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

I just listened to it and said to myself, "God, I really love this album." Still, today, it just sounds so fresh. It sounds full of ideas. These guys knew what they were doing. They're good. And they're inventive. I haven't heard anything this year that's as inventive. I don't really expect to.

That's how Paul McCartney describes his response to hearing *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* earlier this year, and it's hard to argue with him. The album he and those other "guys" in the Beatles released in 1967 revolutionized rock & roll. The "splendid time" McCartney, John Lennon, George Harrison and Ringo Starr "guaranteed for all" has lasted more than two decades — and that immensely pleasurable trip has earned *Sgt. Pepper* its place as the best record of the past twenty years.

After the Beatles stopped touring in 1966, they had time to explore in greater depth the possibilities of the recording studio with producer George Martin. And removed, essentially for the first time, from the nonstop hoopla of Beatlemania, they also had time to question their identity as Beatles. A chasm had begun to open between their growing musical sophistication and the public's perception of them as lovable mop tops. The magnitude of the Beatles phenomenon was starting to encroach on the band — and their experience with psychedelic drugs made that phenomenon seem increasingly surreal. Already trapped, in their early twenties, the Beatles had to find a way out. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was born.

"Pepper was probably the one Beatle album I can say was my idea," McCartney says. "It was my idea to say to the guys, 'Hey, how about disguising ourselves and getting an alter ego, because we're the Beatles and we're fed up. Every time you approach a song, John, you gotta sing it like John would. Every time I approach a ballad, it's gotta be like Paul would. Why don't we just make up some incredible alter egos and think, 'Now how would he sing it? How would he approach this track?'" And it freed us. It was a very liberating thing to do."

Clearly the *Sgt. Pepper* concept was more significant for the psychological escape route it provided the Beatles than for its specific use on the album. Apart from some relatively modest touches — the colorful uniforms, the opening theme song,

the reprise near the end and Ringo's entertaining turn as "the one and only Billy Shears" in "With a Little Help from My Friends" — the alter egos make no discernible appearances on the album. But one look at the cover of *Sgt. Pepper* — festooned with the band's wildly eclectic gallery of heroes and with the wax figures of the youthful Fab Four standing next to their far more hirsute and serious-looking real-life counterparts — eloquently tells how greatly removed the group had grown from what they were. Under the guise of alter egos the Beatles had finally allowed their real selves to emerge.

Interestingly, however, the Beatles had freed themselves not merely to chronicle such weighty subjects as the joys of mind-expanding drugs, in "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," the paradoxical wisdom of Eastern religious philosophy, in "Within You Without You," or the sterile absurdity of mainstream values in the astonishing "Day in the Life." On the contrary, *Sgt. Pepper* is filled with sly inside jokes, broad music-hall humor and completely gratuitous novelties. It is not only the Beatles' most artistically ambitious album but their funniest.

Take, for example, the dog whistle — which humans can't hear — buried on the album's second side. "We're sitting around the studio, and one of the engineers starts talking about wavelengths, wave forms and stuff, kilohertz," McCartney recalls. "I still don't understand these things — I'm completely nontechnical. And as for John, he couldn't even change a plug — he really couldn't, you know. The engineers would be explaining to us what all this stuff was. An ultrasonic sound wave — 'a low one, you can kill people with the low ones.' We were all saying, 'Wow, man. Hey, wow.' 'And the high ones,' he said, 'only dogs can hear it.' We said, 'We gotta have it on! There's going to be one dog and his owner, and I'd just love to be there when his ears prick up.'"

And the famous "Inner Groove" — the snippet of pointless conversation that sticks in the album's run-out groove and that was not included in the original American version of *Sgt. Pepper* — has an equally zany genesis. Around the time of "Sgt. Pepper's" release, McCartney explains, "a lot of record players didn't have auto-change. You would play an album and it would go, 'Tick, tick, tick,' in the run-out groove — it would just stay there endlessly. We were whacked out so much of the time in the Sixties — just quite harmlessly, as we thought, it was quite innocent — but you would be at friends' houses, twelve at night, and nobody would be going to get up to change that record player. So we'd be getting into the

little 'tick, tick, tick,': 'It's quite good, you know? There's a rhythm there.' We were into Cage and Stockhausen, those kind of people. Obviously, once you allow yourself that kind of freedom . . . well, Cage is appreciating silence, isn't he? We were appreciating the run-out groove! We said, 'What if we put something, so that every time it did that, it said something?' So we put a little loop of conversation on."

These are minor points, perhaps, in the context of the enormous achievement of "Sgt. Pepper". But such fun-loving experimentalism — born of the optimistic determination to blow away anything that "stops my mind from wandering where it will go" — is "Sgt. Pepper's" best legacy for our time. In a decade of political conservatism and stifling musical formats, of sexual fear and obsession with the past, the hopeful message of *Sgt. Pepper* — that visionary breakthroughs are necessary to strive for and possible to achieve in every facet of life — is much more urgent now than it was twenty years ago today.