“Ringo- a lovely performer. George- a mystical unrealized talent. But John and Paul, Saints John and Paul, were, and made, and aureoled and beatified and eternalized the concept that shall always be known, remembered and deeply loved as The Beatles”

- Leonard Bernstein

The Beatles are one of the most popular bands of all time. This is an undisputed fact no matter the location. They were so popular that in America, they had to stop touring due to the screaming fans which caused the band not to be able to hear themselves. Never before was there a group that was so incredibly popular in history. This popularity and other factors led the members of the Beatles to change as individuals and as a group as they matured musically and mentally. Their identity shifted from a group identity to a self-identity. From the Beatles first album, Please Please Me, to their last, Let It Be, the shift in their identity can be seen through their music and the appearances that led to individualism and eventually their downfall.
The Music

“It would not seem quite so likely that the accompanying fever known as Beatlemania will also be successfully exported. On this side of the Atlantic it is dazed stuff.”

-Jack Gould, New York Times television critic

The Beatles music and lyrics changed drastically from their first to last album due to adapting to a changing society, musical maturity, and their increased popularity. The Beatles first began to become popular in the United States in 1964 when they first performed on the Ed Sullivan Show. They played one of their first hit songs, “I Want to Hold Your Hand” among others. This broadcast drew an estimated audience of 73 million viewers, a world record for that time and furthermore, began the British Invasion in music. The lyrics of this song are about a down-to-earth, innocent love for someone that can be seen through the lyrics, “Oh yeah I’ll tell you somethin’ / I think you will understand / When I say that somethin’ / I want to hold your hand” and, “And when I touch you / I feel happy inside.” These lyrics are accompanied by an upbeat, bright feeling from the guitar and the vocal harmonies bringing out the innocence and euphoria of the music. The Beatles identity at this time was a fun-loving innocent group that anyone could enjoy. They were the purest form of the Beatles as a collective and identity as a group.

As the Beatles became more popular their music began to change in 1965 and 1966 with the release of the albums Rubber Soul and Revolver. They moved to a side of ambiguity and lyricism that made the listener have to listen to the lyrics to find the meaning. This was because of many reasons, the main one being the popularity of the Beatles during this time. The music that they would write would be listened to
because of their popularity. They could now write music they were more interested in and passionate about causing them to begin to move away from the innocence of their past. They never left this style of their music behind, but their new style of music began to become more popular. However, this also caused them to start the shift away from their past group style and move towards the Beatles as individuals with their individual songs. An example of this ambiguity and separation can be found in the song, “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown)” on the Rubber Soul album. The lyrics leave the listener wondering what it is about, “I once had a girl / Or should I say she once had me / She showed me her room / Isn’t it good Norwegian wood?” and, “She told me she worked / In the morning and started to laugh / I told her I didn’t / And crawled off to sleep in the bath.” These lyrics are accompanied by the eerie sound of the sitar, an instrument popular in folk music in India. John Lennon, the writer of this song, revealed that it was about an extramarital affair he was having, and he worded it to hide the truth from his wife. This demonstrates the individualism that started to be revealed through the album. It is not a song concerning the collective anymore, it’s a song solely about an event in John Lennon’s life. In this period there are more instances of this ambiguity such as the single, “Day Tripper” which Paul McCartney, the writer, said, “This was getting towards the psychedelic period when we were interested in winking to your friends and comrades in arms... ‘Day Tripper’ was to do with tripping” (Inglis 132). This quote shows the dramatic shift in the Beatles music from wanting to hold someone’s hand, to an affair, to a song about tripping on drugs.

From 1967-1970, the Beatles music shifted further into ambiguity and drugs that caused censorship and recording
problems. One of their most historic albums, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Heart Club Band*, acted as the beginning of this shift. The song, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” is an example of this. The song contained lyrics such as, “Picture yourself on a boat on a river / With tangerine trees and marmalade skies. / Somebody calls to you, you answer quite slowly / A girl with kaleidoscope eyes.” This song sparked controversy because most people thought it was about an LSD trip, which was heightened once someone discovered that each letter in the title spelled out L-S-D. This caused many radio stations to ban this song, the major one being the British Broadcasting Corporation. This song remained banned even after John Lennon, who wrote it, said that the song was inspired from a drawing that his son made in school depicting his classmate Lucy. Although, Lennon and McCartney also admitted to taking LSD during the time they were writing this song and many others. This again shows the sense of individualism that is revealed through their music, but in this case, it is harder to see without the history of the song. This song was not the only record on this album to be banned, the BBC famously banned many of their songs including “A Day in the Life” for its many drug references (Inglis 134).

