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For the Beatles: notes on their achievement

TIM RILEY*

'Give Me Love' by Rosie and the Originals. An amazing record. It's one of the greatest strange records, it's all just out of beat and everybody misses it – they knocked off the B-side in ten minutes.

John Lennon to Jonathan Cott in 1968

Rosie and the Originals released their only 45 rpm single in early 1960. 'Angel Baby', the A side, reached number five in America, but it never even saw the light of day on the British charts. The song is dismissable, a one-hit wonder from singer Rosie Hamlin that didn't deserve a follow-up. But the B side is something else entirely: for one thing, one of the Originals is hogging the mike, Rosie is nowhere to be heard – a mystery that the label doesn't explain. The record is much as Lennon describes: after a revved-up guitar intro, the drums vanish and leave everyone else playing straight off the top of their heads. The listener eavesdrops on a sloppy rhythm and blues concoction, with jealous lyrics sung to unrehearsed riffing – it's so sloppy, so incoherently diffuse that it's more laughable than it is danceable. To say 'Give Me Love' sounds spontaneous doesn't begin to suggest its strangeness; the musicians themselves don't seem to know where the next downbeat is going to land. The listener has trouble making sense of the music, but then again, so do the musicians. Far from backing up Rosie's wilful début, it sounds as though someone left the tape machine running during an early morning musical reverie – sounds that were completely random became crystallised on tape. It unveiled the would-be Originals as crudely inspired amateurs, who weren't even able to sustain their facade as a group from one side of a 45 rpm single to the other.

This is what pop music was all about to the young John Lennon. That he prized this oddity says a great deal about what he listened for in pop: he put the *feel* of a record above everything else, and treasured the magic and humour of ordinary situations where most heard unkempt discord. To John, Paul, George, Ringo, and their Merseyside peers, the singles like these that they begged off the Cunard Yanks at the Liverpool docks meant much more to them than they could really express. They would practise their guitars to these records, mimic their favourite singers, go nuts over their favourite moments and crack up at inside jokes they shared. In the beginning, they weren't much different from millions of other teenagers in the late 1950s – they invested a lot in their fantasies. It was teenagers like the Beatles all over the world who helped invent the outrageous dimensions that Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley – the undisputed King – inhabited.

* This is an extract from Riley, 1988

Pop completed their young world in ways that television and movies couldn't – it made them feel connected up to something that confirmed their adolescent impulses, and gave voice to their most private emotional secrets. Because the Beatles were avid participators in the pop life, they learned a lot from it, not only about themselves and their own capabilities but the medium they would go on to transform. 'You Know My Name (Look Up My Number)', a *Sgt Pepper* out-take that got stuck on the back of 'Let it Be' ten years after Rosie and the Originals made their mark on Lennon, is somewhat more developed than 'Give Me Love', but no less absurd. The droll opening duet, sung conspicuously low, gives way to a snazzy night-club cha-cha. McCartney's MC welcomes us to club 'Slaggers', and introduces Ringo's lounge-act alter ego, 'Dennis O'Dell', who oozes lovesick sentimentality through a glib vibrato ('you *know* you know my name . . .'). Then Lennon interrupts McCartney's prodding announcer with a scolding bespectacled granny surrounded by penny whistles. After a verse of cacophonous counting, a precocious piano solo gets grumbled and scatted over by everybody, and the mock variety show ends with one last bark of Lennon's gibberish. ('What's the New Mary Jane', the A-side that Lennon prepared for 'You Know My Name' in late 1969, was rejected for sounding even more inchoate.)

Like 'Give Me Love', 'You Know My Name' captures the unstudied spark of a first or second take – the mistakes are left in, and the casual tone is an essential part of its hit-or-miss appeal. The Beatles are making this music as a lark, more for themselves than they are the microphones and the listeners beyond. This aura of a shared secret informs even the Beatles' most accomplished recordings, like 'She Loves You' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand'; there's something extra at work in these tracks that seems to transport the musicians as they play. Even when in complete command of the music, they're intoxicated with the sounds they're making.

None of the Beatles were formally trained, but this fondness for mystery and off-beat humour in rock 'n' roll counts as the best education they could have ever given themselves. Listening to records like 'Give Me Love' hundreds of times, they soon developed an uncanny sense of what makes music tick, both as material and recorded sound. It taught them about the aspects of pop they would go on to revitalise, both the 45 rpm single (the form they grew up on), and the full-length album (the form they re-defined). Their aspirations for the pop album spring directly from this affection for obscure B-sides, and as they progressed, the longer form blossomed into an artistic statement; the idea of the long-playing album grew to be larger than the idea of each individual song. As Rolling Stone Keith Richards would later put it: 'Both the Beatles and us had been through buying albums that were filled with ten tracks of rubbish. We said, "No, we want to make each track good. Work almost as hard on it as you would work on a single . . ".' The unaffected feel of any given Beatle track shows just how well they understood what it takes to pull this feat off: their songs became increasingly self-conscious, but their playing always shunned affectation, they were never more cerebral than they were visceral.

Presley and rock 'n' roll

The Beatles are a pivotal part of rock's story not just because their music can still dazzle, but because their arrival as rock 'n' rollers with an endless stream of original material challenged what anyone had imagined pop could become. They weren't the first nor the only to dare towards such greatness. The foundations had been laid for

them by Sinatra, Presley and a handful of others, and they shared the 1960s stage primarily with the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. But as a microcosm of the rock experience, nothing equals the Beatles' catalogue: it integrates the best of what came before, and signals the array of styles that would soon follow. They may not be responsible for everything, but nearly everything that comes after would be impossible without them. Strictly speaking, Frank Zappa's *Freak Out* has claims as the first concept album, but *Sgt Pepper* was the record that made the idea convincing to most ears. Their influence touches every extreme: 'She Said She Said' certainly inspired Lou Reed, and 'Birthday' perfected the kind of infectious guitar riff that a hundred derivative bands like Cheap Trick used as excuses for careers.

