. He traced their years together as a group between 1962 and 1970, and began by stating that they changed the face of popular music. Kevin maintained that his talk would be a brief history of the group plus how they honed their craft and talent.

The speaker firstly went back to 1956, when John Lennon was part of the Quarrymen, who played skiffle, rock & roll and country music. In 1957 John met Paul McCartney, they started writing songs, and later George Harrison joined them. In March 1960 the Quarrymen became The Beatles, and very soon they played in Hamburg, Germany, Pete Best the drummer left, and in November 1961 Brian Epstein became their manager. On New Year's Day 1962 at their first official session they recorded some songs but were rejected.

A feature of The Beatles' career progression were those superstars who influenced them such as Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Roy Orbison, early Elvis Presley records, the Motown Sound, other songwriters and Ella Fitzgerald. The group's next step was recording records in Abbey Road studios in August 1962, when Ringo Starr replaced Pete Best. Their first recording “Love Me Do”, was followed by the more successful single “Please Please Me” issued in January 1963. The “B” side “Ask Me Why” which Kevin played showed how the group's structures and harmonies had progressed in quality with time. Their success and the cracking of the UK market in 1963, was in a large proportion due to manager Brian Epstein, and their music arranger George Martin. It is interesting to note that “Please Please Me” their first LP spent 36 weeks at Number 1 in the album charts. He spoke about the group's light-hearted somewhat cynical humour, and described 1964 as a good year for the “Fab Four”, with the press summing up their presence as “Beatlemania”. They also conquered the USA, appearing on live TV on the prestigious Ed Sullivan Show --- the largest television audience at the time.

The huge impression they made in America opened the floodgates for success in Britain because on April 4 1964 they almost unbelievably held 12 positions in the Billboard Top 100. Their first film “A Hard Day's Night”---- was really a spoof on the group's life, and also at the time their song writing abilities improved. Kevin was also keen to inform his audience of their large number of various UK, USA and worldwide overseas tours.

Speaker Kevin must be commended on his excellent lecture, and his choice of playing some of their lesser known but very expressive popular songs ---- he said simple songs with strong melodies were their trademark. The year 1965 brought the award of their MBE's, and their second

film “Help”, which was also an L.P.(which I remember purchasing myself). At the time they were trying different arrangements in order to widen their musical boundaries, including a string quartet recommended by George Martin. “ Yesterday” being a good example of their recordings, with George Harrison being into Indian music at the time. Kevin continued to play some records to illustrate his important point that the Beatles possessed the very successful habit of making the arrangements just right for the song. These included “In My Life” and “ We Can Work It Out”, and they were always keen to experiment.

1966 was not a good year, the quotation by John Lennon that the group were more popular than Jesus was taken out of context and sensationalised in USA. They completed their final tour, their LP “Revolver” contained classic songs and Indian music. At the time the group spent many hours in the recording studio, notably to record “Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band”. Then Brian Epstein died, they recorded “Yellow Submarine”(1968) and lastly the White Album “ Let It Be”.

Finally Kevin answered questions and was thanked sincerely for a very professionally delivered talk by Chairman Berwyn.