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# Review: The Beatles' 'White Album'

Our take on the 1968 double album from the Fab Four

By **JANN S. WENNER** 

**(L-R) George Harrison, John Lennon, Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr of The Beatles in circa 1969.**

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The power of rock and roll is a constantly amazing process. Although it is Bob Dylan who is the single most important figure in rock and roll; and although it is the Rolling Stones who are the embodiment of a rock and roll band; it is nonetheless Our Boys. **The Beatles**, who are the perfect product and result of everything that rock and roll means and encompasses.

Never has this been so plainly evident as on their new two-album set. *The Beatles* (Apple SWBO 101). Whatever else it is or isn't, it is the best album they have ever released, and only the Beatles are capable of making a better one. You are either hip to it, or you ain't.

The impact of it is so overwhelming that one of the ideas of the LP is to contain every part of extant Western music through the all-embracing medium of rock and roll, that such categorical and absolute statements are imperative. Just a slightly closer look shows it to be a far more deliberate, self-conscious, pretentious, organized and structured, coherent and full, *more perfect* album than *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*.

*Sgt. Pepper's* applied the concept of the symphony to rock and roll, adding an incredible (and soon overused) dimension to rock and roll. Nothing could have been more ambitious than the current release: The Beatles is the history and synthesis of Western music. And that, of course is what rock and roll is, and that is what the Beatles are.

Rock and roll, the first successful art form of the McLuhan age, is a series of increasing hybrids of musical styles, starting from its basic hybrid of country and western music and black American music (blues, if you will). That merger represents the distantly effected marriage of the music of England and Africa, a yin and yang that could be infinitely extended.

Not only the origin of rock and roll, but also the short history of it can be seen as a series of hybridizations, the constantly changing styles and fads, as rock assimilates every conceivable musical style (folk, blues, soul, Indian; classical, psychedelic, ballad, country) not only a recent process, but one that goes back to the Drifters, Elvis Presley, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and so on. Rock and roll's longevity is its ability to assimilate the energy and style of all these musical traditions. Rock and roll at once exists and doesn't exist; that is why the term "rock and roll" is the best term we have, as it means nothing and thus everything — —and that is quite possibly the musical and mystical secret of the most overwhelming popular music the world has known.

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themselves extremely vulnerable. There is not the dissemblance of being "our boys" from *Hard Day's Night*, nor the disguise of Sgt. Pepper's Band; it is on every level an explanation and an understanding of who and what the Beatles are.

As usual, the personal honesty is met with an attack. (The secret is that innocence is invulnerable, and those who rush too quickly for the kill, are just themselves dead.) On the level of musical ignorance, I read the very first review of this record that appeared; it was in the New York Times. In about 250 words the "critic" dismissed the album as being neither as good as the Big Brother *Cheap Thrills* LP nor as the forthcoming Blood, Sweat and Tears album. You come up with only one of two answers about that reviewer: he is either deaf or he is evil.

Those who attacked the Beatles for their single "Revolution," should be set down with a good pair of earphones for a listen to Side Four, where the theme of the single is carried out in two different versions, the latter with the most impact. And if the message isn't clear enough, "Revolution No. 9" is followed by "Goodnight."

To say the Beatles are guilty of some kind of revolutionary heresy is absurd; they are being absolutely true to their identity as it has evolved through the last six years. These songs do not deny their own "political" impact or desires, they just indicate the channelling for them.

Rock and roll has indeed become a style and a vehicle for changing the system. But one of the parts of the system to be changed is "politics" and this includes "new Left" politics. There is no verbal recognition required for the beautifully organized music concrete version of "Revolution." A good set of earphones should deliver the message to those we have so far been able to reach. Maybe this album would be a good gift for them, "with love from me to you."

