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

Finally free of touring, the Beatles next sought to be free of themselves, hitting on the rather daft concept of recording as an alias band. The idea held for all of two songs, one coda, and one album sleeve, but was retained as the central organizing and marketing feature of the band's 1967 album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Hailed on its release as proof that popular music could be as rich an artistic pursuit as more high-minded media such as jazz and classical, the record's reputation and sense of ambition ushered in the album era. Its influence was so pervasive and so instructional regarding the way music is crafted and sold to the public that this is still the predominant means of organizing, distributing, and promoting new music four decades later, well after the decline of physical media.

The concept, of course, is that the record was to be recorded by the titular fictional band, a washed-up rock'n'roll group on the comeback trail. (This was actually the second concept earmarked for the Beatles' next LP; the original, a record of songs about Liverpool, was abandoned when its first two tracks were needed for the group's next single, "Strawberry Fields Forever"/ "Penny Lane".) Probably for the best, little of the fictional-band vision for the record made it through; what did last from that conceit are a few tangential ideas-- a satirical bent on popular entertainment and a curiosity with nostalgia and the past.

The record opens with a phony live performance by the Lonely Hearts Band, a sort of Vegas act-- the sort of thing that, in 1963, people thought the almost certainly soon-to-be-passé Beatles would be doing themselves in 1967. Instead,

the Beatles had completed their shattering of the rules of light entertainment, even halting their own live performances, which they'd never again do together for a paid audience.

Even as they mocked this old version of a performing band, ironically *Sgt. Pepper's* and its ambitions helped to codify the rock band as artists rather than popular entertainers. In the hands of their followers, the notion of a pop group as a compact, independent entity, responsible for writing, arranging, and performing its own material would be manifested in the opposite way-- rather than holing up in the studio and focusing on records, bands were meant to prove in the flesh they could "bring it" live. Notions of authenticity and transparency would become valued over studio output. (To be fair, upstart bands had to gig in order to get attention and a reputation, while the Beatles, of course, could write, break, and rewrite their own rules; they had the luxury and freedom to take advantage of a changing entertainment world and could experiment with different, emerging models of how to function as a rock band in much the same way that Trent Reznor or Radiohead can today.)

The freedom from live performance didn't necessitate that Beatles songs now sounded practiced or rehearsed, and indeed they weren't. Instead, they were studio creations assembled in sections and pieces. As the band splintered, this practice would spill over into releasing song sketches on the White Album and inspire, in part through necessity, the lengthy song cycle at the close of *Abbey Road*. On *Sgt. Pepper's*, the most rewarding manifestation of this shift was the record's most forward-looking piece, "A Day in the Life". Complex in construction and epic in feel, "A Day in the Life" nevertheless seems enveloping and breezy to listeners. Indeed, the sustained, closing ringing chord of the song comes a mere 4:20 into the track.

"A Day"'s only best-in-show competitor was McCartney's "She's Leaving Home". (As on *Revolver*, the peaks here were a mold-breaking closer and classically inspired story-song). "A Day in the Life" has only grown in estimation, rightfully becoming one of the most acclaimed Beatles tracks. "She's Leaving Home", by contrast, has slid from view-- perhaps too maudlin to work on classic rock radio and too MOR for hipster embrace, it was nevertheless the other headline track on *Sgt. Pepper's* when it was released. The story of a runaway teen, it misses as a defiant generational statement in part because it's actually sympathetic to the parents in the song. In the second verse, McCartney defies expectations by not following the young girl on her adventure but keeping the track set in the home as her parents wake to find her goodbye letter.

In the end, we learn "She" left home for "fun"-- a rather churlish reason, and when paired with McCartney's simplistic sentiments in "When I'm 64" (the aging couple there will be happy to "scrimp and save"), the young girl seems more selfish than trapped. In fact, for a group whose every move was a generational wedge, and for such a modern record, the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's* is oddly conservative in places: "Being For the Benefit of Mr. Kite" takes inspiration from a Victorian-era carnival; "When I'm 64" is a music-hall parody that fantasizes about what it would be like to be the Beatles' grandparents' age; "Fixing a Hole" has a rather mundane domestic setting; the fantasy girl in "Lovely Rita" is a cop. Lyrically, it's an atypical way to usher in the Summer of Love, but musically, the record is wildly inventive, built on double-tracking, tape effects, and studio technology. The dream-like haze of "Lucy in the Sky With Diamonds", the fairground, sawdust feel of "Mr. Kite", and the cavalcade of sound effects at the end of "Good Morning Good Morning" were the most demonstrative sounds on the record, but otherwise benign passages were also steeped in innovation,

whether recording from the inside of a brass instrument or plugging instruments directly into the sound board instead of capturing them through mics.

Almost everything done on *Sgt. Pepper's* turned out to be new and forward-thinking, from the iconic record sleeve to the totemic ending to "A Day in the Life". There are very few moments in pop music history in which you can mark a clear before and after, in which almost everything changed. In the UK, it's arguably happened only five times, and on just four instances in the U.S. (*Thriller* here; acid house and punk there, and Elvis everywhere, of course); in both nations, the Beatles launched two of those moments.

In retrospect, it almost seems like this time the band itself was taken aback by its own accomplishments, not only shying from directly living up to *Revolver* via the smoke and mirrors of the Lonely Hearts Club Band but then never again throwing themselves into their work as a collective unit. *Sgt. Pepper's*, possibly as a corrective to the hushed tones with which it's been received for decades, has slipped in estimation behind a few of the band's other records, but it's easy to hear how it achieved that reputation in the first place. Even if John, Paul, George, and Ringo would arguably go on to best a handful of its moments, the amazing stretch of music created in 1966-67 was the peak of the Beatles as a working band.