A Splendid Time Was Guaranteed For All: A personal look at Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band

In the course of 1966, three classic albums, now widely held to be cornerstones of any collection of 1960s pop-rock, were released: The Beach Boys’ Pet Sounds, Bob Dylan’s Blonde On Blonde, and The Beatles’ Revolver. Arguably the last true Beatles album, where they were writing and recording as a band, on this record the Beatles were co-operating, and all firing on full cylinders. Revolver captures them, in tracks such as ‘Taxman’ and ‘And Your Bird Can Sing’, pushing the two-guitars-bass-drums beat group format as far as it could possibly go in 1966, perhaps even a little further. John Lennon and Paul McCartney were functioning as equal partners for the last time before Lennon’s drug-induced lassitude let the initiative pass to McCartney. Lyrically, they had left behind the teen love themes with which they had made their reputation (only six of the fourteen tracks could be called love songs, and none of them are Lennon’s). George Harrison started to make his case for being an equal songwriter to the other two, with three contributions.

2 It is almost as if the drugs and drinks that would sap Lennon’s creative energies in 1967 and 1968 had already drained his libido.
Nevertheless, some contemporary observers felt that the American records, both released before *Revolver* (in fact, on the same day, 16 May 1966), had the edge on the lovable Liverpudlian moptops, and wondered whether The Beatles could regain their hitherto unquestioned position as leaders of the pop world, or whether they were, in fact ‘finished’ – speculation fuelled by the fact that, since they were no longer touring and had not produced a new album for Christmas 1966, as they had for the previous three years, they were pretty much out of the public eye between the release of *Revolver* in August 1966 and the ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’/’Penny Lane’ single in February 1967. Some later commentators have suggested that they might not have got back on top, had it not been for Brian Wilson’s mental breakdown and Dylan’s motorcycle accident (which may or may not have actually happened).

The truth is that The Beatles were always in a better position to beat off all challengers than their rivals. Wilson’s breakdown and Dylan’s using his accident as an excuse to pull back were not so much causes of The Beatles’ renewed leadership as symptoms of the other acts’ lesser ability to cope with the strain.

The Beatles survived because at their heart was a partnership. John Lennon and Paul McCartney were songwriters of equal talent and stature. They could keep each other on their mettle, and crucially, they could share the responsibility for keeping the band ahead, and help each other if they got stuck. Neither Dylan nor Wilson, for all the latter’s use of lyricists, had anyone of the same stature as themselves to whom they might turn. Moreover, the support Lennon and McCartney received from George Harrison and Ringo Starr was far greater than that which Wilson could expect from the other Beach Boys, from whom he was estranged due to remaining in the studio while they toured, and far beyond anything Dylan might get from the admittedly talented blues sidemen he employed.

But, of course, The Beatles did not stay at the top simply by waiting for their rivals to crack under the pressure. They also set to work to surpass *Revolver*, by starting in late 1966 on what was to become *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

It must have been clear to The Beatles that they could not simply build on *Revolver* in the way that *Revolver* had built on the previous album, 1965’s *Rubber Soul*. Whatever they did next would need to be a more radical departure from their previous sound. Fortunately, some of the directions they had experimented with on *Revolver* would prove productive.

Some commentators (including Beatles producer George Martin) have identified Lennon’s ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ as the clearest pointer to The Beatles’ forthcoming direction. That track certainly shows the band’s growing interest in production effects, something both Lennon and McCartney were interested in, though in different ways – Lennon having an idea for a sound he wanted, but little concept of or interest in how to get it, McCartney being more engaged in the mechanics of the process. It also demonstrates the growing importance of producer Martin in their sound. It foreshadows such tracks as Lennon’s ‘Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite!’ It is also more moulded by LSD, the impact of which is crucial to *Pepper*, than any other song on *Revolver* (or indeed any other song The Beatles ever recorded). But at its heart, despite the innovative way it remains on the note of C almost through-
out, it is still a straightforward ’60s pop-rock song, driven by a forceful contribution from Ringo Starr (Ringo was a great drummer – just accept it).³