Censorship was not the only problem that the band faced, but the drugs itself started causing problems. In 1966, the Beatles abandoned touring and became full-time studio musicians. When they started recording *The Beatles (The White Album)*, studio time became excruciatingly long. “The first album, *Please Please Me*, took 10 hours to record...By the recording of *The Beatles*, studio time appeared to be of less concern. Several tracks— ‘Revolution 1’ (40 hours) ‘Revolution 9’ (two days prior to studio recording), ‘Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da’ (42 hours) ... To some extent, time can be accounted for by the
drugs- LSD and cannabis- the group was using in this period” (Inglis 129). This quote shows that the drugs were starting to become a severe problem for the Beatles, and it was starting to affect their performance. Of course, there was no stopping them because they were the Beatles.

This shift in musical and lyrical style shows how the Beatles identity as a group changed with their increased popularity. They were able to make music that they wanted because they could, due to their popularity. People would listen to their music no matter what. The BBC did censor many of their songs, but in the US that was very uncommon. People loved their music even if it was talking about drugs and affairs. This is mainly due to the evolving culture of the United States, especially the hippie movement that swept all the major cities in the US. Drug culture was never as present as it was 1960’s during the height of the Beatles popularity. By their last album, they were not the “I Want To Hold Your Hand” Beatles anymore; they were this psychedelic group of drug loving individuals, with their individual songs.

**Appearance**

“One shake of the bushy fringe of their identical, mop-like haircuts is enough to start a riot in any theater...”

*The New York Times Magazine* December 1963

The Beatles’ appearance went through a transformation that reflected the advancement of their musical style. When the Beatles first appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, they were clean cut, with matching hair, and matching suits, leading to an overall uniform, clean look.

This reflected the music they were playing such as, “I Want To Hold Your Hand.” They were singing innocent songs, so their appearance matched this identity they were trying to portray. This look also shows the group identity within the
Beatles. They were a group of four people who looked completely the same, making music together. This look stayed consistent for their next albums, but slowly became more individualistic but with the same commonness of their hair styles to keep the unity feeling among the band. It was not until the release of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, that they began to break this uniformity among the members.

The clean look from before has started to change, but not completely. They still have similar hairstyles and mustaches here, but the wardrobe has changed. They are now wearing bright, flashy military uniforms, hence “Sgt. Pepper.” The album covers also has many other notable faces, including: Bob Dylan, Edgar Allan Poe, Karl Marx, and, most noticeably, the old Beatlemania Beatles to the left of the singers. This comparison directly shows the continuous change of the Beatles. By putting Karl Marx on their album cover, while the United States was still
involved in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, also shows the change of style of the Beatles. The Ed Sullivan Beatles would not have been able to make a statement like this. Their identity was evolving. It was evolving into separate identities.

In the following Beatles albums, *Magical Mystery Tour*, *The Beatles*, *Yellow Submarine*, *Abbey Road*, and *Let It Be*, the group’s appearance deviated and became completely individualistic. *The Magical Mystery Tour* was the first album to not feature the Beatles themselves, instead it featured them dressed as walruses on the cover. However, this individualistic form of identity can be seen in the music video, “I am the Walrus.”

In the photo to the left, they look almost completely different from earlier group photos, with much longer hair and no uniformity. They completely lost the “clean cut” Beatles look from the *Ed Sullivan Show*. They had become individuals not a group, a clear shift from their last albums and the mindset they had. They were still the Beatles, but they had diverted and become four individuals. The next album, *The Beatles*, does not feature the Beatles entirely, instead it just has the plain white front, hence “The White Album.” *Yellow Submarine* only features the Beatles in an animated form. It is not until *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* that the Beatles return to the album cover. The album cover for *Let It Be* best demonstrates the transition toward complete individuality.

This album cover shows the change of identity for each of the Beatles. Their identity was not “the Beatles” anymore. Their identity was John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George
Harrison, and Ringo Starr. This idea is even shown in the cover, by the separation of each member in the square layout. This was also the first album that the Beatles were not in one picture but instead, four pictures taken at different times. This is fitting, since this is the last released album of the Beatles. By the separation of the Beatles within the squares, it can be inferred that the Beatles were no more. They were their own separate squares, with their own separate lives.

