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# 'Nothing You Can See That Isn't Shown': the album covers of the Beatles

IAN INGLIS

## Introduction

From their release in the 1960s, the LPs of the Beatles have dominated the various selections and lists which routinely purport to identify the most popular/most influential/best albums of the popular music era. Throughout each subsequent decade, the verdicts expressed in audience polls, in critics' choices and in the comments of other musicians have served to effectively maintain and enhance the group's reputation.

There is, however, an additional way – often alluded to, but rarely investigated – in which the albums of the Beatles are celebrated. Almost without exception, the album covers themselves have been seen as groundbreaking in their visual and aesthetic properties, have been congratulated for their innovative and imaginative designs, have been credited with providing an early impetus for the expansion of the graphic design industry into the imagery of popular music, and have been seen as largely responsible for allowing the connections between art and pop to be made explicit.

Now may be a particularly opportune moment to pursue in a little more depth these, and other related, issues. The nature of the relationship between popular music and its traditional visual conventions is ambiguous. On the one hand, the performance of much live music relies on the accompaniment of startling (and expensive) visual accessories. Performers such as the Rolling Stones, Michael Jackson, U2 and Madonna employ increasingly complex and ostentatious sets, costumes and special effects to enhance (some would say, to disguise) their music. On the other hand, the all but complete commercial replacement of the LP by the much smaller CD has led many to lament the decline, even the disappearance of album art: 'Just like the 78 rpm record, the record album became a relic of the past. The room for cover art was reduced from 12 to 5 inches while the price of albums almost doubled.' (Ochs 1996, p. 495)

By concentrating on the aesthetics of the Beatles' album covers, I hope to be able to offer some observations which may be applicable to an investigation of the dynamics of album art in general. At the same time, I believe that such an examination might allow an overdue reassessment of the revolutionary qualities they have long been reputed to possess. First, however, it is necessary to remind ourselves of what it is that album covers actually *do*.

The first and basic role of album covers has been to ensure the *protection* of the recording they contain. In the early years of the twentieth century, records were

distributed and sold with no packaging or with a paper sleeve. Cardboard began to replace paper in the 1930s, but the combination of a paper inner within a card sleeve was not achieved until Columbia's introduction of the long-playing record in 1948. With occasional variations – the gatefold sleeve, the boxed set – this has remained the standard form of packaging.

Secondly, album covers are an *advertisement* for the recordings they contain. In this, they reflect the conventions of other media forms, notably the news headline and/or lead, which act as an enticement to the reader to continue reading; and the magazine advertisement or television commercial, which similarly seek to attract and retain the consumer's attention.

Thirdly, album covers function as an *accompaniment* to the music. This may range from the inclusion of a simple photograph of the performer to which the listener may refer when playing the LP, to the reproduction of the album's lyrics which can be followed, studied and sung. In this way, the sleeve is not a superfluous thing to be discarded during the act of listening, but an integral component of the listening which assists and expands the musical experience.

Fourthly, there is an important sense in which an album sleeve can be seen as a *commodity* in its own right. Like other forms of commercial art – the poster, the print – the sleeve itself may be the object of purchase: 'For a fanatical few, the cover can be everything. "I may buy something purely on the cover," writes designer Neville Brody "and throw the record away".' (Sorger 1988, p. 56) Alternatively, sleeves may be coveted as trophies in a collection: Roger Dean, Stanley Mouse and Derek Riggs are among those designers whose work is increasingly sought out in this way by collectors.

## The album covers of the Beatles

As the commercial success of the group extended from Britain around the world, the titles, contents and packaging of their album releases were adapted for the variety of markets in which they were promoted. In the UK the group released thirteen albums (on Parlophone and Apple) during their recording career from 1962 to 1970; by contrast, twenty-three albums were released in the US (on Vee Jay, Capitol, United Artists and Apple) over the same period. When that number is multiplied globally, increased by three decades of re-releases, compilations of old material and anthologies of 'new' material, distorted by an abundance of unofficial or bootleg recordings, and complicated by the occasional banned or withdrawn cover,<sup>1</sup> it quickly becomes apparent that there are, in fact, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Beatles album covers in existence.

I shall confine my discussion to the twelve original and official albums<sup>2</sup> released in the UK:

- (1) *Please Please Me* (Parlophone), March 1963
- (2) *With The Beatles* (Parlophone), November 1963
- (3) *A Hard Day's Night* (Parlophone), July 1964
- (4) *Beatles For Sale* (Parlophone), December 1964
- (5) *Help!* (Parlophone), August 1965
- (6) *Rubber Soul* (Parlophone), December 1965

- (7) *Revolver* (Parlophone), August 1966
- (8) *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (Parlophone), June 1967
- (9) *The Beatles* (Apple), November 1968
- (10) *Yellow Submarine* (Apple), January 1969
- (11) *Abbey Road* (Apple), September 1969
- (12) *Let It Be* (Apple), May 1970

While other performers have released many more album titles (the Grateful Dead, the Beach Boys, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Elton John), and in spite of the fact that there are a large number of other albums whose individual sales overshadow those achieved by any of the Beatles' LPs (*Saturday Night Fever*, Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours*, Carole King's *Tapestry*, Michael Jackson's *Thriller* and the Eagles' *Greatest Hits*), none have received the consistent and positive acclaim for their artwork enjoyed by the Beatles:

Record sleeves . . . functioned as the visual signposts of the 'dynamic decade'. Periods and events between 1963 and 1970 can be recalled by reference to particular Beatles album covers, as clear a beacon as that of their actual music. The Beatles' album art – like their music – was highly innovative, setting the standards that others followed during the 60s and since. (Evans 1984A, p. 24).

