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## Rutlemania Is Back, and It's Unreal

### The Rutles Parody the Beatles

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The Rutles in the film "All You Need Is Cash": from left, Eric Idle, Ricky Fataar, John Halsey and Neil Innes.

By MARC SPITZ

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There's long been debate over who can truly claim the title "the Fifth Beatle." The disc jockey Murray Kaufman pursued it. Later, arguments were made for the keyboardist Billy Preston or Yoko Ono. A new [graphic novel](#) bestows the honorific on the band's manager Brian Epstein. However, the [Beatles'](#) most essential partners may be their fictional counterparts: the Rutles, stars of the mockumentary "All You Need Is Cash."

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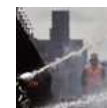
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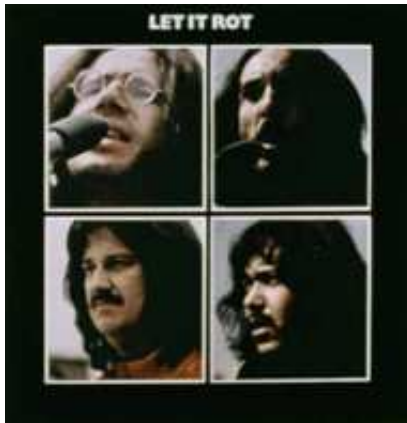


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An album cover spoofs the Beatles' "Let It Be."

The Rutles were a hapless but well-meaning band created as both tribute and goof by Eric Idle (of Monty Python fame) when he was appearing on the BBC sketch show "Rutland Weekend Television" in the mid-'70s.

The group was given musical voice by Neil Innes (a Python collaborator and member of the comedy rock group Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band). The Rutles were conceived and still exist as inhabitants of a kind of meta-universe where there were no Beatles, no era-defining hits like "Penny Lane," but rather a carefully created near-sound-alike titled

"Doubleback Alley," and no real revolution.

Each time there's a swell of Beatlemania and a flood of product, the "Prefab Four" have been there to keep the Fab Four's myth in check. In the mid-'90s, the multipart Beatles documentary and album "Anthology" inspired new Rutles music, "Archaeology." In the early 2000s, the real group's hit album "1" spawned the Rutles' charming but less sharp mockumentary "Can't Buy Me Lunch."

With the holidays and the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' first trip to America in 1964 fast approaching, there's another swell upon us. It includes a number of new books, like "Tune In," the first installment of Mark Lewisohn's history, "[The Beatles: All These Years](#)"; a John Lennon album app; and a collection of [BBC recordings](#). A televised tribute, "The Night That Changed America: A [Grammy](#) Salute to the Beatles," is scheduled for February as well. And so, right on time, this month sees the release of "The Rutles Anthology," a Blu-ray DVD package that collects the two mockumentaries as well as early sketches.

"I'm not watchdogging them," Mr. Idle said. "It happens in the culture."

The 1978 film "[All You Need Is Cash](#)," for which Mr. Idle was co-director (with Gary

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Weis), writer and star (in multiple roles), introduced the other Liverpool combo and its career-making “tight trousers” to America. The title is, of course, a play on the Beatles’ 1967 single, “All You Need Is Love,” but it’s really an attack on the rock of the late ’70s, when artists like the Eagles, Peter Frampton, Led Zeppelin and Fleetwood Mac sold extraordinary numbers of albums and concert tickets. In 1976, the promoter Sid Bernstein (who brought the Beatles, then estranged, to Shea Stadium in 1965) tried to reunite the Beatles for one more mega-concert by supposedly offering hundreds of millions.

“It was time to get a grip, ” said Mr. Innes, who played Ron Nasty, the Rutles’ Lennon figure, and who wrote the music for the film. “The Rutles were the perfect antidote to all the hysteria.”

After it had its BBC premiere on Rutland Television, the Rutles’ black-and-white short, “A Hard Day’s Rut,” a spoof of the Beatles’ madcap film debut, “[A Hard Day’s Night](#),” soon found two crucial supporters. One was Lorne Michaels, creator of “Saturday Night Live,” who had already offered the Beatles \$3,000 in 1976 to reunite on the show. “SNL” also broadcast Rutles footage when Mr. Idle hosted that year.

“I loved it,” Mr. Michaels said in a phone interview. “I said, ‘I think it might be a bigger piece of work.’ ” Mr. Michaels persuaded an initially skeptical NBC to back a feature-length production and Mr. Idle set to work plotting out key points in Beatles lore to revisit, including their tenure in Hamburg, their meeting with Bob Dylan, their sojourn in India, the arrival of Ms. Ono and their eventual dissolution. “I bought every Beatle book there was,” Mr. Idle said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Innes was creating the soundtrack. Rutles’ songs are just close enough to Beatles songs to signal their targets (“[Help!](#)” becomes “[Ouch!](#)”) but different enough to skirt parody and stand as melodic triumphs, albeit with occasionally absurd lyrics that tweak pop’s self-seriousness. Many of the performers who portrayed the Rutles in the film, including John Halsey (as the drummer Barry Wom), and Ricky Fataar (as the guitarist Stig O’Hara) actually play the songs. (The guitarist-vocalist Ollie Halsall completed the

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lineup.) In the studio, at least, “we were a real band,” Mr. Innes said.

Mr. Idle, who doesn’t sing on the album, portrays the Paul McCartney figure Dirk McQuickly, and lip syncs. “It was quite fun to do his eyes,” Mr. Idle said. “He’s slightly cute and knows he’s cute.”

Mr. Idle’s second ally didn’t need to do much research: George Harrison, perhaps the Rutles’ greatest fan. “I couldn’t have written it without George,” Mr. Idle said.

Harrison appears in a cameo in “All You Need Is Cash” and screened an unreleased Beatles documentary, [“The Long and Winding Road.”](#) which contained scenes that Mr. Idle gleefully sent up. Mick Jagger and Paul Simon appear as themselves in interviews. “Everything was extemporizing,” Mr. Simon said. “I just imagined I was answering Beatles questions. Instead of Beatles, I said Rutles.” “SNL” stars like Bill Murray and John Belushi portrayed figures in the Rutles lore.

A hit in Britain, the Rutles film met with mixed reviews in America. [“This Is Spinal Tap”](#) was still five years away, and some critics and audience members were perplexed. “People weren’t sure how they were supposed to react,” Mr. Michaels said, “because the music was really good.” Future comedy nerds were elated. “The very young Jimmy Fallon knew it by heart,” Mr. Michaels added.

Warner Bros. released a soundtrack for “All You Need Is Cash,” which was marketed by Derek Taylor, a former Beatles publicist. After ATV, a music publisher that owned some Beatles songs, threatened to sue, Mr. Innes reached an out-of-court settlement. The other three Beatles had mixed reactions, with Mr. Lennon appreciating the barbs the most.

“I don’t think Eric meant to really make fun of them,” Mr. Simon said. “It was almost as much of a panegyric as a satire.”

The Beatles-Rutles bond has remained so close that the deaths of Lennon in 1980 and Harrison in 2001 erased any chance of a Rutles reunion as well. “You can only parody

people whilst they're alive," Mr. Idle said.

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