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Sgt. Pepper: A True Innovation?

Winona Mefford

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June 2, 1967 was a revolutionary day in the history of popular music. The album that would 20 years later be deemed the best rock album ever by Rolling Stone magazine ("Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band" 46) was released. The Beatles’ Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band was a turning point in rock history. In a sense, it helped legitimize rock music in the “art music” world. In an essay on the Beatles, composer Ned Rorem stated that “She’s Leaving Home” is “equal to any song that Schubert ever wrote” ("The Beatles triumphant” 60). Many people, including music critics and members of the general public, believe that Sgt. Pepper is the Greatest Rock Album Ever. Granted, the techniques used to record this album are primitive by today’s standards. Yet they were indeed revolutionary, and a great amount of credit is due to Beatles producer George Martin for helping to master the effects. The sounds of the songs themselves, however, were not as “new” as pop music listeners believed them to be.

Musical styles evolve over time; a new style does not “suddenly appear.” The Baroque era, for example, did not extend from exactly January 1, 1600, to Johann Sebastian Bach’s death in 1750. Composers did not wake up the next day inspired to write Classic music. Likewise the Beatles, with their preceding albums Rubber Soul (1965) and Revolver (1966), along with the February 1967 single of “Penny Lane” / “Strawberry Fields Forever,” clearly foreshadowed what was to come.

Albums mentioned in this paper refer to the British versions of the Beatles albums, which are different from the original American releases up to and including Revolver. The British albums are recorded as the Beatles originally intended and are drastically different from the “hack jobs” that were released in America—albums of singles, bootleg tapes, and sometimes material combined from two different British albums (Pond 131). In fact, the Beatles themselves attempted to make a statement about practice. The cover for their June 1966 Yesterday...and Today showed the Beatles posed with bloody baby doll parts at their babies—their albums—were being Records, their American distributor, disordered another one made (Wallgren 1 “butcher cover” slipped by the presses, worth over $50,000 each. In Britain, they have been released before the album from an already-released album. The EMI/Parlophone. Singles are included and II, and on the Beatles’ greatest hits from 1963-66, and “Blue,” from 1967.

The Beatles’ early sound, “simple,” (Gammond 46), was developed in Han the only place where they could find re marked the beginning of Beatlemania it not to be felt overseas until early 1964. “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and a late Ed Sullivan Show.” Their classic film was released in mid-1964 to great critical ac musical style was moving away from the they made famous and into more subd

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Many people, including music critics, the general public, believe that Sgt. Pepper is the Beatles' masterpiece. The cover for their June 1966 American album "Yesterday...and Today" showed the Beatles dressed as butchers, happily posed with bloody baby doll parts around them, a statement that their babies—their albums—were being butchered. Capitol Records, their American distributor, did not like this cover and ordered another one made (Wallgren 164). Three copies of the "butcher cover" slipped by the presses, however, and are now worth over $50,000 each. In Britain, singles are considered separate releases from albums. Singles are not included on an album if they have been released before the album, but a single can be taken from an already-released album. The Beatles' album catalog was standardized (as the British releases) in 1987 with the albums' release on compact disc (Putterbaugh 10). The proper, British versions of the Beatles' albums are now available from EMI/Parlophone. Singles are included on Past Masters, volumes I and II, and on the Beatles' greatest hits collections, the "Red," from 1963-66, and "Blue," from 1967-1970, albums.

The Beatles' early sound, "simple, economic, and distinctive" (Gammond 46), was developed in Hamburg in the early 1960's, the only place where they could find regular work. Early 1963 marked the beginning of Beatlemania in England. Their effect was not to be felt overseas until early 1964, after a number one single, "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and a legendary appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show." Their classic film A Hard Day's Night was released in mid-1964 to great critical acclaim. By this time, their musical style was moving away from the early "Merseybeat" sound they made famous and into more subdued, inventive music.

