

The Beatles were musical geniuses but no heroes



JOHN LENNON'S fans paid tribute to him last week on the 30th anniversary of his murder. Outside the former Beatle's Manhattan apartment building, hundreds of admirers placed flowers on a mosaic named for his song, "Imagine," and played his music.

In Liverpool, where Lennon got his start, hundreds of worshippers gathered for a vigil around the "Peace and Harmony" sculpture he inspired.

The tributes contrasted with the re-release by Rolling Stone Magazine of Lennon's final interview in which he complained about the "idol worship" his critics heaped on "dead heroes like Sid Vicious and James Dean." "I'm not interested in being a dead (expletive) hero," he added.

Nor am I.

Although I grew up listening to Lennon and the Beatles, I certainly never considered them heroes. Their behavior, especially after the mid-1960s, was difficult to condone by most moral standards. While their music was embraced by those people who rejected conventional canons of respectability, it was inspired more by self-promotion than a genuine desire for world peace.

To be sure, the Beatles revolutionized popular music as the rock 'n' roll of the 1950s and the gentle strains of folk music gave way to a new genre of British rock that swept the country. Known as "Beatlemania," the fad gained international popularity in 1963 with bouncy songs such as "Love Me Do," "Can't

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Buy Me Love" and "I Wanna Hold Your Hand."

As the 1960s unfolded, the group's music became more sophisticated. Led by Lennon's musical genius and Paul McCartney's vocals, the Beatles worked in a variety of genres ranging from pop ballads to psychedelic rock, often incorporating classical, jazz and other elements in innovative ways.

But they also became victims of their own celebrity.

In March 1966, Lennon publicly boasted that the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus," predicting that "Christianity will vanish" in the wake of rock 'n' roll. The remark led to threats against his life, the burning of Beatles' records and contributed to the band's decision to stop touring.

By 1968 the group was in disarray. Personal jealousies destroyed the once harmonious relationship that existed between Lennon and McCartney, and the various members became estranged.

While their drug abuse might have produced hit songs such as "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," it also resulted in severe addiction, promiscuity and divorce among the band's members. When Lennon's song "Revolution" was released, some felt that The Beatles were justifying political violence.

McCartney put an end to all the acrimony on Dec. 31, 1970 when he filed a suit for the dissolution of the group. Its last album was "Let It Be."

Relocating to New York City, Lennon embarked on a solo career and an increasingly eccentric lifestyle including a second and open marriage and violent behavior. Two of his most popular songs – "Give Peace a Chance" and "Happy Xmas (War is Over)" – were adopted as anthems by protesters of the Vietnam War. His criticism of the war also resulted in a lengthy and unsuccessful attempt by the Nixon administration to deport him. But it was a shallow commitment.

Lennon struggled to remain in the public eye. His anti-war songs and highly publicized "Bed-in for World Peace" with his second wife, Yoko Ono, were simply ploys to steal the spotlight from McCartney, whose solo career was soaring.

In 1975, Lennon disengaged himself from the music business. Although he re-emerged in 1980 with a new album, "Double Fantasy," he was murdered three weeks after its release.

Today, John Lennon's music endures as an expression of the progressive ideals of the social and cultural revolutions of the 1960s; but that doesn't mean we have to worship him or the life he led. After all, Lennon disdained "dead heroes." Why persist in making him one?

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