The Beatles and their generation were the first to go through puberty with rock 'n' roll on the radio. The chief concern of rock 'n' roll is youth, and it distinguishes itself from jazz in this way. That other great American art form and essential predecessor celebrates musical creativity itself, stressing improvisation (more often de-emphasising lyrics) as a means towards self-expression. (Both styles derive their titles from black slang words for sex.) In early rock 'n' roll, the main concern is puberty itself, the search to assimilate experience into a cohesive self-identity. What the Beatles heard in the rock 'n' roll they fell in love with was the potential not just for variety, but the possibility of summing up a long tradition of popular styles. Their artistry grew from their eclectic love for the entire spectrum that stretched from ragtime to Broadway, and from a desire to synthesise the best of the rock 'n' roll they had grown up with with the larger heritage of pop they saw as its backdrop. Explicitly, these roots go as far back as ragtime or the Victorian dance halls; implicitly, the wedding of country swing to rhythm and blues (white to black) can be traced back to the rhythms of African folk cultures and the vignettes of British storytelling ballads.

Greil Marcus' excellent essay on Elvis Presley articulates Presley's role in giving rock 'n' roll its mass appeal:

> Echoing through all of rock 'n' roll is the simple demand for peace of mind and a good time . . . Satisfaction is not all there is to it, but it is where it all begins. Finally, the music must provoke as well as delight, disturb as well as comfort, create as well as sustain. If it doesn't, it lies, and there is only so much comfort you can take in a lie before it all falls apart. Marcus, (1975, p. 162).

To this we can add the idea of liberation, the boundaries that Presley seemed to break in his singing become metaphors for ways of thinking about life. The most aggressive rock 'n' roll is a testing of limits, a combustive enactment of the frontier spirit. With a combination of determination and good luck, anything is possible, the sound seems to be telling us. We hear it in all the great rock recordings from 'Hound Dog' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' right up through Bruce Springsteen's 'Hungry Heart'. Good rock 'n' roll is simple, but not dull – it must bear repeated listenings. It relies on impact, saying a lot in a short periods of time, and it innovates as well as conforms to conventional patterns. Ideally, rock 'n' roll plays with our expectations, making each experience of a given song different.

When they spoke about their heroes in interviews, the Beatles revealed impeccable taste: they named themselves after Buddy Holly's band, the Crickets (John changed the 'ee' to 'ea' for the pun on beat), and they idolised Chuck Berry, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, and the Everly Brothers to the extreme. They caught the British tours of Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent and Little Richard at every

possible opportunity. John flipped at the audacity of someone dubbing themselves 'Dr Feelgood', he loved the manic intensity of Larry Williams' deliveries, and the soul-bearing vocalisms of Arthur Alexander; Paul cited Little Richard, Peggy Lee, the Platters; George mentioned girl groups like the Shirelles and doo-wop favourites like the Chiffons; Ringo wanted to move to Texas because 'that's where Lightnin' Hopkins came from'. And they all emphasised Elvis.

Elvis embodied the rock 'n' roll myth. Myths combine fact and fiction, feeding off both the images they project – both real and fictive – and the imaginative space their records inhabit. 'Johnny B. Goode', the 1958 Chuck Berry hit, is loosely based on Elvis Presley's story: the country boy who finds fame in Hollywood from the railroad rhythms he plays on his guitar. The idiosyncrasies of Presley's real life lend themselves to such treatment: he was a mother's boy, polite to a fault, and had a twin brother who died at birth. (The title even suggests what the mother may have told him as a boy – 'be good'.)

He used to carry his guitar in a gunnysack
Go sit beneath the tree by the railroad tracks
Old engineer would see him sittin' in the shade
Strummin' with the rhythm that the drivers made
When people passed him by they would stop and say,
'Oh my, but that country boy can play!'

The heart of the music is its rhythm – it still makes more sense when you dance to it – but to young Johnny, the train's motion means a lot more than just a beat to strum to. It symbolises his turning from a boy into a man in the big world, leaving poverty behind for the big time and separating from his mother. When Elvis returned from his Army stint in 1960, Berry wrote a sequel, 'Bye Bye Johnny', about how Johnny builds a mansion by the railroad tracks where he could settle with his new wife and mother. By then, Elvis Presley's mother had died near Graceland, the mansion he had built.

The Beatles cavorted their way through 'Johnny B. Goode' on BBC radio broadcasts, and the Rolling Stones were still sneering 'Bye Bye Johnnie' as late as their 1972 tour. But Elvis wound up living out the dark side of success, the kind that feeds on bottomless desires: according to Elaine Dundy in *Elvis and Gladys* (1900), he never overcame his mother's death. Bruce Springsteen would write the final song of the B. Goode legend, 'Johnny Bye Bye', about Elvis' death in Memphis ('They found him slumped up against the drain/a whole lotta trouble runnin' through his veins . . .')

The Beatles' myth resembles Presley's in important ways: supposedly, they sprang from nowhere as overnight sensations, working-class northerners who stormed the British ruling class of pop in London, four happy-go-lucky mop-tops to whom life meant fun and then some. But like Berry's version of the Presley legend, much of the Beatle myth is drawn from conclusions that are not based on fact: only Ringo's Dingle neighbourhood upbringing can be called poor, the other Beatles were solidly middle-class grammar-school types, more privileged than underprivileged. To Americans, it may have seemed as though they enjoyed overnight success, but a glance at their schedules in Mark Lewisohn's exhaustive *The Beatles Live!* in Hamburg and British dance halls between 1957 and their first recording session in 1962 argues against it.

