

Beatles scholar
**Gordon
Thompson**
reflects on
the legacy of
The Fab Four



THEN & NOW -- Hippie-era drummer Gordon Thompson and ethnomusicologist, Beatles scholar and Skidmore College Music Chair and Professor Gordon Thompson.

As the curtain was falling on the golden anniversary of Beatlemania's 1964 American debut, the stage was being set for groovy celebrations marking other milestones that kept The Fab Four rocking in the global spotlight until they disbanded in 1970.

"We will be celebrating Beatles 50-year anniversaries for the next six years," predicted ethnomusicologist, Beatles scholar and Skidmore College Music Chair and Professor Gordon Thompson during a 2014 interview. The 1964 movie *A Hard Day's Night* had just been released in a new digitally restored version while *Help!* Was awaiting re-release in 2015. "Of course," noted Thompson, "Apple Corps will continue to release new material, or at least new versions of material. Indeed, they have managed to keep The Beatles alive as a commercial entity, even if the band has long since dissolved."

The professor, who was a 14-year-old Grade 8 public school student in Windsor, Ontario, Canada when The Beatles made their first appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in NYC in February 1964, responded 50 years later to questions posed by author Ann Hauprich. His answers not only shed added light on the past, but why it's important to keep the music that was made famous by George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr half a century ago alive for generations to come.

The following Q & A between author Ann Hauprich and Professor Gordon Thompson transpired during 2014.

In what ways did the arrival of The Beatles in North America in 1964 impact the remainder of that year for you – both in and out of academic settings?

The immediate impact was that I suddenly started listening to a friend who had been trying to persuade me to take up the drums. I almost immediately got my hands on a very old drum kit and practiced, practiced, practiced. By graduation time in June, I was in a band. The school did not have an instrumental music program (although we did a fair amount of what I know now was Kodaly vocal instruction) so I basically learned to play by listening carefully and imitating. Given that both of my parents worked, I would come home from school around 3:15 and practice until around 6:30 p.m. On Saturdays, I practiced from the time they left the house around 8 in the morning until around 5 o'clock in the afternoon when they came home.

What are some of your most vivid recollections of how adults – from your parents to teachers to members of the clergy – responded to the manner in which members of the younger generation were embracing the music and fashions inspired by The Fab Four?

I entered into a long series of arguments with my father about the length of my hair and soon the kinds of clothing I wanted to wear. We didn't have much money, so I didn't have a lot of choices and my dad tried to cut my hair to cut expenses. He only knew one style: short. The big crisis came when a band I was in wanted to rehearse on Sunday afternoons. My dad was set against this as he saw a disconnection between the music I wanted to play and a religious day. We eventually sat down with the pastor (the Reverend Crowe) to try to mediate the dispute. That didn't end well for the band, but it made me even more determined to be a musician.

When did you purchase your FIRST record by The Beatles? Do you still own this record?

Not sure when and what was the first Beatles record I purchased. The first Beatles album I owned was *The Beatles Second Album*, which an aunt gave me for Christmas in 1964 and, yes, I still have that record.

How often did you play your FIRST record by The Beatles? Did you invite friends over to sing and/or dance along to it?

We really didn't have much of a phonograph on which to play records and there was no room in our small house to have many friends over to listen. I did go to a friend's house. He was an only child and had all these amazing things, in particular a room of his own, a stereo phonograph, and a cabinet full of records. We didn't sing along. We listened very intently trying to grasp as many musical details as we could, replaying in the records to confirm what we thought we had heard, and trying to discover more than the ear could hear. Listening was a very, very intense experience.

How many records by The Beatles did you subsequently purchase? Which were your favorites – and why?

In high school, I started to get gigs playing in country bands. I didn't like most of the music, but they paid well, so I started to purchase records to play on some very jerry-rigged equipment. (Imagine a damaged hand-me-down turntable, a radio amplifier, and a couple of cabinetless speakers dangling from the rafters in the unheated attic of my parents' house where I had set up a desk so I could do my school work away from the television.) By that time, there was lots of music to listen to besides The Beatles: Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Traffic, etc. But the two Beatles albums from that era that I particularly remember listening to were *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *The Beatles* (i.e., "The White Album"). In the late seventies, when I was in college and Capitol re-released all of the Beatles albums, I purchased most of the early records. Today, of course, I have everything.

Was there ever a song recorded by The Beatles during the 1960s that you did NOT like?

