

# REVOLVER

“Listen to the colour of your dreams” says John Lennon on *Revolver*’s psychedelic landmark *Tomorrow Never Knows*. The Beatles did just that – and they created a masterpiece.

Steve Harnell tunes in...



John and Paul signing autographs for fans as they arrive at EMI studios, Abbey Road, for a rehearsal during the recording of what would become *Revolver*, 22 June 1966

**I**t may only have been a fleeting moment, but for a brief period, England's bustling capital was at the epicentre of the pop cultural universe. 'Swinging London' has since descended into the realms of newsreel montage cliché, but in 1966 the thrilling adventurousness and diversity of its creative forces in music, film, theatre and fashion was the envy of the entire world.

The climate was of experimentalism and freedom, throwing off the shackles of post-war austerity. From the rise of working class heroes like Michael Caine, Terence Stamp and Sean Connery in the acting world, through the ground-breaking innovations of Mary Quant in the fashion industry and the emergence of Twiggy and Chrissie Shrimpton, all eyes were on London – and England even won the World Cup that summer.

The Beatles were the fulcrum of it all, of course, the biggest pop cultural phenomenon that has ever been. Although only St John's Wood-dwelling man-about-town Paul McCartney was a continual presence on the countercultural scene (John, George and Ringo had already decamped from the bright lights to the more sedate environs of the stockbroker belt), the band were still perfectly placed to fully embrace, and then spearhead, a radical new movement of artistic endeavour.

In April 1966, The Rolling Stones, driven by the vision of exotic multi-instrumentalist Brian Jones, had mirrored the 'Swinging London' ethos and ideology with *Aftermath*, but four months later *Revolver* captured the zeitgeist to an even greater degree.

### FILLED WITH THINGS TO SAY

Originally, manager Brian Epstein had envisaged that 1966 should follow a similar itinerary to the previous two years, with The Beatles making a third movie and an accompanying soundtrack album and undertaking extensive summer touring. But when the band vetoed the movie idea, an unprecedented three-month hole appeared in their schedule. It was an extraordinary luxury for a band who'd been forced to work at breakneck speed ever since their earliest days.

A typically perverse decision from the foursome was to shun their usual home at Abbey Road to record at Stax Studio in Memphis, the birthplace of seminal records by the likes of Otis Redding, Booker T & the MGs and Sam and Dave. In-house producer Jim Stewart would have replaced George Martin, but the plan was eventually abandoned, and reported similar relocations to either New York's Atlantic Studios or Motown's hit factory in Detroit were also dismissed.

Reluctantly, the band reconvened at Abbey Road for their seventh studio

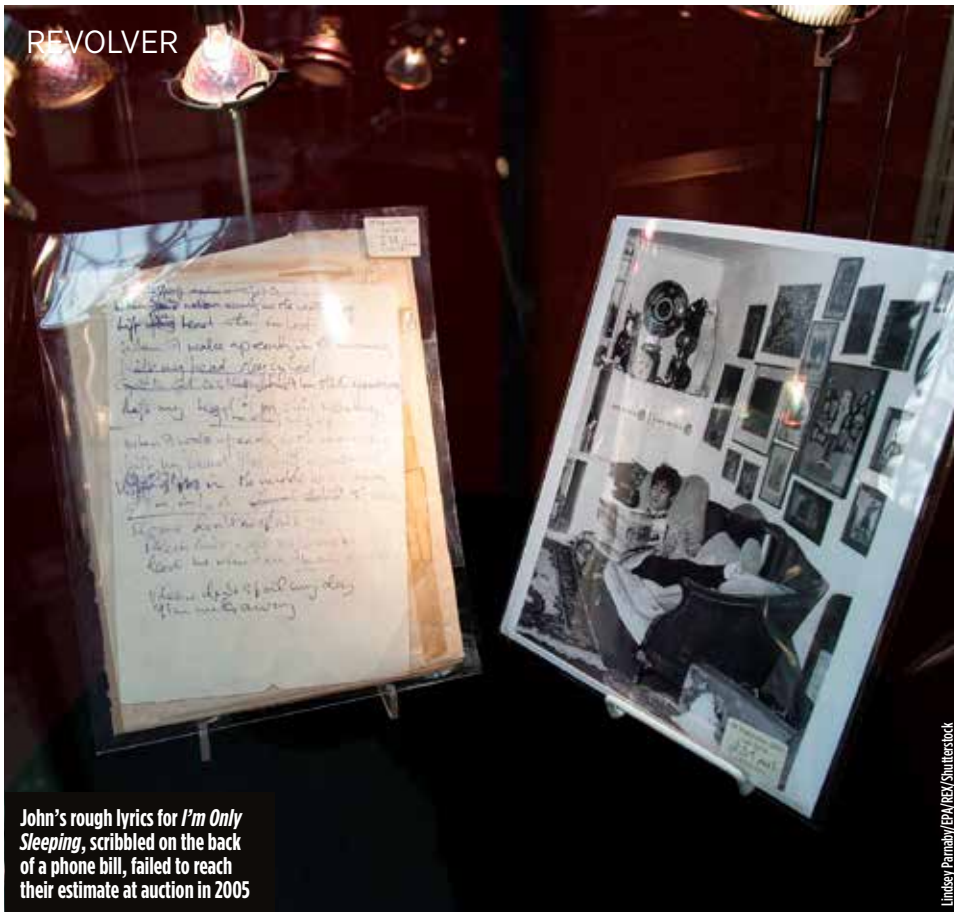
album alongside George Martin. It was hardly the most auspicious of starts for what has arguably become their crowning achievement.

