

SPOTLIGHT ON ENTERTAINMENT

THE BEATLES CELEBRATION ON QUEEN MARY 2

By

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Cunard Line is quite proud of its history and tradition. This is manifested in the experience presented on the Cunard ships by such things as having more formal nights than other lines, adherence to the traditional dining system, and having the largest ballrooms at sea which are used for amongst other things, classic afternoon teas and grand balls. In addition, the line displays its history onboard each ship with memorabilia, graphic displays and with large photographs of the stars and celebrities who sailed on Cunarders during the first half of the 20th Century.

One part of Cunard's history and tradition, however, that has been largely overlooked in recent years is the line's ties to Swinging England and the British pop music of the 1960s. As maritime historian Bill Miller has pointed out, this connection actually began before the 1960s when

stewards and other crew members of the Cunard liners started bringing home to England rock and roll recordings that they had purchased while their ships were in port in the United States. These recordings became popular with young people in Britain who started forming their own rock and roll bands including the bands that were to achieve worldwide fame in the 1960s.

Cunard's best loved ship, the Queen Elizabeth 2, which entered service in 1969, was designed to reflect the new Britain of the 1960s. An early brochure for the ship proclaimed: "Ships have been boring long enough". Therefore, QE2's designers eschewed creating "a vast floating grand hotel. This was the concept of liners in the thirties." Nor were they interested in making her "an anthology of British traditions, with hunting prints on

the walls and thatched rooks over the bars.” Instead, QE2’s use of space age architectural designs, abstract art, stainless steel, plastic and fabrics like bright green naugahyde and colored suede were intended to “make people feel they were on a great ship enjoying a unique adventure.”

One group of people who were intrigued by this revolutionary new liner were The Beatles. Over dinner one night shortly after QE2 entered service, John Lennon suggested to a group of friends who included George Harrison and Ringo Starr that they all do an Atlantic crossing on the new Cunarder. Harrison had other commitments and so could not go but Lennon and Starr booked staterooms on One Deck (1050) and Two Deck (2081) respectively. Lennon planned to make a film of the voyage and to sing peace songs over the ship’s public address system as the ship entered New York harbor.

But the Nixon Administration did not like Lennon and his peace activism. So, the wheels of bureaucracy ground suspiciously slowly in considering Lennon’s application for the necessary visa. By the time QE2 sailed, no visa had been issued and so Lennon’s cabin went empty.

But Ringo and his family, accompanied by actor Peter Sellers, made the voyage, partying in the Q4 nightclub (later The Lido) and attending an officers’ party in the Ward Room. The Beatles Book, the band’s monthly magazine, reported the voyage, proclaiming to the group’s fans: “The QE2 is a splendid ship” and “QE2 is ahead of her time.” In short, QE2 was Beatles-approved.

During the 1990s, QE2 looked back to the music of the 1960s by having a series of British Invasion bands, including such multi-hit bands as Herman’s Hermits, play concerts in the Grand Lounge. Indeed, one season, Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders made so many appearances on QE2 that they seemed like the house band.

Given this history, it was altogether fitting for Cunard to have performances by The Beatles Celebration on Queen Mary 2’s June 24, 2012 crossing from Southampton to New York. Not just another Beatles tribute band, The Beatles Celebration is a show that involves acting as well as playing The Beatles music. Those who saw The Beatles perform live as well as those who have seen their films will be impressed by the way The Beatles Celebration performers have learned the on-stage mannerisms, accents, and personalities of John, Paul, George and Ringo. Thus, the audience is transported back in time and can easily succumb to the belief that it is watching the real thing.

Onboard Queen Mary 2, The Beatles Celebration gave performances first in the ship’s Royal Court Theatre and then later in the voyage in the ship’s ballroom, The Queens Room. The Theatre show was a concert-style performance with the four performers coming on stage dressed as The Beatles during the first wave of Beatlemania. Later, in the set, they changed to the khaki military-style jackets that the group wore during their Shea Stadium concert in New York in 1965.

Their rendition of The Beatles’ songs was quite good in the lead vocals, the instrumentation and in the element

most often neglected when people attempt to cover a Beatles' song - - the harmonies. In addition, the performers remained in character between songs, engaging in the type of banter that The Beatles engaged in during their live performances.

The concert depicted in the show is one that never actually took place. Although The Beatles continued to record together throughout the 1960s, the group stopped performing live in concert in 1966. (NB A few subsequent live performances were made for films and television). Nonetheless, The Beatles Celebration concert includes songs from throughout The Beatles' career. While some historic license has been taken, the later songs add to the show and it is nice to think that this is what it would have been like if The Beatles had performed live such songs as "Something," "With A Little Help From My Friends" and "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

The performance in the Queens Room was a dance concert. The Beatles began their career in clubs playing dance music. While they branched out into ballads and other styles, much of their catalog lends itself to dancing. For this performance, The Beatles Celebration used many of the songs that they had done during their concert performance. However, particularly in their second set, they played quite a few Beatles songs that had not been in the concert. Once again, the performers remained in character throughout.

After they became famous, The Beatles would occasionally lament that they could no longer play clubs or dance halls. Indeed, at one point, nostalgia for the old days gave birth to a rather

impractical plan to load their equipment in a van, drive around England and simply drop in at various clubs where they would perform. Perhaps the Queens Room performance is what one of those imaginary club performances would have been like.

One of the more surprising things about The Beatles Celebration is that it is not the name of a specific group of musicians but rather a brand name. At any one time, there can be several Beatles Celebration shows playing in various locations around the world. For the shows on Queen Mary 2, Paul McDonough played John Lennon, Mal Price played Paul McCartney, James Hender was George Harrison and Chris Graham was Ringo Starr.

The four performers had never played together before sailing on Queen Mary 2. However, because they had not only performed The Beatles' music many times before with other musicians but studied the music and the characters, they were able to perform the shows as if they had been together for years.

"It is very demanding, it is not easy. Like most things that seem simple and easy, [the songs] are actually not, they are very complicated. Everything interacts. Every part is important. They are so precise as songs and that's why they have lasted. There is not one second wasted on those records and every minute is precious." McDonough explained. "I've studied it inside out."

Furthermore, Hender pointed out: "It was fascinating for me to find out about this phenomenon - - The Beatles and Beatlemania. It was just interesting to find

out what they were like, what was going on and why they were so big.”

The four performers were all born well after The Beatles broke up. But because of the enduring quality of the music, they became fans. “You can’t do the job unless you are, in my opinion. You really have to know the material and know the characters. If you haven’t got that, it just doesn’t work. You’ve got to be a fan; you’ve got to love the music,” said McDonough.

“You couldn’t really study it, if you didn’t like it. What’s not to like anyway? I think it is just good music, full stop,” added Price.

“We are lucky people. I’ve seen the world doing it. I’ve been treated like a

Beatle – you get that wave of affection by proxy,” McDonough noted.

But what was the QM2 audience’s reaction to The Beatles Celebration? The Royal Court Theatre was full for the concerts with the guests clearly enjoying the show, including dancing in the aisles. For the dance show, there was no space on the Queens Room dance floor, which is the largest at sea, and many guests watched from the tables surrounding the dance floor. This should not be surprising because although they may not look or dress the same way as they did back then, they are the generation that discovered and lived with The Beatles.