

Introducing the Beatles

KENNETH WOMACK

If the artist could explain in words what he has made, he would not have had to create it.

ALFRED STIEGLITZ

This book is about the Beatles' musical art. It is about the songwriting and recording processes that brought it to fruition, while also studying their recording career as an evolving text that can be interpreted as a body of work. But how, then, do we trace the contours of the Beatles' art? If we understand a work of art to be both the expression or exploration of a creative impulse and the process of creating a material object – whether that object be a novel, a painting, a sculpture, or a song – then we also implicitly recognize the art work to be the result of an indelibly human drive to communicate a set of ideas, to draw upon a sustained sense of aesthetics or ethos in order to establish beauty, and to engage in acts of storytelling in order to generate an emotional reaction. These latter elements enable the art object to function as a symbolic vehicle of cultural expression. If we accept the notion of the Beatles as recording *artists*, how, then, do we define the principal aesthetic and literary-musicological elements that inform John, Paul, George, and Ringo's enduring "body of work"? In order to comprehend their art as the result of a creative synthesis, we must work from a set of principles that assists us in understanding the range of their artistic pursuits as they are made manifest in the recording studio. With the Beatles, there was a genuine sense of wonder – a desire, even, for the primitive feel and muscularity of rock and roll, yet there was also a deeply felt nostalgia that developed throughout their career, a reverence for the awesome weight of the past, and a blunt recognition of the creative possibilities and rewards of authorship.

But we're getting way ahead of ourselves here. Long before Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play – long before the pressures of real life had reached their fever-pitch – there were two boys in love with music, gazing upon a brave new world, and upon each other's imaginations, under the blue suburban skies of a Liverpool churchyard. In many ways, the narrative of the Beatles is – and always will be – their story.

In his classic biography, *James Joyce* (1959), Richard Ellmann observes that his volume "enters Joyce's life to reflect his complex, incessant joining of event and composition." In short, Ellmann seeks to understand "the life of the artist" in order to interpret the great sweep of the novelist's

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accomplishment (3). As an artistic fusion, the Beatles merit this same depth and scope of treatment. The essayists in this volume trace the group's creative arc from the band's earliest recordings through *Abbey Road* and the twilight of their career. In so doing, it is my sincere hope that the *Cambridge Companion to the Beatles* will reflect the complexity of the Beatles' work, while also communicating the nature and power of their remarkable artistic achievement – both during their heyday and beyond.

In addition to Anthony DeCurtis's prescient Foreword, this anthology features a Beatles chronology, as well as such resources as a "General discography" of the band's UK and US recordings through 1970 and a "Select bibliography" of book-length biographical and critical studies of the Beatles. In the *Companion's* first section, two contributors address the Beatles' background, including their early years and their emergence as innovative songwriters and recording artists. In "Six boys, six beatles: the formative years, 1950–1962," Dave Laing traces the early years of the Beatles during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Laing takes particular care to demonstrate the future bandmates as express products of the historical process in 1950s-era England. In addition to documenting their passage from childhood and adolescence through young adulthood, Laing examines the musical influences that came together in the personnel of the Quarrymen, Lennon's skiffle group, and the early Beatles. In "The Beatles as recording artists," Jerry Zolten investigates the technological aspects of the group, as well as the role of studio wizardry in the formulation of their art. In addition to discussing the producers and technicians who assisted the Beatles during their studio years, Zolten identifies the key moments of electronic innovation that propelled the band's music to new and uncharted sonic heights. In so doing, Zolten reveals the manner in which the Beatles' art has not only weathered but trumped the music of the ages.

In the *Companion's* second section, which is devoted to the group's album-length productions, the essayists trace the band's output from *Please Please Me* through their solo careers. Howard Kramer's "Rock and roll music" traces the Beatles' growth from their first album, which they recorded within the space of a single day, through *With the Beatles*. In addition to addressing the recording and release of such landmark singles as "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand," Kramer discusses the manner in which the Beatles consolidated their fame at a breakneck, frenzied speed. Kramer also affords attention to the ways in which the group employed the sounds of "first generation rock and roll" in the gestation of their own innovative musical foundations. In "'Try thinking more': *Rubber Soul* and the Beatles' transformation of pop," James M. Decker examines *Rubber Soul* as the Beatles' "transitional" album, as the long-playing record in which they dispensed with high-octane rock and roll in favor of a new sound that

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embraces studio technology and the lyricism of pop poetry. Decker devotes considerable emphasis to the group's expanding experimental nature in their work, as well as to their increasing sense of edginess and ambiguity in their music. With the release of *Rubber Soul*, Decker argues, the Beatles began to transcend the creative boundaries of individual tracks in favor of the more nuanced expression inherent in the album as musical construct. In "Magical mystery tours, and other trips: yellow submarines, newspaper taxis, and the Beatles' psychedelic years," Russell Reising and Jim LeBlanc explore the groundbreaking musical accomplishments of the Beatles' psychedelic era from *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* through the *Magical Mystery Tour* project. Beginning with the spring of 1966, Reising and LeBlanc trace the group's experimentation with psychedelic themes, sounds, and insights in both their words and their music. In so doing, Reising and LeBlanc map out the musical dimension of the Beatles' output during this period, while also identifying the nature of the musical direction that would define their latter efforts in the studio.

