

Esquire Magazine

December, 1967

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band - The Beatles

In case you've been in New Guinea or something, you ought to be told that the Beatles have a new album out. It is called Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and even before its release on June 2 it was the subject of all kinds of published and unpublished rumors. Afterward, the information barrage was overwhelming. Capitol Records sent out an extraordinary feature, spiced with terms like "modals," "atonality," and--egad!--"bowels" and casting aspersions upon the "Tin Pan Alley-spawned lyrical cliché." There were stories in Life (in which Paul McCartney, to the surprise of no one and the shock of quite a few, revealed that he had sampled the dreaded lysergic acid diethylamide; he was seconded quickly by John and George, but Ringo, lovely Ringo, has remained silent), Time (in which George Martin, the group's producer, who has a degree in music and is thus permitted to be a genius, was singled out as the brains of the operation), and Newsweek (in which the former kings of rock and roll were compared, unpejoratively and in order, to Alfred Lord Tennyson, Edith Sitwell, Charlie Chaplin, Donald Barthelme, Harold Pinter, and T.S. Eliot--and not to Elvis Presley or even Bob Dylan). The trades bristled with excited little pieces that always seemed to contain the word "artistic." And in The New York Times Richard Goldstein put the album down and was almost lynched.

Goldstein, who has had his own story in Newsweek, is the best-known critic of pop in the country. Like any rising star, he engendered the inevitable resentment, always masquerading, of course, as contempt for the phony, the sellout, etc.. I often disagree with Goldstein, but a sellout he is not. He is unfailingly honest and about as malevolent as Winnie-the-Pooh. There are very few "pop critics" who can match him even occasionally for incisiveness, perspective, and wit. Goldstein was disappointed with Sgt. Pepper. After an initial moment of panic, I wasn't. In fact, I was exalted by it, although a little of that has worn off. Which is just the point. Goldstein may have been wrong, but he wasn't that wrong. Sgt. Pepper is not the world's most perfect work of art. But that is what the Beatles' fans have come to assume their idols must produce.

It all started in December, 1965, when they released Rubber Soul, an album that for innovation, tightness, and lyrical intelligence was about twice as good as anything they or anyone else (except maybe the Stones) had done previously. In June, 1966, Capitol followed with The Beatles--"Yesterday" . . . and Today, comprising both sides of three singles plus extra cuts from the English versions of Rubber Soul and Revolver. The Beatles (perhaps as a metaphor for this hodgepodge, which was not released in England) provided a cover that depicted Our Boys in bloody butcher aprons, surrounded by hunks of meat and dismembered doll. The powers yowled, the cover was replaced as a reported cost of \$250,000, and then in August the American Revolver went on sale. That did it. Revolver was twice as good and four times as startling as Rubber Soul, with sound effects, Oriental drones, jazz bands, transcendentalist lyrics, all kinds of rhythmic and harmonic surprises, and a filter that made John Lennon sound like God singing through a foghorn. Partly because the ten-month gap between Revolver and Sgt. Pepper was so unprecedented, the album was awaited in much the same spirit as installments of Dickens must have been a century ago. Everyone was a little edgy: Could they do it again? The answer: yes and no. Sgt. Pepper is a consolidation, more intricate than Revolver but not more substantial. Part of Goldstein's mistake, I think, has been to allow all the filters and reverbs and orchestral effects and overdubs to deafen him to the stuff underneath, which was pretty nice, and to fall victim to over anticipation. Although Goldstein still insists he was right, I attribute his review to a failure of nerve.

Plus, perhaps, a predilection for folk music. Sgt. Pepper, four months in gestation, is the epitome of studio rock, and Goldstein wasn't entirely wrong when he accused it of being "busy, hip and cluttered." It contains nothing as lovely as "In My Life" on Rubber Soul or "Here, There and Everywhere" on Revolver. But no one seems to care. The week after Goldstein's review

appeared, Cash Box listed Sgt. Pepper as the best-selling album in the country, a position it has occupied all summer.

Meanwhile, Goldstein himself has become a storm center. The Voice, his home base, published a rebuttal by a guy named Tom Phillips, who works for the Times. (Now who's square?) Goldstein responded with a Voice defense of his review. (Title: "I Lost My Cool Through the New York Times.") Paul Williams, of Crawdaddy, complained that Goldstein "got hung up on his own integrity and attempted to judge what he admittedly [sic] did not understand." (What have you done for rock this week?) And the Times was deluged with letters, many abusive and every last one in disagreement, the largest response to a music review in its history.