What would distinguish *Sgt Pepper* from the band’s previous output is that, instead of layering production effects on Beatles-format songs, they broke free of the format altogether, writing songs without necessarily having ‘The Beatles’, the group, in mind. They had first used non-Beatles instrumentation on *Help!* in 1965 (on ‘You’ve Got To Hide Your Love Away’ and ‘Yesterday’), but did not really start to explore the possibilities until *Revolver*, before leaping fully into the approach from late 1966. By this means, they were able to give their songs the best possible arrangement/sound, rather than the best possible *Beatles* arrangement. So, tracks on *Pepper* such as McCartney’s ‘She’s Leaving Home’ or Harrison’s ‘Within You, Without You’ feature no standard Beatles instrumentation at all, and many other tracks fill out the guitar/piano/drums sound with brass, wind, strings or other instruments up to then rare in 1960s beat group music. In this respect, a better pointer on *Revolver* to the future than ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ would be McCartney’s extraordinary, novelistic ‘Eleanor Rigby’; the latter song was included in 1968’s *Yellow Submarine* movie soundtrack next to products of 1967, and sits very comfortably with them. Another signpost is ‘Yellow Submarine’ itself, McCartney’s eclectic novelty song, sung by Ringo Starr.

A fairly simple but fundamental indicator of this change is how many songs on *Pepper* are built around piano/keyboard parts: ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’, ‘Fixing A Hole’, ‘Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite!’, ‘Lovely Rita’. The Beatles had always composed on piano – ‘I Want To Hold Your Hand’ and ‘Yesterday’ being just two examples – but had almost always transposed songs onto guitar before taking them into the studio. Now they only did that if they specifically thought it suited the song better (as Lennon did with ‘Good Morning, Good Morning’, and McCartney with ‘Getting Better’). Again, McCartney had shown the way on *Revolver*, with his piano-led songs ‘For No One’ and ‘Good Day Sunshine’.

Ever since *Rubber Soul*, in response to the redefinition of the pop lyric effected by Dylan, The Beatles had been moving away from straightforward love songs. The lyrical content of *Sgt Pepper* builds on this, and is also distinguished by a clear sense of place. The only other song in The Beatles’ catalogue that comes anything like as close as the songs on *Pepper* to instantly bringing to mind a particular geographic location is their first single, ‘Love Me Do’, and arguably that is a result of forty years of it being used as the backdrop for scenes of Liverpool while some narrator relates the origins of the Fab Four. *Pepper*, however, doesn’t just conjure up a place, but also the whole way of life associated with it. That place is England, and specifically northern England.

This was almost certainly intentional. Paul McCartney claims not to recall any formal agreement to do a ‘northern album’, but one suspects his memory is playing him false here, as a self-conscious ‘northern-ness’ permeates the record. There is the explicit reference to ‘Blackburn, Lancashire’ in ‘A Day In The Life’, whilst the album’s very title conjures up imag-

³ It’s also worth noting that the most innovative feature of the track, the tape loops, were the work of McCartney, not Lennon.
es of brass bands and working men’s clubs (echoed by the brass band sounds of the title track). ‘Good Morning, Good Morning’ namechecks Meet The Wife, a sitcom starring ‘professional northerner’ Thora Hird. Anyone who’d grown up in the north of England with a working or lower middle class background would recognize the self-righteous self-denying parents of ‘She’s Leaving Home’ (‘We struggled hard all our lives to get by’), the typical family holiday of ‘When I’m Sixty-Four’ (‘We could rent a cottage in the Isle of Wight’), or the difficulties of courting in overcrowded houses (‘I nearly made it, sitting on a sofa with a sister or two’), as depicted in ‘Lovely Rita’, with its glorious celebration of ordinariness. The album’s cover has been described by McCartney as originating from an idea that ‘The Beatles were in a park up north somewhere’. And The Beatles play up their northern accents more than they had on record in the previous three years.

This all suggests that, even there was no formal decision right at the start, there soon evolved an understanding that a northern flavour would be given to the songs on the album. This grew naturally out of material The Beatles, and especially McCartney, had been producing in the previous year. ‘Paperback Writer’ (a song on which The Monkees based much of their career) and ‘Eleanor Rigby’ both have lyrical echoes of kitchen sink dramas such as Saturday Night, Sunday Morning and A Kind Of Loving (in Yellow Submarine ‘Eleanor Rigby’ is used for the drab ‘realistic’ Liverpool sequence). Immediately before starting work on Pepper, McCartney had worked with George Martin composing a score for The Family Way, another northern drama film of the same ilk, deliberately drawing on the sounds of his childhood, primarily using brass band music, but also using the sort of strings earlier heard on ‘Eleanor Rigby’.