The differences in the compositional styles of John Lennon and Paul McCartney were beginning to become more obvious around 1965. It should be noted that, even though almost all the Beatles' songs were written by Lennon-McCartney, their contributions were often quite different. Lennon wrote the music, while McCartney handled the lyrics. The Beatles' songs were written in a variety of styles, often with different themes and moods. This diversity was one of the key factors in their success. The Beatles' music was not just about love and relationships, but also about politics, social issues, and personal growth. Their songs were a reflection of their time, and they continue to be listened to and enjoyed today.
songs are credited to “Lennon/ McCartney,” there were few true collaborations. Some of these songs were written wholly by only one of the songwriting duo. Todd Compton gives a full analysis of the Lennon/ McCartney songs and who actually wrote them. “Norwegian Wood” and “Nowhere Man,” with their simple yet memorable melodies and occasionally cynical lyrics, were written by Lennon. “Eleanor Rigby” was written by McCartney. “Tomorrow Never Knows,” the haunting song that closes Revolver, was a product of Lennon, as were “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” rumored to be an LSD song. These songs recall drug trips and psychedelic dreams with their off-the-wall lyrics and dizzying accompaniments. Even an untrained ear can discern the differences between the jaunty, lyrical, dance-hall vaudevillian style of McCartney’s songs and the “trippy,” zooming melodies and Carrollian lyrics of Lennon.

After Help!, their second movie, and the album soundtrack, “the Beatles got ‘mature’: less adrenaline, more subtlety” (Pond 131). Rubber Soul was released in December 1965, and contained music that was a bit more experimental than previous releases, due to the fact that the Beatles were able to invest more time and thought into their recordings than ever before (Lewisohn 15, 1996). With “Nowhere Man,” the Beatles became more like Bob Dylan in their lyrics (Roxon 34) and the close harmonies proved to be something fresh for audiences:

Doesn’t have a point of view
Knows not where he’s going to
Isn’t he a bit like you and me?
Nowhere man, please listen
You don’t know what you’re missing
Nowhere man, the world is at your command (“Nowhere Man”).

George Harrison’s interests in Indian music and his role in introducing the sitar to American pop audiences. Rubber Soul thoroughly changed the Beatles’ sound and a reflective maturity crept into the entire album together. On this album: “Norwegian Wood” to introduce the sitar with Indian audiences. Rubber Soul started the Beatles’ move to adding electronic effects and adding an entire sound to Revolver, the Beatles moved away from the Beatles’ pop influence, in a traditional manner. “Love You To,” another song with Indian instruments, in a traditional interpretation of Rigby,” the first pop song to have a cleft opening, further demonstrates the Beatles’ musical content and musical creativity. The aptly placed; “Tomorrow Never Knows” psychedelic accompaniment and words was a definite hint of what was to come:

Turn off your mind, relax and float
It is not dying, it is not dying
Lay down all thought, surrender to
It is shining, it is shining . . .
But listen to the colour of your drea

It is not living, it is not living (“To These songs and ones that followed were “boy-girl romantic themes” of their early explorations. A highly adventurous pop record, and est “recording-studio auteurs” (Loder 52), and unwilling—to perform any of the sequent American tour, which was to be

August 29, 1966 was to be the Beatles’ Candlestick Park in San Francisco. With August 29, 1966 being the Beatles’ final American tour, which was to be
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George Harrison’s interests in Indian music helped the song
“Norwegian Wood” to introduce the sitar, an Indian instrument, to
American pop audiences. Rubber Soul offered a new refinement to
the Beatles’ sound and a reflective maturity that seemed to tie the
entire album together. On this album and its follow-up, August
1966’s Revolver, the Beatles moved away from simplicity, experi-
menting with electronic effects and added instruments in the stu-
dio, moving in different stylistic directions (Gammond 46).
Revolver sported “Love You To,” another Harrison composition
with Indian instruments, in a traditional Indian style. “Eleanor
Rigby,” the first pop song to have a classical string-only accompa-
niment, further demonstrates the Beatles’ ability to grow in both lyrical
content and musical creativity. The last song on Revolver is
aptly placed; “Tomorrow Never Knows,” a swirling song with a
psychedelic accompaniment and words that could recall a drug trip,
was a definite hint of what was to come.