Ian Inglis's "Revolution" offers a shrewd reading of the convoluted historical and cultural context inherent in the labyrinthine recording sessions for *The Beatles* (the White Album). Inglis establishes a complex level of acclaim and uncertainty for the Beatles at the dawn of 1968, ranging from the spell-binding success of *Sgt. Pepper* to the critical disdain for *Magical Mystery Tour* – not to mention the traumatizing specter of war and assassination on the international front. Inglis reads the resulting album as a strident contrast with the careful sense of direction and purpose that marked their earlier efforts, with the White Album sporting disunity, fragmentation, and disillusionment as its primary – if not primal – characteristics. In "On their way home: the Beatles in 1969 and 1970," Steve Hamelman provides an expansive analysis of the Beatles' last recordings, including the *Get Back* project and *Abbey Road*. For Hamelman, the group's final spate of music – recorded, for the most part, as the backdrop for the bandmates' impending "divorce" – finds the Beatles reaching new artistic heights in terms of lyricism, and, ironic as it may seem, musical unity. In addition to affording particular attention to the symphonic suite that closes their career, Hamelman addresses the remarkable music synergy that sees the *Get Back* project establishing the musical foundation for the Beatles' swan song on *Abbey Road*. In so doing, writes Hamelman, the band "ends with a benediction ('And in the end, the love you take / Is equal to the love you make') sung sweetly and sincerely to a cushion of strings. The Beatles end the record, their career in fact, with a couplet worthy of Shakespeare." Bruce Spizer's "Apple Records" examines the peculiar role of Apple Corps in the Beatles' history – particularly as a central creative and economic force during their final years as an artistic unit and beyond. In addition to tracing the

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genesis of Apple from holding company to multi-faceted artistic enterprise, Spizer speculates about the label's influence during the Beatles' solo years. Spizer also identifies the creative and business personalities who piloted the company during its truncated history.

Walter Everett's "Any time at all: the Beatles' free phrase rhythms" explores the bandmates' songwriting proclivities in terms of the rhythmic nature of their music. In this powerful work of musicology, Everett demonstrates that the group's songs are phrase-based in nature, ultimately referencing a vast array of compositions throughout their recording career. As Everett points out, the Beatles' interest in appropriating their music as the vehicle for portraying emotional and interpersonal conflicts serves as the bedrock for their resounding artistic achievement. Michael Frontani's "The solo years" offers one of music criticism's most extensive and thorough examinations of the bandmates' solo output. Drawing upon John, Paul, George, and Ringo's recorded corpus from 1969 through the present, Frontani enumerates the artistic highs and lows of the ex-Beatles' solo careers. Frontani affords special emphasis to the manner in which the former group members both struggle with and venerate their accomplishments as a musical unit during the 1960s.

The *Companion's* final section, entitled "History and influence," investigates the nature of the band's enduring sociocultural power, as well as the ways in which successive generations have interpreted the Beatles for their own purposes and desires. The essayists in this section also impinge upon the interpersonal, political, and commercial factors that have shaped the group's reception and commodification since their disbandment. In "The Beatles as zeitgeist," Sheila Whiteley examines the band's influence in the 1960s and beyond. Whiteley devotes special attention to the wide-ranging nature of the Beatles' inroads into popular culture in terms of such issues as politics, fashion, commerce, gender, sexuality, and the arts. Whiteley also discusses the manner in which the Beatles' influence spans divergent generations and cultures. In "Beatles news: product line extensions and the rock canon," Gary Burns addresses the evolution of the Beatles as a *bona fide* economic brand. By treating their commercial attainments separately from their critical status as sociocultural icons, Burns identifies the bandmates and their representatives as savvy businessmen who have become increasingly successful during the post-breakup years at promoting their product. Burns argues that the Beatles' remarkably fruitful afterlife is the express result of a deliberate and skillfully marketed product line – a commercial brand that has been every bit as effective as the band's innovative and trendsetting artistic model. Finally, John Kimsey's "An abstraction, like Christmas': the Beatles for sale and for keeps" offers an extensive study of the internal and external political dynamics that have shaped the

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Beatles' reception, repackaging, and self-defining (and, indeed, self-redefining) efforts from 1970 through the present. Kimsey affords considerable attention to such legacy-promoting activities as the *Anthology* series of music and videos released during the 1990s; the calculated release of such albums as *1*, *Let It Be... Naked*, and the Capitol Albums; and the recent success of *Love*, the band's Cirque du Soleil venture. In so doing, Kimsey elucidates a marketing strategy that never loses its momentum, that never ceases to produce dividends.