It was also an understandable response to other currents in the pop music of 1966. Ray Davies of The Kinks was writing songs about England (and more specifically London) throughout 1966, whilst The Rolling Stones more obliquely explored the social and sexual mores of Swinging London, and The Who expressed their nationality through their style of dress. And then there is Pet Sounds.

The Beach Boys had built their career on songs that made explicit reference to American place-names (e.g. ‘Surfin’ USA’, ‘California Girls’). It is initially surprising, therefore, that Pet Sounds contains hardly a single place-name. Nonetheless, perhaps because of a subtext planted in the listener’s mind by their previous output, Pet Sounds is highly evocative of Californian life. The Beatles (or rather, specifically McCartney) conceived of Pepper as their response to Pet Sounds. It is therefore not altogether surprising that they should answer this most American of albums with one of the most English albums of the 1960s.

The other major influence on Pepper is, of course, drugs (though George Martin was apparently not aware of this at the time). The band aimed at relative sobriety when actually recording (at least at this stage in their careers – by 1968 Lennon and Harrison were happy to record whilst too stoned to know or care whether they were producing anything of artis-

---

4 McCartney himself admits this song is ‘a parody of Northern life’.
tic value), but the songs and their musical and lyrical imagery bear the clear stamp of LSD. Thus it is not the drab grey north of England of kitchen sink drama that The Beatles present, but a Technicolour North, existing in perpetual dreamlike summer.

Nowhere is this clearer than in two of the first tracks recorded for the album, ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ and ‘Penny Lane’. Lennon began writing ‘Strawberry Fields’ in autumn 1966 while in Spain filming Richard Lester’s How I Won The War (though he had not completed all the verses before returning to London), suggesting that the ‘northern childhood’ idea had possibly been discussed as early as mid-1966. Listening to the numerous versions of the song (as well as the original release, four different versions are available on Anthology 2, and a snatch of the penultimate version, Take 26, could be heard in Radio Two’s Across The Universe documentary series), one can hear how Lennon’s concept of the song evolved, and watch his perfectionism in action. The finger-picking of his first demo changes into a second, strummed version. The first studio version is positively pastoral, whilst the second version seeks to capture the lyric’s dreaminess through a Mellotron opening, played and composed by McCartney. For the third version Lennon moved into non-Beatle instrumentation, up to then largely McCartney’s preserve, for a string and horn arrangement. He finally got what he wanted through joining the first and second versions, though he later expressed dissatisfaction even with this, and wanted to rerecord the song. Martin discovered that fortuitously the difference in tempo and key between the two versions pretty much cancelled each other out, a happy accident which no doubt contributed to the band’s growing belief that all accidents in the studio were ipso facto happy. Lyrically, it is a surrealistic collage, built around a central mantra of ‘nothing is real’.

McCartney’s response to ‘Strawberry Fields’ was ‘Penny Lane’, a joyous celebration of summer which still sounds as fresh as it did at the beginning of 1967. On the face of it this is more conventional than Lennon’s song, but in truth it is just as aurally innovative and lyrically surrealistic.

---

5 It has been suggested that cocaine-heroin ‘speedballs’ were being consumed during the Sgt Pepper sessions. If so, it is hard to say that there is any sign of their influence on the album, at least in comparison with LSD.

6 An innovative movie inasmuch as it was one of the earliest movies featuring a pop star in an actor’s role, rather than having a pop star play a fictional pop star or take a musical role (into which category nearly all of Elvis Presley’s and Cliff Richard’s movies fall), though it has to be said Lennon is pretty awful as an actor.

7 Further versions are to be found on 2017’s 50th anniversary edition of Pepper, and numerous bootlegs can, of course, also be found.

