

The Album Heard 'Round the World: A Look Into *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*

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ABSTRACT

Today, few people are unaware of The Beatles; whether in a vintage t-shirt, a dorm room poster, or a compilation of songs on their iPod, generations for four decades have embraced the legendary sixties rock 'n' roll band. Nevertheless, many do not understand the impact the group had beyond the tunes that still dominate television commercials today. In particular, through the making and release of *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the Beatles transcended the boundary of mere entertainers into the realm of revolutionary artists.

The Beatles' eighth album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, took more than seven hundred hours over the course of four and a half months to complete (Martin and Pearson 167). Despite their time and efforts, the Beatles were concerned it would not sell. Nevertheless, when the album was released on June 1, 1967, their worries proved unfounded. In less than three months, over two and half million copies were sold and the album remained at the top of the charts for twenty-three consecutive weeks (Gould 396). Four decades later, the public continues to embrace the album. In the November 2003 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was named the number one greatest album of all time (Goldstein 97). The reason for such zeal lies within the revolutionary nature of what the Beatles created. The production of this one album changed the nature of rock 'n' roll, the recording process, and the public's perception of music.

There are many reasons why the Beatles were able to make such a revolutionary album at this point in their careers. For one thing, they no longer faced the pressure of deadlines. The initial contract they had signed with George Martin that mandated four singles and two albums per year ended in 1966 (Spitz 659). Moreover, the Beatles were so profitable that Electric and Music Industries (EMI) executives were willing to accommodate them. Many times the Beatles would show up four hours (or more) late to their seven o'clock sessions and then continue to work until dawn the next day (Emerick 142). EMI would leave the studio open to allow the group to record at their own pace. This practice was so unusual that the Beatles had to break into the kitchen one night for milk because the room had been locked at ten o'clock by the staff unaccustomed to having people in the studio overnight (169).

The Beatles also had more time because they had recently decided to stop touring. They received death threats while in Tokyo, were physically intimidated and had their luggage intentionally misdirected in the Philippines, and were shunned and vilified in the United States (Martin and Pearson 8). Overall, the Beatles were "hotel fatigued" as a result of Brian Epstein's overzealous bookings that had the group constantly travelling between cities that were hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles apart. In addition, touring was beginning to hinder their musicianship. For one thing, audiences' screams were so deafening at concerts that the Beatles could rarely hear themselves or each other performing. Also, on the *Revolver* tour, the group sometimes could not reproduce a song as it sounded on the album because of the complicated techniques used in the studio (10). As John Lennon noted, a lack of touring commitments would allow the band to drop what he called "soft music" intended to be performed live and pursue "something that's never been heard before" (Emerick 132).

John, speaking on behalf of the group, wanted to create "a new kind of record with new kinds of sounds" inspired by their drug use, in particular, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) (Emerick 132). When

Paul first took LSD in November 1966, he became the last of the Beatles to experiment with it (Gould 388). As George pointed out, LSD was “opening [their] minds to different areas and . . . it was exciting because there was a lot of cross fertilization” (Marshall 14).

As a result of these conditions before and during the recording of *Sergeant Pepper*, the Beatles were able to produce a revolutionary album that some consider the beginning of the “second Renaissance of rock ‘n’ roll”; it transformed the genre from being just another form of pop music to being an art form (Spitz 697). Rather than simply recording songs, they created an organized album (Emerick 190).

Overall, the concept of the album as a performance by a fictional groups called Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band represents rock ‘n’ roll’s shift towards becoming an art form. It reflects the Beatles’ desire to produce a coherent work rather than a mere collection of disconnected songs. To achieve a concert-like sound, the standard three second gaps between songs were omitted (Spitz 658). Also, the concept was carried over onto the cover. John, Paul, George, and Ringo were dressed in vibrantly colored Edwardian military jackets and stood beside their 1963 Madame Tussaud’s waxwork figures dressed in black and white suits and ties (Turner 128).

The album cover, created by Peter Blake, was itself revolutionary for the rock ‘n’ roll industry. It includes, for example, accessories related to the theme of the album. The Beatles had initially wanted to have a transparent envelope attached with stick-on tattoos and little pins. While this was deemed too expensive and impractical, cut-outs were included. There were sergeant badges, a postcard from Sergeant Pepper, clip-on mustaches, and a Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band bass drum (Spitz 678). Moreover, the lyrics were printed on the back cover to be read and studied (Turner 2). Timothy Leary, in his essay, “Drop Out or Cop Out,” even called the lyrics “the newest Testament chanted by the four Evangelists—Saints John, Paul, George and Ringo” (127). Previously, including lyrics was not common because of a fear of interfering with sheet music sales. After spending nearly sixty times the normal cost, the Beatles produced an album cover unlike anything that had ever been done before (Gould 355).