The most misleading part of their myth is the idea that Liverpool is 'nowhere', for nowhere else in Britain – and probably the world – was beat music as alive as it

was in the Merseyside scene when the Beatles cut their chops. Over three hundred bands worked the area, over thirty of them engaged several nights a week at the popular clubs for both lunchtime and evening slots. The musical community fed on a furious energy, bands scouted other bands, keen for the best unnoticed B-sides of American popular records that the Yankee sailors would bring them from across the Atlantic on the Cunard shipping lines. Along with a mutual respect for quality, there was a competitive edge between groups that challenged them all to greater heights. Opening acts would stump their headliners with a new-found beat thriller that no-one had even heard before, headliners would be forced to try and live up to what came before them. There were many other groups that could hold their own in this arena (the Searchers, Derry and the Seniors, the Big Three), but the Beatles had the peculiar advantages of Brian Epstein's fancy and the luck of a Parlophone contract. It is no accident that they came from the active musical life of Liverpool, but they quickly outdid all their peers with a talent and ambition that left all the others behind. After all, they wanted to be bigger than Elvis.

Like all the other Merseysiders at the time, the Beatles subscribed to the ethic of copying the American sounds they loved as closely as possible, faithful to all the licks, fills, guitar solos and vocal treatments from their favourite stateside records. The old dictum that artists' early work is first recognised by their influences could not be more true than with the Beatles, and the paradox is that the more they polished their imitations of songs, the closer they came to an individual sound. The more John sang Richie Barret's 'Some Other Guy', the more he invested his own jealous longing into it; the more Paul sang Little Richard's 'Lucille', the more he flavoured it with his giddy brand of camp. George couldn't help but sound like George even when he mimicked Eddie Fontaine's 'Nothin' Shakin' (But the Leaves on the Trees)'. What they learned from the records they copied was not merely how to sound like someone else, it was how to play and sing, how to put a song forward. 'Don't copy the swimming teacher, learn how to swim!' is how John later put it.

They all cite Lonnie Donegan's 'Rock Island Line', a skiffle treatment of the American blues song, as one of the most influential records of their youth. A fluke hit in Britain in 1956, it caught their ear not only because it was catchy, rhythmic and somewhat raw, but because they could master it immediately. With other hits, they crammed all the sounds they heard into the two guitar, bass and drums format, reworking sax solos, string arrangements and high female vocals along the way. They omitted the string ornaments from the girl group songs they covered in part because of studio costs, but more because they wanted to project the entire imaginative illusion by themselves. Had Decca records signed them on the merits of their audition tape (now widely available, and astonishing), they would have been treated like any other pop group – given material to play, told how to sound, and recorded and mixed by a professional slick pop producer.

But since George Martin wasn't really a pop producer (he was best known for his comedy records), and was won over by their original songs, the Beatles made their début with an enthusiasm won by their determination to be true to an ideal they cherished, not a sound targeted for a presumed listenership. Martin trusted their sense of their potential audience, instead of trying to define it for them, as producers usually do. This was a radical posture: in remaining faithful to the sounds they loved, they re-defined pop in their own terms, and sparked their career-long journey towards self-definition. They became recording artists soon after bucking the sure-fire hit system, but they mastered their craft from the inside out – not by having

studio technique applied to their music for effect, but by allowing their material to incorporate more sophisticated effects as needed. The difference is everything.

The polarised partnership

To be bigger than Elvis, the Beatles had to propose bigger challenges, put across even more provocative ideas. From the outset, they embodied the notion that an individual can realise their own identity in a community, even when it consists of four utterly different – even contradictory – parts. Their view of the world, as seen through their records, affirms a sense of perspective no matter what they happen to be singing about – whether it's a broken heart or some shattered illusion, the individual slant is always framed in a group context. When they covered the Isley Brothers' 1959 debut 'Shout', they rotated singers: after Paul and John kick things off, George takes it down ('a little bit softer now'), Ringo brings it back up ('a little bit louder now'), Paul re-enters with call-and-response 'hey—'s, and Lennon goes out howling'I'm foockin' shoutin' now!' In their own work, their exchanges illuminate each other's personalities even more: the conflict in 'We Can Work It Out' sounds as non-threatening as a simple misunderstanding to Paul (who sings 'we can work it out'), and more like an argument to Lennon (who answers 'there's no time for fussing and fighting . . .'). Paul's strongest heartache songs ('Yesterday' and 'For No One') are contrasted with the bottomless sorrow and longing in John's 'Julia' or 'Don't Let Me Down' – different emotional climates surrounding the same subject matter. And to get such radically opposing views on similar topics from the same band fulfilled any audience's demand for simple variety at the same time that it enlarged their impact.

Lennon and McCartney are an unusually polarised songwriting team, even though they were both madly in love with rock 'n' roll when they began playing together. The difference was, they both loved it for entirely different reasons: John was always more concerned with expressing himself, he came to see his music as an art; Paul became a consumate craftsman, he saw pop music more as a trade.