Turn off your mind, relax and float down-stream
It is not dying, it is not dying
Lay down all thought, surrender to the void
It is shining, it is shining . . .
But listen to the colour of your dreams
It is not living, it is not living (“Tomorrow Never Knows”).

These songs and ones that followed were a step away from the
“boy-girl romantic themes” of their earlier songs. Revolver was a
highly adventurous pop record, and established the Beatles as
“recording-studio auteurs” (Loder 52). In fact, they were unable—and
unwilling—to perform any of the Revolver songs on their sub-
sequent American tour, which was to be their last.

August 29, 1966 was to be the Beatles’ last official concert, in
Candlestick Park in San Francisco. With the relief of no longer hav-
ing to tour incessantly came more inventiveness in the studio, and

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more time to produce an album. As an example, the Beatles’ first British album, *Please Please Me*, took 585 minutes of studio time; *Sgt. Pepper* would take 700 hours (Lewisohn 4, 1987). Fueled by the Beach Boys’ 1965 album *Pet Sounds*, which introduced the theremin into American pop music with “Good Vibrations,” and the threat of *Smile*, a work-in-progress by Brian Wilson that was reportedly the greatest thing that had happened in rock to date (Roxon 34), the Beatles went back into the studio to work on new material. Fortunately for the Beatles, *Smile* never made it out of the studio.

The studio sessions resulting in the *Sgt. Pepper* album began in November 1966 (Loder 52). The first song in these sessions was “Strawberry Fields Forever,” a Lennon song that recalls both a Liverpool orphanage and a dreamy, trippy feel.

Let me take you down
‘cos I’m going to strawberry fields
Nothing is real
And nothing to get hung about . . .
Always, no sometimes, think it’s me
But, you know, I know when it’s a dream
I think I know, I mean, er, yes
But it’s all wrong

That is, I think I disagree (“Strawberry Fields Forever”). This was also the Beatles’ first use of a Mellotron, a forerunner to the synthesizers of today. The first attempts at recording this song resulted in a heavy rock background. A later attempt yielded an accompaniment of cellos and trumpets. Lennon liked both versions, and asked producer George Martin for a beginning of the first with the end of the second. This problem: the two versions were in two different tempos. Fortunately, the slower version compared to the faster one. Martin made a reel-control tape machine, and slowed one version up to make the two versions meet in tempo and in the same key (Martin 199-201). By the time these three songs were recorded, the band’s label, was pressuring them for a single. “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “Penny Lane” were released as a combination of Takes seven and eight (Lewisohn 30, 1996), and by listening closely the second half of the song sounds just a bit slower.

Next, the group tackled “When I’m Sixty-Four,” a song that evoked the sounds and attitudes of old London. “Penny Lane,” another McCartney tune, was accomplished with a B-flat piccolo trumpet, like the one McCartney used in a recent performance of J.S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto No. 201). By the time these three songs were recorded and released, the band’s label, was pressuring them for a single. “When I’m Sixty-Four” and “Penny Lane” were released as a combination of Takes seven and eight (Lewisohn 30, 1996), and by listening closely the second half of the song sounds just a bit slower.

Work resumed in February 1967 on the single. More songs were recorded: “Lovely Rita,” “Good Morning, Good Morning,” “She’s Leaving Home,” “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” The theme of the album did not come until after the single was released. Lennon even said in an interview that any

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1The theremin is a musical instrument invented by Lev Theremin in the early 20th century. It resembles a television set, and is played by moving the hands around it, playing the sound waves. It produces an eerie sound.
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down 

strawberry fields 

get hungabout . . . 

sometimes, think it's me 

I know when it's a dream 

I mean, er, yes 

agree (“Strawberry Fields Forever”). 

