

It was 20 years ago today Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play

By Kristen Tonole
Of The Print

The date is Feb. 7, 1964. The place is New York's Kennedy International Airport, and the scene is 10,000 screaming teen-agers running around hysterically.

Who (or what) could be causing this sensation? No, it isn't Michael Jackson arriving for a visit to the Big Apple (He's probably just getting ready to start school like all the other 5-year-olds in Gary, Indiana).

So what is this strange phenomenon that has brought 10,000 people together to scream, cry, faint, and scream some more? Naturally, it is the first arrival to the United States of the Beatles.

The Beatles weren't expecting anything close to the amount of fanfare they received. They were expecting to come to America, buy some of the records of their favorite idols (Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Buddy Holly) and perform their three scheduled Ed Sullivan shows with the hopes that at least a few people would watch (It turned out that those few people totalled 73 million viewers).

As their plane circled Kennedy International and the mob came into view, the Beatles assumed that some important person, perhaps even the president, was also landing there. As they disembarked from their plane, however, they soon realized that the screaming girls and the dozens of media crews were there to greet them.

Everywhere they looked, the Beatles could see girls screaming out their names, singing chants to them and holding up signs proclaiming their love for them and begging them to stay in America. During an impromptu press conference, they immediately won

their way into the hearts of the press with their quick wit, charm and good humor. Beatlemania was sweeping the nation and it wouldn't be long before Paul McCartney, John Lennon, Ringo Starr and George Harrison would become household names.

The mob scene at the airport was only one of many which the Beatles would encounter before their touring days ended. For the next two years they would be subject to grueling tours, long hours in the studio and hysterical girls all wanting to be near, touch, or even just see a Beatle.

But their efforts were not without rewards. These four young lads from the old English seaport of Liverpool had become millionaires almost overnight. Besides the obvious millions they took in from their records and tours, the Beatles themselves became a billion-dollar enterprise. With the sale of such popular memorabilia as Beatle wigs, Beatle T-shirts, Beatle lunch boxes and even Beatle-Nut Ice Cream, the Beatles reaped in thousands of dollars each year. Ringo said it best when he said "anytime you spell beetle with an 'A' we make some more money."

By the summer of 1966, however, the Beatles were growing tired of touring. They virtually were kept prisoners in their hotel rooms and they were getting less and less time to do what they loved the most: make records. To make matters worse, a London newspaper misquoted Lennon as saying the Beatles were more popular than Christ. Though he apologized and said he was just making a comment on the decline in religion, the God-fearing Christians in the Southern states were angered by the remark. They showed their anger by holding a number of huge bonfires destroying numerous Beatle records and memorabilia and protesting the Beatles' upcoming U.S. tour.

The threats and tensions coming from the South, mixed with the general weariness of endless concerts and public appearances, had taken their toll on the group. It was for these reasons that in 1966 the group decided to stop touring.

With touring over, the Beatles had more time to spend as individuals. While Lennon and McCartney worked on developing their talents as songwriters, George pursued his interest in Eastern religion by attending a



seminar on Indian Mysticism under the Guru Mahareshi Mahesh Yogi. Ringo chose to spend time at home with his wife and children.

It wasn't long, however, before the demands of their record label forced them to have their "vacations" come to a premature halt. The Beatles had not released any new material since the August 1966 album, "Revolver." Consequently it was time to satisfy the hungry record buyers with some new sounds. Not having the time to finish the album they had started work on in November, the Beatles chose to temporarily satisfy their fans by releasing a single with the promise of an album to follow soon. As a result, the two-sided hit "Strawberry Fields Forever"/"Penny Lane" was released in February 1967.

Along with this single came something new. Since the Beatles were no longer visible to the public by way of concerts, producer George Martin came up with the idea of filming the Beatles singing their new songs. (And you thought rock videos were a thing of the '80's). What Beatle fans saw was not the four happy-go-lucky mop tops that sang "I Want To Hold Your Hand," but they saw four men who were sporting moustaches and, yes, their hair was even longer. It did not discourage the fans, though, and as usual, record sales soared landing both songs on the number-one position. But the Beatles had no time to celebrate their latest success, for they were back hard at work in the studio perfecting the sounds and putting the finishing touches on the album that was about to catapult an entire generation into the Psychedelic Era.

Next week: The later years.



Photos courtesy of "John Lennon & The Beatles," published by Harris Publications, Inc.