

12 THEORIES ABOUT HIDDEN MEANINGS IN “YELLOW SUBMARINE”

We were originally going to include this as a single entry in the “11 Yellow Things and Why They’re Yellow” list (see page 196), but as we scoured Beatles books and Internet message boards, we kept finding more and more outlandish theories of supposed secret meanings in this seemingly innocuous kids’ song from the Beatles’ 1966 album Revolver. It starts off innocently enough...

***In the town where I was born,
Lived a man who sailed to sea,
And he told us of his life,
In the land of submarines...***

1 THE “YELLOW SUBMARINE” IS A DRUG. This is the most common fan theory, but which drug? In the 1960s, marijuana rolling papers were yellow, hence the slang term for a “fat joint” was “yellow submarine.” Another theory goes that yellow Darvon sleeping pills—popular in San Francisco at the time—were called “yellow submarines,” and that’s what the song is about. Another theory goes that the song was inspired by a yellow LSD pill. Stranger still: “Yellow Submarine” is about smoking yellow banana peels. Regardless of which drug inspired the song, the “man who sailed to sea” is a drug dealer. The lyric “And our friends are all aboard” means that all the Beatles’ friends liked to do drugs, too.

2 THE SONG WAS INSPIRED BY AN ACID TRIP. This story goes that John Lennon, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr were tripping on LSD at Harrison’s house when Lennon hallucinated

that he was “under the sea.” He kept saying, “It’s like we’re all living in a yellow submarine, man.” (A variation goes that they were tripping in a car and Lennon remarked that a house they passed looked like a yellow submarine.)

3 THE SONG IS ABOUT GETTING DRUNK. The phrase “yellow sub” is Cockney rhyming slang for a pub, where the Beatles spent a lot of time with friends who were “all aboard.”

4 IT WAS INSPIRED BY A REAL YELLOW SUBMARINE. Not far north of the Beatles’ hometown of Liverpool, England, is the town of Barrow-in-Furness, which has a shipyard where submarines were built during the war years. Before the vessels were painted black, they were given a primer coat of yellow ocher. One of the Beatles (depending on which version you hear) visited the shipyard and later told his bandmates he saw a “yellow submarine.” Another rumor goes that one of the Beatles was inspired by a yellow submarine in southern France.

5 IT WAS INSPIRED BY A WHALE IN A CHURCH. An anonymous Beatles fan wrote on an Internet message board: “While on a visit to Liverpool last week, I came across a man at Saint Peter’s church, where he first met Paul and John. He showed me a picture on a wall of a whale. He said that the whale gave John the idea of a yellow submarine.”

6 IT’S A METAPHOR ABOUT FAME. The color yellow is symbolic of all the “bright attention” the Beatles were receiving; the submarine is symbolic of the box that they were trapped in by all that fame. But they had their friends there—“every one of us has all we need”—so they made the best of it.

7 IT’S ABOUT FEAR. People who are afraid to share their true feelings go “beneath the waves” to hide inside a submarine that is yellow, the color of cowardice.

8 IT'S ABOUT COMMUNISM. As evidenced by the “every one of us has all we need” lyric. (So shouldn't it have been called “Red Submarine”?) The “sea of green” in this case refers to money. A related theory: Yellow refers to China—the song is a political statement about Western governments ignoring the plight of the Chinese people.

9 IT'S ABOUT A BUG FROM OUTER SPACE. One night Paul McCartney dreamed that an “alien praying mantis” (which resembles a yellow submarine) visited him and gave him the idea for the song. The (lone) Internet commenter who put forth this theory said he wrote a letter to McCartney for verification but didn't receive a reply.

10 IT'S BATHROOM HUMOR. According to yet another Internet commenter: “Sorry to be so graphic. Ever notice in the toilet after you use it, it often leaves ‘submarines’ that can be close to yellow on occasion? My humble understanding was that considering all the politicians, wars, etc., it can often seem as if we are living inside sh*t.”

11 IT'S FURTHER PROOF THAT “PAUL IS DEAD.” This bizarre rumor (spread by an American deejay) dogged the band in their later years, with fans uncovering all sorts of “evidence” that Paul McCartney had been killed in a car accident and replaced by a lookalike. In this theory, the yellow submarine represents a pine coffin, and the lyric “sky of blue and sea of green” is Paul's grave in a grassy graveyard on a sunny day. Some people claim that among all the yelling and sound effects in the background of the song, you can clearly hear Lennon say, “Paul is dead.”

12 IT'S A CONSPIRACY! The Beatles were pawns of the Illuminati. The secretive cult actually wrote all of the Fab Four's tunes and scripted their interviews in an attempt to weaken Western civilization with “drugs and free love” so

the Illuminati could take over the world. “Yellow Submarine” is symbolic of the “Golden Phallus” that serves as the capstone of the Ziggurat pyramid...or something along those lines. If you want to know more, you try reading through all of those conspiracy websites. We give up.

AND THE 1 REAL MEANING OF “YELLOW SUBMARINE” IS...

It’s just a kids’ song. According to Paul McCartney, who wrote the melody and most of the lyrics, there are no hidden meanings in “Yellow Submarine.” In Barry Miles’s 1997 biography *Many Years from Now*, McCartney explains how the idea popped into his head:

I remember thinking that a children’s song would be quite a good idea, and I thought of images and the color yellow came to me, and a submarine came to me, and I thought, “Well, that’s kind of nice, like a toy, a very childish yellow submarine.”

Here’s the story: In early 1966, McCartney was living in girlfriend Jane Asher’s parents’ house when he got the idea for the song as he was falling asleep one night. “I was thinking of it as a song for Ringo, which it eventually turned out to be, so I wrote it as not too rangey in the vocal, then started making a story, sort of an ancient mariner, telling the young kids where he’d lived.” Despite McCartney’s explanation, however, the fan theories persist to this day. In a recent interview, he reiterated, “It’s a happy place, that’s all! And there’s nothing more to be read into it than there is in the lyrics of any children’s song.”

Bonus fact: One of the most colorful lyrics in “Yellow Submarine” was provided by the Scottish singer Donovan. He and McCartney were friends, and one day Paul asked him for help with a song. “He said he was missing a line and would I fill it in,” recalled Donovan. “I left the room and returned with this: ‘Sky of blue and sea of green / In our yellow submarine.’ It was nothing really, but Paul liked it and it stayed in.” (But what does it mean?)