The Beatles’ first use of a Mellotron, a forerunner to 
the instrument invented by Lev Theremin in 
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accompaniment of cellos and trumpets. Lennon decided that he 
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ferent tempos. Fortunately, the slower version was a semitone flat 
compared to the faster one. Martin made adjustments on a vari-
able-control tape machine, and slowed one down and sped the 
other up to make the two versions meet in the middle, at the same 
tempo and in the same key (Martin 199-201). This third version 
was released as a combination of Takes seven and twenty-six 
(Lewisohn 30, 1996), and by listening closely, one can tell that the 
second half of the song sounds just a bit slowed down. 

Next, the group tackled “When I’m Sixty-Four,” a McCartney 
song that evoked the sounds and attitudes of vaudeville. “Penny 
Lane,” another McCartney tune, was accented by the sounds of a 
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recent performance of J.S. Bach’s Brandenburg Concerti (Martin 
201). By the time these three songs were recorded, EMI, the 
band’s label, was pressuring them for a single. “Strawberry Fields 
Forever” and “Penny Lane” were released as a double A-sided 
record, and were therefore left off the Sgt. Pepper album. This sin-
gle displayed the Beatles on a new plane (Loder 52). Beatles engi-

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exception of “Sgt. Pepper” and “With a Little Help From My Friends” could have been on any album (The Beatles Anthology). McCartney suddenly got the idea of the album being by Sergeant Pepper and his Lonely Hearts Club Band. This idea eventually evolved into the Beatles’ development of the first-ever concept album. The album was to be a concert by Sergeant Pepper’s band, and the cover art by Peter Blake reflects this: on the cover, the “concert” is over, and the band is posing with concertgoers, people that the Beatles, Peter Blake, and photographer Michael Cooper chose for the shoot. The cover was to evoke a sense of community, with Sgt. Pepper’s Band surrounded by their friends. The album begins:

We’re Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
We hope you will enjoy the show
Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band
Sit back and let the evening go (“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”).

One of the most remarkable things about the Sgt. Pepper album was the innovations in technology and recording that it produced. The methods used in 1967 to produce this album now seem quite primitive. No synthesizers (except for the Mellotron) or sampling machines were used. The equipment they had was a four-track machine, similar to what is now called a “portable studio” and cost around $500 in 1987 (Loder 54). George Martin produced a masterful work, considering the simple equipment. He sometimes linked up two four-track recorders to make an eight-track machine. In the recording of “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!”, a Lennon song written about an 1843 circus poster (Lewisohn 35, 1996), Lennon wanted a swirling cloud of circus-type music in waltz time. Martin, Lennon, and another man achieved the hurdy-gurdy sound with a Hammond organ, a Wurlitzer organ, and a huge bass harmonica. Due to Martin’s lack of speed control, he played an octave lower, and slower on their parts, and sped up later. Martin also used Victorian steam organs to add to the sound of a tape of his own. To ensure that none of the identifiable, the Victorian tape was cut into the air, and put back together in random order, in a potpourri of carousel noises, and when previous tape, it gave the overall impression of a circus.

Sgt. Pepper has been hailed as the Beatles’ first concept album (“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” album is probably the best example of the famous chord in “A Day in the Life” fades out. This 20,000 hertz note was put just to annoy listeners’ dogs. After fade out, nonsense chatter stretches into the tape players without auto-change or a manual start; would keep playing the run-out groove through silence, isn’t he? We were appreciating the Beatles decided to record something in the Stockhausen, those kind of people... We silence, isn’t he? We were appreciating the nonsense chatter of Sgt. Pepper—the nonsense chatter leno.