8 This is what Barry Miles says in Many Years From Now, written in close co-operation with McCartney. But elsewhere McCartney has been quoted as claiming that he wrote ‘Penny Lane’ first, and ‘Strawberry Fields’ was Lennon’s response. McCartney had certainly been toying with the title since the end of 1965, and had no doubt discussed this with Lennon. Perhaps what happened was that McCartney had been meaning to write this song, but was only prompted to actually do so when Lennon came up with ‘Strawberry Fields’; though other accounts claim that Lennon, the only Beatle who had actually lived in the Penny Lane region of Liverpool, initially suggested the title.
These tracks set the tone, both musically and lyrically, for the whole of the album that followed. But they did not appear on that album; they were pulled off to form a new single, at EMI’s or manager Brian Epstein’s request. Believing it better value to put entirely new tracks on an album, George Martin and The Beatles dropped these tracks from the running order of Pepper.9

It is impossible for those, like myself, not of radio-listening age in early 1967 to imagine the impact of ‘Strawberry Fields’/’Penny Lane’ when it first appeared. That impact has been diluted by the fact that, within six months, every act in pop was copying some aspect of the single, and The Beatles’ aural experimentation now forms an integral part of the rock music tradition. But there simply had never been anything like ‘Strawberry Fields’. Beatles biographer Hunter Davies says he was ‘amazed’ at ‘Strawberry Fields’ when Brian Epstein played the as yet unreleased single to him in January 1967. The novelty of the record probably also explains why it did not sell as well as previous Beatles singles, being the first since ‘Please Please Me’ in 1963 not to be universally acknowledged by all UK charts as a Number One; most charts placed it at Number Two, behind Englebert Humperdink’s much safer ‘Release Me’, Melody Maker being an exception.10 ‘Penny Lane’ got to Number One in the US, according to the arcane US chart rules of the time, but ‘Strawberry Fields’ did not.11

9 It is sometimes stated in discussions of this decision that The Beatles never put singles on their British albums. This is nonsense, as the most cursory glance at their UK discography will show. Both sides of their first two singles are on Please Please Me (1963), both sides of ‘A Hard Day’s Night’ and ‘Can't Buy Me Love’ are on A Hard Day’s Night (1964), the A-sides ‘Ticket To Ride’ and ‘Help!’ are on Help! (1965), and the double A-side single ‘Eleanor Rigby’/’Yellow Submarine’ was taken from Revolver. The first two albums mentioned, however, were produced under considerable pressure. Please Please Me had a single day’s session allocated for a fourteen track album, so it made sense to give themselves a four number head start. The pressure to get A Hard Day’s Night out to coincide with the movie of the same name, compounded by a very full touring schedule and a very late decision to make the album one entirely of Beatles originals, and not to include any cover versions, was such that they were unable to complete the planned fourteen songs, and it had to be issued with just thirteen. Their preferred solution when time allowed, as shown in the Beatles For Sale (1964) and Rubber Soul sessions, was to record sixteen tracks, and issue the extra two as a single, and this is pretty much what they did on Help!, where the extra tracks were issued as B-sides of singles whose A-sides, having featured in the movie Help!, had to be on the soundtrack album. They had followed this policy with Revolver, issuing the extra tracks as the ‘Paperback Writer’ single, but it would seem EMI (or Brian Epstein) thought a second single was needed to coincide with the release of the album, and pulled two tracks off it for lack of any other material. The choice of tracks further suggests a corporate hand, since it is unlikely that ‘Eleanor Rigby’, virtually a McCartney solo track, would have been the first choice of a band who the year before had vetoed the release of ‘Yesterday’, a similarly McCartney-only number, as a UK single; and one might note further the fact that they did no promotional work for the single. That ‘Eleanor Rigby’/’Yellow Submarine’, the last single before ‘Strawberry Fields’/’Penny Lane’, had been culled from an album may well have influenced the decision to take these latter tracks off Pepper. No future single was taken from an album until ‘Something’/’Come Together’ in October 1969, by which time The Beatles had ceased to operate as a band and were no longer interested in recording new material for 45s.

10 It is occasionally suggested that the single did not get to Number One because the double A-side split the sales for chart purposes, but this isn’t true. It is listed in the official charts as “‘Strawberry Fields’/’Penny Lane’, i.e. sales for each track were counted together (if they could even have been separated in the first place, which I doubt). It was kept off Number One because ‘Release Me’, attracting an audience who did not
If there had been nothing like ‘Strawberry Fields’/‘Penny Lane’, nor had there been anything like the album that followed on 1 June 1967. Certainly, The Beatles had never released anything like it. As has already been noted, it is an album that depends more on Beatles songs than on Beatles performances. As a result, it is in some ways more a Lennon and McCartney album than a Beatles album. Starr and Harrison found themselves marginalized. The band were spending more time than ever before in the studio, but much of this was concerned with production effects, or overdubs, with the result that the members of the band not directly concerned with the arrangement of the songs found themselves with long hours in which they had little to do. Starr spent a lot of time learning to play chess with general Beatles’ factotum Neil Aspinall.

