Beatles: How they destroyed Rock 'N' Roll

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A few years after they appeared on "The Ed Sullivan Show," according to guitarist and writer Elijah Wald, the Beatles "lost the little sisters of their first fans, who had loved them as cuddly mop-tops."

With songs like "Yesterday," "Eleanor Rigby," and "Strawberry Fields," the Fab Four traded the stage for the studio, left dancing music behind and separated rock 'n' roll not only from its associations with juvenile delinquency, but "more enduringly," from black Americans. The rock-soul split, Wald concludes, has been bad for both.

Despite these heretical hypotheses, however, the title of Wald's new book represents a bit of a bait and switch. It isn't really about the Beatles, who make their first appearance in Chapter Seventeen. Nor does it have all that much to say about rock 'n' roll.

The book, however, is a sophisticated, scintillating and subversive survey of popular music in the United States in the first half of the 20th century. As they distinguish the music they like from an "insipid mainstream," Wald points out, critics and historians tend to lambast or leave out "mere popularizers." By eschewing aesthetic judgments, he provides a more complete account of change, continuity and conformity in American music.

"How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll" asks tough questions. Why, Wald wonders, do critics label the attempt to make highbrow art out of jazz in the 1920s (which put white artists front and center) "an embarrassing wrong turn" — and greet efforts to do the same for rock 'n' roll in the 1960s (again "privileged" white performers) as "a step forward"?

Why did they imply in the '20s that jazz was the "raw material for high art, bearing the same relationship to the ‘Rhapsody in Blue’ that an African mask bore to Picasso's Demoiselles d'Avignon," and embrace the folk style of rock 'n' roll for its "authenticity," not as "an invitation to transform it into something more elevated"?

To answer these questions, Wald supplies fresh interpretations of the leaders of large dance orchestras, which dominated the music scene right through World War II. Although he's been derided by critics who love "hot jazz" as an impediment to the music's evolution, "substituting lilting strings and pretentious arrangements for swinging rhythms and group improvisation," and for ignoring the contributions of blacks to the genre, Paul Whiteman, Wald demonstrates, was responsible for incredibly important innovations.

He applied scoring techniques previously reserved for classical compositions to dance music; was the first to add a vocal group, the Rhythm Boys (with Bing Crosby) to his band; and among the first to treat jazz as serious music and not "just a noisy fad."

Wald doesn't necessarily disagree with the conventional wisdom that pop musicians were, at times, "the musical equivalent of Automat cuisine — cheap, uniform, easily accessible, and essentially tasteless." Mitch Miller, the "Arts & Repertoire" impresario at Mercury and Columbia Records in the '40s and '50s, he reminds us, advised musicians that genuine emotion and unbridled passion didn't belong in the studios or on the stage.

Miller didn't create enduring art; he cut hits. Envied and emulated, he was open to folk music, country, and the blues. By treating them as "raw materials waiting to be improved by some educated sautéing," he helped prepare audiences for the more substantial artists who followed.

These days, Wald concludes, our understanding of "art" has changed. Critics treat popular culture as a potent force — and sometimes dismiss high art as "irrelevant." Paul Whiteman wouldn't have known what to make of it. And Paul, John, George and Ringo would have laughed all the way to the bank. How the Beatles destroyed Rock 'N' Roll

An Alternative History of American Popular Music
By Elijah Wald
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Associate Images:
A Beatles fan takes a photograph as fans gather to walk across the famous pedestrian crossing on Abbey Road in London in a recreation of Beatles' Abbey Road album cover on the 40th anniversary of the album Aug. 8. Sang Tan/Associated Press