



SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND

The Beatles' most famous album has only grown in stature over the last 50 years and marks the moment in musical history where pop was afforded equal rights with high art.
Steve Harnell doffs his cap

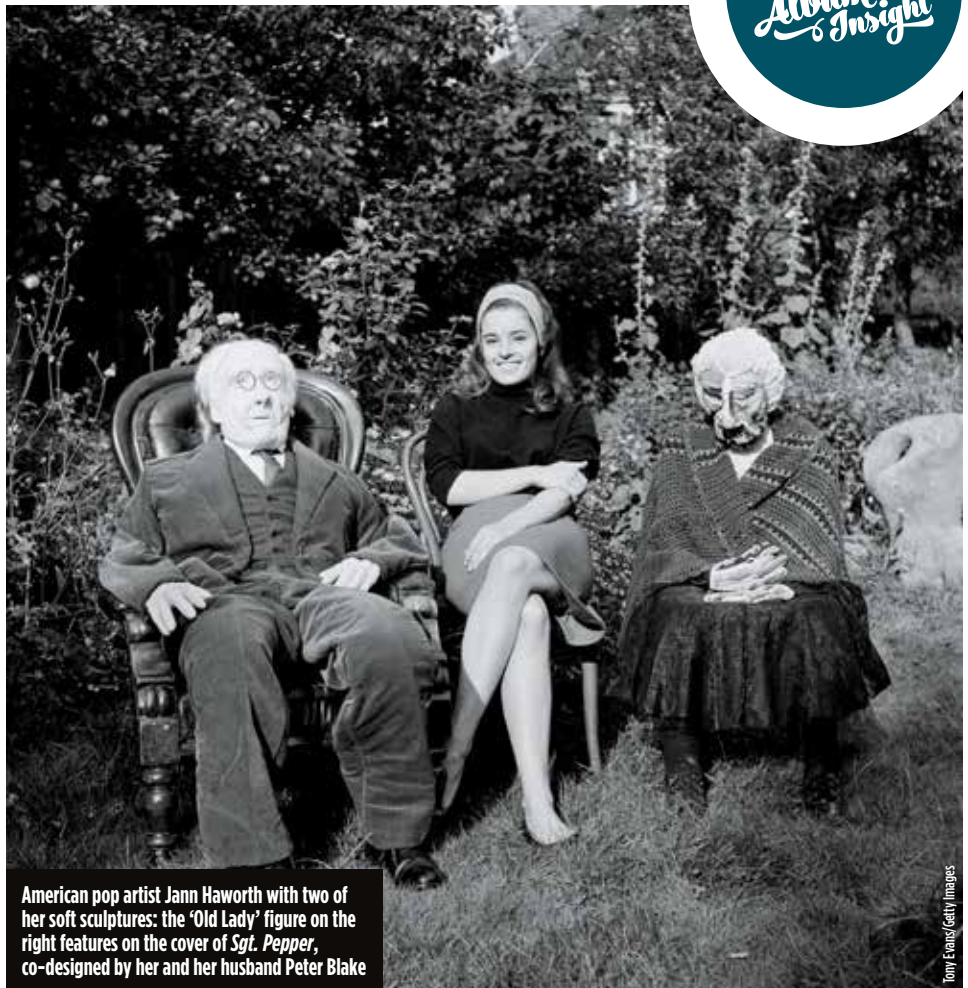
Sgt. *Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* occupies a singular place in the Beatles canon – it's both their most important album and their most misunderstood.

In terms of its significance, there can be no more game-changing long-player in the history of recorded music than the band's 1967 opus. It marked the moment where pop music broke the cultural glass ceiling and could be considered high art. However, its reputation as rock's finest 'concept' album has always been a misnomer. Under examination, the Sgt. Pepper 'fake band' conceit unravels after its second song and only makes a cursory reappearance on the penultimate track. So much for joined-up thinking, then.

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

You could argue that the band made more consistent albums (step forward, *Revolver*) and created more diverse collections (no doubt, the astonishingly generous pick'n'mix smorgasbord of the 'The White Album') but there's something about the whole package of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* – its clutch of now-classic tunes, the psychedelic, era-defining front cover, the much-vaunted audio trickery within – that holds a special place in many Fab Four fans' hearts.

All was not idyllic within the ranks of Beatledom, though. Itchy feet had set in as they reacted against the suffocating pressure of being part of the world's biggest band. Harrison even threatened to leave until his anger was appeased by Brian Epstein's promise that their touring days were officially over. Lennon took time out to hook up once again with *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* director Richard Lester, playing the part of Musketeer Gripweed in *How I Won The War*. McCartney explored his growing fascination with brass band music by providing the soundtrack to the TV drama *The Family Way*, but he had bigger plans in mind for his future.