Perhaps the most frequently talked about is “A Day in the Life.” It appears on the Sgt. Pepper (reprise),” which is fittingly the encore. This song can be thought of as the saved for last, to keep the audience won-
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parts, and sped up later. Martin also used recordings of old
Victorian steam organs to add to the sound, and dubbed them onto
a tape of his own. To ensure that none of the recordings were
identifiable, the Victorian tape was cut into foot-long slices, tossed
into the air, and put back together in random order. This resulted
in a potpourri of carousel noises, and when put together with the
previous tape, it gave the overall impression of the sounds of a cir-

Sgt. Pepper has been hailed as the Beatles’ funniest album
(“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” 46). The end of the
album is probably the best example of their humor. After the
amous chord in “A Day in the Life” fades into silence, a dog whis-
le is blown. This 20,000 hertz note was put at the end of the
album just to annoy listeners’ dogs. After this annoying note fades
out, nonsense chatter stretches into the run-out groove. On record
players without auto-change or a manual return device, the record
would keep playing the run-out groove until it was stopped. The
Beatles decided to record something in this space, a little loop of
conversation. McCartney once said, “We were into Cage and
Stockhausen, those kind of people... Well, Cage is appreciating
silence, isn’t he? We were appreciating the run-out groove!” (“Sgt.
Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” 46). Unfortunately, this does
not have the same effect on the cassette tape or compact disc releas-
es of Sgt. Pepper—the nonsense chatter lasts only about ten seconds.

Perhaps the most frequently talked about song from Sgt. Pepper
is “A Day in the Life.” It appears on the album after the “Sgt.
Pepper (reprise),” which is fittingly the end of Sgt. Pepper’s con-
cert. This song can be thought of as their encore—the best song,
saved for last, to keep the audience wondering what would happen

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at their next “concert.” This was the song that shocked listeners. It was totally unexpected—even from the Beatles. *Time* called it “the most disturbingly beautiful song the group has ever produced” (“The Beatles Triumphant” 61). This song is actually two separate songs: the slow beginning and end verses are a product of Lennon, and the up-tempo middle section is McCartney’s (Martin 208). Lennon’s part was a dreamy, simple melody, with odd lyrics about news stories that he had read:

I read the news today, oh boy
About a lucky man who made the grade
And though the news was rather sad
Well, I just had to laugh
I saw the photograph
He blew his mind out in a car
He didn’t notice that the lights had changed
A crowd of people stood and stared . . . (“A Day in the Life”) McCartney’s contribution fit in, according to Martin (208), as a dream sequence to this song. The tempo and mood are contrasting: Lennon’s is slow, McCartney’s is upbeat and typical of the vaudeville dance-hall style he had adopted as of late.

Woke up, got out of bed
Dragged a comb across my head
Found my way upstairs and drank a cup
And looking up, I noticed I was late.
Found my coat, and grabbed my hat
Made the bus in seconds flat
Found my way upstairs and had a smoke
And somebody spoke and I went into a dream . . . (“A Day in the Life”).

Startling sonic delights fill this song. Lennon’s first part is separated from McCartney’s by “the crescendo,” a massive swirl of sound from a full orchestra. Actually, it was only with the tape dubbed slightly slower to give the orchestra (Martin 211-212). The instructions were different from anything they had ever read, and an ensemble musician is taught to listen to everything. Martin wanted them to do just the opposite. For this part of the score, the lowest note possible was notated. Twenty-four bars later, the horns written. A squiggly line was all that appeared. The musicians were instructed to go at their own tempo; the lowest note to the fortissimo highest note. The musicians, dubbed to “double” the size of the orchestra were given to the players, Martin and the faders as hard as possible. In the control room, the faders, which control the volume from the possible. As the chords faded away, Emerick flipped the faders up to full blast. The people in the sound booth, three times, building up a massive sound for the miraculous chord was a fitting end to “A Day in the Life.”