Evaluations of this kind invite an examination of the group's album covers from three positions. The first is the assumption that the covers provided a physical link between the group's visual image and its recordings, which in some way reflected the Beatles' current musical and professional identity. The second is the claim that these covers became highly influential within the popular music community, and that ideas and styles derived from them were to be rapidly disseminated and imitated. The third is the proposition that the album covers themselves can be subjected to a textual analysis yielding rich insights into the ways in which they invite or allow the consumer to decipher them.

### Image and identity

Angus McBean's photograph of the Beatles looking down the stairway at EMI House in Manchester Square, London, which was used as the cover for *Please Please Me*, locates the group precisely and predictably within the conventions of the British popular music industry in the early 1960s. It exemplifies what Thorgeron has called 'the personality cover' (Thorgeron 1989, p. 10). Identically dressed in suits and ties and smiling happily into the camera, they personify the contemporary pop star – bright, breezy, young and handsome. Following the traditions of the era, their two hit singles are named followed by the promise of 'twelve other songs'. In early 1963, of course, EMI was unaware that the Beatles were anything more than an attractive pop group with a Number One single – they were still unknown outside the UK, Beatlemania was yet to emerge, and their two significant television appearances of 1963 – on *Sunday Night At The London Palladium* in October and *The Royal Command Performance* in November – were months in the future.

But by the release of *With The Beatles*, these events, and others, had taken place, and distinct and recognisable images of the group had begun to coalesce around the identity of the Fab Four, Merseyside's mop-tops. Its cover, and those of the subsequent four albums, were photographed by Robert Freeman and served to

consolidate that identity. While the Beatles spearheaded the British Invasion of the USA in 1964–5, taking the British popular music industry from its peripheral imitation of American styles to a creative dominance of global markets, the musical and visual appeal of the group's casual, accessible and playful image was unequivocally emphasised and maintained through the covers of *With The Beatles*, *A Hard Day's Night* (which reflected EMI and Brian Epstein's agreement with the traditional pop star trajectory from records to movies), *Beatles For Sale* and *Help!* (the group's second movie). The four covers provide a striking example of the correspondence between music and visual packaging which can be achieved by 'the sleeve as the semblance of sound' (Kemper 1996, p. 14).

The first disruption to the effervescence of the Fab Four, which suggested that both the group and its music might be prepared to explore alternatives to the Top Ten and the conventions of the three-minute pop song, came with *Rubber Soul*. It is the first of the group's covers from which the word 'Beatles' is absent. The four Beatles are still there, as recognisable as ever, but three of the group choose to ignore the photographer, looking away from him and the audience, their thoughts elsewhere. In doing so, they assert a newly discovered independence. Only Lennon returns the camera's gaze. As on the covers of *With The Beatles* and *Beatles For Sale*, there are no smiling faces, but here the challenge – both to the audience and to the conventions of the album cover portrait – is increased by the deliberately stretched and distorted faces of the Beatles. Evans has claimed a connection between the album cover, its songs and the group's growing immersion in drugs: 'the image distortion of the picture hinted at chemical visions both sinister and sublime' (Evans 1984A, p. 28). The photographer himself assigns more general causes to the disintegration of the Beatles' familiar image:

The distorted effect in the photo was a reflection of the changing shape of their lives. They had begun their careers as musicians, but the wide range of people and ideas that they had encountered, their financial success, and the new privacy of their homes encouraged them to take up more varied and personal interests. As a group they were still the Beatles, but as individuals they were experiencing a subtle chemistry of change. The direction in which they were moving was inwards. (Freeman 1996, p. 15)

The cover of *Rubber Soul* may have been an early clue to the new directions open to the Beatles, whose unmatched commercial success had by now guaranteed them a degree of unprecedented professional autonomy. However, John Lennon's comments in March 1966 in which he appeared to claim that the Beatles enjoyed a greater current popularity than Jesus Christ, and the group's decision in August 1966 to stop touring in order to concentrate on studio work, were merely the first of many events which signalled their abrupt departure from the world of the pop star and a willingness to explore directions and debates that went far beyond conventional assumptions about the activities of young musicians (see Inglis 1995) and which were to define the remaining years of their career.