The songs they each chose to sing lead on for their early BBC radio spots reveal their separate traits: John identified with the broken family in Chuck Berry's 'Memphis, Tennessee', the rampant consonants of Berry's wordy 'Too Much Monkey Business', and the tenderness that turns to frustration in Phil Spector's 'To Know Her Is To Love Her'. Paul loved the fun side of Chan Romero's 'Hippy Hippy Shake', the Hollywood sentimentalism of 'The Honeymoon Song', and the high melodrama of 'Besame Mucho'. As Greil Marcus writes, 'Consistently, John's songs described struggle, while Paul's denied it;' (1980, p. 188). To say that McCartney aims to please is not really going too far – to this day he loves to entertain, and he's in his element when he's upbeat, celebrative, and downright whimsical. In the 1963 Christmas message he told his fans, 'We'll try to do everything we can to please you with the type of songs we write and record next year . . .'. Paul McCartney is a comfortable person: looking both inside himself, and at the world around him, he waxes positive, life suits him. His personality plays itself out musically with lyrical melodies dressed in clever harmonic frameworks (the two-key layout of 'Here, There and Everywhere', the major–minor tension of 'Eleanor Rigby'). And his appetite for kitsch is at least as large as his hero Elvis Presley's.

Lennon had more in common with Presley's rebellious posture – the side that provoked questions, confronted assumptions and challenged authority. When he

looked at himself and the world around him, he felt unsettled, dissatisfied; life wore on him. The creative process for Lennon was a working out of this discomfort – he got a lot off his chest in song. He was, as McCartney himself has said, a more autobiographical writer than his partner, events in his life directly influenced the songs he wrote; the same is not true as often with McCartney. 'Norwegian Wood' is about an affair Lennon had; 'Michelle' has nothing to do with McCartney's own love life. Lennon's musical personality is obsessed with rhythm, and his lyrics most often rise above Paul's. Paul was primarily a melodic thinker, both in the lyricism of his vocal lines and the sweep of his bass playing; his gift lies in linear phrases where Lennon's jagged beats disrupt songs horizontally. McCartney's texts are usually witty, charming, narrative or sentimental. Lennon's are more extreme: acerbic, confessional, or maddeningly obtuse.

A knowledge of the music Lennon and McCartney had in their ears by 1962 explains where some of their licks come from, but based on the bands who carried on to record after Beatlemania hit, they weren't the only four Liverpudlians who knew and cherished their girl group records. What matters more is how they digested what came before and turned it into something they could call their own – you can hear Elvis' corn in Paul's rendition of 'Till There Was You', and Williams' howling jealousy when Lennon sings 'Leave My Kitten Alone' (from the *Beatles for Sale* sessions), but you can't explain either of them by pointing to their exemplars. In the best sense, they define each other.

They immersed themselves in songwriting, to the point where they threw away between fifty and a hundred tunes before they wrote 'Love Me Do' (some of these, 'One After 909', 'I'll Follow the Sun', 'What Goes On' and 'When I'm Sixty-Four' were revived later on). When they duetted on Carl Perkins' 'Sure to Fall', they learned as much from its style as they did its construction; the small silences in their cover of the Everly Brothers' hit 'So How Come (No One Loves Me)' taught them the value of such tricks. Among their performing heroes, many wrote their own songs (Buddy Holly, Carl Perkins, Little Richard, Smokey Robinson, Chuck Berry, Roy Orbison) – and they were always covering or copping ideas from pop's great tunesmiths (Leiber and Stoller, Goffin and King, Shuman and Pomus, and Motown's Berry Gordy).

Their individual tendencies dictate the form a song takes. McCartney prefers dramatic settings, complete with characters: 'Eleanor Rigby' and 'She's Leaving Home' are like pop-song short stories. The two-key harmonic framework of 'Penny Lane' articulates its double narrative structure. Lennon is more interested in projecting moral visions with mythical figures like 'Nowhere Man' or 'I Am The Walrus', and he addresses his audience more directly. As collaborators (and competitors – the distinction is often subtle) they constantly influenced one another, and were well aware of their differences. It is not completely a joke that Lennon enjoyed referring to 'Why Don't We Do it in the Road' as McCartney's best song.

As collaborators, their idiosyncrasies appear explicitly in songs like 'We Can Work it Out', a lover's quarrel that turns out to be an argument in itself, and 'A Day in the Life', where two separate ideas are stitched together into one musical setting. But the same dynamic also produces opposing visions like the 'Penny Lane'/'Strawberry Fields Forever' single: here each song springs from the same desire to depict a personal vision of childhood. McCartney's is charming, of 'ordinary' lunacy at the corner barber shop. Lennon's song uses an image of homelessness (the title refers to an orphanage near where he grew up), and poses despairing questions about abandonment. McCartney could never have penned the disturbing 'Happiness is a

Warm Gun', just as Lennon would never have bothered with 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer'.

Because they often contradicted themselves in interviews, we can't know in detail who contributed what to many songs. Hunter Davies (1978) describes them writing 'With A Little Help From My Friends', bouncing ideas off each other for Ringo's *Sgt Pepper* spotlight. But the specifics of what else we know make their partnership seem utilitarian – they would use one another when and if they wanted to: Lennon re-wrote 'Drive My Car', which McCartney brought in as 'Baby, You Can Wear My Diamond Ring'; Paul introduced the first draft of 'Hey Jude' as gibberish and John dubbed it finished; John discarded several descriptive verses for 'In My Life', but Paul claims to have written the melody; and for Lennon's 'Ticket to Ride', Paul suggested the lopsided drum hook.

As musicians, their personalities complement each other, enlarging the scope of what would otherwise be individual statements. Paul's lyrical harmony and melodic bass playing shades Lennon's intensity in 'Don't Let Me Down'. Lennon's background harmony to the last verse of 'Hey Jude' lends it a warmth and spirit the way no other singer could. If they didn't always work together when writing – they composed more and more separately as the years passed, even though the publishing citations still credit them jointly – they were almost always generous towards each other in performance.