In addition, the Beatles shifted away from the standard “two-guitars-bass-and-drums lineup” towards a wider variety of sounds. For example, other genres of music are reshaped and transformed on the *Sergeant Pepper* album. For example, on “She’s Leaving Home,” the band innovatively used a classical string octet and harp (Spitz 668). Also, on “A Day in the Life,” a forty man orchestra that included violins, violas, cellos, double basses, and French horns was employed (Macdonald 227). For the recording of this song, the Beatles, like sculptors, manipulated the way the orchestra played to blur the boundaries between classical and rock ‘n’ roll. For one thing, the Beatles created a unique atmosphere atypical for an orchestra performance. Bubble machines and hookahs were brought in and the musicians given gag accessories such as clown wigs, rubber noses, clip-on nipples, gorilla paws, and party hats (Martin and Pearson 213). This was considered so taboo by the classical musicians that one man even slapped Mal Evans who was handing out the toys. The instructions were also unlike anything the musicians, who played in prestigious orchestras such as the London Symphony and the Royal Philharmonic, had ever encountered (Gould 388). George Martin, the Beatles’ producer, told the orchestra to progress from their lowest note to the highest note within twenty-four bars at whatever speed they saw fit. He further emphasized that they need not attempt to keep in time with their fellow musicians (Emerick 155). This concept was so radical that one offended individual stormed out despite the double wages he was being paid (Martin and Hornsby 211). Observing the entire scene, the Beatles’ engineer Geoff Emerick commented that it was like a “passing of the torch” from traditional music that is well defined to innovative music that surpassed any preexisting limitations (Emerick 159).

In addition to classical music, the Beatles also used the sound of Eastern instruments on *Sergeant Pepper*. For example, in “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” the combination of George Harrison’s guitar and John’s singing imitates the sound of a sarangi, an Indian classical instrument that sounds like a human voice (Marshall 14). “Within You Without You” is also described as “Raga meets western classical music” (14). For the recording, members of the Eastern Music Circle of London were brought in to play instruments such as the dilruba, an Indian violin, as well as a svramandal, tabla, and tambura (Macdonald 243). In an effort to produce an inspirational setting, the Beatles requested paisley throw

rugs and lit incenses (Emerick 179). As a result, the song produced is considered “the most distant departure from the staple Beatles sound in their discography” (Macdonald 244).

On top of reshaping and incorporating sounds from other genres of music, the Beatles also introduced many original sounds and concepts. For example, on “Lovely Rita,” combs wrapped with waxy EMI toilet paper were used to produce a kazoo-like noise to make a song John considered “boring,” more interesting (Spitz 670). In addition, at the end of “Good Morning Good Morning,” John decided that the fade-out was too “normal.” As a result, he asked that the illusion of a chaotic animal chase be created by overdubbing and mixing EMI sound effects of sheep, cows, horses, elephants, lions and hens (Emerick 178). The Beatles’ dedication to creating an original album continued even after the songs ended. For example, after the close of “A Day in the Life,” Paul, with his dog, Martha, in mind, asked that a noise high enough to be audible only to dogs be added (Martin and Pearson 158). Also, the run-out groove is filled with gibberish created by looping, repeating, and overlapping a recording of the phrase “never needed any other way” until it was meaningless (Emerick 188). Although some believe the nonsensical noises announce “we’ll fuck you like Superman” when played backwards, the message was not intended (Spitz 673). Their work on this album changed the Beatles’ status “from being just an ordinary rock-n-roll group into being significant contributors of artistic performance” (Martin and Pearson 124).

With the Beatles having such high aspirations for this album, the recording process was inevitably revolutionized. One particular song on which this is evident is “A Day in the Life.” For example, at the beginning of the section after the first twenty-four bars of instrumental chaos, Paul asked that his voice sound groggy to resemble a person who has just woken up. To achieve this effect, Emerick innovatively took out much of the treble and then compressed the sound (Emerick 152). On the same song, Emerick was able to sustain an E major chord played on the piano for an unprecedented forty seconds by tracking it four times on three pianos (Gould 417). In addition, to obtain a new sound from the orchestral instruments in the twenty-four bars sections, microphones were stuck down the bells of the brass and “creative” microphones were made by taping headphones to violins (Gould 387).

Emerick was also able to achieve fresh sounds on “Lovely Rita.” For the bass part, Paul wanted a rounder and smoother sound. After he failed to achieve it despite experimenting until his fingers bled, Emerick stepped in. The amp was moved to the center of the studio and the microphone placed six feet away. Producing a sound rarely heard before, these techniques have been emulated by engineers ever since (Emerick 170). In addition, Emerick did not want any two piano segments on the album to sound the same. To change the sound on “Lovely Rita,” he put sticky editing tape on the guide rollers of the tape machine. It was described as a “contravention of the rules that, with any band other than the Beatles, would have easily gotten me fired” (172).

“Being For the Benefit of Mr. Kite” also used revolutionary recording methods. In this song, John wanted to create a “fair sound” that would evoke a carnival-like atmosphere. At first, George Martin attempted to achieve this by mixing recordings of harmoniums, organs, and a harmonica. However, when this failed to achieve the desired effect, Martin invented a new process. Two-minute sections of John Phillip Sousa marches were recorded, cut into fifteen-inch pieces, thrown into the air, collected randomly and then recorded again (Spitz 669). It was a technique that was described as taking the process “almost to absurdity” (Martin and Hornsby 150).