Even more memorable is the chord he called the crescendo, at the end of the song. This chord that rings on for forty-five seconds. This trickery from Martin, Emerick, and all four pianists, one upright and two grands—were used because one upright and two grands—were used because were given to the players, Martin and the faders, which control the volume from the knobs as much as possible. As the chords faded away, Emerick flipped the faders up to full blast. The people in the sound booth, three times, building up a massive sound for a chord which *Sgt. Pepper* will be remembered. The challenging album could be recorded on what machine is astonishing. The album still ho
This was the song that shocked listeners. It was the song that shocked listeners. *Time* called it "the most beautiful song the group has ever produced" (Martin 208). This song is actually two separate songs. The opening and end verses are a product of Lennon, while the middle section is McCartney's (Martin 208). The dreamy, simple melody, with odd lyrics about a dream come true, is actually two separate songs. The tempo and mood are contrasted by the closing section. McCartney's is upbeat and typical of the style he had adopted as of late.

The technical innovations are one of the things for which *Sgt. Pepper* will be remembered. That such a sonically challenging album could be recorded on what was basically a four-track machine is astonishing. The album still holds up today as one of the Beatles' best, according to Martin (209-212). The instructions given to the orchestra were different from anything they had ever heard. A good ensemble musician is taught to listen to everyone in the ensemble. Martin wanted them to do just the opposite. At the beginning of this part of the score, the lowest note possible on each instrument was notated. Twenty-four bars later, the highest possible note was written. A squiggly line was all that appeared in between. The musicians were instructed to go at their own pace from the pianissimo to the fortissimo highest note. This effect from the musicians, dubbed to "double" the size of the orchestra, created what is probably the most famous crescendo in rock music (Martin 209-212).

Even more memorable is the chord heard after the second crescendo, at the end of the song. This chord is a loud piano chord that rings on for forty-five seconds. This required more studio trickery from Martin, Emerick, and all four Beatles. Three pianos—one upright and two grands—were used by five men. The chords were given to the players, Martin and the Beatles, and all hit the chords as hard as possible. In the control room, Emerick had the faders, which control the volume from the studio, down as low as possible. As the chords faded away, Emerick gradually turned the faders up to full blast. The people in the studio had to be very quiet, as the microphones were very live. This method was used three times, building up a massive sound from the pianos. This miraculous chord was a fitting end to "A Day in the Life."

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Even more memorable is the chord heard after the second crescendo, at the end of the song. This chord is a loud piano chord that rings on for forty-five seconds. This required more studio trickery from Martin, Emerick, and all four Beatles. Three pianos—one upright and two grands—were used by five men. The chords were given to the players, Martin and the Beatles, and all hit the chords as hard as possible. In the control room, Emerick had the faders, which control the volume from the studio, down as low as possible. As the chords faded away, Emerick gradually turned the faders up to full blast. The people in the studio had to be very quiet, as the microphones were very live. This method was used three times, building up a massive sound from the pianos. This miraculous chord was a fitting end to "A Day in the Life."

Clearly, the technical innovations are one of the things for which *Sgt. Pepper* will be remembered. That such a sonically challenging album could be recorded on what was basically a four-track machine is astonishing. The album still holds up today as one of the Beatles' best, according to Martin (209-212). The instructions given to the orchestra were different from anything they had ever heard. A good ensemble musician is taught to listen to everyone in the ensemble. Martin wanted them to do just the opposite. At the beginning of this part of the score, the lowest note possible on each instrument was notated. Twenty-four bars later, the highest possible note was written. A squiggly line was all that appeared in between. The musicians were instructed to go at their own pace from the pianissimo to the fortissimo highest note. This effect from the musicians, dubbed to “double” the size of the orchestra, created what is probably the most famous crescendo in rock music (Martin 209-212).
the best albums of all time. However, it should not be passed off as a “sudden innovation.” The music and lyrics evolved over a period of two years and three albums. The advances realized in Sgt. Pepper aided the Beatles in their further explorations of sound in the studio.

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