Harrison, already disillusioned with The Beatles through his experiences in 1966 on tour in the Philippines and the USA, was in an even worse position. For most tracks, Starr would at least usually be involved in putting down a basic time-keeping track, and eventually would be called to add finished percussion tracks. Harrison found himself made almost irrelevant to The Beatles. With many tracks driven by piano, the lead guitar became less important. Solos in 1967 were often not guitar solos, but piano solos (e.g. ‘Lovely Rita’), or even solos by piccolo trumpet (‘Penny Lane’) or cut-up tape lops of fairground organs and calliopes (‘Being For the Benefit Of Mr Kite!’). Harrison’s instrumental contributions to some tracks, such as ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’ or ‘Penny Lane’, became mere adding of minor layers of colour (on ‘Penny Lane’ the guitar is hardly audible). On other tracks that do feature a prominent guitar part, that part is often played not by Harrison, but by Lennon (e.g. ‘When I’m Sixty-Four’ or ‘A Day In The Life’, to which Harrison’s only contribution is shaking maracas) or by McCartney (e.g. ‘Good Morning, Good Morning’).

Since 1965 McCartney had been insisting on Harrison playing guitar solos on his songs exactly as he, McCartney, wanted them, and if Harrison was unable to get it right, McCartney would record the solo himself. An extreme example of this is on the title track of Sgt Pepper, where Harrison spent seven hours recording a guitar solo that McCartney then replaced. Starr didn’t have to worry about this practice until the next year, when it precipitated his temporary walking out on the band.

In the end, George Martin is more important to the sound of Sgt Pepper than George Harrison. Harrison was fed up with being a Beatle already (he had threatened to quit the usually buy singles, sold phenomenally. George Martin did later say that he thought the single would have sold better had they only one A-side, which I presume means he felt the promotion was split between the two tracks when it would have been better to concentrate on one. This has given rise to the idea that is found in Bob Spitz’s The Beatles: The Biography, that the tracks were split on the chart (as they would have been in the US), and the record as a whole outsold ‘Release Me’. But this is a myth.

11 As a result, ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ was left off 1, the compilation of all of The Beatles’ UK and US official Number Ones, contrary to the idea suggested in the New Musical Express review that it had been omitted simply to make room for George Harrison’s ‘Something’.

12 An exception is ‘Fixing a Hole’, where the bright metallic solo is played by Harrison on his Fender Stratocaster.
year before), and it is, therefore, hardly surprising that, when interviewed in the 1990s for the *Anthology* project, he had little good to say of the process of recording *Pepper*.

At the time, he responded through ‘Only A Northern Song’. In this track he poured out his bitterness at his treatment as the junior partner, through irony and sarcasm. The title is ostensibly a swipe at Northern Songs, The Beatles’ publishing company to which Harrison was signed, but in which, unlike Lennon and McCartney, he had no financial stake; but it may also have been a snide comment on the ‘northern album’ idea (Harrison himself said the title was partly a reference to Liverpool). It was intended by Harrison as his contribution to *Sgt Pepper*, but work ceased after two days, and was not resumed until just before the final overdubs for the album were completed, by which time Harrison had been persuaded to drop the track from the record. He had also been persuaded to change the lyrics, replacing most uses of the first person singular (‘I’) with the first person plural (‘we’). This defanged the song, altering the whole tone of the track, so that instead of being a comment on Harrison’s isolation from the other Beatles, it becomes a comment on The Beatles’ artistic distance from the conventional ‘straight’ musical establishment, an effect McCartney emphasized through adding some deliberately and ridiculously incompetent trumpet playing. The original version, finally issued on *Anthology 2*, is far more bitter, and as a consequence funnier.\(^{13}\) Instead of this track, Harrison’s contribution to *Sgt Pepper* is ‘Within You, Without You’, an Indian-influenced number that was entirely Harrison’s creation, with no input from any other Beatle, either in terms of composition or performance. ‘Only A Northern Song’ eventually appeared in the soundtrack of the *Yellow Submarine* movie.