American pop artist Jann Haworth with two of her soft sculptures: the 'Old Lady' figure on the right features on the cover of *Sgt. Pepper*, co-designed by her and her husband Peter Blake

Tony Stone/Cathy Images

The genesis of *Sgt. Pepper* marks a key moment in Beatle history where McCartney asserted himself as the main motivational force within the band. Meanwhile, manager Brian Epstein, who was battling depression and an addiction to pills, was by this point proving to be far from the dynamic force of old. Distracted by his troubles, his role was becoming more reactive than proactive.

The bassist wrote the lion's share of the material on the album and came up with an idea for a song which would eventually become *Sgt. Pepper's* seemingly unifying concept while on a return flight to London from Kenya with tour manager Mal Evans. With a view to freeing up The Beatles stylistically, McCartney posited the concept of creating a fictional Edwardian-era military band.

Evans, for his part, riffing off the a/courant West Coast psychedelic band names of the times, reportedly came up with the title *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Paul later explained:

"I thought it would be nice to lose our identities, to submerge ourselves in the persona of a fake group. We could make up all the culture around it and collect all our heroes in one place."

At first, the idea formed just the seed for the rocking opening song from the album. It was only three months into recording sessions that McCartney suggested that the 'Sgt. Pepper' concept could be used as an overarching framing device.

George Martin recalled: "*Sgt. Pepper* itself didn't appear until halfway through making the album. It was Paul's song, just an ordinary rock number. But when we finished it, Paul said: 'Why don't we make a whole album as though the Pepper band really existed, as though Sgt. Pepper was making the record?' I loved the idea and from that moment on it was as though *Pepper* had a life of its own."

The Beach Boys' seminal *Pet Sounds* was a regular touchstone throughout the recording process and a continual reminder of how a studio could

"PAUL SAID, 'WHY DON'T WE MAKE A WHOLE ALBUM AS THOUGH SGT. PEPPER WAS MAKING THE RECORD?' I LOVED THE IDEA" GEORGE MARTIN



John Lennon's Romany *Sgt. Pepper* caravan, painted by The Fool, July 1967. The vehicle spent years on Lennon's Irish island but was retrieved and part-restored by Ringo after John's death

Evening Standard/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

become an instrument in itself. McCartney has recognised the influence of *Freak Out!* by The Mothers of Invention, now often seen as rock's first fully-fledged concept album (in a perfect example of pop eating itself, Frank Zappa's band went on to satirise *Sgt. Pepper* with their 1968 album *We're Only In It For The Money*, which parodied the famous cover art. Upon their record company's insistence, however, Zappa's artful reference was removed from the front of the album and placed inside the gatefold).

With The Beatles afforded the luxury of limitless studio time, they originally began recording sessions for what became *Sgt. Pepper* with the idea of creating a themed work around their childhoods in Liverpool. Early fruit yielded from those sessions were *Strawberry Fields Forever*, *When I'm Sixty-Four* and *Penny Lane*. With the band taking an unheard-of amount of time between the delivery of albums – an unrelenting record-buying public had been led to expect most acts to release two LPs a year – Epstein was eventually pressured into giving up *Strawberry Fields Forever* and *Penny Lane* for a double A-sided single in

February 1967. Remarkably, what is almost universally considered the greatest 7-inch record of all time only made it to #2 in the UK singles chart. Engelbert Humperdinck's *Please Release Me* pipped it to the summit, breaking The Beatles' four-year run of chart-topping singles in the UK.

The two sides of the single were omitted from the eventual tracklisting of the album, a decision which George Martin has described as the biggest mistake of his professional life. The whole affair left a sour taste in the mouth, for not only did the single fail to make it to #1 but the two songs' absence also stymied the entire 'Liverpool childhood' concept.

