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1968 Now: Revolution and Revolt  
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Revolution Nine (teen-Sixty-Eight): A 50-year Retrospective on the Beatles' White Album

In many ways, the music of the Beatles is the soundtrack of the 1960s. Much in the same way that this pivotal decade was defined by its turmoil and revolution, the Beatles thrived on challenging conventional culture and even their own previous success. This willingness to reinvent themselves was put on full display in their self-titled ninth album, *The Beatles*. Commonly referred to as the White Album, the 30 song double album remains ingenious in its conception and enigmatic in its haphazard execution. The purpose of this paper is to research the creation, release, and enduring cultural impact of the White Album, in commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its release this past November. In a broader sense, the work remains important as a unique insight into the socio-political concerns that were relevant in the late 1960s. The legacy of the White Album reflects the complicated spirit of 1968 in its inquisitively, spirituality, levity, and shortcomings, tethering modern-day listeners to a year that remains culturally relevant even half a century later.

The Beatles by the beginning of 1968 had enjoyed nearly half a decade of international superstardom. Their 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, spent fifteen weeks as the best-selling record in the United States and was critically acclaimed as an innovative triumph of popular music (Innerney). Critics praised its lush melodies, novel production techniques such as crossfading in between tracks, and eye-popping musical and aesthetic creative choices. The signature sound and look of *Sgt. Pepper* resulted from the Beatles' experimentation with LSD and other psychotropic drugs (however, not everyone was a fan of this creative direction, critic George Melly writing for the Observer remarked that these "psychedelic excursions" often felt

like “wooly nursery surrealism”) (Melly). The Beatles by ‘67 had already undergone several major changes to their signature sound, transforming from a run-of-the-mill boy band to icons of culture with albums like *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, and *Sgt. Pepper*. The White Album was another conscious shift in the creative direction of the band. John Lennon later said that he “wasn’t interested in following up *Sgt. Pepper* and I don't know whether the others were or not, but I know that what I was going for was to forget about *Sgt. Pepper*. You know that was *Sgt. Pepper* and that's alright, fine, it's over... and just get back to basic music” (Hauser). Nowhere was this decision to move on from their previous work clearer than in the album’s now-iconic white cover with minimalist font, which was a clear departure from *Sgt. Pepper*’s hyper-vivid cover art. By the time the Beatles began work on a new album in early ‘68, creative reinvention had been cemented as a critical part of their songwriting process, and came more naturally to them than staying stylistically stagnant. In this way, the band came to embrace the spirit of the late 60s as a period where previous conventions, such as gender roles, sexuality, and race relations, could be tested and pushed in novel ways (de Beauvoir).

The majority of the songs on the White Album were drafted during the Beatles’ trip to India in February to April 1968. There, the four bandmates studied Transcendental Meditation under the guidance of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a famed guru. Whereas their recent works had been shaped by drug use, while in India the band heavily reduced their habit in favor of pursuing Indian spirituality. While only there for a brief period of time, the trip proved to be the most productive period for the band’s songwriting; in all, they composed eighteen of the thirty songs that would later appear on the White Album. Some tracks, such as Lennon’s “Child of Nature”, contain direct references to the retreat (“On the road to Rishikesh/I was dreaming more or less”). The Beatles’ pursuit of transcendentalism, which was especially prioritized by Harrison and

Lennon, reflected a popular interest of the late 60s to expand one's own state of consciousness. For the Beatles, meditation and the study of Eastern spirituality was one avenue to achieve this heightened state of being. For scientists like Timothy Leary, the expansion of the mind could similarly be achieved through recreational psilocybin use. "In four hours by the swimming pool in Cuernavaca", Leary remarked, "I learned more about the mind, the brain, and its structures than I did in the preceding fifteen as a diligent psychologist" (Pollan). The Beatles' trip to India, which attracted considerable media attention, helped blur the lines between mysticism and psychedelic science, and both became staples of the 1960s counterculture. The band's return to the West also influenced a newfound interest Indian music and fashion. Although the trip was cut short due to arguments between the Beatles and the Maharishi, the Beatles' experiences in India had an indelible impact not only on the stripped-back sound of their new album but also on the wider culture of 1968.