But to conceive of *Sgt Pepper* as a Lennon-McCartney (and Martin) album rather than a Beatles album is also not to tell the full story. For the partnership is not an equal one on this record. McCartney dominates *Pepper* as he had never dominated an album before, and would not again until *Abbey Road* in 1969. His is the concept of ‘Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’, which ties, however loosely, the whole album together. Of the thirteen tracks, only four are Lennon songs, one is by Harrison, and the other eight were all written, in the initial stages anyway, by McCartney. Lennon, his artistic energies depressed by his prodigious drugs intake, spent most of 1967 in a depressive state. By his own admission, he found it difficult to come up with the songs needed to make his contribution to the album, when confronted by the workaholic McCartney’s belief that it was time for a new record. McCartney, in contrast, was at the top of his game, overflowing with excess energies, songs flowing out of him at an impressive rate.

\(^{13}\) This would perhaps not be the last time Harrison commented on his relations with the other Beatles in song. ‘Not Guilty’ recorded in 1968 but not released, is an explicit complain about how he was being treated. ‘Here Comes The Sun’, from 1969’s *Abbey Road*, makes sense as Harrison’s view of the impending break-up of the band and his relief from all bad things he had come to associate with The Beatles; his delighting in the fact that he knows he’s not going to have to be a Beatle for much longer. And ‘Wah-Wah’ from his 1970 *All Things Must Pass* album was about the arguments over Apple.

\(^{14}\) The story at the time (and still told by Al Brodax, producer of the movie) was that the track was knocked off quickly specially for the movie.
However, unlike on later albums, the Lennon-McCartney partnership, though unequal, was still a partnership. Though only producing four songs himself, Lennon contributed heavily to the writing of ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’, and to a lesser extent to ‘She’s Leaving Home’ and ‘Getting Better’ (and to ‘Penny Lane’).

The partnership shows itself best on ‘A Day In The Life’, the album’s crowning achievement, constructed out of a verse structure by Lennon, and a middle eight by McCartney, (who also supplied the line ‘I’d love to turn you on’, and was the driving force between the orchestral sections to join the two parts of the song. As Ian MacDonald writes in Revolution in the Head, ‘more nonsense has been written about this recording than anything else The Beatles ever produced’. This nonsense includes that it was a sober comment on the fantasy of ‘Pepperland’, and idea encouraged by the tracks placement at the end of the album; but in fact it was made right at the beginning of the recording process, being only the second of the tracks that finally ended up on Pepper to be started. It has also been suggested that the line ‘a crowd of people turned away’ referred to the poor reception given to How I Won The War, which is definitely referred to in the song’s lyric immediately beforehand; but the movie did not in fact open until 18 October 1967, more than four months after Pepper was released. Lennon himself gave the impression in interviews that ‘A Day In The Life’ was knocked off quickly to make sure he would be on the album (though he perhaps did not mean to suggest that it was done at the end of the process of recording). Cleared of the mythology, it stands as the last, and possibly best, example of what Lennon and McCartney could achieve when working together as full partners.

Recorded early in the process of creating the album, ‘A Day In The Life’ did not so much comment on the rest as set the tone and the standard that the other tracks had to live up to. It is a microcosm of the album, at least in terms of its ambition, and the quantum leap it represented over what had gone before. To take a minor but quantifiable indicator, at over five minutes in length, it completely shatters the three-minute barrier that had dominated The Beatles’ output for the previous five years. The orchestral ‘freak outs’, more reminiscent of twentieth-century classical composition than anything ever heard on a pop record, are also unique in their catalogue.

Critics remain divided on whether Sgt Pepper or Revolver is The Beatles’ best album – I certainly can’t make up my mind. It is, to be sure, reasonable to argue, as MacDonald does, that the average track on Pepper is ‘clearly inferior to the average number on Revolver’. Few

---

15 The line ‘I used to be cruel to my woman, I beat her and kept her apart from the things that she loved’ is clearly a Lennon contribution, as well as a pretty edgy line for a pop band in 1967.

16 Such an idea might, in any case, better fit Lennon’s earthy ‘Good Morning, Good Morning’, had that track not been only the fourth to be started.