I was never a big fan of "Yellow Submarine." It just seemed trite. I remember the summer of 1966 when it came out and, having heard the other material on *Revolver*, wondered why they were wasting their time with this drivel. Now, looking back on that record as an ethnomusicologist, I understand better what was going on in the culture (both business wise and socially). I'm still not a fan of the record, but I can appreciate why it was created.

Did you ever get an opportunity to see The Beatles perform live during the 1960s?

I never did. A couple of years ago, I went to see Paul McCartney in Detroit and told to my mother how much I had had to spend to be on the playing field of Comerica Park. I explained that I spent the money because I had never seen the Beatles when I was a teenager. Her response? "You're right. We couldn't afford the tickets." (The tickets were \$4 to be on the floor of Olympia Stadium, \$2 to be in the balcony.)

How important were The Beatles to you during the remainder of your young adult years?

I never played in a band that played anything by The Beatles. This was the Windsor-Detroit area and R&B ruled. The closest to British pop I came was in a band that played music by the Stones, the Who, and the Animals, along with lots of Wilson Pickett, Sam & Dave, and Otis Redding. I was a drummer, but, as I already mentioned, I found I could make more money playing country music in bars than playing R&B at dances. Eventually, that was replaced by gigs playing soft jazz in supper and night clubs. I always had to think about what I could play to earn money – not the style of music; paying for college was more important. Now that I think about it, that probably has something to do with how I approached my book on British pop in the sixties: I'm focused on the kinds of strategies musicians take in order to survive.

Where did you attend college or university following your high school graduation?

I went to the University of Windsor. Doing so meant I could continue playing gigs that would help me pay for my education. I played dinner music on weekends for a while until I got a job at Windsor's *Top Hat Supper Club*. That was a six-nights-per-week gig playing dinner and dance music and sometimes (as the drummer) backing comedians with the "ba-da-bing" rimshots some of them wanted for their punch lines. That was very good money for the time. I had taught myself music theory with the help of friends and was accepted into the University of Windsor's theory and composition program. I probably imagined that I might become a composer, although I think I really wanted to become a songwriter and producer. But in my first year of college, I took a class with ethnomusicologist Nazir Jairazbhoy who taught courses on the music of India. I had no idea what ethnomusicology was (an interdisciplinary and social-science heavy approach to studying music), but I was hooked on the music. This may have had something to do with George Harrison, but I was soon past that impetus. I became fascinated with the incredible diversity and richness of human music making. I finished my degree in music theory and composition, but I wrote a fairly sophisticated paper for Nazir (the first professor who let me call him by his given name) on a type of musical cadence found in Indian classical music. That got me into graduate school.

The Beatles remain important to you during those post-secondary years or did you find yourself drawn to other types of music?

As I indicated above, I became very interested in Indian classical music, if not lots of other kinds of music (e.g., Tibet, Iran, and Indonesia). My musical life exploded. I was into fusion jazz (Mahavishnu Orchestra and Billy Cobham), music of the avant garde (John Cage and George Crumb), atonal orchestral and choral music (Krzysztof Penderecki and György Ligeti), and of course the musics of India, classical, popular and folk. But I was also becoming interested in why academics weren't studying popular music. In ethnomusicology, I saw scholars studying everything from melodic symmetry in North Indian rāgas to the relationship between drumming and melody in the music of the Blackfoot. All music was open to study. If we studied all of that music because it told us something important about these peoples, why weren't music schools studying some of the most popular music in the Western world? Why was that off limits?

What was your reaction when you learned The Beatles has decided to go their separate ways?

I was disappointed, but watching the film "Let It Be" a couple of times reminded me that all bands come and go, evolve and evaporate, and sometimes fight. Anyone who has spent time in a long-term musical ensemble knows that personalities can take different routes. We grow as individuals and pursue new musical ideas. It's nature. It's a bit like when a child's parents divorce: they wonder what they could have done to prevent this event, they hope that the parents will reconcile, they want the world they imagined they had would return. But it won't and they grow and become stronger.

Did you continue to follow their separate careers?

I of course followed them in their separate careers. I think I actually gained a deeper appreciation of The Beatles after they broke up by hearing what each of them did as individuals. By that time, I was playing gigs too often to be able to attend concerts. Notably, I missed John and Yoko's Plastic Ono Band appearance in Toronto in 1969. I had gone to the first Toronto Pop Festival earlier in the summer of 1969 and was back in school and playing gigs in September when he made his surprise appearance.

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing when news of John's murder was broadcast in December 1980? How did his death impact you?