The difference between their previous album *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* is, in essence, that between two very different thought processes. Even though it stretches its legs sonically – in particular its use of the sitar on *Norwegian Wood – Rubber Soul* was still constructed under the restrictions that it had to be replicated live – or at least an approximation of it. With *Revolver* all bets were off. The band were resolute that their touring days would soon be over (save for a few contractual obligations), so the only aim was to make each song the very best it could be in isolation.

Remarkably, although *Tomorrow Never Knows* seems like the perfect conclusion to *Revolver* and a gateway to the studio sophistication of *Pepper*, it was actually the first track to be recorded at sessions for the follow-up to *Rubber Soul*. After that came chamber music, soulful R&B, world

**THE BAND WERE PERFECTLY PLACED TO SPEARHEAD A RADICAL NEW MOVEMENT OF ARTISTIC ENDEAVOUR**





John's rough lyrics for *I'm Only Sleeping*, scribbled on the back of a phone bill, failed to reach their estimate at auction in 2005

Lindey Parnaby/EPV/REX/Shutterstock

music and a phantasmagorical children's tune so evocative that it inspired a whole animated universe. Is this a reflection of the band's collective ADHD, or the ebullient self-confidence in their own ability to write in any style they chose? Perhaps it's a final realisation that the stylistic stabilisers had been kicked to the kerb and they were now freewheeling into a limitless universe of musical possibilities. For the vast majority of bands, *Tomorrow Never Knows* would have been a sonic eureka moment of seismic proportions. But not The Beatles. For them, it was just another room in an endless corridor of possibilities.

In the end, it's *Taxman* that ushers in the new era of The Beatles on record. The two count-ins that herald the song simultaneously look backwards and forwards: George Harrison character-acts the role of a miser totting up his pennies (this was dubbed onto the song a month after it was originally finished) while the vigorous "1-2-3-4!" in the background by Paul is a knowing nod to the exuberant count-in at the start of *I Saw Her Standing There*, the first song from their debut album, *Please Please Me*. *Taxman* itself is a far more cynical

affair and features George's bitter complaint at the outrageous 95p-in-the-pound tax rate for the UK's highest earners at the time. In his autobiography *I, Me, Mine* Harrison wrote: "*Taxman* was when I first realised that even though we had started earning money, we were actually giving most of it away in taxes; it was and still is typical. Why should this be so? Are we being punished for something we had forgotten to do?" Apart from George's cynicism, the star of the show is McCartney's pumping bassline. Paul also supplies the remarkable crazed guitar solo, too.