17 Paul Du Noyer noted in Mojo 24 that after McCartney’s line ‘and I went into a dream’ ‘a disembodied voice begins to wail wordlessly in expression of the dream state. … But the wailing voice is not Paul’s. It is John. They cannot be separated. It is John who is dreaming Paul’s dream.’ However, whilst on an initial hearing, and quite a few afterwards, it does sound like Lennon singing this bit, on a careful listen, I think it’s actually McCartney (though because their voices are so similar in this register, it’s very difficult to tell).
of the tracks, beyond ‘Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds’, ‘With A Little Help From My Friends’ and ‘A Day In The Life’, get radio play today. But, as MacDonald observes, the tracks on *Pepper* need to be taken as a whole. The Beatles at this point stopped viewing albums as simply a collection of potential singles, and more attention was paid on *Pepper* than on previous Beatles albums, at least by McCartney, to how the individual tracks related to each other. Lennon later claimed that his tracks, at least, could have appeared on any Beatles album, but one suspects that his natural reaction against anything he perceived as artifice has affected his understanding of what was done with the record, and it is difficult to imagine ‘A Day In The Life’ or ‘Being For The Benefit of Mr Kite!’ being on another album. As a result of this attention paid to the album as a whole, the tracks work less well out of context, but the cumulative effect of the album is enhanced. DJs of the time were correct to play the whole album straight through. The importance The Beatles placed on *Pepper* as a whole is further shown by the fact that, thanks to a new contract with EMI, for the first time a Beatles album was released on both sides of the Atlantic in exactly the same form.\(^{18}\)

*Sgt Pepper*’s impact on the subsequent history of rock and pop music cannot be denied, even if you don’t like it. It marked the moment at which the album truly became more important than the single, completing the work begun by *Pet Sounds* and Dylan’s *Highway 61 Revisited and Blonde On Blonde*. It opened up new ways of using orchestral and other instruments outside the usual pop-rock repertoire. Many bands that have since tried to make use of strings, or horns, or other instruments, have found that The Beatles got there before them. Bands are still mining *Sgt Pepper* even today – the string arrangements Oasis used are close and direct descendants of those created by George Martin in early 1967.

On the other hand, there is something to be said for Charles Shaar Murray’s comment that it was a step away from rock music rather than an expression of its possibilities, though you have to accept quite a narrow definition of what constitutes rock music to fully accept his point. For two years, everyone in rock/pop was following, one way or another, the lead of *Pepper*, until in 1969 they found their way back to something more recognizable as rock,

\(^{18}\) Before this, Capitol Records repackaged Beatles releases for the US market, issuing albums with only ten, eleven or twelve tracks, as opposed to the UK standard of fourteen, using different album titles, track listings and sometimes even different mixes. The left-over tracks, together with tracks off singles (which the US had no qualms about putting on albums), were used to make up further records, so that in from 1963 to 1966, when the Beatles issued seven LPs in the UK, Capitol issued nine, plus two soundtrack LPs, made up half of Beatles tracks and half of incidental music, the first of which was issued by United Artists, who had the US rights to distribute the movie soundtrack for *A Hard Day’s Night*. The Beatles themselves seem to have been largely indifferent to this, if somewhat irritated, regardless of their contractual restrictions, at least until they were required in 1965 to go into the studio to quickly record two covers to give Capitol enough material for their *Beatles VI* album (one, ‘Dizzy Miss Lizzy’, subsequently got them out of a hole when McCartney’s ‘That Means A Lot’, intended for *Help!*, had to be abandoned). The final straw seems to have been when three tracks from *Revolver* were taken by Capitol and put in an album called *Yesterday And Today*, released in June 1966, at which point The Beatles had not yet finished the UK album these tracks were intended for. *After Revolver* was issued in the US three tracks short, UK and US single and LP releases were subsequently identical (with the exception of the *Magical Mystery Tour* double EP, beefed up to an LP for the US) until *Hey Jude* in February 1970.
with The Beatles again leading the way with 1968’s *The Beatles* (the ‘White Album’), an eclectic mixture of *Pepper*-style variety (mainly from McCartney) and more conventional band-based tracks (mainly from Lennon and Harrison).