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As to the Beatles, it is hard to see what they are going to do next. Like the success of their earlier albums and the success of all others in this field, whether original artists or good imitative ones, the success of it is based on their ability to bring these other traditions to rock and roll (and not vice versa, like the inevitable excesses of "folk-rock," "raga-rock" and "acid-rock") and especially in the case of Dylan, the Stones, the Beatles and to a lesser extent all the other good groups in rock and roll, the ability to maintain their own identity both as rock and roll and as the Beatles, or as Bob Dylan, or as the Rolling Stones, and so on.

influence or idea or emotion, because their own musical ability and personal/spiritual/artistic identity is so strong that they make it uniquely theirs, and uniquely the Beatles. They are so good that they not only expand the idiom, but they are also able to penetrate it and take it further.

“Back in the USSR,” this album’s first track, is, of course, a perfect example of all this: it is not just an imitation (only in parts) of the Beach Boys, but an imitation of the Beach Boys imitating Chuck Berry. This is hardly an original concept or thing to do: just in the past few months we have been deluged with talk of “going back to rock and roll,” so much that the idea (first expressed in the pages of Rolling Stone) is now a tiresome one. because it is, like all other superficial changes in rock and roll styles, one that soon becomes faddish, over-used and tired-out.

In the past few months we have seen the Turtles doing *The Battle of the Bands* and Frank Zappa and the Mothers with their *Ruben and the Jets*. The Turtles were unable to bring it off (they had to ability to parody, but not the talent to do something new with the old style) and the Mothers were able to operate within a strictly circumscribed area with their usual heavy-handed satirization, a self-limiting process.

It is all open to the Beatles. It would be too simple to say that “Back In the USSR” is a parody, because it operates on more levels than that: it is fine contemporary rock and roll and a fine performance thereof; it is also a superb commentary on the United States S. R., hitting every insight — “honey, disconnect the phone.” As well as a parody, it’s also a Beatles song.

The song is undoubtedly the result of Paul McCartney’s three trips to the United States in 1968 before the album was made (not including a four day visit to New York this past November after the album was done). It is the perfect introductory song for this set. What follows is a trip through the music of the US (SR).

From here on, much of the material is from India, songs’ the Beatles came back with after their sojourn at the Maharishi’s table. “Dear Prudence” is about a girl the Beatles met while meditating in India. The Beatles were always trying to get her to come out of her room to play, and this is about her.

“Looking through a Glass Onion” is, of course, the Beatles on the subject of the Beatles. Whatever they may feel about people who write about their songs and read things into them, it has

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John's telling you right here, while he is rolling another joint.

Part of the phenomenal talent of the Beatles is their ability to compose music that by itself carries the same message and mood as the lyrics. The lyrics and the music not only say the same thing, but are also perfectly complementary. This comes also with the realization that rock and roll is *music*, not literature, and that the music is the most important aspect of it.

“Obladi Oblada,” where they take one of the familiar calypso melodies and beats, is a perfect example. And it's not just a calypso, but a rock and roll calypso with electric bass and drums. Fun music for a fun song about fun. Who needs answers? Not Molly or Desmond Jones, they're married with a diamond ring and kids and a little “Obladi Oblada.” All you need is Obladi Oblada.

“Wild Honey Pie” makes a nice tribute to psychedelic music and allied forms.

“Bungalow Bill,” the mode of the Saturday afternoon kiddie shows, is a tribute to a cat the Beatles met in Marrakesh, an American tiger hunter (“the All American bullet headed saxon mother's son”), who was there accompanied by his mother. He was going out hunting, and this song couldn't put the American in better context, with his cartoon serial morality of killing.

“While My Guitar Gently Weeps” is one of George Harrison's very best songs. There are a number of interesting things about it: the similarity in mood to “Bluejay Way” recalls California, the simple Baja California beat, the dreamy words of the Los Angeles haze, the organic pace lapping around every room as if in invisible waves.

Harrison's usual style, in lyrics, has been a slightly self-righteous and preaching approach, which we have here again. One cannot imagine it being a song about a particular person or incident, rather a general set of incidents, a message, like a sermon, impersonally directed to everyone.