The ease at which the band pinball between styles without any drop-off in quality on the album is staggering. *Eleanor Rigby*, McCartney's bleak, Pinteresque tale of broken, futile lives is heartbreaking. With Paul the sole Beatle on the track, it was also a signpost to his future tendency to dispense with his colleagues and drop the band dynamic when the need arose. George Martin's wonderful orchestral arrangement was inspired by the film scores of French new wave director François Truffaut. The track is arguably McCartney's great

accomplishment as a lyricist. There's a bravery to the bleakness of lines like "Father McKenzie, wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave/ No one was saved". The Samuel Beckett-level desolation must have come as a shock to pop fans the world over. And note that final line: Paul's apparent rejection of Christianity prefaces the eventual "bigger than Jesus" furor created by John that engulfed the band later in the year.

The story of the song's origin has been much debated over the years, with McCartney claiming that both the titular spinster and Father McKenzie were pure figments of his imagination. While wandering the streets of Bristol waiting for girlfriend Jane Asher to finish rehearsals for a play at the Bristol Old Vic, he stumbled across a King Street wine merchants, Rigby & Evens. His original heroine was called Daisy Hawkins, but after splicing in the first name of *Help!* co-star Eleanor Bron and part of the Bristol shop name, he came up with a new title.

In the *Anthology* book, Paul explains: "I thought, I swear, that I made up the name like that. I remember distinctly having the name Eleanor, looking for a believable surname and wandering around the docklands in Bristol and seeing the shop there. But it seems that