The letters are a fascinating testimony to what the Beatles mean to their fans. The correspondents are divided about equally between adolescents and young adults, with age often volunteered as a credential. Needless to say, Goldstein is frequently accused of being Old. (For the record, he is twenty-three. And I am twenty-five.) One common complaint was that Goldstein missed the acronymic implications of a lush little fantasy called "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." (Singers on a trip with pretensions?) Even more common is the indignant avowal that George Harrison's "Within You Without You" did not, as Goldstein averred, "resurrect the very clichés the Beatles helped bury," and that "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," as Sherry Brody, of Brooklyn, put it, "is not like other songs by stupid groups that say I love you and junk like that." (I hope I don't sound condescending. Miss Brody's letter is not only charming--she signs, "Please write back!"--but every bit as perceptive as many of its more ambitious competitors.) Of course, the clichés in "WYWY" to which Goldstein was referring were not "I love you and junk like that." They were "self-discovery" and "universal love," the kind of homilies that used to make the Beatles giggle, but that Harrison now seems to take seriously.

"WYWY" provides the most convenient launching pad for the textual analyses that almost everyone felt compelled to send off. One writer claimed that a book by William R. Shears (Ringo's persona on the record is "Billy Shears"), called Here It Is, is full of illuminating cross-references. A high-school freshman invoked the album as an example of "tmesis--the appearance of a poem to do credit to its words." Many saw the album as "an attack on middle-class values." Some writers were sure the Beatles had arrived at their current synthesis because, to quote a Juilliard student, "they have refused to prostitute themselves for their fans." But others insisted that Sgt. Pepper was "for the people."

The genius of the Beatles can be found in those last two contradictory suggestions, because both are true. Few of their old fans could have anticipated their present course or wished for it. Yet the Beatles have continued to please more of the old-timers than anyone but they--and the old-timers themselves--could have hoped. They really started the whole long-haired hippie business four years ago, and who knows whether they developed with it or it developed with them? All those pages of analysis are a gauge of how important the Beatles have become to . . . us.

One song on Sgt. Pepper, "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite," seems to me deliberately one-dimensional, nothing more than a description of a traveling circus. It fits beautifully into the album, which is a kind of long vaudeville show, but I feel almost certain it has no "meaning." Yet one girl, "age fifteen," writes that it presents "life as an eerie perverted circus." Is this sad? silly? horrifying? contemptible? From an adult it might be all four, but from a fifteen-year-old it is simply moving. A good Lennon-McCartney song is sufficiently cryptic to speak to the needs of whoever listens. If a fifteen-year-old finds life "an eerie perverted circus"--and for a fifteen-year-old that is an important perception--then that's what "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite" can just as well be about. If you've just discovered universal love, you have reason to find "Within You Without You" "great poetry." It really doesn't matter; if you're wrong, you're right.

One of the nice things the Beatles do for those of us who love them is charge commonplace English with meaning. I want to hold your hand. It's getting better all the time. Yeah, yeah, yeah. "Fixing a Hole," to which I alluded just above, is full of just such suggestive phrases. I'll resist temptation and

quote only five lines: "And it really doesn't matter if I'm wrong I'm right/ Where I belong I'm right/ Where I belong./ See the people standing there who disagree and never win/ And wonder why they don't get in my door." This passage not only indicates the interesting things the Beatles are doing with rhyme, skewing their stanzas and dispensing almost completely with traditional song form. It also serves as a gnomic reminder of the limitations of criticism. Allow me to fall into its trap by providing my own paraphrase, viz.: "In matters of interpretation, the important thing is not whether you're `wrong' or `right' but whether you are faithful to your own peculiar stance in the world. Those who insist upon the absolute rectitude of their opinions will never attain a state of enlightenment."

Well, there it is; I've finally done it. Pompous, right? Sorry, I'm just not John Lennon. But like everyone else, I feel compelled to make Our Boys My Boys. The first thirty times I heard "Fixing a Hole," I just listened and enjoyed it, keeping time, singing along, confident that it was obscure beyond my powers to investigate. Then I noticed that all the interpreters were shying away from that song, or making an obvious botch of it, and I couldn't resist the challenge. Now, after several false starts that had me convinced for a while, I think I've got it. It's not surprising that their ideas are so much like my own. That's what they're saying, isn't it?

For, just like Sherry Brody, I have my own Beatles. As far as I'm concerned, "Fixing a Hole" is not like other songs by stupid groups that say I am alienated and junk like that. And I have other prejudices. I can't believe that the Beatles indulge in the simplistic kind of symbolism that turns a yellow submarine into a Nembutal or a banana--it is just a yellow submarine, damn it, an obvious elaboration of John's submarine fixation, first revealed in A Hard Day's Night. I think they want their meanings to be absorbed on an instinctual level, just as their new, complex music can be absorbed on a sensual level. I don't think they much care whether Sgt. Pepper is Great Art or some other moldy fig. And I think they are inordinately fond (in a rather recondite way) of what I call the real world. They want to turn us on, all right--to everything in that world and in ourselves. What else could a journalist think?