

The Beatles: Eight Days a Week—The Touring Years (2016)

Documentary. Running time: 2 hours 17 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

NOTE: The film is still in some theaters across the U.S. On November 18, it will be released for home viewing and is likely to be a popular holiday present for Beatles fans.

Even if your mind is filled with trivia about what some regard as the greatest band in the world, Ron Howard's documentary will warm your heart—and I was moved, along with several other members of the audience, to keep time to the music with my feet and hands. I also joined in the applause at the end of the film, something I have experienced only a few times, and then usually at studio-sponsored advanced screenings. There are not as many new Beatle facts as claimed by the film's PR (except for one segment to be discussed later), but this is of little consequence because the film really is a trip back to a time of wonderful musical moments that live in the hearts of music lovers.

Ron Howard has drawn on lots of photos, film and TV clips, home movies of the band, and recordings of their voices. There are shots of The Quarrymen, the high school band started by John Lennon, and which later Paul McCartney joined, and then George Harrison. There are footage and photos of their gigs in Hamburg, and of course, of their playing in Liverpool's The Cavern.

When Brian Epstein becomes their manager, he has them abandon

their scruffy biker image, dressing them up in matching suits and ties. Soon, with Ringo Starr at last also adopting their "mop head" hair style, they are traveling, recording, and becoming the unique phenomenon attracting thousands of adoring fans who often became a safety threat, both to themselves and to the band. The clips take us to Liverpool, Hamburg, Australia, Japan, the Philippines, and the U.S. The savvy TV and entertainment mogul Ed Sullivan hosted their first American appearance on his show, and then later reappears to briefly introduce them again, this as I recall being at the massive Shea Stadium concert in New York.

Of the three surviving band interviewees, we probably see Paul McCartney the most, fondly recalling at one moment how when they tried out Ringo Starr, he had that something that they were looking for to complete the band. Although they were already becoming popular in Liverpool, they greatly expanded their support base during the next few months. Of course, Brian Epstein, plus the original songs by McCartney and John Lennon, were also important factors.

The rest of the film is divided into years, with 1963 marking their rise to international stardom. Howard sets the rise of the band into historical context by showing news clips of nuclear tests in the Pacific, Civil Rights demonstrations, and the murder of President Kennedy.

In 1964 they are off to America and their Sullivan Show appearance. Whoopi Goldberg, one of many celebrity commentators used by Howard, speaks of her excitement upon hearing their music, commenting that to her, their race was immaterial—"they were colorless." There is a shot of the crowd in a Liverpool football stadium joyfully singing "She Loves You."

All through this and the rest of the film the danger of The Beatles Phenomenon is discussed and shown. From the band's very first appearance young girls scream at the top of their

lungs, drowning out the music. Some faint, try to rush toward the performers, and are chased after by police. At first in city after city the authorities underestimate the number of security guards needed. Now playing in sports stadiums, the first band to do so, thousands of young females are thrown into paroxysms of emotions. As we see police carrying out prostrate bodies of overcome girls, and in a couple of cases, parents trying to calm a tearful daughter, we are told that at their British Columbia concert 240 teenagers were given first aid.

All of this pressure from over enthusiastic audiences took its toll on the four musicians. During their 3rd US tour that began at Shea Stadium in August of 1965, unable even to hear each other over the ear-splitting noise of their fans, it would not be long before they would stop their live concerts and withdraw into the studio. They had already enjoyed working with directors in producing their two films, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help*, so they found that in the studio they could again do what they loved best, perform their music after experimenting with it. By now they had joined with the creative arranger George Martin, whose in valuable contributions to their recordings earned him the title of "The Fifth Beatle"). Once they quit touring after their Candlestick Park concert in 1966, the film moves quickly through their remaining years as a band, giving few details of their family lives and break-up. I don't recall Yoko Ono even being mentioned! And I wish that Howard had included more than just a mention of the singer they looked up to, Elvis Presley—not only did they meet him, but he hosted them at his mansion.

For me the new facts in the film has a welcome social justice theme, told by African-American historian Kitty Oliver. Their second tour of North America included a concert in the segregated city of Jacksonville, Florida. We see in a list of the band's ten contractual demands that No. 10 stated they would not perform before a segregated audience, so the

authorities had to relent on their Jim Crow rules. Dr. Oliver relates that this was the first time she had been a part of an integrated audience, the experience of joining with so many whites around her producing a feeling in her never before felt. Whoopi Goldberg also agrees that the group contributed to the breaking down of racial barriers in this country. I think it was at this point that a clip is used of John Lennon talking about the lack of such racial barriers in his native land.

I don't want to make it seem that this film is a sober document dealing with heavy issues. There are far too many cheeky comments and glorious music by the Beatles to justify such a claim. (I love the quick comebacks that the band members make to the often hostile reporters during their early days!) Howard does include some down moments of the group, such as their sudden, and brief, boycott by DJs and fans in America following John Lennon's innocent but indiscrete observation that the band is more popular than Jesus Christ, but this soon passes. The film ends with shots of their 1969 Rooftop Concert as the end credit begin to roll. Also included are end notes about their 1970 breakup and other facts. Be forewarned, though, that when the background turns to a black screen as the minor credits scroll upwards, stay in your seat. Immediately following these credits is an edited down version of their gigantic Shea Stadium Concert, itself about 30 minutes in length. What starts out to be a banquet for Beatles lovers becomes a veritable feast!

Note: As soon as I post this I will be writing a little on my blog, available on this site, about my own experience with the music of this group, especially their studio songs.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the Oct. issue of Visual Parables.