**FOR THE BEATLES, TOMORROW NEVER KNOWS WAS JUST ANOTHER ROOM IN AN ENDLESS CORRIDOR OF POSSIBILITIES**

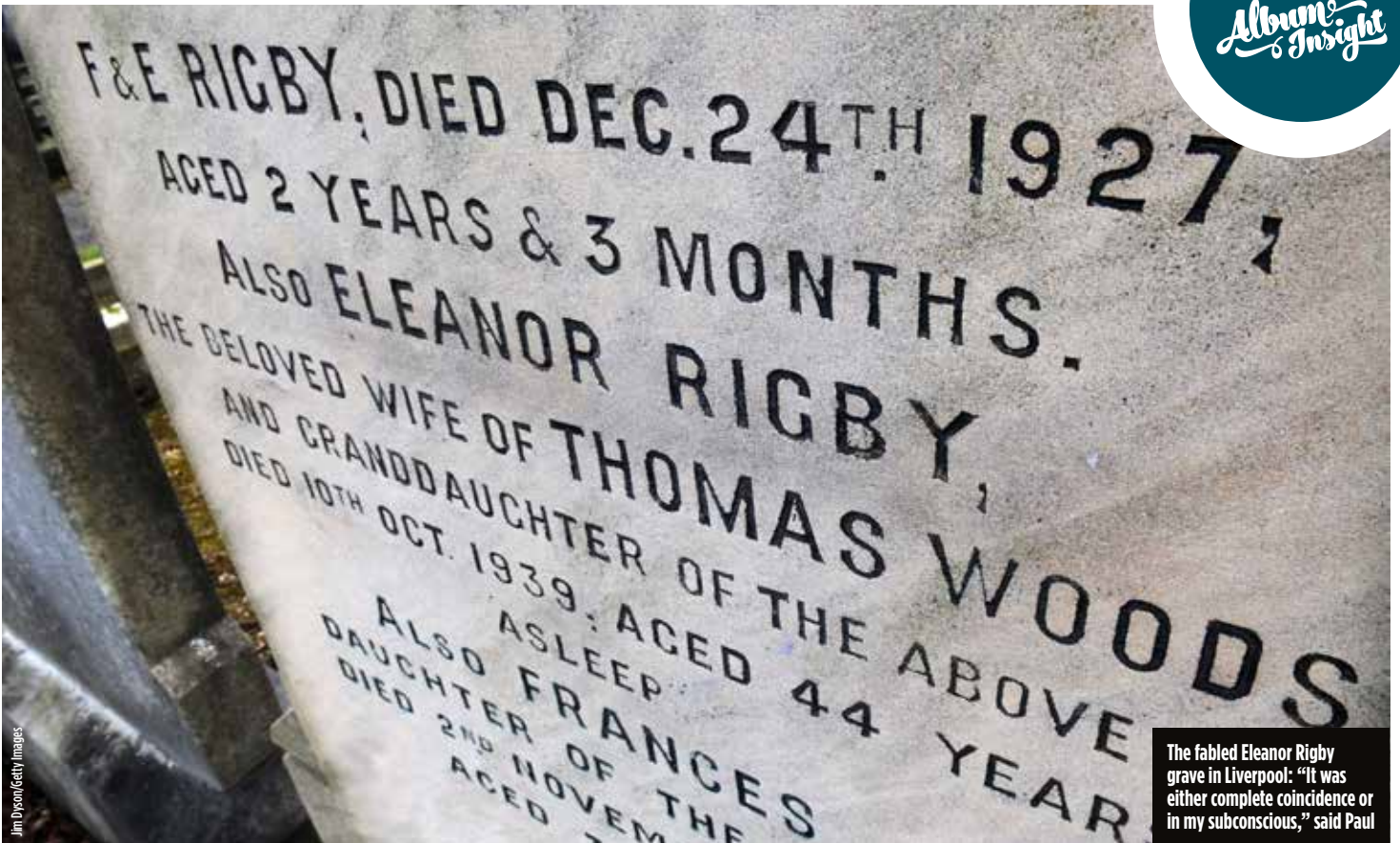
**REVOLVER**  
1966 • PARLOPHONE

*Side 1*

- Taxman** (Harrison)
- Eleanor Rigby** (Lennon & McCartney)
- I'm Only Sleeping** (Lennon & McCartney)
- Love You To** (Harrison)
- Here, There And Everywhere** (Lennon & McCartney)
- Yellow Submarine** (Lennon & McCartney)
- She Said She Said** (Lennon & McCartney)

*Side 2*

- Good Day Sunshine** (Lennon & McCartney)
- And Your Bird Can Sing** (Lennon & McCartney)
- For No One** (Lennon & McCartney)
- Doctor Robert** (Lennon & McCartney)
- I Want To Tell You** (Harrison)
- Got To Get You Into My Life** (Lennon & McCartney)
- Tomorrow Never Knows** (Lennon & McCartney)



The fabled Eleanor Rigby grave in Liverpool: “It was either complete coincidence or in my subconscious,” said Paul

up in Woolton Cemetery where I used to hang out a lot with John, there’s a gravestone to an Eleanor Rigby. Apparently, a few yards to the right, there’s someone called McKenzie. It was either complete coincidence or in my subconscious.” It’s also said that Father McKenzie started life as Father McCartney until Lennon’s friend Pete Shotton suggested it could be misinterpreted and came up with the new name while Paul worked on the song at John’s Surrey house. Analysing *Eleanor Rigby* in his book *Revolution In The Head*, Ian MacDonald acutely adds: “Often misrepresented as purveyors of escapist fantasy, The Beatles were, at their best, more poignantly realistic than any other popular artists of their time.”

Lennon’s cynicism at fame shows through in his ode to lethargy, *I’m Only Sleeping*. This was something of a perennial songwriting theme of his; he returned to it on ‘The White Album’ track *I’m So Tired* and later in his solo career with *#9 Dream*. Harrison’s Indian-style backwards guitar solo was constructed during a six-hour session, thus creating another song that was impossible to duplicate live.

Another landmark moment on the album is found with Harrison’s *Love You To*. Although George had already utilised a sitar on *Norwegian Wood*, *Love You To* was the first track specifically written with the instrument in mind. George played sitar, and hired Indian musician Anil Bhagwat to play tabla. The song was

originally titled *Granny Smith*; Harrison often completed a song before finalising a name for it. His message here may have been one of universal love and peace, but there’s still an element of cynicism that was often typical of his songwriting: “There’s people standing round, who’ll screw you in the ground/ They’ll fill you in with all their sins you’ll see”.

