

"Across the Universe" with the Beatles

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Meredith faculty put a good bit of energy into understanding the cultural forces that shape our students. This knowledge helps us connect what you know with what we think you need to know. If you would like to return the favor to those professors who are starting to look like candidates for Botox, go see the Beatles-inspired film *Across the Universe*. It will give you a sense of the world we witnessed as we were coming of age. Think of it as our high school musical.

But first, there's homework. If your parents (or an eccentric uncle) did not blast the Beatles at you from infancy, find a music store with a generous Beatles section. If someone did perform this service for you, borrow the CDs (or cassettes or those ancient record albums) and refresh your memory. Note the range, from the early simple love songs ("She Loves You," "Happy Just to Dance with You") to the experimental (Magical Mystery Tour and Sergeant Pepper albums) to the densely political (Abbey Road). For now, don't sweat the details, but bear in mind that, along with the music, we observed--some from afar, others close-up--the Civil Rights Movement, major race riots in Detroit, the Vietnam War, student-led war protests, and what the media labeled the Hippie movement: psychedelic drugs, love cults, alternate religions, and brightly painted buses.

Now you're as ready as you can be to see the film. It's a quirky blend

of corny musical, across-the-Atlantic-boy-meets-girl saga, buddy story, questing adventure, and documentary, all tied together with Beatle songs performed by the actors. Thematically, it portrays a national loss of innocence. When the ornery Max (Joe Anderson) drops out of Princeton, he's shipped off to Vietnam, where real psychic damage occurs. His sister Lucy (Raleigh native Evan Rachel Wood), drawn into the anti-war movement by a charismatic womanizer, finds her ideals shaken when the group starts building bombs. The fresh-faced actors seem to have been cast to emphasize their innocence. Jude (Jim Sturgess), the winsome Liverpool dock-worker who tracks down his American father, blends the boyish looks of young Lennon and McCartney, those same fellows who sent a generation of girls into screaming fits at stadium concerts and sleepovers in the mid 1960s. Prudence (T.V.Carpio), a high school cheerleader from Dayton, Ohio, wants to "come out" and play with two women who don't seem to notice, and we are moved to feel her pain.

The film gets more interesting, however, as it departs from realism and becomes a multi-sensory impression/interpretation of the times. Technology sweeps the film across the generations, as dancing actors and Uncle Sam morph into chiseled animated figures to the tune of "I Want You." Mr. Kite's circus includes a troupe of video game-like blue finger beings,

also computer drawn. In a post-war hospital scene, the image of Salma Hayek is multiplied five times. The Beatles' psychedelic material lends itself well to these treatments. Yet symbol and allusion linger behind these seemingly playful scenes. A water dance of dark-haired women, for instance, summons images of the My Lai Massacre, our first intimation that battle lines in Vietnam were crudely drawn and that innocent civilians were being killed.

The love and buddy stories intersect with the big issues, especially through Max's political art. He produces a concept piece of fresh strawberries pinned to a canvas, dripping red juice and darkening John Lennon's nostalgic Strawberry Fields. Max also provides a needed critique of the violent anti-war movement, as he disrupts the group's harem-like headquarters with a scathing rendition of "Revolution." Yet the film never loses sight of the personal or the optimistic. It has a story that you can enjoy nearly context-free if necessary.

This film takes a generation back in time, but (probably thanks to the special effects) it doesn't assert the notion that "this is how it was." Rather, it gently nudges us to remember and rethink, and for me, to wonder if I've brought enough of the sixties to the life I'm living today. Certainly "All you need is love" won't play in the ENG111 classroom, where we have those

"Universe" cont. on
pg. 3

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Among plug-in technology, fuel cells, hybrid technology, ethanol and vegetable oil, one fact seems inevitable: in the future, cars will run off of anything except gasoline.

Topping the 2008 list of most fuel-efficient vehicles are, not surprisingly, hybrid vehicles. Toyota Prius reigns supreme, with a combined highway/city mileage of 46; Civic Hybrid finishes second with combined mpg of 42. Nissan Altima Hybrid, Toyota Camry Hybrid and two-wheel drive Ford Escape Hybrid (the only SUV to make the list) round out the top five.

A new array of hybrid vehicles has arrived for drivers clinging to their behemoth SUVs and vans but perhaps wanting to cut down on emissions and gasoline consumption. Chevy Tahoe, Toyota Sienna, Dodge Durango, Lexus RX 400h and Ford Escape are just a few of the hybrid "big boys."

How does a hybrid car work? Well, it couples a smaller-than-usual gasoline engine with a battery and an electric engine (or, as with General Motors' "two-mode" hybrid technology, two electric engines with different gear ratios for various

driving modes). The electric engine comes into play when the car is idle or stopped, say at a stop light. The gasoline engine shuts off, and the car runs off of its electric motor and battery. While the car is in motion, cylinders in the gasoline engine can be shut off and on, depending on the speed and driving conditions (and, therefore, the amount of power required for driving). The battery charges automatically when it is not in use. Low driving speeds require the use of only the electric engine, oftentimes until speeds of 15 or 30 mph are reached. All of these features add up to a quieter ride, lower emissions and much greater fuel efficiency than with the traditional, gasoline-powered vehicle.

Although electric technology is enabling the public to cut down on its gasoline consumption, some nonrenewable energy sources are being used to produce the electricity; for example, coal is oftentimes burned in electric power plants. This process of burning coal creates carbon dioxide, which harms the environment. However, hybrid technology is a huge step toward independence from the gasoline monster.

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for good reason