One of the more striking and evident changes was in the nature of the subjects the Beatles chose to explore in their subsequent albums. Of the eighty-three tracks on the six albums released from 1963 to 1965 (*Please Please Me* to *Rubber Soul*), seventy-six, or ninety-one per cent, are love songs. Of the ninety-two tracks on the six albums released from 1966 to 1970 (*Revolver* to *Let It Be*), only sixteen, or fifteen per cent, can be conventionally described as love songs. The group's shift from the traditional and predictable theme of popular music to the construction and performance of songs whose lyrics consider such topics as the payment of taxes

and life in a submarine, has led several critics to comment on the significant distance of *Revolver* from '... the conventions of commercialised pop music. Halfway between ritual and art, it's both verbally and musically an extraordinary breakthrough.' (Mellers 1973, p. 69) No less innovative is the album cover itself, which for the first time in the group's career, eschewed the conventions of the personality photograph(s) in favour of a montage of small photographs of the four Beatles variously peeping through larger line drawings of their heads. It was designed and drawn by artist and musician Klaus Voorman, whom the Beatles had first met during their performances in Hamburg in the early 1960s. The similarity of Hertsgaard's observation that the 'songs on *Revolver* were performed in ways that had never before been realised in pop music ... the lyrical sophistication of their songs also reached new heights' (Hertsgaard 1995, p. 176) and Evans' assertion that its cover 'was far removed from anything the Beatles – or any other recording artists – had attempted before' (Evans 1984A, p. 28) does support the view that with this, their seventh album, the Beatles had achieved a remarkable visual–musical correspondence. The incongruities and idiosyncrasies of the cover in which the (unnamed) Beatles reject any notions of uniformity (of location, pose or activity) were a preparation for the varieties and innovations of the music inside it.

*Please Please Me* had been recorded in early 1963 in one day at a cost of £400. By contrast, *Sgt Pepper* took more than seven hundred hours to record before its release in 1967 and cost £25,000. The cover design alone cost more than £1500. Almost everything about the project indicated the ease with which the Beatles felt able to develop the initiatives of *Revolver* in both musical and design terms. It was the first record not to be banded into individual tracks. It was the first album whose inner sleeve was not just a white paper envelope but part of the overall package design. It was the first record to have the song lyrics printed in full on the rear of the album cover. It was the first album to contain an additional cardboard sheet of cut-out memorabilia. It also, incidentally, contained the first Beatles song to be banned by the BBC – 'A Day In The Life'.

Reactions to its release showed that the Beatles had promoted the cultural significance of popular music to a level unimaginable at the start of the decade. Kenneth Tynan claimed that the record represented 'a decisive moment in the history of Western civilisation' (Dowlding 1989, p. 161). Timothy Leary believed that it compressed 'the evolutionary development of musicology and much of the history of Eastern and Western sound in a new tympanic complexity' (Dowlding 1989, p. 162). Mellers has judged that it marked 'the climacteric point in the Beatles' career, their definite break with the pop music industry ... henceforth the world they've created is *sui generis*, bringing in its own criteria' (Mellers 1973, p. 101). And MacDonald has suggested that 'the psychic shiver which *Sgt Pepper* sent through the world was nothing less than a cinematic dissolve from one *Zeitgeist* to another' (MacDonald 1995, p. 198). The majority of these, and many similar, comments are responses to the music of *Sgt Pepper*. Countless interviews, numerous articles and several books<sup>3</sup> have devoted themselves to examinations of the bewildering variety of styles, themes and vocabularies that characterise what is arguably the most celebrated album in the history of post-war popular music (a word which recurs in many of these accounts is 'kaleidoscopic').

No less significant has been the attention paid to its cover, whose extravagance and complexity amply and consciously reflect its music. 'The Beatles and their entourage took exceptional pains to create for the *Sgt Pepper* jacket a collage as

colorful, imaginative and intriguing as the record itself' (Schaffner 1977, p. 81). As the Beatles reinvent and introduce themselves on the album's opening track not as the Beatles now, but as the members of Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, so too the cover confirms the new identities. Surrounded by an audience of around sixty of the group's friends, heroes and mentors (including the early Beatles themselves), wearing the satin military style uniforms of a Northern brass band, holding brass and wind instruments in place of guitars, and posed behind a bass drum on which the new band's name is proudly displayed, the Beatles are encouraging us to re-evaluate our assumptions about who they are. But in fact there is a surfeit of visual clues – the references to competitor-colleagues Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, a portable television, flowers that spell the word 'Beatles' on what appears to be a fresh grave, a row of marijuana plants, the threefold presence of child star Shirley Temple, a figure of an Indian goddess – whose impulse is amplified when the graphic design of the cover is assessed in conjunction with the musical design of the record, '... among the most varied collections of songs anyone had ever pieced together, a crazy quilt of rock 'n' roll, sound effects, electronic noodling, and Indian, folk, baroque, classical, and music-hall influences' (Schaffner 1977, p. 77). The cover was designed by Peter Blake and Jann Haworth, and photographed by Michael Cooper. Their involvement left little doubt that 'Beatles album sleeves, in the mind of the group itself, as much as in the opinion of ... fans and critics, had assumed the status of Works of Art.' (Evans 1984B, p. 96) Producer George Martin believes that it accomplished its task precisely and efficiently: 'their artwork on the sleeve complements the music inside it perfectly; both are types of collage' (Martin 1994, p. 116).