THE RACE TO WRITE

With Paul asserting his dominance over the direction and workload of the band, resentment began to increase among his colleagues. Always the first to arrive at recording sessions with an armful of new compositions, McCartney's proliferant talent forced Lennon's hand. John's inherent sense of competition with Paul generally allowed him to keep pace, but there was a sense that he was being

THE TWO SIDES OF THE STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER/PENNY LANE SINGLE WERE OMITTED FROM THE TRACKLISTING OF THE ALBUM

SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND

1967 • PARLOPHONE

Side 1

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

(Lennon & McCartney)

With A Little Help From My Friends (Lennon & McCartney)

Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds (Lennon & McCartney)

Getting Better (Lennon & McCartney)

Fixing A Hole (Lennon & McCartney)

She's Leaving Home (Lennon & McCartney)

Being For The Benefit Of Mr Kite! (Lennon & McCartney)

Side 2

Within You Without You (Harrison)

When I'm Sixty Four (Lennon & McCartney)

Lovely Rita (Lennon & McCartney)

Good Morning Good Morning (Lennon & McCartney)

Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (Reprise) (Lennon & McCartney)

A Day In The Life (Lennon & McCartney)

pressurised into writing songs to order rather than being left to wait for the muse to strike. Meanwhile, Harrison was sensing that the new working methods of endless overdubs and assembling songs piecemeal was ruining their traditional band dynamic.

With so much dead time in-between takes, Ringo was a passive bystander for much of the recording. "The biggest memory I have of *Sgt. Pepper* is that I learned to play chess," he added drily.

From the album's opening moments presenting an orchestra tuning up, The Beatles tap into an interesting dualism: they are at once embracing the elder order and thumbing their nose at the establishment. This is an album in the form of an event – unapologetic in its scale, wilfully indulgent and very knowing. George Martin's adept sprinkling of sound effects – refined



It's May 1967, and the four Beatles show off the sleeve of their new album at the press launch at Brian Epstein's house at 24 Chapel Street, London

PERSONNEL

JOHN LENNON – lead, harmony and background vocals; rhythm, acoustic and lead guitars; Hammond organ and final piano E chord; harmonica, tape loops, sound effects and comb and tissue paper; handclaps, tambourine and maracas

PAUL MCCARTNEY – lead, harmony and background vocals; bass and lead guitars; electric and acoustic pianos, Lowrey and Hammond organs; handclaps; vocalisations, tape loops, sound effects, comb and paper

GEORGE HARRISON – harmony and background vocals; lead, rhythm and acoustic guitars; sitar; tamboura; harmonica and kazoo; handclaps and maracas; lead vocals on *Within You Without You*

RINGO STARR – drums, congas, tambourine, maracas, congas, handclaps and tubular bells; lead vocals on *With A Little Help From My Friends*; harmonica; final piano E chord

PRODUCTION

GEORGE MARTIN – producer and mixer; tape loops and sound effects; harpsichord on *Fixing A Hole*, harmonium, Lowrey organ and glockenspiel on *Being For The Benefit Of Mr. Kite!*, Hammond organ on *With A Little Help From My Friends*, and piano on *Getting Better* and the piano solo in *Lovely Rita*; final harmonium chord

GEOFF EMERICK – audio engineering; tape loops and sound effects

during his years working with The Goons and many more comedy acts of the day – is a continual feature of *Sgt. Pepper*. The audience noise at the album's beginning was a combination of a recording of the *Beyond The Fringe* stage show plus takes from the orchestral session that gave birth to *A Day In The Life*.

The *Sgt. Pepper* theme itself is a deft mix of overture, music hall atmospherics and heavy rock. Paul McCartney had witnessed iconic guitar hero Jimi Hendrix in full flight just two nights before recording the track at Brian Epstein's Saville Theatre. Paul's rocking solo, as with his stunning contribution to *Taxman* the previous year, showcased his under-rated chops as a lead guitar player.

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 and a striking example of McCartney's supremely agile bass playing. It was originally titled *Bad Finger Boogie*; The Beatles later played a key part in the eventual rise of Apple Records signees Badfinger, choosing their name, with Paul writing the Top 5 hit *Come And Get It* for them.