The personal relationships these four men shared is also an ever-changing mixture of different balances, but John Lennon was clearly the one they acknowledged as their leader from the start. To begin with, Lennon had more of a vision of what the Beatles were about and what they could be; he spoke of it more in interviews and he lived it out more in his life. (It was John who invited Paul to join the Quarrymen, as much out of respect as fear of competition.) If, as Greil Marcus (1980, p. 184) suggests, that 'it was the Beatles who opened up the turf the Stones took as their own – there was no possibility of a Left until the Beatles created a Center', the same can be said to be true of the different creative spaces Lennon and McCartney inhabited. McCartney can be called the group's centre, the middle of the road, Lennon stands for the fringes that are rock 'n' roll's true holy ground. Paul went along with Brian Epstein's stylised suits and deep bows, John always wanted to skip the formalities. Paul covered the standard classic ballads as a matter of course, John made certain their early records finished to the sound of him wailing 'Twist and Shout', 'Money', and 'Dizzy Miss Lizzie'. The exceptions prove the rule: John's 'Good Night' is as smarmy as anything McCartney ever wrote, and 'Helter Skelter' is Paul's heavy-metal scorcher. But Paul's cover of 'Long Tall Sally' is rollicking where John's 'Money' is utterly vicious; Lennon's love ballad 'Julia' is oedipal exorcising and follows Paul's 'I Will' on the *White Album* the way 'Dear Prudence' follows 'Back In the USSR' – from the ridiculous to the sublime. In the final analysis, Lennon's struggle with life more often outweighs McCartney's contentedness.

As singers, there is an undeniable sympathy between them that makes their best duets something different still. Paul's romanticism curbs John's angst ('If I Fell'), and Lennon shoots McCartney's puerile excesses through with humour ('Yellow Submarine'), one making up for what the other may lack. They are a team as naturally suited to one another as Astaire and Rodgers, Rodgers and Hart/Hammerstein, Hepburn and Tracy. They magnify this power not just because they are two, but because their combined chemistry is so much more than one plus one.

The band

This is true of the band as well: their group identity far outweighs their separate talents. The interplay beween McCartney's bass and George's guitar during the guitar solo of 'Something' is one of the best things about the songs itself – Paul comes close to stealing the show.

Ringo Starr is still an underrated drummer. To begin with, he keeps flawless time, never giving in to the tendency to rush or slow down, which is essential to driving rock 'n' roll. He doesn't dominate his set the way the Who's Keith Moon did, nor does his relatively earthy musicality compete with a jazzer-turned-rocker like Charlie Watts of the Rolling Stones. But his role in the band is impossible to discount. Each track has its own drum sound, its own specific patterns, and he gives each song a special feel by adjusting his rhythms to suit the musical tone. His partnership with Paul's increasingly active bass-playing is still a lesson in the significant role the bottom end plays in supporting the top in rock. Beginning with 'Boys', Ringo is given a song to sing on nearly every album, supported with musical affection. By the time he delivers 'Yellow Submarine', his presence is central.

George Harrison's work will always suffer from the comparison he invites to Lennon and McCartney; such brilliant company inevitably makes his efforts sound weaker. Like the silent partners found in John Entwistle's role as the Who's bassist, or Bill Wyman's role in the Stones, he counts as an essential ingredient in the band's character more than a striking stand-out. His strong moments are notable by any other standards, songs like 'Taxman', 'While My Guitar Gently Weeps' and 'Here Comes the Sun' have earned their place in rock history, even if his excursions into Indian sitar-based exoticism are now largely dismissable. He's best thought of as a lead guitarist, the one who turned in the effervescent solos on 'And Your Bird Can Sing', or the brief and breathless interruption in 'Got to Get You Into My Life'. Along with Ringo, his musical competency supported, rather than competed with, his elder peers.

On record, the Beatles play up their personalities, enjoying their implications as well as their contradictions. The visual presence they commanded on stage accentuated this: John's Rickenbacker, George's Gretsch and Paul's Hofner each had a distinctive design to it; they were more than phallic, they were logical extensions of their musical wit. Their stage presence was haloed by an illusory arc that stretched from the neck of Lennon's Rickenbacker on the right, over Ringo's drums, to the tuning pegs of Paul's Hofner bass, which he played left-handed while sharing a microphone with George. Their long hair made them arty and outrageous, and as their looks changed over the years, they projected the idea that the way one appears affects the way one perceives one's self.

As an ensemble, their interplay is a constantly shifting exhange of combinations. The simple two-guitar, bass and drums format allows for a number of different set-ups: at the simplest level, Paul's bass provides harmonic foundation and combines with Ringo's drumming to form the rhythm section. On top of this, John's rhythm guitar flanks George's lead. These elementary patterns lead to more intricate configurations: a song can pit lead guitar against the drums ('I Feel Fine') or let the bass play lead almost exclusively ('Rain').

The two songwriters carry the lead vocal parts, and are supported by pairing the remaining lead singers behind (Paul and George back up John, John and George back up Paul). In 'Long Tall Sally', Paul leads the band, in 'Roll Over Beethoven', George lets them carry him; in 'Money', John pits himself against the opposing

forces of the others, turning the act of performance into a competition of will, endurance and emotional thrust. A singer can impose his emotional presence on the way the band actually sounds: John's authoritative presence on 'Bad Boy' conjures up a completely different imaginative space than Paul's equally masterful 'Kansas City'.