And this song speaks at still another level, the very direct one of the title: it is a guitarist's song about his guitar, how and why and what it is that he plays. The music mimics the linear, continuous line of the lead guitarist. It is interesting to note that the song opens with a piano imitating the sound of an electric guitar playing the heavily Spanish lead line well before the guitar picks up the lead. I am willing to bet something substantial that the lead guitarist on this cut is Eric Clapton, yet

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The title, “Happiness Is A Warm Gun,” comes from an advertisement John read in an American rifle magazine. That makes this track the first cousin of “Revolution.” The three parts of it; the break into the wonderful 1954 C-Am-F-G style of rock and roll, with appropriate “Bang Bang, choo, choo.” What can you say about this song except what is obvious?

Part of the success of the Beatles is their ability to make everything they do understandable and acceptable to all listeners. One needn't have an expert acquaintance to dig what they are doing and what they are saying. The other half of letting rock and roll music be receptive of every other form and style of music, is that rock and roll must be perfectly open and accessible to every listener, fulfilling the requirement of what it is— — a popular art.

Paul demonstrates throughout the album his incredible talent as one of the most prolific and professional songwriters in the world today. It's embarrassing how good he is, and embarrassing how he can pull off the perfect melody and arrangement in any genre you would care to think of.

Just name it and Paul will do it, like say, for instance, a love song about a dog in the Gilbert and Sullivan style, with a little ragtime, a little baroque thrown in. “Martha, My Dear,” about Paul's English sheepdog of the same name, with hairy puns (“when you find yourself in the thick of it”) and all. And of course, it works on the level of the send-up and also as an inherently good song, standing fully on its own merits.

“Blackbird” is one of those beautiful Paul McCartney songs in which the yin-yang of love is so perfectly fitted: the joy and sorrow, always that ironic taste of sadness and melancholy in the lyric and in the minor notes and chords of the melody (remember — “Yesterday,” “Eleanor Rigby,” “Good Day Sunshine,” prominently among many.) The irony makes it so much more powerful.

Not only irony: these songs and “Blackbird” share other qualities — the simplicity and sparseness of instrumentation (even with strings) make them penetrate swiftly and universally. This one is done solely with an acoustic guitar. And of course there is the lyric: “Take these sunken eyes and learn to see; All your life you were only waiting for this moment to be free.”

City Blues blowers, circa 1957: Paul is so incredibly versatile not only as a writer, but also as a singer and a musician. Dig the vocal scating, the saloon-hall piano; then the perfect phrasing, enunciation, the slurring (as in the phrase “I’m gonna get that boy...”). The song is so funny and yet dig the lyrics: “To shoot off the legs of his rival.” Not just to kill, mind you, but to maim. And so why does this song come off so funny? Death is funny.

“I Will” is simply another romantic ballad from Paul’s pen. He uses every available musical device and cliché available — melodies, instrumentations, arrangements, harmonies, everything — and he does something entirely original, entirely enjoyable, entirely professional.

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If Paul can do songwriting as easily as some people do crossword puzzles (and that is not to say that he is flippant or careless, because Paul has allowed himself to display his absolute professional ability with song to a point that it can only be seen as a form of personal honesty), John’s songs are agonizing personal statements. They are painful to hear.

“Julia” is a song to his mother, whom John saw killed in a car accident when he was 14 years old. It is the most emotionally revealing piece on the album. The whole world has been witness to the personal lives of the Beatles, and it seems that a record album is the most appropriate place for such a message, sung to, sung for, his mother. And as always, John is protected by his innocence.

“I’m So Tired” begins in the manner of the late night jazz singer (“I wonder should I get up and fix myself a drink”) if not, again, one of the many early styles of rock and roll with those elegantly placed electric guitar chops. And again, it uses this only as a base, a take off point to go on into completely modern, extremely powerful choruses: “You know, I’d give you everything I’ve got for a little peace of mind,” where everything — arrangement, vocal, instruments, melody — perfectly evokes the agony of the plea.

