

ABBEY ROAD

And in the end... The Beatles come together for one last studio hurrah. **Steve Harnell** wipes a tear away from his eye



Hallowed ground: the junction of Abbey Road and Grove End Road in St John's Wood in 1969, with the zebra crossing and the studio in the background

For the romantics among us, *Abbey Road* is The Beatles' swansong, a concerted effort by the band to return to the camaraderie so evident in their earlier work, but it's arguable it also represents one of the great 'what ifs?' of their career.

Thanks to Paul McCartney's workaholic obsession with keeping the band going at all costs, the quartet were reconvened for a fresh set of recording work just three weeks after completing the fractious, debilitating *Get Back* sessions, which would eventually see the light of day as the *Let It Be* album.

As it was, barring the odd disagreement, The Beatles were on reasonable terms and some of the joie de vivre of old returned to the confines of Studio 2 at NW8. Flare-ups still occurred, though, with the band often being caustically bitter with each other. Even banal problems could become major flare-ups: on one occasion, war broke out as John swiped one of George's chocolate digestives – a trademark example of Lennon taking the biscuit.

But what if McCartney had taken his foot off the gas and allowed a more extended break between sessions? An

absence from the charts of a year or more, although almost unheard-of at the time, may have alleviated the tension which had built up. Perhaps a solo album or four could have slipped out; Harrison's backlog of songs, in particular, was astonishing, and would indeed result in his 1971 double LP opus *All Things Must Pass*. Financial disagreements and management issues which had plagued the band since Brian Epstein's death and the arrival of Allen Klein could have been smoothed out with less time pressures.

COMING TOGETHER

As usual, McCartney had an armload of material ready to go for what became *Abbey Road* and was itching to get back to the studio. Nevertheless, he knew only too well that the band's dynamic was in poor shape. He asked George Martin to corral the troops once again in the hope that they would return to their old working methods, leaving their egos at the front door. Martin, by now dejected at how far apart his former charges had grown, refused the invitation at first but was persuaded by McCartney when told he'd be allowed to produce the record free from interference from the band, particularly Lennon.

Recording sessions were a stop-start affair. The backing track to its darkest moment, the biting blues of *I Want You (She's So Heavy)*, was laid down on 22 February 1969, before a lengthy gap while Ringo filmed *The Magic Christian*, a freewheeling black comedy starring Peter Sellers, various Monty Python members and Raquel Welch. After a brief session where the band worked on early ideas for *You Never Give Me Your Money* on 6 May, it was eight weeks before recording began in earnest on *Abbey Road*.

If McCartney's intention had been to get back to the boys' club atmosphere of yore, an unfortunate twist of fate skewed the in-studio vibe for much of the LP's recording. John and Yoko were involved in a car accident in June which left Ono bedridden, and Lennon got around the problem of being without his constant companion by installing a bed for her in Studio 2.

With Ono thus a permanent presence, often making songwriting suggestions as proceedings played out, it's remarkable that the band members managed to remain mostly civil with each other. Paul, Ringo and George Martin have expressed fond memories of the sessions, and George Harrison has remarked it was a welcome



return to a more straightforward band performance recording style. However, later Lennon interviews poured scorn on the entire period. Proving dismissive even of his most famous work as he attempted to distance himself from his past and establish a reputation as a solo artist, Lennon criticised *Abbey Road* for lacking authenticity and relying on studio wizardry to paper over the cracks. According to John, Side 2's medley was "junk... just bits of songs thrown together". Indeed, such was John's alienation from Paul by this point that he even suggested that their songs should not share the same side of the album. Nevertheless, John's

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revisionism does *Abbey Road* a disservice; the album is typically diverse and even the famed medley has a coherence that far exceeds the pragmatic reasons for its birth.

With his writing muse revitalised following the 'The White Album' and the Rishikesh trip, Lennon is on good form for much of *Abbey Road*. The striking opener *Come Together* is a sterling example of his nonsensical couplets finding their own meaning. Its genesis came from a song Lennon wrote for a political campaign by controversial US psychologist and LSD

advocate Timothy Leary, forever enshrined in hippie lore for his "turn on, tune in, drop out" slogan. A rough draft of the song was written during Lennon's second 'bed-in' event at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal in May 1969 – John had intended to stage the event in New York but was denied entry to the US due to his conviction for possessing cannabis the previous November.

As on earlier-recorded works such as *Dig It* and *Dig A Pony*, later released on *Let It Be*, by 1969 Lennon's songs increasingly became an assemblage of disparate non-sequiturs. With only a nominal rewrite of Chuck Berry's "Here come a flat-top, he was movin' up with me" from *You Can't Catch Me* for the opening line of *Come Together*, Lennon was sued by music publisher Morris Levy, the beginning of a long-running legal dispute between the pair. Meanwhile, John's whispered intro declarations of "shoot me!" would take on darkly tragic significance in the light of his murder 11 years later.

With the exception of *Yesterday*, George's stunning ballad *Something* is the most covered song in The Beatles' catalogue. It was Lennon's favourite track on *Abbey Road* and McCartney considered it to be George's best songwriting contribution to The Beatles. Frank Sinatra went as far as calling it "the greatest love song ever written" – although unfortunately Ol' Blue Eyes credited it to the pens of Lennon and McCartney. As with *Come Together*, the springboard for the song was the slight revision of another artist's lyric – this time it was Apple

labelmate James Taylor and his fingerpicked acoustic folk tune *Something In The Way She Moves*, which had appeared on the singer-songwriter's debut album the previous year. George penned the track during the 'The White Album' sessions after Taylor played the song for the lead guitarist and Paul McCartney during an Apple Records audition in 1968.

The version of *Something* that appears on *Abbey Road* is truncated from its nigh-on eight-minute full running time, which included an unused instrumental passage. If McCartney was considered the pre-eminent balladeering Beatle, then here was George giving him a very good run for his money.

UNPLEASANT SCENES

From the harmonious beauty of one of the foursome's most delicate love songs to a hugely bitter episode in their history. By now, the rest of the band had tired of McCartney's tendency for whimsy. *Maxwell's Silver Hammer* would become notorious as one of the

ABBEY ROAD

1969 • APPLE

Side 1

Come Together (Lennon & McCartney)

Something (Harrison)

Maxwell's Silver Hammer (Lennon & McCartney)

Oh! Darling (Lennon & McCartney)

Octopus's Garden (Starr)

I Want You (She's So Heavy) (Lennon & McCartney)

Side 2

Here Comes The Sun (Harrison)

Because (Lennon & McCartney)

You Never Give Me Your Money (Lennon & McCartney)

Sun King (Lennon & McCartney)

Mean Mr Mustard (Lennon & McCartney)

Polythene Pam (Lennon & McCartney)

She Came In Through The Bathroom Window (McCartney)

Golden Slumbers (Lennon & McCartney)

Carry That Weight (Lennon & McCartney)

The End (Lennon & McCartney)

Her Majesty (Lennon & McCartney)

PERSONNEL

JOHN LENNON – lead, harmony and background vocals; rhythm, lead and acoustic guitars; acoustic and electric pianos, Moog synthesiser, Hammond organ; white noise generator and sound effects; tambourine and maracas

PAUL MCCARTNEY – lead, harmony and background vocals; bass, rhythm, lead and acoustic guitars; acoustic and electric pianos, Moog, harmonium; sound effects; wind chimes, handclaps, percussion

GEORGE HARRISON – harmony and background vocals; lead, rhythm and acoustic guitars; bass on

Maxwell's Silver Hammer and *Golden Slumbers/ Carry That Weight*; harmonium and Moog synthesiser; handclaps and percussion; lead vocals (*Something* and *Here Comes the Sun*)

RINGO STARR – drums and percussion; anvil on *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*; background vocals; lead vocals (*Octopus's Garden*)

ADDITIONAL MUSICIANS

GEORGE MARTIN – harpsichord, organ, percussion

BILLY PRESTON – Hammond organ on *Something* and *I Want You (She's So Heavy)*

PRODUCTION

Something and *Here Comes the Sun* orchestrated and conducted by George Martin with George Harrison

Golden Slumbers, Carry That Weight and *The End* orchestrated and conducted by George Martin with Paul McCartney

Produced by George Martin with The Beatles
Recorded by Geoff Emerick and Phil McDonald.

Assistant engineering by Alan Parsons

Mixed by Geoff Emerick, Phil McDonald and George Martin with The Beatles

Moog programming by Mike Vickers

band's most fraught recordings. An odd mixture of perky melodic bounce and dark lyrical subject matter, it's a tale of a serial killer set to something akin to a children's TV theme tune.

A headstrong McCartney was convinced of the song's quality, but he was alone. The bassist even thought this oddly blank and non-judgemental tale of a homicidal maniac had the potential to be a hit single, and he forced the band through countless takes. In the McCartney biography *Many Years From Now*, he tells author Barry Miles: "*Maxwell's Silver Hammer* was my analogy for when something goes wrong out of the blue, as it so often does, as I was beginning to find out at that time in my life. We still use that expression even now when something unexpected happens."

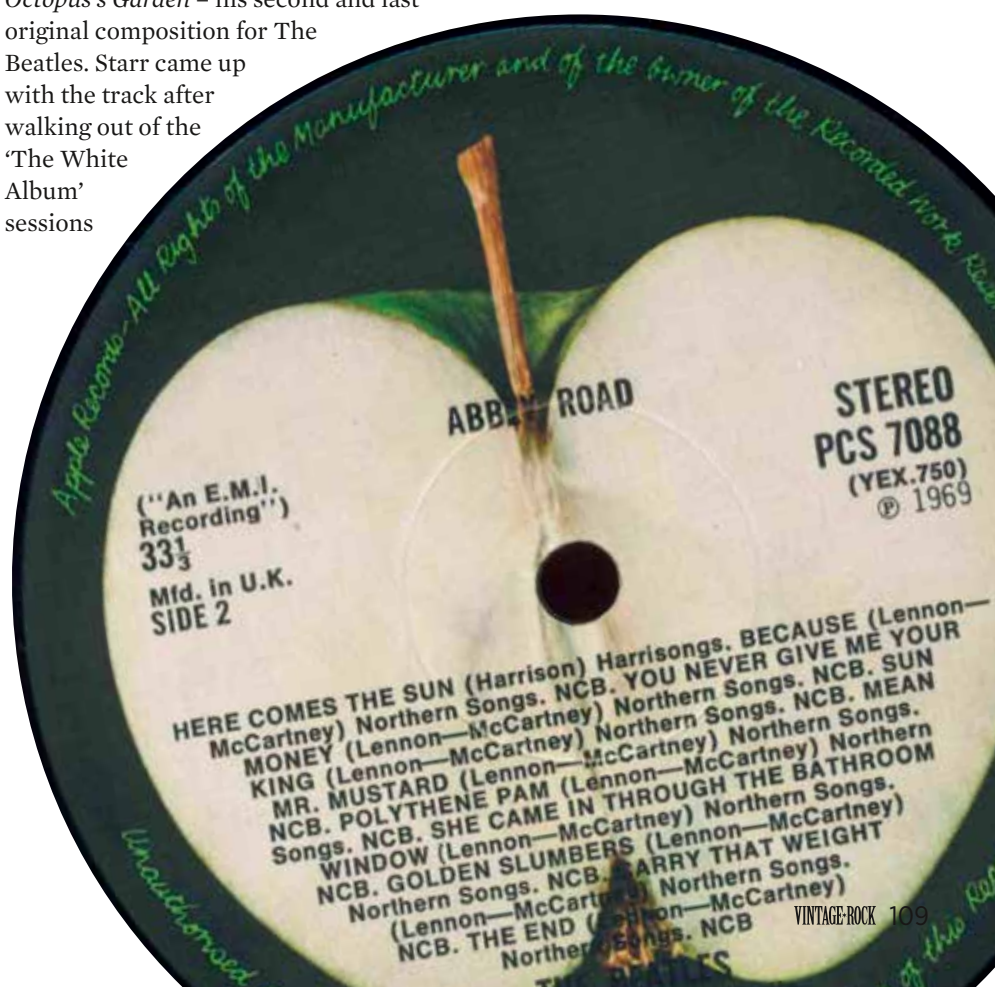
Four cover versions of the song – by Brownhill's Stamp Duty, Format, The Good Ship Lollipop and George Howe – were released, but none managed to make a dent on the charts. The detractors in the band were vindicated, but Paul's ruthless commitment to forcing through his own material come what may left a permanent mark on his colleagues. Even the usually diplomatic Ringo later lamented to *Rolling Stone* magazine: "The worst session ever was *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*. It was the worst track we ever had to record. It went on for f***ing weeks. I thought it was mad."

McCartney at least redeemed himself with the wonderfully raucous performance of the rocking *Oh! Darling*. With Paul spoofing a doo-wop song in the style of Frank Zappa's

Ruben And The Jets album, he would lay down vocal takes early in the morning before his voice had warmed up, and smoked cigarettes excessively to capture his performance at its most rough-edged. Lennon later claimed he should have handled the lead vocals himself as they were more suited to his style, but it's debatable he could have done a better job.

After *Yellow Submarine* and *Good Night*, Ringo was now the band's go-to man for a winsome children's song and he supplied one of his own with *Octopus's Garden* – his second and last original composition for The Beatles. Starr came up with the track after walking out of the 'The White Album' sessions

and grabbing Peter Sellers' yacht for a family holiday in Sardinia. In a way, with its nautical sound effects, *Octopus's Garden* is an extension of the sonic collage feel of *Yellow Submarine*; George helped out on vocals and chipped in with ideas for its melody. Ringo and George would later go on to collaborate once more on three of Starr's successful singles, *It Don't Come Easy*, *Back Off Boogaloo* and *Photograph*, the latter a choice cut from the drummer's hugely successful solo career in the early '70s. ➔





George Martin and Geoff Emerick at Abbey Road's brand new TG12345 desk, installed in November 1968. This latest all-transistor unit imposed a cleaner, smoother sound on the album sessions

Phil Dent/Rediffusion/Getty Images

By *Abbey Road*, The Beatles were less interested in providing a coherent sonic statement than serving up a diverse mix of sonic textures and ideology. Hence the jarring juxtaposition of the perky melodicism of *Octopus's Garden* with the gnarly, progressive blues jam of *I Want You (She's So Heavy)* that closes the album's first side. Alongside *Helter Skelter*, it's arguably the heaviest and most

uncompromising work The Beatles ever laid down on tape. At almost eight minutes in length, like McCartney's commitment to his own material, it proves that Lennon was also uncompromising about presenting his own artistic vision.

I Want You... is deliberately simplistic lyrically, a growling, anguished blues and atypical of the band's usual airy arrangements. Billy

Preston supplies Hammond organ flourishes and Paul anchors the track with a doomy bassline while Lennon and Harrison's chiming, grinding guitars urge the song forwards. The white noise of its head-spinning coda was played by Lennon using a wind-type setting on George's huge, complicated new Moog synthesiser.

A WAY TO GET BACK HOME

If Side 1 ends in ever-enveloping darkness, then the flipside of *Abbey Road* is shot through with sunshine, optimism, melody and a final note of forgiveness. No doubt Lennon would have taken perverse glee in *I Want You...* being the final statement ever delivered by the band on record, but the decision to fill the second side of the album with almost unalloyed positivity is a fitting send-off for a band that brought such joy to the world.

George's *Here Comes The Sun* works wonderfully as a immediate palette-cleanser after the preceding track and, like *Something*, is among the best songs he ever wrote for the foursome. Wandering around Eric Clapton's garden with acoustic guitar in hand, George came up with one of his most timeless songs. It was recorded on Ringo's 29th birthday; Lennon was absent, still recuperating from his car accident in Scotland.

Equally pretty is Lennon's beatific *Because*, an unusually laid-back tune borne from him listening to Yoko play

CONSPIRING TO TALK NONSENSE

The Beatles had a knack for creating the iconic. From the information overload of the *Sgt. Pepper* cover to the simple naturalism of their *Abbey Road* front photo, it seems everything they released into the public domain would be destined to be pored over by musicologists, psychologists, theorists and plain crackpots for decades to come.

In 1966, a conspiracy theory emerged that the band's bassist was no longer of this earth. The 'Paul is dead' argument posited that McCartney had died in a road accident and been replaced by a doppelganger. Various songs over the ensuing years were dragged into this farce, and the front cover of *Abbey Road* became a major talking point. 'Paul is dead' proponents argued the cover was a covert admission from the band that the theory was true, since it depicts the quartet as a funeral procession. Lennon at the front and dressed in white is 'the heavenly figure'; Ringo, dressed in black, is 'the undertaker', and a denim-clad George is 'the gravedigger'. Meanwhile, a barefoot Paul was deemed out of step with the others and symbolised 'the corpse'. As Paul held his cigarette in his right hand, despite being a leftie, more impetus was added to the argument that this was an imposter.

Theorists also argued the white VW Beetle in the background with the registration plate LMW 281F represented the fact that Paul would have been '28 if' he had lived – totally overlooking the fact that Macca would, in fact, have been just 27.

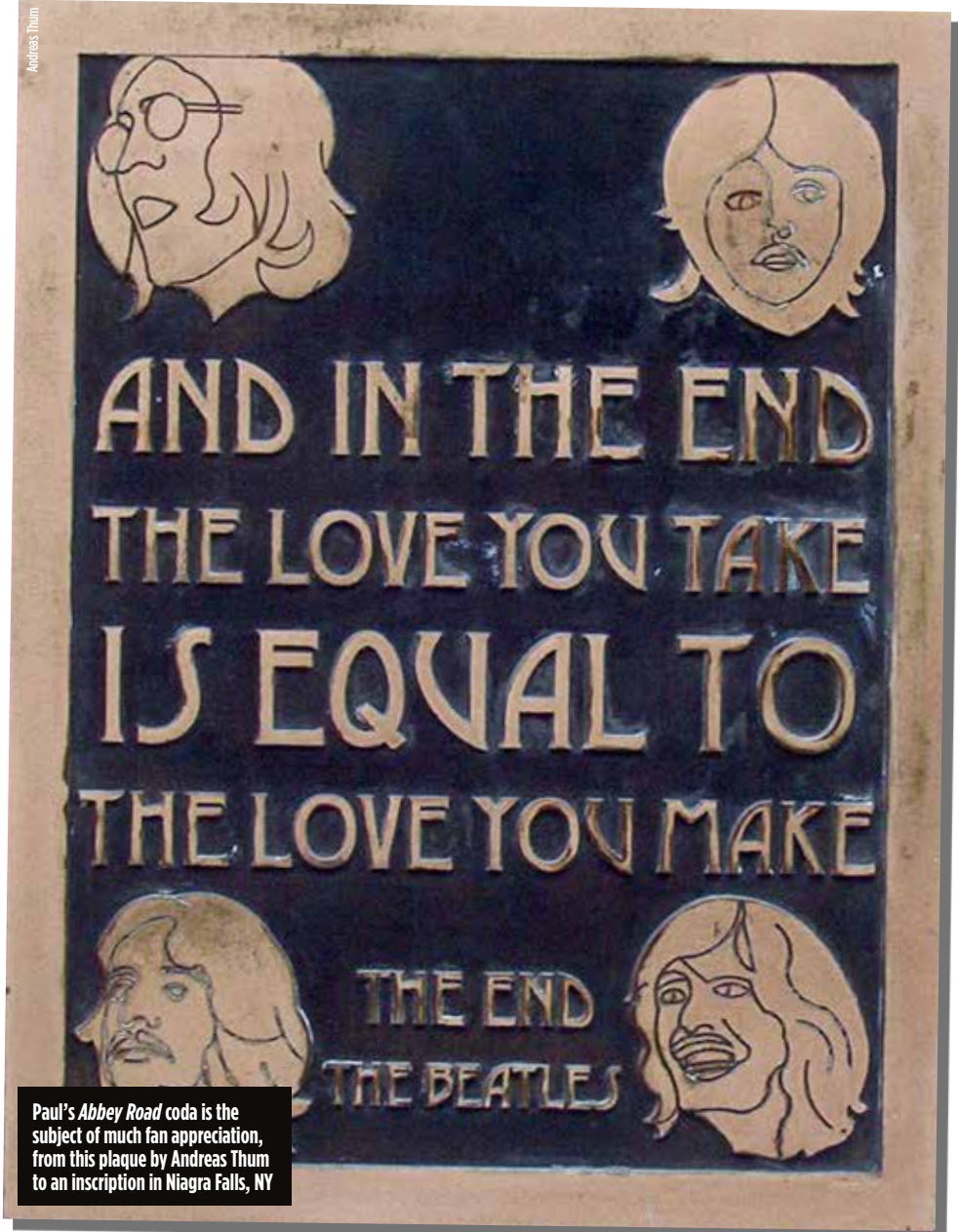


Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* on piano. The ever-resourceful (and a little lazy) Lennon reversed the chord structure for his new song which, when pimped up in the studio, featured the most intricate and layered backing vocals the band ever attempted. The a capella version of the song featured on *Anthology 3* is a stunning showcase for the triple-stacked harmonies of Lennon, McCartney and Harrison.

Apart from *Come Together* and Harrison's duo of gems, *Abbey Road's* legacy is perhaps built on the resourceful 16-minute eight-song medley that illuminates Side 2. Could it also be the best example of smoke-and-mirrors trickery in pop music history? Famed for its seamless cohesion, the songs were, in fact, half-finished snippets stitched together by the expertise of McCartney and George Martin. Once again, the bassist was the instigator but it was the studio nous of the producer that got it over the line.

Paul's recollections over the inspiration of its opening part *You Never Give Me Your Money* have proved unreliable over the years, flipping between claiming it was an indictment of the managerial interference of Allen Klein and a more general complaint against the other Beatles at a time when Apple's finances were in disarray. As McCartney and Klein's main disputes post-dated the song's gestation, it could be a case where Paul is rewriting his own history. Its plaintive tone in places goes against his assertion that this was a song written in anger. Perhaps it's more a tone of reservation – and he could see the steamroller style of Klein meant the writing was on the wall for The Beatles, and that he'd been usurped as the de facto manager of the band since Brian Epstein's death.

Sun King includes another too-close-for-comfort musical steal, this time from Fleetwood Mac's *Albatross*, before Lennon returns to rockier territory for *Mean Mr Mustard* and *Polythene Pam*, extensions of the oddball character studies found in *Happiness Is A Warm Gun*. McCartney's additions to the medley are undoubtedly stronger than his writing 'partner'; *She Came In Through The Bathroom Window* is an effortless pop-rocker borne out of the true story



IF THE BAND WEREN'T TO KNOW THAT THE END WOULD BE THEIR PARTING SHOT ON RECORD, THEN ITS COINCIDENCE IS OVERWHELMING

of an Apple Scruff (they didn't call them stalkers in the '60s) who stood guard outside band members' homes and actually tried to enter McCartney's house via his bathroom. Paul's reworking of the 17th century dramatist Thomas Dekker's poem *Cradle Song* from his 1603 comedy *Patient Grissel on Golden Slumbers* is a marvel. When paired with *Carry That Weight*, its emotional resonance within the Beatles story is almost unbearable – as part of their final goodbye to us, its poignancy can be overpowering.

If the band weren't to know that *The End* would be their parting shot on record, then its coincidence is overwhelming. In order, Paul, George then John lay down a catalogue of stinging solos and Ringo even weighs in with his first and only drum solo in the band. Paul's memorable closing line "The love you take is equal to the love you make" could not be more fitting. Even at their most conflicted as an artistic unit, they still sent messages out to the world that would resound down the generations. ★