For the Beatles themselves, *Sgt Pepper* proved something of a blind alley, partly because it caught the band at a point when unlimited studio time and freedom from the demands of touring were fostering their creativity, but not yet encouraging their self-indulgence. The material they recorded over the next six months, for the ‘All You Need Is Love’ and ‘Hello Goodbye’ singles and the soundtracks for *Magical Mystery Tour* and *Yellow Submarine*, is in the vein of *Pepper*, but forms an afterthought to the earlier record, rather than building upon it, and with a couple of exceptions (e.g. ‘I Am The Walrus’) falls far short of the standard set in early 1967. For the ‘White Album’ the band returned, for the most part, to the guitar-bass-drums format.

However, *Pepper* also captures the last moment when the band was functioning as an organic unit. On the White Album, as has been often observed, they worked as each other’s session musicians, producing what is really a Lennon solo album and a McCartney solo album and a Harrison EP intermingled. McCartney’s attempts to turn The Beatles back into a functioning band for the *Get Back* project in early 1969 (which eventually became *Let It Be*) were disastrous, and *Abbey Road*, the last time they were all in the studio together, emerged as virtually a blueprint for McCartney’s subsequent solo career, and has little to do with what Lennon or Harrison were really interested in recording.

Mythology, rumour and over-interpretation continues to surround *Sgt Pepper*; MacDonald’s remark about the nonsense spoken of ‘A Day In The Life’ could equally be applied to the album as a whole. Albert Goldman, in his misanthropic biography of John Lennon, wrote of *Pepper*:

> offered and received as the voice of the brave new world of the Sixties ..., when examined twenty years later, [it] appears to lie squarely in the mainstream of popular music ... when you strip off *Pepper*’s Day-Glo cellophane wrappings ... what you discover underneath are a style and an attitude that are more old-fashioned than newfangled.

As American critics often do, by setting up innovation and traditionalism as polar opposites, Goldman misses the point. The Beatles firmly believed that they could be innovative and still be steeped in the traditions that had gone before. In America, pop-rock music and youth culture in the Sixties became increasingly confrontational, and about Us (the young, the cool, the hippies, etc.) against Them (the Establishment, the Man, the old, etc.). The Beatles, seeing themselves in the British tradition of family entertainment, had always implicitly rejected such an attitude. As Allen Ginsberg observed, their vision was an inclusive one (‘a

---

19 As one example; on the photo on the back sleeve of the album, Paul McCartney has his back turned to the camera. This was taken up as being Significant by those pushing the ‘Paul is Dead’ rumour. A counter-rumour then grew up that it was not McCartney, but Beatles roadie Mal Evans, to cover for McCartney’s absence in the US. But, as an out-take from the same session that has him with his back to the camera, but head turned to show his profile, demonstrates, it clearly is McCartney.
splendid time is guaranteed for all’), and their appeal had always been broad-based (though as Philip Larkin noted, with Pepper they started to lose some of their mass appeal). Lennon was later, after he became domiciled in the US, to accept the more confrontational approach, and as a result repudiate much of his earlier actions, claiming that he had been gone along with the others and his management against his creative instincts. But Lennon often revised his opinions in the light of what he thought people wanted him to say, and there’s no good reason to believe that he was not sincere in his all-encompassing vision in 1967. McCartney, for his part, still adheres to it.

Sgt Pepper may not have the best music The Beatles ever recorded. If you want to impress someone with how good The Beatles were, you would probably play them Revolver, or if you were more inclined to rock than pop, a selection from the White Album. But if you want to explain what The Beatles were about, and what they meant, play them Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. There had never been an album like it before, and there has not been one since.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. In preparing the original article, I consulted the following works: The Beatles, Anthology; Roy Carr and Tony Tyler, The Beatles: An Illustrated Record; Hunter Davies, The Beatles; Albert Goldman, The Lives of John Lennon; Mark Lewisohn, The Complete Beatles Chronicle; Ian MacDonald, Revolution in the Head: The Beatles’ Records and the Sixties; Barry Miles, Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now; Neville Stannard, The Long and Winding Road: A History of The Beatles on Record; Mojo, issues 24 (November 1995) and 71 (October 1999); and Mark Lewisohn’s sleeve notes for The Beatles, Anthology 2, and the CD reissue of Sgt Pepper. I have also viewed episode 6 of The Beatles: Anthology (which conveniently appeared on DVD just in time for me to use it in writing this), and, of course, listened to the records again.