David Dalton says of this song: “It reminds me of how many changes John has gone through since he was the plump cheeky leader of the Fab Four. Jesus Christ, Sgt. Pepper leading the Children’s Crusade through Disneyland: a voyage to India as victims of their own propaganda; Apple, a citadel of Mammon... Even two years ago, the image of Lennon as a martyr would have seemed ludicrous, but as his trial approaches, a gaunt spiritual John hardly recognizable as his former self emerges.

Other songs on side two include one by George and one by Ringo. George's "Piggies" is an amazing choice to follow "Blackbird" with such an opposite mood and message; "Blackbird" so encouraging, "Piggies" so smug (though accurate: "what they need's a damn good whacking"). Ha! By comparison, both "Piggies" and Ringo's polka, "Don't Pass Me By" (trust Ringo to find the C&W music of any culture) are weak material against some of the superb numbers, although on their own, they're totally groovy.

But it brings forward two interesting points: neither Paul's near-genius ability with notes nor John's rock and rolling edge of honesty are *sine qua non* for the Beatles. The taste and sense of rightness in their music, to choose the perfect musical setting, the absolutely right instrument, are just as important.

The second is that there is almost no attempt in this new set to be anything but what the Beatles actually are: John, Paul, George and Ringo. Four different people, each with songs and styles and abilities. They are no longer Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, and it is possible that they are no longer the Beatles.

When they get together, it's "Why Don't We Do It In the Road," which— — whatever else it may sound like — —tain't nothin' but a Beatles field holler. This is one of many observations to be made about this album. It is at once both their simplest (plain white cover) and yet most complex effort to date.

Someone will do the work, and maybe come up with a list of old and new rock and roll songs and styles which each of these tracks is supposed to be based on. "Birthday" might be Hendrix or Cream, maybe even Larry Williams. The point is that it is, like "Helter Skelter" and "Everybody's Got Something to Hide" as well, all of these, the very best traditional and contemporary elements in rock and roll brightly are suffused into the Beatles. The "hard rock" aspect of the Beatles is one often overlooked and neglected, often times purposely in the attempt to get them to be something they are not. They are a rock and roll band, after all, and they can do that thing. The straight rock is some of their most exciting and mature material. (They don't, however, cut the best of the Stones or of the Who).

it and uses it in its own fashion, perfectly within context and joined with something new in rock and roll *sound recording*, which in this case is the wavering piano sound, obtained by using the leakage from the original piano track onto an empty track as the final take for the mix.

In “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey,” all the old elements of the Beatles are brought back, right up to date, including use of all the old fashions and conventions in such a refreshingly new manner.

Take the structure of the song, for example: it is based on the old I-IV-V twelvebar progression in approach, but in actuality they never do the old thing. From IV they go to VII. When they get back to V after that, they take the most unusual way— — in sound and melody — —to get back to I. They also use those old Beatle harmonic tones. (By way of comparison, set this song against what Steppenwolf is now popular at doing with this same material).

“Helter Skelter” is again both traditional and contemporary— — and excellent. The guitar lines behind the title words, the rhythm guitar track layering the whole song with that precisely used fuzztone, and Paul’s gorgeous vocal. Lord, what a singer! Man, you can’t sit still. No wonder you have blisters on your fingers.

As completely wide-open eyed artists, sensitive like all others in McLuhanville, they are of course caught up and reflective in their music of what’s happening around them, especially the recent scenes they have been through.

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Many of these songs— — if not the vast majority of them — — were written while the Beatles were with the Maharishi. “Everybody’s Got Something to Hide” is certainly reflective of it in its lyric. “Sexy Sadie” is the Maharishi. The harmonies and other vocal lines are exquisite, especially the “s’s.” The lyrics and the vocal delivery are so sincere and yet so sarcastic. John is still John.