**Self-Identity and Breakup**

“That was last week. The Beatles are no more. But this week I am still jumping, weeping, remembering a good epoch, a golden decade, a fine time, a fine time…”

- Leonard Bernstein

The Beatles went through a change from a group identity of the Beatles, to self-identity and individualism, that inevitably led to their downfall. According to George Martin, the Beatles’ record producer for every original album and often regarded as “the 5th Beatle,” this self-identity started with the return from their trip to India and the recording of *The Beatles* album. “They came back from abroad and they all had a huge collection of songs they wanted to record. And they wanted them done all at the same. By this time, they were four individuals with their individual songs, wanting to record them with the assistance of the other people rather than being a group” (Kozinn 161). According to Kozinn, the
breakup began during the time of the White Album mainly due to varying interests of the members. John Lennon wanted to give up touring and eventually even got tired of recording. Ringo Starr still enjoyed playing with the group, but also was interested in pursuing a career in acting since his success in the Beatles movies. Paul McCartney was interested in the path the Beatles were taking with their music and had difficulty convincing Harrison and Lennon to keep on this path. Meanwhile, George Harrison was still interested in his pursuit of Indian culture and music and wanted to integrate this into his music (Kozinn 162-163).

This separation however started before *The Beatles*; it began after the Magical Mystery Tour with the album of the same name. After the tour was over, they flew to India to study meditation and the Indian culture from Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian guru they met at his lecture. This trip caused much dispute among the band members and caused Ringo to leave only eleven days after arriving and the rest a few weeks later after a dispute with Maharishi. The bands return is when relations became more tense between members. This divide was strengthened when John Lennon began a relationship with Yoko Ono, a singer and musician from Japan. John and Yoko soon became inseparable and Yoko would even come to recording sessions which angered the other members because it interrupted the privacy that they were used to (Kozinn 172-175). This caused strife among the band which led to an increased tension in recording sessions. This even led to Ringo quitting the band because he found it unnecessary to be at the sessions and was further dispirited by their poisonous atmosphere. The other members eventually coaxed him back into joining a few weeks later (Kozinn 177). The Beatles were in a civil war with each other.
This event and the strife among the members started this division and made the next albums *Abbey Roads* and *Let It Be* a long and hard process. During this time, John Lennon was pursuing a career with Yoko Ono and making albums with their band. Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr were also working on their own individual solo albums. In fact, by the time *Let It Be* was released each member had released their own solo album. They were not the Beatles anymore. They could not work well or efficiently together anymore. They were four individuals with their individuals’ ideas trying to make music together. They finally agreed that it was not worth the strife and fighting that was occurring in the sessions. It was John Lennon who finally ended the band after the many legal fights, legal suits, and disputes among the band members. Lennon said, “I started the band, I disbanded it. It’s as simple as that” (Gilmore “Why the Beatles Broke Up”). Lennon had enough of the Beatles and was the one who decided to end it. This was a mutual feeling among the Beatles because they knew that it was over. They knew the Beatles were no more.

It was individualism that caused the Beatles to break up. It was not solely Yoko Ono, who most people blame. The Beatles were fractured before she came into the picture. By the time of *The Beatles*, they were not the Beatles anymore, they were four individuals making music together. Their identity and focus shifted and went down four different paths. The separation was inevitable but necessary. They knew there was no changing from each of their current paths. They tried as long as they could to be the Beatles, but in the end, they were Paul, John, George, and Ringo. In a span of eight years, the Beatles rose to the top and conquered the music industry of the world, cementing themselves in music history forever, but the shift from group to self-identity is what caused their downfall.
Works Cited


*I Am the Walrus.* 1967, upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/22/The_Beatles_magical_mystery_tour.jpg/1280pxThe_Beatles_magical_mystery_tour.jpg

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

Context
1. Throughout the piece, the author tracks the evolution of The Beatles from a band (often noted as “the original boy band”) to four individual artists. What might such evolution suggest about societal pressures and norms? Can you think of any other examples of such evolitional pattern in popular culture?
2. The author ultimately argues that the “individualism” expressed in the latter part of The Beatles’ career is what caused their split. How can this argument be tracked throughout the essay? What thoughts do you have about the development of and evidence used for this essay’s thesis?

Style
1. The author uses epigraphs at the beginning of each section. How do the epigraphs set the tone for what follows?
2. Visual evidence is provided in support of the author’s thesis. Do you find such evidence convincing? Why or why not?