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PART ONE

Background

1 Six boys, six Beatles: the formative years, 1950–1962

DAVE LAING

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory.¹ ANTONIO GRAMSCI

Introduction

The chapter deals with the formative years of both the Beatles and the six youths who were group members in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including Stuart Sutcliffe and Pete Best, who left the band in 1961 and 1962 respectively. Although it cannot claim to be a complete inventory (to borrow a term from Gramsci in the quotation above), it is intended to present the boys and the band as products of the historical process in the England of the 1950s through the presentation of some of the “infinity of traces” deposited in them by that historical period.

In this account of the dual formation of the group and the six individuals, I will discuss first the various networks within which the six were enmeshed as children, adolescents and young men: those of the family and social class, of the school and youth culture peer group. The second part of the chapter describes and analyses the musical factors and features that coalesced to form first the Quarrymen skiffle group and then the early Beatles.

The data upon which this chapter is based are drawn from published biographies and autobiographies. These publications are of three types: authorized biographies such as those of Shepherd, Davies, Miles, and the Beatles “themselves”;² unauthorized biographies such as Goldman’s, Connolly’s, and Sullivan’s psychoanalytical volume;³ and the memoirs of colleagues, friends, and family such as Epstein, Cynthia Lennon, and Pauline Sutcliffe.⁴ The overall quality of this material is uneven, with a number of errors and discrepancies that have confused the general understanding of the early years of the Beatles.⁵ A useful corrective to much of this is the testimony of Bill Harry, the editor of the *Mersey Beat* newspaper from 1961. Many of the articles that appeared in the newspaper are available on his website (www.triumphpc.com/mersey-beat).

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War babies

The United Kingdom was at war with Germany and its allies between 1939 and 1945. All six boys were born during that conflict. John Lennon, Ringo Starr (Richard Starkey), Pete Best and Stuart Sutcliffe were born in 1940, John and Ringo in Liverpool, Pete in India, and Stuart in Scotland. Paul McCartney and George Harrison were Liverpool-born, in 1942 and 1943 respectively. Although all were infants during the wartime period, the conflict continued to shape British society and culture for at least the first decade of peacetime.

One minor but pertinent index of this was John Lennon's middle name. Until he replaced it with "Ono," John's second forename was Winston, after the British war leader Winston Churchill. It was a permanent reminder of his status as a war baby (the name was also very popular for baby boys in Jamaica, a British colony until 1960) – and there was a set of Churchill's works on display in his aunt Mimi and uncle George's house. This name became something of a minor obsession with John (perhaps because Churchill remained a current political figure until the late 1950s, and regained the post of prime minister from 1951 to 1955). The biographical literature provides three instances. A Beatles' instrumental piece included in a Hamburg set-list was named "Winston's Walk,"⁶ and the film *Backbeat* shows John telling an anti-German joke onstage in Hamburg: "My name's John Winston Lennon, Winston after the butcher." Finally, Paul told his biographer of a masturbation session involving several of the Quarrymen in a darkened room. The ritual was for each boy in turn to call out the name of a suitable female sex symbol ("Brigitte Bardot," etc.) but when it was Lennon's turn he deflated the erotic mood by saying, "Winston Churchill." Even the discarding of the name had some anti-imperialist significance, according to Yoko, who told one biographer that John disliked its "implication that he was somehow a subscriber to the spirit of the upper-class British empire and all that."⁷

As a major seaport, Liverpool was one of the main targets of German bombing in the early part of World War II. Paul McCartney's biographer Barry Miles summarized the scale and impact of these air raids:

From the night of 17 August 1940 until 10 January 1942 there were sixty-eight raids and over five hundred air-raid warnings. Every night thousands of people huddled together in basements and bomb shelters as high-explosive, incendiary and parachute bombs rained down upon the city, killing 2,650, seriously injuring over 2,000 others and leaving much of the city centre in ruins. The dead were buried in mass graves in Anfield cemetery. Over 10,000 of the homes in Liverpool were completely destroyed and over two-thirds of all homes were seriously damaged.⁸