“You may be a lover, but you ain’t no dancer.” What a choice for the next track.

Another very deliberate parody is “Yer Blues,” a song that does away with most all of this “blues revival” nonsense out of Great Britain these days. With the exceptions of Eric Clapton, the Jeff Beck

The organ riff at the end of the last chorus so perfectly tells the whole story; it is based on the very boring and repetitious style of these new blues musicians who will pound the shit out of some mediocre change or short riff as if it is *the* riff which has got them to such incredible heights of feeling and style.

The Beatles of course, make it interesting, because it is so stylistically in context with the piece in which it is set. Same with the opening lyric “Yes I’m lonely wanna die.” The line “black cloud crossed my mind” is in phrasing and content a parody of the “black cat crossed my path,” and yet a good line by itself and as part of this song.

Forgetting the parody for a moment, it’s a very good modern rock and roll blues. Dig the lines “My mother was of the sky/My father was of the earth/But I am of the universe/And you know what it’s worth.”

Getting back to the message (even in the title), here’s Mr. Dalton again, on the English blues scene:

“The trendy transvestites of the English blues scene: Pretentious and ludicrously out of context; drawing room blues singers have created a cult of the blues bordering on intellectual snobbery and purism. It is hard to imagine anything more incongruous: the English blues fans fanatically denouncing a group for adding horns, fights breaking out in the audience at the Clapton Blues Festival. Mr. Jones [Writes the Beatles refer to in this song] is said to be Dylan’s grisly portrait of the folk purist, with his intellectual hang-ups, who could not accept the brash commercial forces of rock and roll. The blues purist who looks down on Soul Music as a debased commercial form is just Mr. Jones in a sheepskin jacket.”

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If you take any one of these songs and really get down with it, to where every piece of excellence and craftsmanship is explained and understood fully (and it’s always just as good, and always even better, when you do), whatever you say about that one song is as true for the rest.

“Revolution No. 1” is a better piece, in texture and substance, than the single, although the latter was better *as* a single. “No. 1” carries the message more easily and more successfully. The horns at

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“Honey Pie” is another one of those perfect Paul McCartney evocations of a whole musical era, understanding the essence so finely, that it could be as good as the original. Lovin’ the rhymes: crazy-lazy, tragic-magic frantic-Atlantic. He not only is able to re-create such moods and eras with his melody, his words, his arrangements, instrumentation, but also with his voice. He is equally expert in all these areas.

“Honey Pie” is also a more sophisticated version of “When I’m 64,” just as “Savoy Truffle” is a more sophisticated look at “Lucy In the Sky With Diamonds,” and “Back in the USSR,” a more sophisticated “Sgt. Pepper.” It is unlikely that “With A Little Help From My Friends” will ever be topped as a song for Ringo. The question is whether they are *better* songs. I am inclined to think so, but only the acquaintance of time will tell, and it doesn’t really matter anyway.

If these are weaker songs, they are the only flaws of this album set. It is a relatively minor point, and considered at a longer view, an almost irrelevant one. No creative persons in history were able to match their own brilliance with absolute consistency.

“Cry Baby Cry,” hits me at first as a throwaway, but the further acquaintance says this: another top-notch Beatles song. Every time they are exploring and opening new possibilities and combinations. Every time they make them work.

So many factors enter into the success of the Beatles in what they do. Some of them have been touched on. In addition to everything else, they are excellent musicians (Ringo’s drumming on this LP is his best, and among the very best to be heard on any rock and roll record; George’s leads are continually well-placed, well-written and well-played). We see them all in their varied strengths on this record.

In short, it is the new Beatles record and fulfills all our expectations of it. In general, you could say that this new release (excellent) stands in the same relationship to *Sgt. Pepper* (incredible) as *Revolver* (excellent) was to *Rubber Soul* (incredible). And that is to say, the next one ought to be incredible.

Good night. Sleep tight.

Debut.

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