By the appearance of the group's next album some sixteen months later, three events had impacted upon the trajectory of the Beatles' career. The first was the death, in August 1967, of their manager Brian Epstein; the second was their introduction to and increasing immersion in the doctrine of Transcendental Meditation practised by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, which culminated in their visit to Rishikesh, India, in the Spring of 1968; the third was the inauguration, in January 1968, of their own management and recording company, named Apple Corps Ltd. Released in November 1968, the group's only double album, *The Beatles*, has continued to meet with critical confusion. Some have hailed it as another masterpiece, pointing to its 'remarkable richness of invention and variety of mood' (Mellers 1973, p. 125), while others see it as disappointing and mediocre, believing that 'half the tracks on it are poor by earlier standards ... many of its lyrics are little more than the lazy navel-gazing of pampered recluses' (MacDonald 1995, p. 261). Many of the tracks were written during the group's stay in Rishikesh, and betray all too clearly the varying degrees of (dis)satisfaction the four Beatles experienced at the time, as first Ringo Starr, then Paul McCartney, finally John Lennon and George Harrison, returned to Britain to engage in a number of individual projects in the early and middle months of 1968. It is not surprising then, that 'there is little in this collection of songs to suggest either literary or musical unity ... the album fails to demonstrate any particular theme or conceptual reference point' (O'Grady 1983, p. 150). In fact Lennon himself has confirmed that the initial signs of the Beatles' eventual break-up were in their preoccupation with individual musical ambitions at the time of this album. 'We made the double album, the set ... it was just me and a backing group, Paul and a backing group, and I enjoyed it. We broke up then.' (Miles 1980, p. 69)

If the design of any album cover should reflect the music it contains and evoke the intention of the performers, the strategy employed to illuminate and accompany two LPs, by four *de facto* soloists, whose musical contents encompassed rock 'n' roll, doo-wop, blues, folk, rock, country, pop, psychedelia, avant-garde and music-hall, was deceptively simple. Richard Hamilton, one of the earliest exponents of Pop Art, was recruited as designer for the double album. He proposed a blank white cover, subtly embossed with the words 'The Beatles', indicating both performers and title, which could be embellished by the inclusion of photographs and prints inside, and a unique 'limited edition' number on the outside; eventually the first two million copies to be pressed bore their own serial number. It did, however, also possess a powerful commercial rationale: 'It was a very radical way to package the album. Richard Hamilton saw it, not as an art statement, but as a way of competing with the lavish design treatments of most post-*Sgt Pepper* sleeves.' (Miles 1997, p. 502) And by curtailing the conventions of the album sleeve to the most extreme of minimalist concepts, the design – in contrast to *Sgt Pepper* – provides no clues to the nature of the complex and unpredictable correspondences (if any) between performers and music, between the Beatles and *The Beatles*. For the only time in their career, there is no place for the group (in whatever form) on the album front. In saying nothing, the cover says everything.

Although the group's third film, the full-length cartoon *Yellow Submarine*, was released in July 1968, the soundtrack album, containing only four new songs, did not appear until January 1969. The delay was mainly to allow Apple to concentrate on the promotion of *The Beatles* – uniquely, the rear of the *Yellow Submarine* cover said nothing about its own record, choosing instead to reproduce Tony Palmer's review of *The Beatles* that had appeared in *The Observer*. But it also reflected the overall lack of involvement and attention given by the Beatles to the project. The movie had been demanded by United Artists (the producers of *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*) whose contractual arrangements with the group had stipulated three films: 'Both the Beatles and Brian [Epstein] treated it as a throwaway, a means of fulfilling their obligation to provide United Artists with a third film.' (McCabe and Schonfield 1972, p. 105) The Beatles' voices were dubbed by actors, and for the first time in its career the group had little or no control over the imagery and identities constructed for them: 'the contribution of "the Beatles" was limited to the four contractually enforced original songs, a few minor script ideas, and a brief appearance at the film's closure' (Neaverson 1997, p. 83). The album was completed by the inclusion of a couple of previously released songs – including 'Yellow Submarine' – and the original film score, composed and orchestrated by George Martin. Disowned by the Beatles themselves and generally regarded as the weakest of their albums (Dowling 1989, p. 210), its music fails to match the psychedelia and extravagance of the post-*Sgt Pepper* cartoon caricatures the movie depicts. Instead, the colourful graphics and characterisations, designed by Heinz Edelmann, which adorn the cover are in sharp contrast to the hastily assembled music of the record itself.

The lack of title and the absence of the group's name on the cover of *Abbey Road* (which was the last album the group recorded, although its release came before *Let It Be*) can be seen to serve a specific purpose. The photograph, by Iain MacMillan, of the group confidently striding across the zebra crossing was an 'uncomplicated acknowledgement of the scene of their greatest artistic achievements, the Abbey Road EMI recording studio' (Evans 1984b, p. 100). Led, appropri-

ately, by John Lennon whose Quarrymen skiffle group, formed in March 1957, had eventually evolved into the Beatles, the presence of the group provides a visual signature which permanently and officially links its music with the location in which it was produced. Unlike many of their contemporaries in the 1960s, such as the Rolling Stones, who used a variety of studios in the UK and US in their attempts to create particular sounds,<sup>4</sup> the Beatles had seen little need to go beyond the familiarity of Abbey Road and George Martin. *Abbey Road's* combination of the traditional conventions of pop (the love songs, ballads and rock 'n' roll of Side One, in which all four Beatles are present as composers and vocalists) with the innovative and unexpected aesthetics of rock (the fifteen-minute suite of songs on Side Two) is ideally complemented by the cover's image of four independent young men who must remain inevitably connected to the end: 'the *Abbey Road* album seems to sum up all the reasons why the Beatles became the most popular and accomplished musical force of their time' (Hertsgaard 1995, p. 304).