Upon returning to the UK, the band recorded the majority of the album's songs for the first time at Harrison's house in Esher. The Esher demos, which have only been recently released, are rough recordings which utilized only acoustic guitars and haphazard harmonies. The songs are played freely and with a light-hearted whimsicality, evidence to the Beatles' harmonious time in India (Sheffield). They belie what would prove to be a disastrous recording process that nearly broke up the band on multiple occasions. In many ways, the White Album was the beginning of the end for the "Fab Four", due to both creative and personal differences. Gone were the days where entire albums could be produced in the span of days; the album progressed painstakingly slowly, with Lennon and McCartney failing to see eye-to-eye in their songwriting process. One of Harrison's tracks, "Not Guilty", was cut from the album after 102 outtakes (Sheffield). The band's musical differences were exacerbated by the presence of

Lennon's new partner, Yoko Ono, who to the chagrin of the other Beatles accompanied Lennon at every studio session and encouraged an increasingly uncontrolled heroin habit. At one point, Starr quit the band entirely, and had to be coaxed to return by the other three members (Sheffield). But an irrevocable rift had formed between the band; of the album's 30 tracks, only 16 have all four band members performing. McCartney would later recall that "there was a lot of friction during (the) album. We were just about to break up, and that was tense in itself" (Sheffield). Ultimately, the Beatles' greatest strength, their creative flexibility, became its greatest weakness as the four artists grew further apart in terms of artistic vision and musical taste. In some ways, the gradual dissolution of the band is a parallel to the unrealized vision of the '67 "Summer of Love" (Littlejohn). Just as the band's momentary harmony dissolved after their return from India, the utopian vision of love and harmony envisioned at Woodstock stumbled in the face 1968's socio-political turmoil.

Despite the internal conflicts that marred the creation of *The Beatles*, the album remains impressive for its experimentation with a wide range of musical genres and messages. "Rocky Raccoon" evokes folk music through its lyrical imagery and bright acoustic backing. Songs like "Long, Long, Long" indicate the influence of Indian spirituality on the band, while others like "Glass Onion" defy meaning altogether. "Wild Honey Pie", and the ever-puzzling "Revolution 9" are seemingly superfluous experimental tapings that delve into the territory of abstract music. "Helter Skelter" transformed from a blues song to a distorted guitar-driven track that is widely regarded as a key influence on the development of the heavy metal genre (Wenner). "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" and "Revolution 1", speak to broader socio-political sentiments that were relevant to the late 60s, urging listeners to pay attention to contemporary issues and carry out political actions in a way that is free of hate or violence (Littlejohn). The inconsistent range of

songs and messages found in the album can be jarring to modern-day listeners, but is representative of 1968 in the way that artists were able to combine their critiques of society with a sense of play and experimentation that is often missing from today's popular art and music. '68 was a unique time in history that the counterculture movement came to encapsulate mainstream culture, making it possible for a group like the Beatles for becoming the most commercially successful band in the world while being free to take creative risks and explore artistic directions that defied common trends.

Upon its release, the White Album sold extraordinarily well in both the UK and foreign markets, and remains the best-selling Beatles album in United States. However, some critics were dismissive of the album as inconsistent and lacking in coherent style (Wenner). This criticism is valid to an extent, and a result of the aforementioned tension that plagued the band during the recording process. But it is precisely this inconsistency that lends the White Album its timeless character: even 50 years later, the album never ceases to surprise the listener in its jarring boldness and artistic choices, defying definition in 2018 just as easily as it did in 1968. By choosing not to settle for the familiar and constantly adapting their musical style, the Beatles crafted a discography that has remained relevant and continues to inspire future generations of musicians, artists, and music-lovers. The enduring legacy of the Beatles and the White Album is in many ways the legacy of 1968: in the face of discordant perspectives and disillusionment the band was able to embrace creative change head-on, in doing so altering the course of music history and pop culture forever.

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