If *Revolver* is regularly shot through with world-weary cynicism, then Paul McCartney often provides its lighter moments including the beautifully melodic *Here, There And Everywhere* and *Good Day Sunshine*, the latter Macca’s inspired attempt to channel the aural injection of Vitamin D that was The Lovin’ Spoonful’s *Daydream*. Meanwhile, Ringo’s traditional

## PERSONNEL

**JOHN LENNON** – lead, harmony and backing vocals; rhythm and acoustic guitars; Hammond organ, harmonium, tape loops, sound effects; tambourine, handclaps, finger snaps

**PAUL McCARTNEY** – lead, harmony and backing vocals; bass, acoustic and lead guitars; piano, clavichord; tape loops, sound effects; handclaps, finger snaps

**GEORGE HARRISON** – head, harmony and backing vocals; lead, acoustic, rhythm and bass guitars; sitar,

tambura; tape loops, sound effects; maracas, tambourine, handclaps, finger snaps

**RINGO STARR** – drums; tambourine, maracas, cowbell, shaker, handclaps, finger snaps; tape loops; lead vocals on *Yellow Submarine*

### NOTABLE GUESTS

**ANIL BHAGWAT** – tabla on *Love You To*

**ALAN CIVIL** – French horn on *For No One*

**MAL EVANS** – bass drum, added backing vocals on *Yellow Submarine*

**NEIL ASPINALL, BRIAN JONES, PATTIE BOYD, MARIANNE FAITHFULL, ALF BICKNELL** – background vocals on *Yellow Submarine*

### PRODUCTION

**GEORGE MARTIN** – producer, mixing engineer; piano on *Good Day Sunshine* and *Tomorrow Never Knows*; Hammond organ on *Got To Get You Into My Life*; tape loops of marching band (band unknown, found in the EMI archives) on *Yellow Submarine*

**GEOFF EMERICK** – recording and mixing engineer; tape loops of marching band on *Yellow Submarine*





The Beatles snapped at London Airport en route to Germany for a three-city mini-tour, 23rd June 1966

Wesley/Keystone/Hulton/Arndt/Getty Images

one-song outing comes on the wonderful children’s classic *Yellow Submarine*. The sheer audacity of writing a children’s song and placing it slap-bang in the middle of a generation-defining artistic statement is quite remarkable. Among those providing sound effects in the studio were Beatle insiders Mal Evans and Neil Aspinall, Rolling Stone Brian Jones, and Marianne Faithfull – and that’s the band’s chauffeur Alf Bicknell rattling chains in the background, too. A 30-second introduction from Ringo was cut from the final recording, which saw the band spending more time on this one song than on the whole of their debut album.

In the *Anthology* book, Paul explains: “I thought that with Ringo being so good with children – a knockabout uncle type – it might not be a bad idea

for him to have a children’s song rather than a serious song. He wasn’t that keen on singing.”

As Lennon set about creating a suitably nautical soundscape to back the track, he came upon the idea of singing underwater. George Martin dissuaded him from the plan but engineer Geoff Emerick came up with an alternative: how about John sing into a microphone that was immersed in water? A microphone was duly wrapped in a condom and placed inside a milk carton. The signal was so weak, though, that this idea was scrapped. It was only years later that Emerick realised what folly it could have been and recalled: “I realised with horror that the microphone we were using was phantom-powered – meaning that it actually was a live electrical object. In conjunction with

the 240V system used in England, any of us, including Lennon, could easily have been electrocuted, and I would have gone down in history as the first recording engineer to kill a client in the studio.”

## TURNING ON, TUNING IN

The band’s enthusiastic adoption (Paul excepted) of LSD is a major influence on *Revolver*. For *She Said She Said*, read *He Said He Said*. The subject in question is in fact the soon-to-be *Easy Rider* star and countercultural icon Peter Fonda. On 24 August 1965, The Beatles were taking a break from their US tour and hanging out with the actor and members of The Byrds. As a child, Fonda had almost died of a gunshot wound, and delighted in telling the gory tale to Harrison and Lennon while the assembled stars were tripping on acid.

Lennon commented: “I wrote [the song] about an acid trip I was on in Los Angeles. It was only the second trip we’d had. We took it because I started hearing things about it and we wanted to know what it was all about. Peter Fonda came over to us and started saying things like ‘I know what it’s like to be dead, man’ and we didn’t wanna know, but he kept going on and on.”