*Let It Be* was intended to be the soundtrack album to accompany a film documentary about the Beatles at work in the recording studio. Although filming was concluded in January 1969, the movie and the album did not appear until May of the following year, as a result of the group's disillusionment with the project. Recorded in (and on the roof of) the newly built Apple Studios in Savile Row, rather than Abbey Road, the music (and the movie) reveal the lack of unity or optimism within the group. As the tapes were passed from George Martin to Glyn Johns to Phil Spector in an attempt to improve their quality, the Beatles 'were horrified at how ragged and thin it sounded. They were also sick of it.' (Miles 1997, pp. 549–50) Lennon gave guarded approval of Spector's contribution to the eventual release: 'he was given the shittiest load of badly recorded shit with a lousy feeling to it ever, and he made something out of it' (Wenner 1971, p. 120). But this opinion was not shared by McCartney who complained bitterly about Spector's embellishments, which included '... harps, horns, an orchestra and women's choir added. No one had asked me what I thought. I couldn't believe it. I would never have female voices on a Beatles record.' (Miles 1997, p. 575)

Given the acrimony that the album created within the group, it is, perhaps, entirely appropriate that the four Beatles, again unnamed, appear separately on its cover. Four separate portraits (photographed by Ethan Russell), bordered in black, present the Beatles unequivocally as four separate individuals, with separate opinions, ambitions and trajectories. Made somewhat more attractive by the inclusion of a glossy book of photographs in the boxed set, which was designed by John Kosh, nevertheless 'many record reviewers saw his black sombre design as a fitting choice for the last Beatles' album' (Stannard 1982, p. 91).

## Impacts and influences

George Martin's assertion that 'the art of the vinyl album sleeve . . . did not have much of a life before the Beatles' (Martin 1994, p. 121) has been echoed by many commentators who are keen to credit the group with initiating the explosion of innovative album design which characterised the mid and late 1960s. Evans (1984A) has suggested that, with the exception of the cover of *Please Please Me*, which followed the conventional 'personality' pose of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the album covers fall into three distinct groups, whose designs reflect the intentions of promotion (*With The Beatles* to *Rubber Soul*), art (*Revolver* to *The Beatles*) and music

(*Abbey Road* to *Let It Be*); he excludes *Yellow Submarine* from his analysis, although chronologically and stylistically it would seem to belong in the second categorisation.

Described as 'one of the most familiar – if not *the* most familiar – images in Beatles iconography' (Evans 1984b, p. 41), Robert Freeman's photograph for *With The Beatles* quickly persuaded a number of young British groups caught up in the turbulence of Beatlemania to mimic the unsmiling half-lit pose adopted by the group. Albums such as Them's *Angry Young Them*, The Kink's *Kinks*, and the Rolling Stones' *The Rolling Stones* were early imitators of a style continued through to the 1980s and 1990s by, for example, Phil Collins' *No Jacket Required* and Lou Reed & John Cale's *Songs For Drella*.

Despite EMI's preference for a colour portrait for *With The Beatles*, the photographer won the support of Brian Epstein, George Martin and the Beatles themselves: 'Black-and-white photographs had been used for jazz album covers, whose standards of design were consistently high, but it was the first time, to my knowledge, that a black-and-white photograph had been used on an LP cover for popular musicians.' (Freeman 1996, p. 9)

The use of side-lit photography was continued in the selection of twenty black-and-white 'film strip' snaps of the four Beatles for the cover of *A Hard Day's Night*. By visually signalling the relationship between movie and album in this way, the traditional necessity to use the sleeve as an advertisement for the movie rather than for the record was overcome. It was, however, not an entirely new device; the album cover for Elvis Presley's *Blue Hawaii*, for example, had made use of a similar film-strip approach on both front and rear, albeit in a less dramatic way. Like *With The Beatles*, the design of *A Hard Day's Night* has continued to attract imitations and parodies in the decades since it appeared. John Cale's *The Academy In Peril*, the Rolling Stones' *Some Girls*, the Bangles' *Different Light* and the Super Furry Animals' *Fuzzy Logic* are all albums whose lineage stems directly from the cover of *A Hard Day's Night*.

The portrait of the group on the cover of *Beatles For Sale* was the first colour photograph Robert Freeman had taken of the Beatles, and evokes the image of *With The Beatles* in its directness. It provides an exemplification of Sontag's observation that 'in its simplest form, we have in a photograph surrogate possession of a cherished person or thing' (Sontag 1978, p. 120). It is that possession or ownership which this sequence of album covers accomplishes. When we purchase the record in its cover, we simultaneously purchase the Beatles themselves; when we play the record and/or examine the cover, we consume our purchase; when we file the record away in our record collections, we confirm that the product is now uniquely ours. In this respect the title and design of *Beatles For Sale* represent a remarkably astute insight into the nature of the relationship between the group and its fans.

