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EXPERT COMMENT: Are The Beatles still more misunderstood than Jesus?

[Brian Ward](#), Professor in American Studies at Northumbria University, writes about The Beatles for The Conversation.

“We should be wearing targets here,” quipped Paul McCartney as he stepped nervously off a plane at Memphis airport on August 19 1966.

The Beatles arrived in Memphis amid massive controversy. In March, John Lennon had suggested in an interview with Maureen Cleave of the London Evening Standard that the Beatles had grown more popular than Jesus. When his remarks reappeared in the American teen magazine Datebook in August, they sparked a fierce backlash just as the band embarked on its final tour.

Hostility was particularly intense in the American south. In Alabama, DJs Tommy Charles and Doug Layton at the WAQY-Birmingham radio station were first to initiate a “ban-the-Beatles campaign”. Other stations, cities and towns soon followed suit. Starke in Florida had the dubious distinction of being the first place to burn Beatles records and memorabilia.

Similar conflagrations spread quickly across the region. Some of the most pyrotechnical protests involved those formidable guardians of white racial and religious purity, the Ku Klux Klan. In Chester, South Carolina, Klan Grand Dragon Bob Scoggins nailed a Beatles record to a large cross and set it on fire. In Tupelo, Mississippi, Grand Wizard Dale Walton urged teens to “cut their Beatle wigs off” and send them to a “public burning”. In Washington DC and Memphis, Klansmen in full regalia were an ominous presence outside the band’s concerts.

The “Jesus” controversy is [often considered](#) a watershed moment in the

Beatles's career. In the aftermath, they abandoned live shows and, according to biographer Jon Weiner, Lennon took his "first steps towards radical politics". And yet the controversy remains largely misunderstood and misrepresented in the vast literature on the band. Virtually nobody has explored what kind of publication Datebook, the magazine responsible for circulating the claim, really was. Few commentators have got to grips with the motives of its owner-editor [Art Unger](#), or considered the role of Danny Fields, later manager of the Ramones, who worked briefly at the magazine in mid-1966.

Datebook

While on Datebook's payroll, Fields was tasked with revamping its cover for a special "Shout Out!" issue to mark the transition from bi-monthly to monthly publication. That was the issue that featured Lennon's interview with his infamous quote, "I don't know which will go first, Christianity or rock'n'roll!" on its cover. Even more prominent was McCartney's tart comment on US race relations: "It's a lousy country where anyone black is a dirty nigger!" The cover also advertised articles on LSD, the Vietnam War and the virtues of interracial dating.

This content suggests Datebook was not the "standard teenybop rag" routinely depicted in accounts of the "Jesus" controversy. Most of those accounts also erroneously accuse Datebook – Unger is seldom mentioned by name – of cynically reproducing Lennon's controversial comments out of context and using the interview without permission.

In fact, Unger had been encouraged to use all four Beatles interviews, which were reproduced in Datebook without any significant changes, by Tony Barrow, the band's press officer. In March 1966, Barrow wrote to Unger:

I think you might be more than interested in a series of 'in-depth' pieces which Maureen Cleave is doing on each Beatle for the London Evening Standard. I'm enclosing a clipping showing her piece on John Lennon; I think the style and content is very much in line with the sort of thing DATEBOOK likes to use.

Clearly, Barrow already understood Datebook's politics. Unger had created a socially engaged magazine dedicated to challenging all manner of prejudice, dogma, and discrimination, even as it dispensed advice about haircare, makeup and dating etiquette. The fact that Unger, like Fields, was a gay may

have fuelled their determination to nurture more tolerant attitudes among Datebook's young readers. Nowhere was Datebook's quietly subversive agenda more clear than in the realm of race relations.

'Segregation is a lot of rubbish'

At the height of the civil rights movement in the south, Datebook often focused on racial and religious intolerance. In 1961, for example, it asked "should you date boys of another race or religion?" and concluded that "across-the-line dating can be a healthy and desirable thing". That same year Lillian Smith, a leading southern white racial liberal, urged Datebook's overwhelmingly white female readers to break with the racism of an older generation. The magazine even included contact details for various civil rights groups so that readers could support the movement.

The Beatles were also aware of Unger's liberal agenda. They first met him in 1964. Afterwards, their press office regularly supplied Datebook with news scoops and provided extensive access whenever the band toured the US. The band often proved willing accomplices in Unger's plans. In 1965, Datebook reported a flight from Houston when drummer Ringo had "joined a circle of performers, many of whom were Negroes, and they talked about everything, including race relations, Ringo making his pro-integration feelings very clear". Ringo insisted: "Segregation is a lot of rubbish. As far as we're concerned, people are people, no different from each other."

Understanding the Beatles's links to Unger and their willingness to speak out on social issues in his magazine long before 1966, changes our perspective on the dramatic events of that summer. Suddenly, they begin to look less like the first chapter in the story of the band's political awakening and more like an important episode in a much longer tale. Looking back through the pages, not to mention the covers, of Datebook certainly reminds us that Lennon was not the only Beatle with strong opinions on current affairs.

Fifty years on, it is time to stop casting Unger's decision to reprint Lennon's interview as the act of the unscrupulous owner of a "cheesy American teen magazine" out for a fast buck. Instead, we need to see it as one phase in his efforts to use Datebook to showcase progressive politics, encourage unconventional opinions, and expose all kinds of prejudice. The Beatles certainly recognised that Unger's Datebook was very different from other teen publications. And so should we.

This article was originally published in The Conversation. [Read the original article.](#)

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