Equally trip-related is Lennon’s *Doctor Robert*. The identity of the man in question is yet another hotly-debated topic but it is thought to be Dr Robert Freymann, who ran a clinic in New York; he was notorious for giving his clients Vitamin B12 shots with a healthy dose of amphetamines. It’s another exercise in Lennon’s continual

## STUDIO INNOVATIONS

Could a teenager be the key to the freeflowing sense of experimentalism that courses through the veins of *Revolver*? Engineer Geoff Emerick was just 19 when he was chosen to man the mixing desk at Abbey Road during the sessions. He has no doubt of the album’s ground-breaking nature and says: “I know for a fact that, from the day it came out, *Revolver* changed the way that everyone made records.”

Writer Ian McDonald is effusive in his praise, too, of the youthful Emerick’s influence describing him as an “audio experimentalist” in the tradition of groundbreaking producer Joe Meek.

Surprisingly, *Revolver* also marked the very first time that EMI’s four-track tape machines were placed in the studio’s control room alongside the producer and engineer, making it easy for the pair to reach over and make

instant alterations to recordings or introduce sonic effects.

The Beatles were keen to replicate the heightened sensory states brought on by LSD, and a number of recording innovations were introduced during sessions, most notably automatic double tracking (ADT), which doubles up vocal takes and provides a thickened, richer sound. Lennon, never a fan of his own voice, was particularly keen to play with new

vocal treatments, even having his pipes amplified through the revolving – suitably enough – speakers found inside a Leslie organ cabinet for *Tomorrow Never Knows*. The track also made extensive use of tape loops, an idea from McCartney that had been influenced by avant garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and which was later used to even more extreme effect on *Revolution #9* on ‘The White Album’.

need to subvert the pop form and fill his lyrics with in-jokes for the turned-on countercultural insiders. Likewise, the same goes for *Here Come The Nice* by The Small Faces.