Let me start with the Kennedy assassination on November 22, 1963. I'm Canadian, eh. But I do remember that afternoon, coming in from recess to have the television set up in the classroom. We watched the news reports, Lee Harvey Oswald murdered on live television, and then the funeral on Monday. It was very sobering. Canadians have a complicated relationship with Americans. In Windsor, the auto industry linked us with Detroit, as had prohibition in the 1920s (albeit in a different way). Most of us had family on both sides of the border. We are different and the same. The very fact that we have the Queen on our dollar says something to that effect. But the assassination was haunting. How could this happen? What had changed in the world that would allow this to happen? When Lennon was assassinated, I was living in Los Angeles and was hosting a friend from Papua New Guinea. We had been out to dinner on his last night in the US and turned on the television when we got home. This was shocking and sad, and somewhere on the same plain as Kennedy's assassination, without the strategic national implications. It marked the end of a productive life that still had considerable potential. He and I went out and bought *Playboy* magazines (not something we normally did) to read Lennon's last interview.

What about when George passed away?

Harrison died the same autumn as the 9/11 attacks. That was sobering and was the semester when my Beatles seminar asked if they could put on a concert. We found an unofficial date on the calendar (a day when the college had commanded that there be no events) and, without any advertising, played a bunch of Beatles tunes. That concert has happened every year since then and is now the largest event on campus each year. Beatlemore Skidmania

(a slightly scrambled version of “Skidmore Beatlemania” to avoid potential lawsuits) now sells out the Helen Filene-Ladd Concert Hall of the Zankel Music Center three times the weekend before Thanksgiving and raises money for local charities and for student financial aid. So, in a way, Harrison’s passing helped to produce something good. The concert raised spirits and helped bring the community together. Just this week, we received an award from the president of the college for “embracing the educational mission and progressive spirit” of the college.

Did it ever occur to you when only Paul and Ringo were left that THE BEATLES as an entity would never die?

The Beatles are gone. The unique chemistry to which each of them contributed and in which each of them collaborated had already begun to disappear in 1969. They had become true individuals pursuing their own musical visions. Sometimes, they would draw on each other to recreate something of that magic; but musical magic is ephemeral, materializing in the presence of unique constellations of individuals at fleeting moments in time and space. What perhaps was remarkable about The Beatles was that they managed to create that moment repeatedly for around seven years (1963-1969). That we continue to cherish their music and the times in which we lived says as much about who we are as it does about who they were.

Have you ever wished that the sons of John, Paul, George and Ringo might record music and tour together?

Never had that wish. Why would we want to put that burden on them? It would be a good story, but good stories don’t necessarily make good music. The Beatles came from a particular and unique cultural milieu. Liverpool in the forties, fifties, and early sixties was a challenging place, devastated by German bombing and then industrial decline. It was multicultural and world-aware, without being haughty. How could it be? The only thing Britons recognized Liverpool for was comedians and football. The children of Lennon, Harrison, McCartney, and Starr have a different world to navigate.

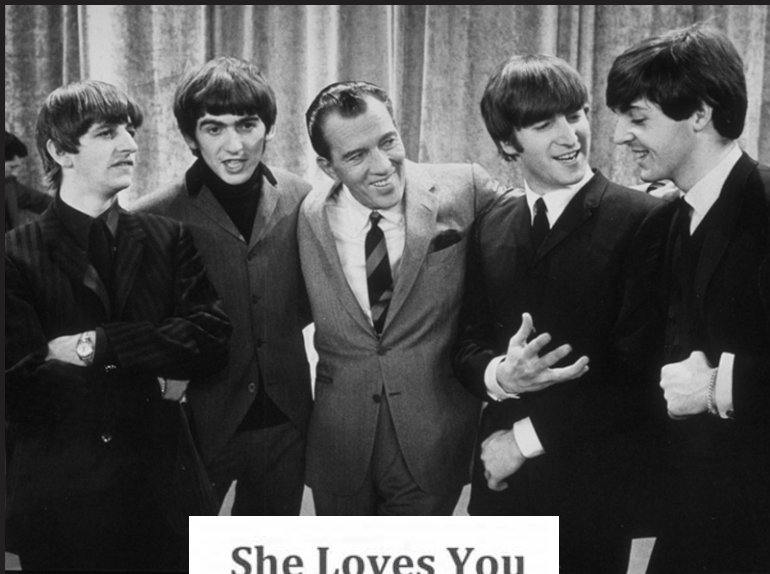
When, how and why did you decide to become a Beatles scholar?