The standard close-up portrait of head-and-shoulders utilised on the covers of the group's first four albums was sacrificed for the design of *Help!* On this occasion, the four group members were presented as full-length figures, set back a considerable way from the camera, whose dark snow-gear was starkly contrasted against an all-white background. It freely recalled the multiple portraits of the full-length, gold lame-suited Elvis Presley from the cover of *Elvis' Gold Records Volume 2*. The organisation of the group's image was simple enough, as Freeman has explained: 'For the design of the album cover I had the Beatles signalling in semaphore the word HELP!' (Freeman 1996, p. 15). Evans describes how 'the semaphore

*Help* . . . became another trademark, another symbol that made them instantly identifiable . . . even at a distance' (Evans 1984A, p. 27). In fact, the semaphore positions adopted by the Beatles spell out the letters NUJV. Linguistically meaningless, but visually attractive, the distortion of reality and manipulation of imagery presented by the Beatles on the cover of *Help!* was a demonstration of the argument that 'the function of advertising is to create images that sell products . . . and there is therefore no need for it to adhere to truth' (Gordon and Kittross 1999, p. 240).

The design for *Rubber Soul* has been described as the cover that 'effected quite a revolution in album artwork, which had heretofore been as cheap and unimaginatively garish as that on noodle boxes' (Schaffner 1977, p. 49). Most striking was the pre-psychedelic typography which 'heralded a style that was to become the *de rigeur* of the poster art of the flower power subculture which blossomed on America's West Coast in 1966' (Evans 1984B, p. 60) and which directly influenced the output of graphic designers like Wes Wilson, Alton Kelley and Victor Moscoso. An equally tangible impact was to be seen in the number of covers which seemed to draw directly from *Rubber Soul's* photography, both in terms of the dominant colours, background and stance of the performer (for example, Bob Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde* and Count Five's *Psychotic Reaction*), and also in their use of the fisheye lens which mimicked the image distortion of the Beatles (such as Captain Beefheart's *Safe As Milk* and the Rolling Stones' *Big Hits, High Tide And Green Grass*).

Klaus Voorman's design and artwork for *Revolver* won the Grammy award for the best album cover of 1966. While it reflected the revival of interest in the Victorian illustrator Aubrey Beardsley,<sup>5</sup> whose elegant, black-and-white line drawings were enthusiastically imitated by cartoonists, advertisers and designers, it boldly transferred their whimsical, exotic qualities to the more vibrant environment of mid-1960s rock: 'Its cover, amid its rivals' Carnaby colours, was plain black and white. Who else in the world would announce themselves in graphics reflecting the smartest magazines? Who else but the Beatles would have confidence colossal enough to be so chastely downbeat?' (Norman 1981, pp. 262–3)

The cover for *Sgt Pepper*, which won the Grammy award for the best album cover of 1967, is undoubtedly the most celebrated that popular music has yet produced. Weaving together images from psychedelia, nostalgia, the fairy-tale, the fair-ground and popular culture, it was the first cover to specifically offer itself as an object for overt investigation and analysis; identifying the figures (who included Aubrey Beardsley, as well as contemporary American artists Simon Rodia, Richard Merkin, Wallace Borman, Richard Lindner and Larry Bell) featured in the tableau became a popular game and an intellectual exercise. And in 1999, the BBC placed the album cover in its Arena Top Twenty list of British twentieth century masterpieces of art and design – ahead of such national icons as Mary Quant's mini skirt, Sir Gilbert Scott's red telephone box, and Sir Alec Issigonis's Mini car.

Like many Beatles albums, the cover continues to attract parody and pastiche, most famously from the Mothers Of Invention's *We're Only In It For The Money*. It also fostered a series of weak imitations, notably the Rolling Stones' *Their Satanic Majesties Request* (also photographed, like *Sgt Pepper*, by Michael Cooper). In fact, the group's regular and unacknowledged plagiarism of the Beatles' output over the years frustrated John Lennon: 'I would just like to list what we did and what the Stones did two months after, on every fucking album and every fucking thing we did . . . you know *Satanic Majesties* is *Pepper* . . . I resent the implication that the Stones are like revolutionaries and that the Beatles weren't . . . they are not in the

same class, music-wise or power-wise.' (Wenner 1971, pp. 90–1) In addition, the planned but unfulfilled involvement of Dutch design team The Fool in the *Sgt Pepper* project (they were to have designed the centrefold spread) led to their actual involvement in the creation of a number of other album sleeves (such as The Incredible String Band's *5000 Spirits*). And their adventurous and elaborate Indian-influenced designs were, in turn, to exert an influence on the covers of many more LPs of the late 1960s, including Cream's *Disraeli Gears* and The Jimi Hendrix Experience's *Axis: Bold As Love*.