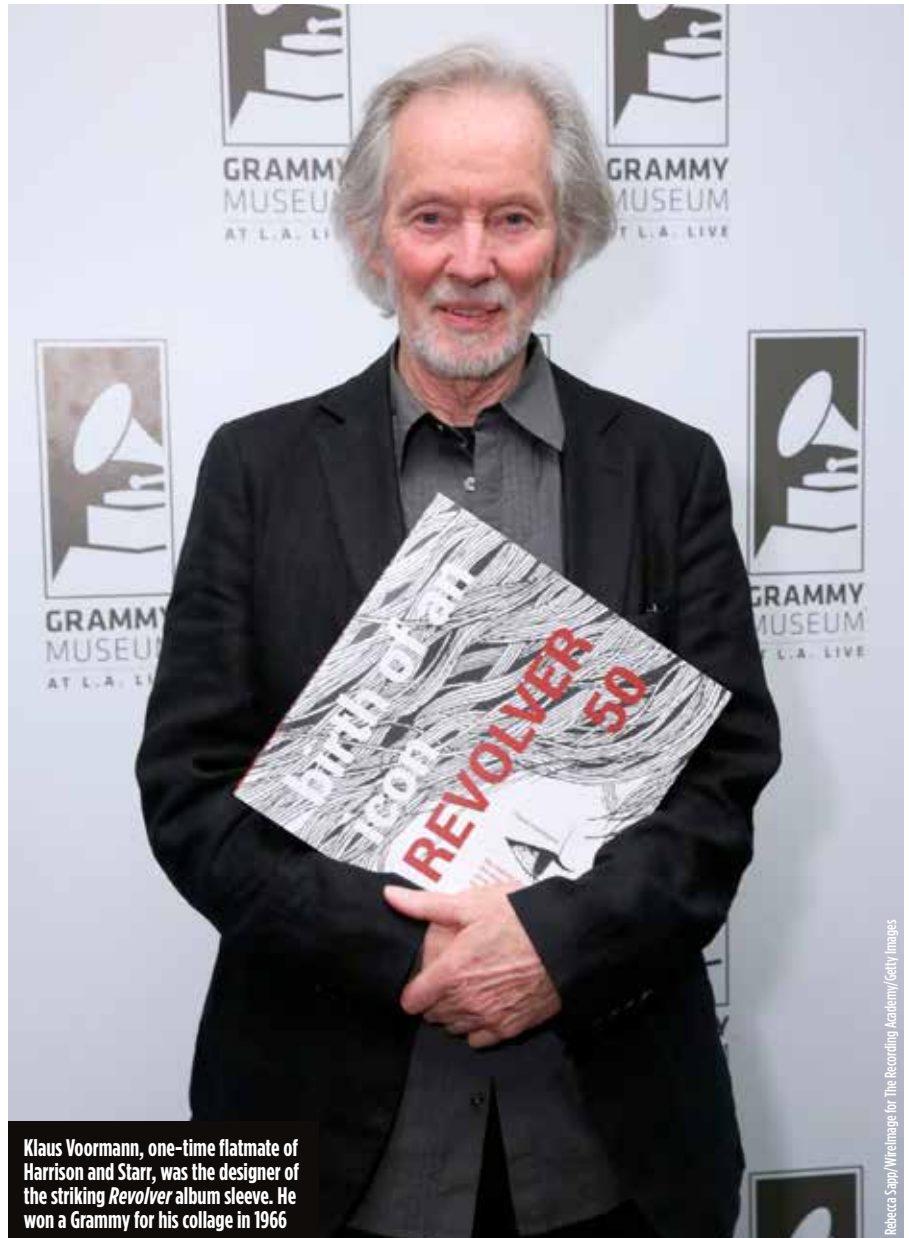
## FOUR SIDES NOW

Even though McCartney had refused to take LSD by the time he recorded *Revolver*, he still managed to sneak in the pro-marijuana Motown-influenced *Got To Get You Into My Life* under the guise of a sweet love song. “I wrote it when I had first been introduced to pot – like someone else might write an ode to chocolate or a good claret,” McCartney later explained. The song was a coded boast, too, as Paul later added: “We were kind of proud to have been introduced to pot by Dylan, that was rather a coup. It was like being introduced to meditation and given your mantra by the Maharishi. There was a certain status to it.”

The band only finalised the album’s title while on tour in Germany in late June. Among the contenders was *Abracadabra*, but this was ditched when they realised it had already been used. Also on the potentials list were *Magic Circles*, *Beatles On Safari*, *Four Sides Of The Eternal Triangle* and even, rather astonishingly, *Fat Man And Bobby*. At one point Ringo also attempted a groansome pun on The Rolling Stones’ *Aftermath* when he suggested *After Geography*.

Following years of tinkering with tracklistings, *Revolver* was the final example of a Beatles album having differing incarnations in the UK and US. Three Lennon compositions – *I’m Only Sleeping*, *And Your Bird Can Sing* and *Doctor Robert* – were taken off the US pressing as they’d already featured on previous Capitol release *Yesterday And Today* just two months earlier.

When the album was unveiled in the US, its release and concurrent live shows were at first marred by the controversy surrounding Lennon’s notorious “bigger than Jesus” interview with Maureen Cleave that first appeared in the *Evening Standard* in March 1966. Although Lennon’s statement attracted little attention in the UK, five months later it blew up into a row which very nearly threatened the band’s existence in the United States, where Beatle record-



Klaus Voormann, one-time flatmate of Harrison and Starr, was the designer of the striking *Revolver* album sleeve. He won a Grammy for his collage in 1966

Rebecca Sapp/WireImage for The Recording Academy/Getty Images

**“I’M NOT ANTI-CHRIST OR ANTI-RELIGION... I JUST SAID WHAT I SAID AND WAS WRONG, OR WAS TAKEN WRONG, AND NOW IT’S ALL THIS”**

**JOHN LENNON**

burning events became commonplace. Lennon had told Cleave: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I’ll be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first – rock’n’roll or Christianity. Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary.”

While at a press conference at the Astor Hotel before the 1966 US mini-tour, a clearly rattled Lennon semi-backtracked: “I’m not anti-Christ or anti-religion or anti-God. I’m not

saying we’re better or greater, or comparing us with Jesus Christ as a person, or God as a thing or whatever it is. I just said what I said and was wrong, or was taken wrong, and now it’s all this.”

Faced with this, the band adopted a siege mentality. The Abbey Road recording studio would become their bunker, and the extended recording sessions for *Revolver*’s follow-up would result in the most important album of all time. The military intervention of *Sgt. Pepper* awaited. ★