Clearly an accident. When I arrived at Skidmore College, I had finished a dissertation on the relationship between patron values and musical style in Gujarati-speaking Western India. I was working in the fairly arcane area of the melodic formulae associated with Hindu devotional singing in western India. But I had done a master’s thesis on the history of the song “Georgia on My Mind,” so I had interest in studying popular music: it just wasn’t widely acceptable as an academic area of study yet. (Actually, for many in academia, it still isn’t.)

Students knew that I was interested in popular music and they started bringing me recordings to hear and to discuss. Somehow, this took the route of talking about the Beatles. In 1995, Skidmore needed a director for their London program and I was asked if I would consider leading it. The suggestion was that I would teach a course on London as a center for international exchange. After drafting up a course outline, I realized that I had no passion for the subject. I did, however, think that a course on British popular music in the sixties would attract students.

Regents College in London was good enough to entertain the idea and, in the spring of 1996, I dedicated myself to collecting recordings and books, staying a week ahead of the class. I realized in the process that there was a paucity of good books on the general subject and, so, I began writing and researching the era.

If there’s one subject within that area that does have lots of publications, it’s the Beatles. I was soon thinking about the volumes of study on the Beatles and instituted a seminar at Skidmore that compared how different authors discussed them. Along the way, after hours of discussing the band and bringing into the seminar scholars who had written on the Beatles, and after interviewing musicians and professionals who had been active in that environment, I wrote a book on the music and recording industries in London in the 1960s. The result was *Please Please Me: Sixties British Pop, Inside Out* (Oxford). Of course, you cannot write that book without talking about the Beatles. Moreover, fans want to know about the Beatles, so I was asked to write more about the Beatles. As John Lennon commented, history is what happens while you’re making other plans and, while I wasn’t really paying attention, people started calling me a Beatles expert.



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**NY LIVING LEGACY –
THE BEATLES IN NEW YORK**

"She Loves You – The Beatles
and New York"
February 6-13

A series of events throughout the Capital Region that will explore the impact of the British Invasion on New York, led by The Beatles in February 1964, their historic concert at Shea Stadium, John Lennon's NYC connection and discuss how their music continues to be an inspiration to composers and performing artists today.

FOR A COMPLETE SCHEDULE
VISIT: <http://www.theegg.org/beatles>

**A Valentine's Day Concert of
Beatles Love Songs**
Friday, February 14, 7:30 PM

Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' arrival in New York, this concert will feature The Nutopians, the guitar trio of Rick Badrosian, Tom Raider & Brad Jarvis, violinist/vocalist Sara Milonovich with guitarist Scott Petito as well as pianist Cole Broderick.



The Fab Faux
Saturday, February 15, 7:30 PM

The Fab Faux – accompanied by the Crème Tangerine Strings and Hoghead Horns – celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the arrival of The Beatles in New York, recreating the music on their classic studio albums – from unplugged acoustic to the most intricately produced arrangements.

When and how did the idea of the 50th anniversary series in which you were most recently involved with Egg Performing Arts Executive Director Peter Lesser come to be?

Peter has been to our Beatlemania Skidmania shows and, when members of the original Quarrymen (John Lennon's first band) came through Albany to play after the premier of the film *Nowhere Boy* (about Lennon before The Beatles), he asked me if I would do the Q&A with these musicians. Apparently, that went well. With the 50th anniversary on the horizon, Peter began putting together a series of events to celebrate the event, including a show by the Fab Faux (a great band that does great performances of Beatles songs and recordings) and me. My lectures had the intention of helping people understand the cultural contexts (the technology, the demographics, the politics, etc.) of the arrival and success of The Beatles.

What was the most rewarding part of that experience for you?

Perhaps the most exciting lecture was on the anniversary of The Beatles debut on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It was an afternoon lecture at the Half Moon Public Library and a couple of hundred people came out to hear my lecture; but they also came to celebrate that important date and their memories. I tried to contextualize the event and help them understand why it had been important to them. They brought not only their memories, but also photos and other memorabilia. (One woman brought photos of the family television set from 1964.) It was as much a cultural event as had been The Beatles playing that cold February night in 1964.

The most challenging?

The most challenging was giving a lecture every day for at least a week and a half in a different location every time, while at the same time teaching classes and serving as chair of my department, not to mention being the editor for a couple of different publications. February 2-14 went by very quickly.

Those wishing to learn more about Gordon Thompson should visit www.skidmore.edu.