In the same manner that *Sgt Pepper* had introduced unsuspected complexities into the aesthetics of album cover design, *The Beatles* reacted against the trend its predecessor had instigated by reverting to a uniquely minimalist design; to this day, the album is conventionally referred to as the *White Album*. The flamboyance, diversity, and visual excess typified by *Sgt Pepper* continued to be the chief signatures of album art through the late 1960s and early 1970s: 'album cover design plundered whatever was necessary in order to approximate to an experience that the music was trying to embody' (Thorgerson 1989, p. 95). In contrast, the design of *The Beatles* remained an exceptional, if startling, alternative to the lustrous and decorative colours of psychedelia.

The most lasting impact of *Yellow Submarine*, whose cartoon depictions of the Beatles in Pepperland act as a compendium of visual styles of the late 1960s – op art, pop art, art nouveau, psychedelia, surrealism – lies not in any direct influences it may have had over album art generally, but in its significance for the merchandising and memorabilia sectors of the popular music industry. Toys, games, jigsaw puzzles, souvenir books, watches, costumes, bedclothes, greetings cards, lampshades, lunch boxes and crockery were among the dozens of associated products marketed to coincide with the release of the album and the movie. This second wave of Beatle-related merchandising, four years after the wave that accompanied their initial US success, was the final substantial marketing of the group as a product; it 'updated the mop-top image of the 1964 versions with a dash of the trendy psychedelia as exemplified by the film itself' (Schaffner 1977, p. 100). Together they created a template which has been periodically employed to maximise commercial returns within the entertainment industry; the most notable beneficiaries may well be the Spice Girls of 1996–8.

This said, it is also undeniable that in the period immediately after the release of *Yellow Submarine*, there was a distinct growth in the number of albums which featured cartoon covers. Cat Stevens' *Teaser And The Firecat*, the Flamin' Groovies' *Supersnazz* and the Move's *Shazam* may well have been encouraged in their use of what was previously a relatively neglected area of album art by the example of the Beatles. In fact, throughout the practices of the entertainment media, a new subculture of 'animatophilia' was ushered in by the success of *Yellow Submarine*; as Neaverson (1997, p. 122) has noted, the consequences of its rediscovery of the art and possibilities of animation have continued into the 1990s.

*Abbey Road* is perhaps unique among Beatles album covers in its presentation of an unremarkable, even banal image, which has nonetheless become as potent a symbol of the group as any of its other images. Compared with the painstaking research and preparation required for *Sgt Pepper*, the cover's creation, by Iain MacMillan, could not have been easier: 'MacMillan set up his camera in the middle of Abbey Road, right outside the studios, and while the police stopped traffic the Beatles walked across the road three or four times.' (Fawcett 1976, p. 84) Pre-

dictably, the shot of the four Beatles on the zebra crossing has produced its parodies, such as the Red Hot Chilli Peppers' *The Abbey Road EP* and New York City's *Soulful Road*. Far less predictable, however, was the version by Booker T and the MGs of the entire *Abbey Road* album – music and sleeve: *McLemore Avenue* was named after the Memphis street in which it was recorded, and its cover shows the group walking across the avenue which gave their LP its title.

The *Abbey Road* cover also served to fuel the rumour current in 1969 that Paul McCartney was no longer alive, by allegedly providing clues to his death (Patterson 1996); in fact McCartney himself was to provide a pastiche of the cover for his own album *Paul Is Live*. And, of course, the album can also be credited for introducing the practice of naming an LP after a significant address: Eric Clapton's *461 Ocean Boulevard*, Paul Weller's *Stanley Road*, and John Lennon's *Menlove Avenue* are familiar examples.

After the impressive and influential innovations of their previous album covers, the cover for *Let It Be* returned, rather despondently, to the conventions of the 'personality' pose of their very earliest LPs. Evans' observation that 'design-wise, the cover had little to offer' (Evans 1984B, p. 102) is a charitable assessment of a cover which would not have been out of place in record racks a decade earlier.

### Readerly and writerly texts

In his discussion of the insights offered by Barthes (1975) into the interpretation of texts, Fiske has pointed to the essential differences between the 'readerly text [which] invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made . . . [and] . . . the writerly text, which challenges the reader constantly to rewrite it, to make sense out of it' (Fiske 1989, p. 103). The former can be characterised as a closed text, where meaning is intrinsic, easily accessible and which contains little or no room for dispute. The latter is a (more difficult) open text which requires the reader's involvement in the negotiation of meaning(s).

However, the construction and assignment of meaning may take time, and is contingent on any number of emotional, material, experiential and intellectual conditions. The belief that any text possesses a single absolute meaning is difficult to sustain, since such a claim rests on the assumptions that the text contains a deliberate message, which is decoded by the reader in the way it was encoded by the producer, and which is accepted uncritically. Nonetheless, the attempt to *suggest* if not to *specify* meaning is very necessary to the practice of informative advertising, which aims to eliminate confusion and provide exact information. Within the highly competitive world of popular music, in which (certainly in the 1960s) success is largely equated with record sales, there is thus a commercial imperative to diminish the potential consumer's scope for uncertainty at the point of transaction by emphasising as clearly as possible the nature of the commodity on sale. For the sale of albums, the easiest ways to accomplish this are to frankly present the name of the performers, their likeness (usually a photograph), and the title of the LP. This is the strategy adopted by the Beatles.

