

Magical Memory Tour

October 01, 2008

Earlier this year, the *Observer* (April 2008) highlighted a study being conducted by Catriona M. Morrison and APS Fellow Martin A. Conway at the University of Leeds that asked people to record their memories of the Beatles in an online survey at www.magicalmemorytour.com. The study sought to use people's autobiographical memories of Beatles songs, albums, movies, concerts, and news events to show how music — particularly the music of the most influential band of the rock 'n' roll era — can be used to retrieve memories that have been all but forgotten.

There were nearly 3,000 responses from people ranging in age from 17 to 87, though most people fell within the 55 to 65 age range, having been teenagers in the 1960s when the Beatles were together.

The study shows that the music of the Beatles appeals to all people of all ages across all nationalities and both sexes, though preferences for songs and events differed. The song that cued the most memories among young people was “Hey Jude,” whereas “She Loves You” was most popular among middle-aged people and “Love Me Do” cued the most memories of older people. *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was the most popular album among all age groups.

There are 69 nationalities represented in the survey, and although there are differences in song, album, movie, and concert preferences, the Beatles have a very positive overall appeal among all represented cultures. The memories cued by the songs and events are surprisingly detailed and diverse snapshot images of long-forgotten times and places. Entries include a 55 year-old Tanzanian man's memory of the weather on the first night he heard “She Loves Me” at age 11; a 57 year-old Canadian woman who, at 15, sobbed her eyes out at hearing the news of George Harrison's marriage; and a 47 year-old English man who clearly remembers lying in the grass at age seven and playing with his toy soldiers as “Penny Lane” played on the radio.

Another interesting finding of the study was that most retrieved memories occurred during the early teenage years. The scientists reason that these years are the time when people are forming a sense of self, of which autobiographical memories are a key part. Furthermore, the scientists note that other types of memory cues do not form autobiographical memories as early as music does.

Respondents were also asked to rate the emotions elicited by songs, albums, or events. While certain events and songs elicited negative emotions, such as the deaths of John Lennon and George Harrison, most events and songs were rated extremely positively. The scientists note that this is evidence that the Beatles and their music encourage the storage of memories tied to positive emotions.

The results of this study seem to support the idea that music is an integral part of human social development, particularly in the development of a sense of self. Further, the apparent strong emotional connection that Beatles music seems to have with the storage and retrieval of autobiographical memories implies that music has a powerful influence on the storage and retrieval of long-term memories in

general.

The results of the study were reported in September 2008 at the British Association for the Advancement of Science's Festival of Science in Liverpool. ?