

A Bit of Peace

(An excerpt from Chapter 10 of my book, *The Beatles: The Long and Winding Road*)

Bigger Than Jesus

Running from screaming fans had never been much of a problem for the Beatles before this incident – Manila showed them, however, that fans screaming with anger, rather than pleasure or lust, was a whole different game. They were glad to see the back of it – yet there was another controversy awaiting the group when they eventually arrived back in Britain.

In March 1966, an interview by journalist Maureen Cleave with John Lennon was published in London newspaper 'The Evening Standard'. By late July it had been quoted on the cover of American teen publication 'Datebook Magazine', dated July 29, 1966:

“Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I do not know what will go first, rock 'n' roll or Christianity. We're more popular than Jesus now. Jesus was all right, but his disciples were thick and ordinary.”

The statement caused a huge backlash against Lennon and the Beatles. While the statement could certainly be interpreted as true, devout Christian elements in the American Bible Belt felt deeply insulted and responded with indignation and disgust.

In scenes reminiscent of 1930s Nazi-controlled Germany, Beatles records and merchandise were burned at mass bonfires, radio stations banned their records and venues cancelled concerts. The Beatles were so closely watched that the slightest stumble or statement taken out of context was in danger of ruining their career, or at the very least seriously damaging it.

Brian Epstein had already committed the group to a series of concerts in the USA during late summer and early autumn; they were compelled therefore to travel to the states to fulfil these obligations. Such had been the pressure of constant touring, however, that they didn't want to go.

Since hitting the top of the charts in 1963, the Beatles had worked tirelessly, writing new songs, recording records, promoting their work on television and radio, playing live, making films, moving to London, and playing live around the globe.

The Beatles were tired.

They were also the world's biggest band, and if John Lennon was wide of the mark saying that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus, they were certainly more popular than Elvis. The idea of cancelling the American tour was considered, but in the end the decision was made to fulfil the remaining dates.

On August 11th, 1966, John Lennon apologised at a press conference in Chicago.

“If I had said television is more popular than Jesus, I might have got away with it, but I just happened to be talking to a friend and I used the words "Beatles" as a remote thing, not as what I think - as

Beatles, as those other Beatles like other people see us. I just said "they" are having more influence on kids and things than anything else, including Jesus. But I said it in that way which is the wrong way.

"I wasn't saying whatever they're saying I was saying. I'm sorry I said it really. I never meant it to be a lousy anti-religious thing. I apologize if that will make you happy. I still don't know quite what I've done. I've tried to tell you what I did do but if you want me to apologize, if that will make you happy, then OK, I'm sorry."

The incident was at heart nothing more than a storm in a teacup. All John Lennon had done was speak his mind about a subject fascinated him.