CULTURE

Lend me your ears: the Beatles and AI

// BY CIELO GAZARD

The Beatles' legacy as the world's most influential band seems set in stone by now. How we think of popular music and the album broadly is due in large part to the Beatles' musical innovations. However, over the past five years, the Beatles have been embracing artificial intelligence. This is incredibly concerning to me as a fan, and as someone who believes AI to be a detriment to the creative process.

If the world's greatest band normalizes AI in music, will the rest of the music industry soon follow?

The first use of AI on a Beatles-related project was not for music. In 2021, a nearly eight-hour documentary entitled "The Beatles: Get Back" was released. Directed and produced by Peter Jackson, the documentary used unearthed footage from 1969 to paint a clearer picture of the final moments of camaraderie within the band. Jackson used artificial intelligence to "restore" some of the grainy footage and inaudible studio banter.

The artificial intelligence used was a machine-assisted learning technology called MAL, a nod to both the Beatles' roadie and personal assistant Mal Evans and also the famously homicidal supercomputer HAL 9000 from the movie "2001: A Space Odyssey." MAL is not a generative AI. It isn't like Jackson put the footage into an AI chatbot and wrote a prompt like "Make it look clearer" or "Make John's voice louder." MAL was used to find and separate audio, like individual conversations, which was then amplified or reduced. It also removed film grain from footage that had been sitting in the Beatles' archive for five decades.

I've watched "The Beatles: Get Back" many times. I think it is required viewing for fans and succeeds as a film by challenging many preconceived notions of the Beatles' breakup. However, there are moments where it's impossible to not be thrown off by the AI restoration. Sometimes, a close-up on someone's face looks too glossy, or a quirk of production is tweaked to be strikingly cinematic. When that happens, you're reminded that you are watching what is essentially an AI-upscaled video of the Beatles rehearsing and goofing around. If immersion is what Jackson, the surviving Beatles and the estates of John Lennon and George Harrison wanted from "The Beatles: Get Back," the use of AI prevents a viewer from truly feeling like a fly on the wall.

It didn't take too long for the MAL technology to be used in the Beatles' music. In fact, it was used to make a supposedly "new" Beatles song. In November 2023, the Beatles released "Now and Then," a song advertised as the band's last. The MAL technology was used to restore Lennon's voice from a 1977 cassette tape. In the 1990s, the three surviving Beatles tried to use the recording from the tape to accompany the incredibly extensive "Anthology" documentary series. Due to the poor quality of Lennon's voice on the recording, "Now and Then" was shelved for nearly 30 years.

Much of the coverage around "Now and Then" in 2023 included the fact that AI was used to help create the song. Much of the reporting was lackluster and incorrect, as some headlines made it seem as if a generative AI model was used to create the song. As explained earlier, MAL was used to isolate Lennon's vocals from the loud piano on the demo tape to be used in the final product. Nothing new was generated from extracts of Lennon's voice.

I'll never forget the first time I listened to "Now and Then." It came out at 10 a.m. on Nov. 2, 2023. I remember sitting in my dorm counting down the minutes until the song was finally released. I never got to experience a Beatles release in real time, though I've loved the band since I was six years old. I cried through the entire song.

Upon a later listen, I had growing reservations, particularly because the production is far too loud. In fact, there's a section from the original "Now and Then" tape that was not used at all. The song builds up to nothing, which is quite surprising from a band known to have amazing climaxes. When reading about how Lennon's vocals were restored, I didn't see an issue at the time. I don't return to "Now and Then" at all. It's not in my regular rotation. I put an asterisk next to it being a Beatles song and see it as more of a tribute to the legacy of the band.

While I didn't seem to mind the AI-restored vocals on "Now and Then" at the time, the Beatles have used the MAL technology far too much since then. Since "The Beatles: Get Back," MAL technology has been used on every new remixing and remastering project. Starting in 2017, Giles Martin, son of the Beatles' producer George Martin, has been leading the charge on remixing and remastering Beatles albums. The records had been remastered a few times in the past, once in the late 1980s when the band's albums were first put on CD and again in 2009.

The 2009 remastering of every Beatles album is how I was first introduced to the band. The 2009 remasters are also a little controversial among Beatles fans. It's become a joke that it's possible to listen to the Beatles with only one earbud in, but this is because the 2009 remasters largely pan certain instruments or vocals super hard to the right or left of the mix. This is to create a "fake stereo" sound. As was the standard in the 1960s, every Beatles album except "Yellow Submarine," "Abbey Road" and "Let it Be" was mixed in mono. To some fans, the proper way to listen to the Beatles is to listen to them in mono, but it's never been available as an option on streaming. So unless you want to dish out hundreds of dollars to get the mono boxset, you only have two options on streaming: the hard-panning 2009 remasters or the new remasters that have been incorporating AI since 2022.

Last month, a remastered super deluxe edition of the Beatles' 1965 album "Rubber Soul" was released. I listened to some of the remastered tracks and immediately didn't like what I was hearing. Everything sounded muffled and not as bright as what I had been used to from an album I know so well. The same demixing, isolation and restoration techniques done on "Now and Then" were used to create the new stereo mixes on "Rubber Soul." The official announcement on the band's website praises the "cutting-edge de-mixing technology" that allegedly remains "faithful to the spirit of the original recordings." But how can an AI-assisted approximation of what "Rubber Soul" supposedly sounded like be faithful to the original? Digitally recording an album wasn't even possible in 1965.

Arguments against AI use in the workplace often critique losses of jobs or employment opportunities. This extends to the world of recording and audio engineering. Reliance on MAL technology removes major opportunities for those who are skilled in the world of remastering and remixing analog recordings. And, as proven by previous remastering projects involving the Beatles' catalog, it isn't like we don't know how to remaster recorded material!

There are plenty of moral and ethical arguments against AI. Much has been said about the disastrous environmental impact of data centers, for one. Bringing this back to the Beatles, I present an ethical question of our own: Do we really need more Beatles material? Do we need more Beatles songs or another remaster of now 60-year-old music? Maybe we, as Beatles fans, demand too much from a band that's been inactive longer than many of us have been alive. With MAL technology seeping into every part of the Beatles' catalog, who knows if Giles Martin or Peter Jackson may try using generative AI to create a Beatles song from old drafts and demos in the future? Some fans may defend it just to feel the euphoria of being alive for a "new" Beatles release.

In 1995 and 1996, respectively, the three surviving Beatles released the singles "Free as a Bird" and "Real Love." The songs were lifted from the same cassette recording where "Now and Then" was found. Lennon's voice on these tracks is not very clear. He sounds out of this world, as if he is singing from a metaphysical plain of existence. These tracks were "cleaned up" using MAL technology last year. But from my perspective, Lennon's muffled vocals are what made these tracks so special. The songs are not perfect. They are human.

The Beatles were not a perfect band. They were human beings, and that's what makes them so influential. We cannot etch away imperfections with a machine without etching away humanity.



ILLUSTRATION BY CATHY ZHANG

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

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