

“Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”—The Beatles (1967)

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Essay by Bob Spitz (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



The Beatles

It doesn't matter when--whether it was 20 years ago today or when you're sixty-four—"Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" remains perhaps the quintessence of rock 'n' roll artistry. The album marked a cultural and artistic watershed for the Beatles in 1967, as their image shifted from one of lovable mop-tops, which they despised, to a creative force wired by drugs, disaffection, self-exploration, and a mandate to push the musical envelope as far as it would go.

The idea for the album was Paul McCartney's; the goal: to extinguish the trappings of Beatlemania. "Let's not be ourselves," he proposed to his bandmates, "Let's develop alter egos...to put some distance between the Beatles and the public." They would be the fictional Sgt. Pepper's band; the music would be *made* by the Beatles--but *not* the Beatles--a performance within a performance. A concept album, from beginning to end, with songs that melted into each other, without the standard three-second pause between tracks. Completely novel!

George Harrison and John Lennon hated the idea. It was hard for them to grasp the uniqueness of what Paul envisioned. George, distracted as he was at the time by Eastern and mystical philosophies, was especially skeptical, thinking it was gimmicky at best. Paul's proposal sounded "mad" to him, as though the Beatles were drifting backward, into silly Fab Four territory. But Paul was persuasive--and obstinate. As 1966 lapsed into 1967, the four men were eager to launch a new studio project, and "Sgt. Pepper's" was their best hope of meeting deadline issues.

"Sgt. Pepper's" took the Beatles five-and-a-half months to make at EMI's Abbey Road studios, a staggering, unheard-of amount of time, without precedent in the annals of pop recording. Never had the group enjoyed such a luxury of time to record. Ideas that might have been polished off in a day or two were turned inside out to see where they might lead. The studio, according to their producer George Martin, became a creative "playground," but a laboratory was more like it.

The music on the album is a synthesis of the group's musical influences--early rock 'n' roll, music hall, classical, avant-garde, psychedelia, Indian fusion, big band, and pop--with cheers

from a canned audience that George Martin laid in, lifted from a Beatles concert at the Hollywood Bowl. Framed by the song “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” which opens the album and introduces its headliner Billy Shears, and the epic “A Day in the Life,” the songs convey a blithe, campy eccentricity, celebrating both show business and the shattering of conventions.

Collectively, as a concept, the songs don’t cohere. There is nothing thematic that knits them together. Other than the title track, John later said, “every other song could have been on any other album.” But individually, there are many heavy-hitters that go toward defining the Beatles’ legacy. From the top, Ringo delivers one of the record’s signature highlights, “With a Little Help from My Friends,” in his droll tenor. It’s an unforgettable frothy confection that segues into one of the album’s most memorable tracks, “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.” Inspired by a watercolor his son brought home from school, John’s song is a phantasmagoric landscape of surreal images--newspaper taxis, kaleidoscope eyes, and marmalade skies--draped in a trancelike musical sleeve that reflected his regimen of drug-taking. Coincidentally or not, overzealous fans deciphered the letters in the title to spell LSD.

Working long days at Abbey Road, the album grew up and around the Beatles. Songs like “Fixing a Hole,” “Good Morning, Good Morning,” “Getting Better,” and “She’s Leaving Home,” bits and pieces of each written during sessions in the studio, showcase extraordinary technical effects that caromed around their heads. Hardly a note was left intact without dissecting and manipulating their abstract properties. On one of the most enterprising tracks, “Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite,” they created a fairground calliope sound with a harmonium, various organ textures, and tape loops of antique instruments. A lot of the album’s joyous mayhem is evident on “Lovely Rita,” one of Paul’s contributions, with a whimsical lyric, honky-tonk piano, and kazoo orchestra fashioned from combs and tissue paper. “When I’m Sixty-Four,” a corny, “rooty-tooty variety style” number Paul wrote when he was sixteen and played during punch-ups at the Cavern, emerged as perhaps one of “Sgt. Pepper’s” most celebrated tracks.

But nothing prepared listeners for the album’s grand finale, “A Day in the Life.” John had composed the song, lifting random images from two newspaper stories--one tragic, one inane--that had caught his attention. The gorgeous melody, as stark as it is soulful, stands as one of the Beatles’ finest accomplishments. The “woke up, fell out of bed” middle sequence transforms the song into a chipper commentary which explodes into a rolling 24 bar interlude played without music by 40 members of the London Philharmonic--an “orchestral orgasm,” according to producer George Martin. To cap it off, the Beatles created a “gigantic piano chord”--ten hands clamped down on an E chord along a single piano keyboard that sustained for just over a minute. It was a magnificent, stirring effect, as conclusive as it was dramatic. No one can argue with the song’s beauty or its astonishing power. Moreover, it revealed the Beatles’ skill and growing confidence as craftsmen--virtuosos--in the studio.

A breakthrough album deserved a cover worthy of the music, and the Beatles delivered a doozy. “Sgt. Pepper’s” demanded a bold departure: not merely a cardboard slipcase, but something fresh, entertaining, experimental--radical. Instead of a one-dimensional surface, they proposed opening it like a book. Working with pop artist Peter Blake, the Beatles, dressed in day-glo

soldiers uniforms, posed on a bandstand and--with the aid of photography, cutouts and waxworks--staged a crowd of their heroes behind them, any obscure face that tickled their fancy: William Burroughs, Mae West, Aldous Huxley, Groucho Marx, Magritte, Fred Astaire, the Marquis de Sade, Edgar Allen Poe, Shirley Temple, and the Maharishi, among others. The cover was phenomenal, a tour de force, as identifiable as what lay inside.

For all the work that went into it, "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" was a cultural and artistic watershed, as "Time" gushed: "a historic departure in the progress of music--any music." For the fans, the Beatles had given them something to play and ponder; less yeah-yeah-yeah, more sophistication and cross-rhythms. It ignited a whole new type of Beatlemania, not powered by screams and swoons as before, but rather a kind of reverence in which every note the Beatles played was analyzed and dissected for greater meaning.

Looking back, it is difficult to name another album that had such a transformative effect on the sound of rock 'n' roll. Instantly familiar, universally embraced, "Sgt. Pepper's" remains a work for the ages.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.