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During the war years, the whole country was militarized. Over 5 million men and women served in the armed forces, but none of the six boys lost a close family member in the war, although the bomber pilot father of Eric Griffiths, a founder member of the Quarrymen, did not return from a raid over Germany. Millions more people were mobilized on the “home front.” Jim McCartney (Paul’s father) was rejected by the armed forces because of defective hearing, but he worked in a munitions factory and was a volunteer fireman at night. Stuart Sutcliffe’s father was directed to move from Scotland to Birkenhead on Merseyside to take up a post in the shipyard that was essential for the war effort. In many cities, young children were evacuated to the countryside, although it seems that none of the future Beatles was evacuated from Liverpool.

Even after the air raids had ceased, daily life was subordinated to the war effort, most notably through rationing. Consumption of twelve foodstuffs was placed under restriction in 1940 and 1941.⁹ These ranged from meat, butter, and cooking fat to sugar, sweets (candy), and chocolate. In 1940, clothing was rationed and each citizen had an annual number of coupons that could be exchanged in various combinations at clothing stores. The British rock and roll singer Marty Wilde recalled that gray, brown, and black “were all the colours I associate with the war. Almost everything was grey. It wasn’t until the Fifties that all colours started to come in clothes.”¹⁰

The depleted state of the British economy meant that rationing was not lifted at the end of World War II. Of the rationed items, only preserves (jams and marmalade) were de-rationed and freely available before 1952. In that year, tea was taken “off ration,” but meat, butter, sweets (candy) and chocolate were not de-rationed until the middle of 1954. Clothing coupons remained in force until 1948. There were also severe restrictions on imports from abroad, a decision taken to protect Britain’s limited reserves of foreign currency. Among the commodities affected were musical instruments, and it was not possible to import American guitars until the end of the 1950s, when the rock and roll singer Cliff Richard bought one of the first Fender Stratocasters to be seen in Britain for his guitarist, Hank Marvin of the Shadows. The inaccessibility of American instruments in the 1950s meant that the first guitars of aspiring young players were often poorly made imports from continental Europe.

While the wartime army was gradually demobilized after 1945, conscription or National Service was introduced in 1947 for young men. National Service cast a shadow over members of the Beatles until, in 1959, the government announced that National Service would be abolished in 1961, the year in which Ringo, John, Pete and Stu would have become eligible for call-up. The fear of conscription had been enough to prevent Ringo

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committing himself to a full-time career as a musician with leading Liverpool group Rory Storm and the Hurricanes. When he heard that National Service was to be abolished, his first thought was “‘Great, now we can play,’ and I left the factory and turned professional with Rory.”¹¹ Paul McCartney went further by hypothesizing that if National Service had not been abolished, and if John, in particular, had been forced to do two years’ military service, the Beatles would have split up: “So that was great luck, the government just stopped it in time, allowing us the parting of the waves, and we went through and we had the freedom and the sixties.”¹² The band had, in fact, been directly affected in 1960, when a drummer called Norman Chapman, who had played with the Beatles for three weeks, received his conscription papers.¹³

British popular culture was saturated with war stories, humour, and references during the 1950s. Second World War movies, made in both the US and Britain, poured into the cinemas, war stories featured in children’s illustrated magazines, and Lennon’s favourite radio series, *The Goon Show*, had its roots in the anarchic humour of World War II conscripts.¹⁴

Family life

In a classic study published in the 1950s, the British sociologist Peter Townshend made a distinction between the immediate family and the extended family. Of the six households in which the boys grew up, all except that of John Lennon conformed to the immediate family model of “one or both parents and their unmarried children living in one household.”¹⁵ However, if the model is limited to the ideal type of “both parents” living with their children, only the Harrisons fully qualify. As Peter Brown put it, “George was the only Beatle whose childhood was not marred by divorce [or] death.”¹⁶ The position of each household was as follows.

Paul McCartney lived with his father Jim (a cotton salesman), mother Mary (a nurse and midwife), and younger brother Michael, until his mother died in 1956, when he was fourteen. John Lennon lived from the age of five with his childless maternal aunt Mimi and uncle George Smith, owner of a small dairy, who died when John was fifteen. John’s father Alfred, a ship’s steward, had separated from his mother Julia when John was three, and Julia had given him up to Mimi when she found a new partner, Bobby Dykins, with whom she had two daughters. Julia died in a road accident when John was seventeen. George Harrison lived with his bus driver father Harold, mother Louise, and older siblings Harry, Louise, and Peter. George’s mother gave ballroom dancing lessons, and his father was a trade unionist and committee member of a bus workers’ social club, where the Beatles