In recording the album, the creative ingenuity of Geoff Emerick and George Martin was stretched to its limits. While the process was complicated, the effort was well worth it. There was such a variety of sound effects created to perfection that Emerick included a note that read “Please transfer flat” when he sent the original tapes to the mastering engineer, Harry Moss. Although the note initially offended Moss, a compromise was reached so that Emerick was allowed to sit in on the mastering sessions (Emerick 189). This was a practice unheard of at EMI and an indication of the significance of his work. Moreover, in 1967, Emerick was deservedly awarded the Grammy for the Best Engineered Record of the year (Martin and Pearson 150). As one critic commented, *Sergeant Pepper* was “the watershed which changed the recording art from something that merely made amusing sounds into something which will stand the test of time as a valid art” (124).

Sergeant Pepper also redefined the way audiences received music. The release of the album initiated a greater engagement amongst listeners. In place of the initial Beatlemania that embraced the music as something to dance to, an "Adult Beatlemania" regarded the music as something to be analyzed (Roessner 166).

The music on *Sergeant Pepper* was more significant to listeners largely because it "liberated, in song, the dreams and ideas of a generation" (Martin and Pearson 158). The relevance of the album was affirmed by many people. One woman from Los Angeles explained that "now songs are about things I think about – world, love, drugs, the way things are" (Porterfield 106). Another fan, a fifteen year old boy who had left home to join a hippie commune, described the music as "all the things I wanted to say to my parents and their freaky friends" (Porterfield 108). John Schumacher, a film director from the New York underground arts scene, agreed that the music on *Sergeant Pepper* was "a reflection of what we were going through" (Turner 129). As Ringo explained, the album reflected "Flower Power coming to its fullest" (Northcutt 130).

The album also highlights the sixties' interest in drugs. Although drugs are never directly mentioned, their effects helped inspire many of the songs. For example, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" is full of psychedelic imagery similar to that in *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll. The lyrics include "newspaper taxis," "cellophane flowers," and "kaleidoscope eyes" (Lennon / McCartney). Furthermore, the concept of time shifting experienced during acid trips is incorporated in songs such as "When I'm Sixty-Four" as Paul is transported back to become a 1920s teenager. This is also a part of "Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" as listeners are taken into the future to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the group (Gould 397). Similarly, in "A Little Help From My Friends," the lines "what do you see when you turn out the light? / I can't tell but I know it's mine" portray the out-of-body experience many people feel when they trip on acid (Macdonald 247).

There are also several innuendos on the album that were not intended by the Beatles but may involve drug imagery. For example, in "A Day in the Life," John sings about "four thousand holes in Blackburn, Lancashire" (Lennon/McCartney). While this line was inspired by an article in the January 17, 1967, edition of the *Daily Mail* about pot holes in the road, some interpreted the holes as marks on the arm of a heroin addict (Spitz 660). Similarly, when John sings about a man who "blew his mind out in a car," he refers to the death of Tara Browne, an heir to the Guinness fortune who crashed into a parked minivan while speeding through red lights in South Kensington (Macdonald 229). Nevertheless, many, including George Martin himself, believed the line to be alluding to getting stoned (Martin 50). In another instance, the line "may I inquire discreetly / when are you free / to take some tea with me" in "Lovely Rita" was thought to allude to Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* in which "tea" is slang for marijuana (Gould 409).

Furthermore, Sgt. Pepper explores the growing generation gap. For example, "When I'm Sixty-Four" parodies the style of music that was popular during the sixties' youths' parents' era (Gould 407). While the musical arrangement is modeled after that of bands such as the Temperance Seven, which specialized in 1920s music, the lyrics communicate Paul's belief that life as an elder is "Hell" (Martin 36). This perhaps echoed the popular sentiment that it was a "particular sin to be old" (36).

Also, the rebellious, free-spirited nature of the counterculture's anti-establishment sentiment was represented on the album through the recurring carnival theme. The album opens with Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band performing in a park. Then, "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite" is set in a carnival atmosphere and laughter is heard after "Within You Without You" (Roessner 152). "A Day in the Life" also reflects upon the generation's "disenchantment with the limits of mundane perception" and their desire to "tune out" and escape reality (Macdonald 229). Another one of the counterculture's ideals, anti-materialism, is captured on "She's Leaving Home." Inspired by an article in the *Daily Mail*, the song describes a girl who leaves home in search of a more fulfilling life even after her parents "gave her everything money could buy" (Gould 402) (Lennon / McCartney).

When *Sergeant Pepper* was released on June 1, 1967, it took the world by storm. One rock magazine editor, Paul Williams, commented that listening to the album was "more constant and universal than the climate or any other aspect of the season" (Gould 396). Critics and fans alike celebrated the innovations they heard. Rock 'n' roll was changed into an art that brought together new

sounds and ideas to create a cohesive entity; the recording process was drastically widened, which made possible countless more effects; and audience participation was redefined and expanded. Today, violins are incorporated into rock bands such as Yellowcard, sound effects have reached unprecedented levels, and lyrics on albums are expected, not the exception. Glancing at the rock 'n' roll industry, it is easy to see that the impact of *Sergeant Pepper's* revolutionary nature is still felt today.

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