Recording artists

The Beatles are the first rock band for whom recording came first and they remain our best. The growing significance of pop music in the 1960s paralleled advancements in the technology of recording, which suited their own creative inclinations to stop touring and concentrate on studio work. The expanding technical possibilities influenced their music to a greater degree than pop had ever been subject to before. Phil Spector's work with the Ronettes, Ike and Tina Turner, the Crystals, and the Righteous Brothers are paragons of how studio technique can turn the simple essence of pop into grand dramatic surges of sound. But Spector was more an *auteur* than he was a full-fledged artist – his catalogue bears his signature but not his soul. The Beatles' work came to be conceived with the studio in mind – all the production values a mixing board had to offer were used to serve the ideas conveyed in their music. A Beatle record is more than just a collection of songs, it is a performance for tape. The recording industry still measures itself against ingenious achievements like *Sgt Pepper* (recorded on two four-track recorders), even though digital circuitry is now far beyond the twelve-track mixing boards which were used to tape their last album, *Abbey Road*.

George Martin, a classically-trained oboist, produced almost all of the Beatles' material for the recording medium. His technically experienced ears lent a disciplined sensibility to Lennon and McCartney's ideas. The classical touches bear Martin's fingerprints (the string quartet on 'Yesterday', the baroque keyboard solo in 'In My Life'), and when Lennon wanted two different versions of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' spliced together to capture the best of both, even though they were in different keys and tempi, it was Martin who figured out how to do it. His creative presence is notably absent on *Let It Be*, the only Beatle record he didn't oversee. Phil Spector produced 'Let it Be', 'The Long and Winding Road' and 'Across the Universe' for that record with strings and female choruses. It's obvious from the resulting clash of sentiment and schmaltz that Spector doesn't speak the Beatles' language as well as Martin does. Martin's care for detail and nuance are why other artists' recordings of Beatle songs are usually less satisfying than their original counterparts. Each element of the production on Beatle records is so carefully placed that it becomes part of the song itself. As time went on, the Beatles weren't so much songwriters as they were record-writers, the studio became a lab where musical ideas were exchanged, re-worked and re-structured for tape.

The merits of a recorded performance compared to the live arena are often disputed in rock 'n' roll – while Bruce Springsteen might contend that rock's most noble values are played out in concert, where artist and audience engage in shared imagery at the same time in the same place, the airwaves are where the music lives in day-to-day life, and since day-to-day life is pop's subject, its medium is its most important message. The very idea that highly individual messages can be shared on a mass scale is enough to make Rosie and her Originals seem almost oracular.

The Beatles' understanding of how the recording medium could be used was

intuitive and unfeigned. In 'Strawberry Fields Forever', sounds roam from place to place, the voice is filtered to warp the sense of space (at times it sounds as if Lennon sings from underwater), and even some of the instruments are unrecognisable because of what surounds them. For a song which grapples with the disturbing questions of alienation and self-identity, the setting alone conveys much of the text's confused tone.

The studio effects don't need to be fancy, though: for the final verse of 'I've Got a Feeling', Phil Spector simply separates the lead voices into separate stereo channels, dividing the duet into two distinct parts, type-casting Lennon and McCartney's swan song by putting it through separate speakers. The way the rhythm instruments are distinguished from the lead vocals on earlier albums enhances the texture: each instrument etches a clear line in the web of sound. These early mixes (vocals opposite instruments) sound simplistic today, but they grew into such lopsided treats as 'Yer Blues' (with the drums all the way over over to the left) and 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer', with its overwrought labyrinth design.

With the wealth of material the band produced, it's surprising to remember that their recording career lasted only seven years. A lifetime in pop is very short, and seven years has come to signify about one generation: seven years after the Beatles dissolution, Punk and New Wave came to the fore in 1977; roughly seven years after that, a new crop of hopefuls like R.E.M., The Replacements, Husker Du and the Minutemen came into maturity in 1984. The Beatles' seven years of recording (1962–69) was loaded with creativity, and when seen as a whole body of work, there is a progressive direction implicit in the best of it. The seeds of their later period can be heard in the early stages, and as early as *Help!*, it assumes a self-reflecting dimension. 'You're Gonna Lose That Girl' is basically a re-write – the unsung threat – of 'She Loves You'.

The idea of turning the long-playing record into an artistic statement came about largely because of the Beatles' own career. John Rockwell points out how records like Frank Sinatra's 'Only the Lonely' have an underlying theme which makes their songs part of a whole, but the concept album as we know it came into its own with *Sgt Pepper*, and has never been the same since. To say a record has an 'inner logic' (to use Robert Christgau's term suggests something more than a common theme. It has to do with the rhythm of an album side, the way songs relate to one another, and the way a listener becomes engaged with the imaginative landscape of sound. In the same way that great movie actors relax and forget their self-consciousness in front of the cameras, the Beatles' ease in front of the microphones lets us hear them feel the music as they play it – the way Ringo plows right into 'Birthday', for instance, or the tight grip that John keeps on his rhythm guitar in 'I'm Happy Just to Dance With You'. Their relationship with the material can be heard in the way a song is played through time, either gaining momentum towards the finish (as in 'Twist and Shout') or ebbing and flowing of its own accord ('If I Needed Someone').

The Beatles treat the album as a journey from one place to another. They built cornerstones into their records by positioning the songs in relation to one another: beginnings and endings of sides can summate, contradict, qualify or cast a shadow over the songs they introduce or follow. Each Beatle album has its own nooks and crannies, its individual contours, speckled with personal moments each listener can latch on to and call their own – a favourite guitar solo, a treasured vocal ad-lib, any number of lyrical indecipherabilities. Their inner logic is best understood by hearing

the songs out of their normal sequence, as on the collection LPs that followed their break-up. After 'Something', the ears wants to hear 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer', after 'Back in the USSR', 'Dear Prudence'.