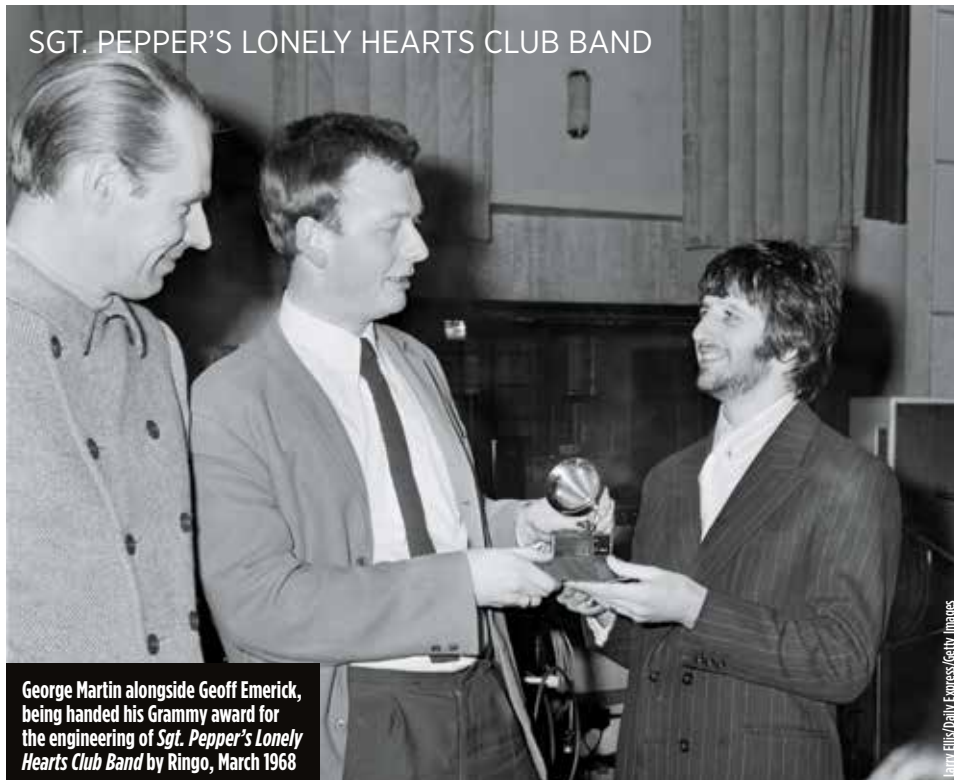
Lennon's first major contribution, *Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds*, has

become a psychedelic treasure, but among the plaudits for its groundbreaking use of surrealism the pleasing counterpoint of laid-back verses and stomping chorus is often missed. Inspired by a pastel drawing by his four-year-old son Julian, Lennon also drew from Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking-Glass* for the dreamlike quality of the song. For once, the drug connotations – it was banned by the BBC as being pro-LSD – were entirely unintentional.

From the psychedelic transportation of *Lucy*, we're snapped back into focus by the upbeat jangle of *Getting Better*, a perfect blend of McCartney and Lennon's yin and yang songwriting (Lennon's contribution of "It can't get much worse" in the countermelody still raises a wry smile). Also provided by Lennon was the song's darkest lyrical refrain: "I used to be cruel to my woman/ I beat her and kept her apart from the things that she loved", which still feels odd coming from the lips of the cherubic McCartney.

Accusations of drug references seem to have affixed themselves to Beatles tracks at every turn during their psychedelic pomp. Even McCartney's apparently innocent *Fixing A Hole* was deemed to promote heroin. With critics reaching for ever-more ridiculous links, they may have overlooked the fact this was more

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George Martin alongside Geoff Emerick, being handed his Grammy award for the engineering of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* by Ringo, March 1968

Harry Ellis/Daily Express/Getty Images

likely Paul's take on recent repairs to his Scottish farmhouse mixed with reflections on the state of his songwriting muse.

One of the album's weaker tracks, *Fixing A Hole* is blown out of the water by the heartbreaking *She's Leaving Home* that follows. Every bit as good as the finely-observed narrative behind *Revolver's* similarly orchestrated *Eleanor Rigby*, the song was an incisive kitchen sink drama that found The Beatles expertly straddling the generation gap between disaffected youth and disappointed parenthood. Sheila Bromberg's harp intro is wonderfully nuanced, and orchestral arranger Mike Leander's occasional use of Indian motifs within a traditional Western string arrangement is absolutely inspired.

Those attracted by *Sgt. Pepper's* studio innovations will no doubt gravitate towards 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. With Lennon frantically trying to keep pace with Paul's output, expediency was the order of the day, with the lyrics barely changed from the text of an 1843 poster for Pablo Fanque's circus in Rochdale bought in a Kent antique shop while on location filming the promo film for *Strawberry Fields Forever*. With Lennon setting Martin and Emerick the task of creating a fairground atmosphere where the listener could "smell the sawdust", the pair assembled a sound collage splicing together loops of harmoniums, steam organs, harmonicas and calliopes.

FROM INSIDE TO OUTSIDE

Side 2 opens with George's only songwriting contribution to *Sgt. Pepper*, the mid-tempo raga *Within You, Without You*. Along with *Love You*

To and *The Inner Light* it marks his fascination with Indian classical music and underlines the forward-thinking nature of this LP at its best. