



The Beatles

SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND (ANNIVERSARY SUPER DELUXE EDITION)

UNIVERSAL

Beatles fans will, of course, endlessly debate which is the band's best album. However, the accolade for the most important surely rests with *Sgt. Pepper...* As arguably the most influential long-player of all time, its reputation as rock's first concept album has always been a misnomer – the 'fake band' conceit unravels after its second song and only makes a cursory reappearance on the penultimate track. So much for joined-up thinking.

Like *Revolver* from 1966, the diversity of musical styles and tone – from Lennon's acerbic bitterness and psychedelic imagination to McCartney's whimsy and Harrison's mysticism – is really what should lie at the heart of *Pepper...*'s long-term appeal. It's also George Martin's finest achievement as a producer.

So, what's the headline news from this new reissue? Well, Ringo's drums

have never sounded bolder and the haul of unreleased gems is the most revealing since *Anthology 2*. From the album's opening moments presenting an orchestra tuning up, The Beatles tap into an interesting dualism. They're at once embracing the older order and thumbing their noses at the establishment. The *Sgt. Pepper...* theme itself is the album's rockiest moment. And this new version comes with added thump: Ringo's kit sounds cavernous, and the overdriven guitars are seriously punchy.

SHINING STARR

Ringo's appearance as Billy Shears on *With A Little Help From My Friends* finds him at the edge of his limited vocal range, for an anthem of collective unity that's a neat summation of the hopes of the emerging counter-culture community itself. It's a striking showcase for McCartney's supremely

agile bass playing and, once again, Ringo's drums are noticeably amped up in this new mix, giving the song considerably more punch.

Lennon's first major contribution, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*, has become a psychedelic treasure, of course. Yet its pleasing counterpoint of laidback verses and stomping chorus is often missed, among the plaudits for its groundbreaking use of surrealism. You'll notice Ringo far more once again here, as his bass drums boom before each chorus. Producers Giles Martin and Sam Okell have also pimped the guitars on *Getting Better*, giving the intro a fresh, metallic sound. A perfect blend of Macca and Lennon's yin and yang.

For those who balk at McCartney's whimsical side, which asserts itself on a handful of tracks at *Pepper's* core, then this mix will alleviate some of those grumbles. If there's an

LONG LIVE
VINYL
CHOICE



adjective that comes most to mind throughout here, it's 'muscular'. This new stereo mix thickens *Fixing A Hole* with far more bottom end than we're used to. There's sophistication, too, though. The Mike Leander string arrangement for *She's Leaving Home* sounds absolutely pristine. This classic 60s kitchen-sink drama finds The Beatles expertly straddling the generation gap of disaffected youth and disappointed parenthood. Sheila Bromberg's harp intro is wonderfully nuanced and Leander's occasional use of Indian motifs within a Western string arrangement is absolutely inspired.

FAIR PLAY

Those attracted by *Pepper's* studio innovations will no doubt gravitate to the swirling cut-and-paste psychedelia of *Being For The Benefit Of Mr. Kite!*, and the hallucinatory nature of

George Martin's and Geoff Emerick's fairground interludes has never been more apparent.

Side 2 opens with George's only songwriting contribution to *Pepper*, the mid-tempo raga of *Within You Without You*. Along with *Love You To* and *The Inner Light*, it continues his fascination with Indian classical music and underlines the forward-thinking nature of this LP at its best. For *When I'm Sixty-Four*, McCartney is seemingly occupying the same headspace as when he soundtracked TV drama *The Family Way* the previous winter. Macca detractors seize upon moments like this – Lennon, of course, termed it "granny music" – but the lightness of touch works well when set against John's cynicism and George's didacticism. McCartney's bassline is the star of the show, alongside a cheeky Martin brass arrangement.

If there's filler on *Pepper*, then perhaps *Lovely Rita* is the biggest culprit. Even on something as throwaway as this, the coda still provides a bizarre twist and this new mix amps up Ringo's crashing snares.

Lennon's *Good Morning Good Morning*, on the face of it, is an upbeat rocker. But listen to the lyrics carefully, and it's far more nihilistic than it at first appears. It feels heavier, too, in this incarnation and doesn't feel beaten down by the rocky *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club (Reprise)*, as on previous versions. And what can be said about the epochal *A Day In The Life*? Well, the strings remain astonishingly avant garde and the final E chord still sounds like the end of the world. The additional CD of early takes and works in progress are as revelatory as the new stereo mix. The Beatles' back catalogue is packed with eureka moments, of course, but the long gestation period of *Pepper* proved they could graft, too.

Each track from the album is offered up here, in an alternative form. The *Sgt. Pepper...* opener without crowd noise and Martin's brass arrangement shows how much he brought to the party. An instrumental of *With A Little Help...* provides us with the space to enjoy Ringo's solid drumming, and from a historical point of view, it's fascinating to hear the very first take of *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds* where Lennon hasn't yet nailed the best rhythm of the lyrics. McCartney's vocal coda to *Fixing A Hole* actually sounds pretty funky, while *She's Leaving Home* and *Within You Without You* work well as instrumentals. Beatles anoraks will thrill, of course, to a version of *A Day In The Life* with a hummed last note instead of the final version's timeless triple-piano and harmonium chord. Like *Anthology 2*, we get multiple takes of *Strawberry Fields Forever*, too.

Sgt. Pepper... is where pop got serious – and this is a seriously good representation of that landmark feat.

Steve Harnell

VERDICT
10/10