They took great care in assembling their records – they had a keen sense of how the order of songs gives shape to the experience of an album. On most of their albums, the songs in any other sequence would lessen their impact, detract from the entirety they form. This is true not only for their concept albums, but the earlier designs that led up to them. The way 'Twist and Shout' finishes off their début LP provides direction as well as a rousing finale; *Revolver* wouldn't have the same flavour if it didn't start with Harrison's bitter 'Taxman'. This sense of arranging the material evolves into works like *Sgt Pepper*, which has a self-conscious beginning, middle and end; side two of *Abbey Road* has a collage effect – the individual songs are less central than the way they relate to one another as parts of an integrated mosaic. Again, the exceptions prove the rule: 'Dizzy Miss Lizzie' sags after 'Yesterday' on the *Help!* album, 'Run For Your Life', the last song on *Rubber Soul*, blemishes that album by undermining its ambiguities.

Once immersed in their catalogue, it's hard to separate any single song from its context. Their rendition of Barret Strong's 'Money' is simply more powerful when heard after listening to the rest of *With the Beatles*, the album it closes. 'Hey Jude' 1968's summer single, would have changed its character on the *White Album* considerably – as a single, it stands out more than if it had it been surrounded by that record's abundance. 1967's 'Penny Lane'/'Strawberry Fields Forever' single may be the most striking use of aural montage in the medium. Understanding their entire output enhances the enjoyment of any particular song.

The entire Beatle catalogue witnesses a growth – both musical and personal – that extends from the unleashed enthusiasm of *Please Please Me* to the resigned farewell of *Abbey Road*'s 'The End'. Their early sound peaks with *Hard Day's Night*, progresses uneasily through *Help!* and *Beatles For Sale*, ripens and blooms on *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*. By 1966, after barely four years of recording, *Revolver* stands as the pinnacle of all they can do: there are no weak tracks, and most of what follows deserves to be measured against it. The rest of the catalogue maps their dissolving partnerships: *Sgt Pepper*, the most famous, is also the most overrated; *Magical Mystery Tour* and *Yellow Submarine* are embarrassments, the *White Album* is a patchwork interwoven by great playing, *Let It Be* is an overhauled modesty. *Abbey Road*, although a success, doesn't quite extend or improve upon what *Revolver* attained.

They weren't conscious of this larger picture, but its implications are broad: they came of age through their music as their audience came of age. The innocence heard in 'I Saw Her Standing There' and 'There's A Place' quickly gives way to the qualified commitment of 'If I Fell', the sadness that pervades 'And I Love Her'. Their singing, playing and album conceptions followed their artistic temperaments, so that at each step of the way, their identities as musicians and writers were served by their natural abilities and their comparatively unschooled studio technique.

By digesting rock 'n' roll during adolescence, and recreating it in their own image as they progressed, the form came of age, and gained the capacity to express more adult themes: isolation, despair, alienation, loss, and the positive correlatives of peace, communication, self-worth, vision and hope. The term rock 'n' roll was abbreviated to rock. Rock 'n' roll still expresses adolescent concerns (that still pack a wad of excitement when Bruce Springsteen closes a show with Eddie Cochran's

'Summertime Blues'). Rock refers to the larger spectrum of adult experience, and embraces everything fom the mature work of Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Who and others, to stylistic heirs like Punk and New Wave, with talents like Elvis Costello and the Talking Heads who continue to explore the genre. The Beatles symbolise this growth towards maturity, even if the weight of the journey is shared by others. Their early work charges adolescent themes with a greater urgency, and their maturation more than delivered on their early promise.

The word

The Beatles combined the physicality of Elvis with a British zeal for verbal flair. The point of good pop is not to be haughty or arcane, but to communicate by twisting assumed meanings, using images out of context or emphasising things in a new way. The Beatles had an uncanny flair for cleverness without being artful or supercilious – their word-painting conjures up varied associations with the simplest of references. Sometimes it is not the performance that is most riveting, it is the singularity of ideas that strikes the imagination; other times, the emotional energy of a vocal performance seems to carry the band along behind, transcending any hidden references in the words: the poignancy of generational conflict in 'She's Leaving Home' makes up for its sentimental setting, and the two lines that Paul repeats in 'Why Don't We Do It In the Road' allows for some masterful vocal gymnastics.

Making intelligent lyrics and arrangements accessible to a popular audience is a formidable challenge. Although their lyrics are made up of clichés and coloquialisms, we always sense a strong voice behind their words, a personality that draws on pop's language as a means of expression, not lines used to fill up spaces in the sound – the sentiment generates the lyrics instead of cliches being forced to fit. Whether it's 'I Am the Walrus' or a 'yeh, yeh, yeh', they constantly re-animate their language. Simple verbal phrases are made to carry an emotional weight beyond their capacity, and when combined with music, they signify much more than what is implied on the surface. These commonalities are treated so that the familiar seems fresh, the ordinary seems special, and the secular somehow becomes holy. The transformation of idioms can be ironic: the slang phrase 'turn you on' of the drug culture becomes a humanitarian plea for enlightenment in 'A Day in the Life'; in 'Let It Be', Paul sings as much to his audience as he does to his companions.

The idea of perspective counts for a lot with the Beatles. The attitude of the lover towards his loved one in early songs is constantly shifting – Lennon can be spiteful and pretentious as easily as he can be vulnerable and paranoid. Women seem to taunt him as much as they symbolise satisfaction to him: 'If I Fell' takes a simple 'Second Time Around' scenario and wrings a song of real consequence from its emotional implications. The transition towards selfhood is found all through their catalogue, from a deceptively simple heart-break song like 'Yesterday' on *Help!* (which came to mean much more to an entire generation that lost its innocence to the Vietnam war and the battle for civil rights), to 'You Never Give Me Your Money' on *Abbey Road*, which laments the inevitable responsibilities of fame. 'Help!' itself was once thought of as simply the title song for a mock James Bond movie, but it has survived as a young man's desperate cry for intimacy. The pessimism in 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' sounds that much darker when weighed against the unflinching exuberance of 'I Want to Hold Your Hand'.