The name of the group appears on eight of their twelve albums; when it is absent (*Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be*) their photographs are there to confirm their identity. Their photographs (in one case, a cartoon depiction) are

on eleven of the twelve covers; when they are missing (*The Beatles*) the album's title and the group's name simultaneously appear to offer reassurance. The title is also to be found on eleven covers; on the one occasion when it is absent (*Abbey Road*) there is a photograph of the Beatles in Abbey Road itself. In this sense, the album covers of the Beatles allow little possibility for alternative readings. They ask nothing of the reader. Each cover is absolutely and uniquely what it appears – the cover of a new, named album by the Beatles. Even *Sgt Pepper* rigorously adheres to these rules; in fact, by presenting *two* versions of the Beatles (one in military costume, one in suits) plus its prominent display of the group's name and the album's title, the cover emphatically signals what is on offer. Similarly, the all-white cover of *The Beatles* does not invite interpretation but restricts it, since the only visible words are, explicitly, 'the Beatles'.

The album covers of the Beatles thus exemplify the readerly text. Through their direct identification of the performers, consistent reproduction of their likeness and clear display of the LP's title, the covers achieve closure; there is nothing else that these texts can possibly be other than the covers of specific albums, created at specific times, by the Beatles. That they are colourful, inventive, unusual or provocative does not detract from this basic characteristic. As texts, they are in sharp contrast to those produced by, for example, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin, groups who have released several albums whose sleeves have dispensed with name, likeness and title. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side Of The Moon*, *Atom Heart Mother*, *Meddle*, *Wish You Were Here* and Led Zeppelin's *Houses Of The Holy*, *Untitled/Four Symbols* and *Presence* typify the writerly text; they contain no reference to the group or to the album title, and the images have no musical relevance. They generate multiple meanings and, in so doing, free the reader from the tyranny of imposed definition. All interpretations are left open; these texts could be anything – including album covers, but excluding nothing.

Although it has been argued that 'words, comparisons, signs need to create a context for a printed photograph ... they must mark and leave open diverse approaches' (Berger 1980, p. 63), the words and signs on the album covers of the Beatles achieve the opposite effect. Partly because of the universal familiarity of the images of the four Beatles (there can be no speculation about their identity) and partly because of the straightforward announcement of their contents (repetition of name and title) the group's album covers served the function of 'transparent wrappers'. That they should remain so during a period in which 'enigmatic images replaced the informative and documentary nature of the usual photographic album cover' (Sorger 1988, p. 18) is quite remarkable. It may be ironic that the group praised more than any other for its daring should, in this particular facet of its career at least, demonstrate its affinity with the routine and the popular, rather than the avant garde with which it has so often been linked.

## Conclusion

Commerce and technology have played significant roles in the history of album cover art. Its birth was assisted by the postwar reorganisation of record retailing (coinciding with the emergence of rock 'n' roll) which introduced self-service record racks through which the consumer could browse; they 'brought the cover face to face with the customer ... slowly the importance of the cover as a 'silent salesman' was noticed by the record companies and their marketing personnel' (Sorger 1988,

p. 11). Its death was provoked, some four decades later by Philips' introduction of the CD, after which the creative significance and budgetary allocation given to cover design was severely curtailed.

The album cover might therefore be approached as a historical relic whose chronology can be precisely located, in much the same way as other ancient artefacts, such as the chronometer, the Davy Lamp, or the flintlock musket. But whereas the creation of those objects stemmed from the recognition of certain needs and the attempts to resolve those needs, the commercial world inhabited by the designers of album covers stresses not needs, but desires – the desire of the producer to sell, the desire of the purchaser to consume. And 'what characterises the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs' (Barthes 1981, pp. 118–19). The issues raised by an examination of the particular imagery of album covers have, therefore, much wider relevance than the specific position they occupy within popular music.

By concentrating on the album covers of the Beatles, whose images will be familiar to almost all, I have attempted to illustrate the success they achieved in linking the visual image of the group with its current musical output. In addition, I have indicated some of the enduring ways in which their innovative design and imagery were to impact on the popular music community. And I have also suggested that, notwithstanding these considerable achievements, they remain fundamentally conservative texts which reflect a set of commercially driven and relatively inflexible assumptions and practices. In view of the group's ability to confront and dismantle many of the restrictive structures and cultures of the popular music industry throughout its career, it is perhaps surprising that, in this case, the Beatles should demur from the opportunity for challenge, and consent instead to a policy of innovation within predictability.

## Endnotes

1. Notably the notorious 'Butcher' cover, originally intended as the album sleeve for *Yesterday And Today*, released in the US in June 1966.
2. Excluding the compilation, *A Collection Of Beatles Oldies But Goldies*, released in the UK in December 1966.
3. See, for example, Harry (1989), Martin (1994) and Moore (1997).
4. The eight albums released by the Rolling Stones in the 1960s – from *The Rolling Stones* (April 1964) to *Let It Bleed* (December 1969) – utilised various producers (Andrew Loog Oldham, Glyn Johns, Jimmy Miller) and different studios (Regent Sound in London, RCA Studios in Hollywood, Chess Studios in Chicago, Olympic Studios in London).
5. An exhibition of Beardsley's work at London's Victoria & Albert Museum had drawn huge crowds in the Summer of 1966.

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