Later, as they begin to address the larger concerns of adulthood, their masks

and innuendos change. Paul's financial terminology on side two of *Abbey Road* stems directly from the legal confrontations the Beatles were then facing with their publishers. Lennon's identity crisis at the height of his fame spawned a number of self-referential confessionals about his identity ('Help!', 'Strawberry Fields' and 'She Said She Said') and alternative realms of the imagination that reached beyond the conscious world ('Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds' and 'Tomorrow Never Knows'). The layered levels of inference in a song as full of imagery as 'I Am the Walrus' or even 'Hey, Bulldog' has the welling sense of the uncontrollable to it; the storyteller sounds barely in control of his story, never mind his subject. He had to write 'A Day in the Life' before he could return to basics with songs like 'Revolution', 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)' and 'Don't Let Me Down'.

The effect of time on people's lives is treated both romantically (as in 'It Won't Be Long' and 'Things We Said Today') and humorously ('When I'm Sixty-Four' and 'Obladi-Oblada'). The soporific images of nature found in 'And I Love Her', mature into the sublime restraint of 'Dear Prudence'. 'All My Loving' is ripe with irony – the joy of the performance belies the sentiment of the text; 'Drive My Car' has an even more sophisticated ironic wit. This wealth of material goes way beyond diversity, and it takes many forms – it can pop up as respectful parody (which can still stand on its own) like 'Honey Pie', or it can lie in the grooves between such different songs as 'The Word', an up-tempo community song by Lennon, and the unabashed cabaret setting of McCartney's 'Michelle'. They hated over-intellectualisation of their songs ('Glass Onion') almost as much as they hated not being taken seriously ('I'll Get You', 'I'm So Tired', and 'Sexy Sadie').

As the music develops, the basic primal passions of rock 'n' roll are carried forward and enlarged. When the music first appeared, it challenged some basic assumptions. Presley's conjunction of black and white was radical enough for some, but along with this, rock 'n' roll raised the whole issue of freedom (again). The Beatles played out the concept of 'the beat can set you free' and emphasised the freedom even more than the beat. Their beat was enormous (as Marcus points out), but the possibilities of what it could do became even bigger. What kinds of freedom could rock 'n' roll address? Initially, of course, it was sexual freedom – Elvis Presley's image was both racial and physical. But the Beatles didn't so much sharpen rock's sexual and cultural arrows as they did infuse the style with an even greater musical intelligence. If Elvis Presley symbolised everything that rock 'n' roll could stand for, the Beatles took it all apart and put it back together in ways that made the music sound infinitely resourceful, adaptable, rich. They didn't re-invent rock 'n' roll so much as re-examine how one could look at it, transforming it into a style both bold enough to provoke and seasoned enough to sustain itself – they played up possibilities that didn't seem feasible on the surface. Without being explicit, their work inspired their audience far more dramatically than protest songs and peace-love-and-brotherhood propaganda would have ('The Word' and 'All You Need Is Love' are the only songs that flirt with flower-power). Lennon's rendition of 'Twist and Shout', with all its lust, has kernels of spiritual longing. The way he sings 'Money' on the next album makes the physical–spiritual tug of war more apparent: the spirit of his singing tells us that he sees right through the materialist doctrine he's supposedly endorsing.

Eventually, the beat conveys more complex notions of freedom – and what lies beyond. The *Revolver* album confronts mortality, and seeks transcendental and romantic avenues towards peace of mind. The incessant rhythm track of 'Tomorrow

Never Knows' is merely bedding for tape loops and a backwards guitar solo – instead of riding the beat like a wave, it's like they're inside the wave itself. The beat of 'Rain' is mesmerising; the layered patterns in 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' make the stomach turn; and the variety of rhythmic sequences in 'I Want You' gives the simple text a potent framework. 'She said, She Said' condenses three stages of life into less than four minutes by letting the beat tell half the story. As complex as their rhythmic ideas can get, they never lose sight of where it all springs from: the backbeat. The finale to *Abbey Road* has as its centrepiece a simple guitar jam, as fundamental as anything from *Please Please Me*. Their love of simple rock 'n' roll was always a springboard for messages of higher implication, and their achievements encompass not only new musical styles, but new ways of looking at the world.

The Beatles never seemed to question whether rock 'n' roll could speak to all these concerns, they simply acted as if it could. Along the way, they transformed the style nonchalantly, whipping off dazzling record after dazzling record, transforming the very idea of the rock album each time out, making technical and artistic feats sound not only easy, but fun. By the time they bid their audience farewell with 'Her Majesty', they've developed new vocabularies for pop, whether it's the way an album begins and ends, or the flashes of brilliance in between that their singles embody. The journey from unknown upstarts to consummate professionals is a story best told by the music.

Before setting foot in a recording studio the Beatles paid their dues like any other band. They started playing whever they could at church dances, picnics, and the small clubs that would let them open for bigger acts. When Allan Williams decided to manage them, bookings were scarce. They simply weren't very good yet, and none of them had the means to devote the time to a career – it meant giving up jobs and school. But when Williams got them a long-term contract to play the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, they leapt at the chance. It was steady income, and it meant they could devote their lives to music. To see an early picture of the band, on their way to play Hamburg for the first time in 1960, posing in front of the Arnhem War Cemetery, is to have a strange retrospective sense of prophecy. The tomb they are posed upon reads: *'Their name liveth forevermore.'*

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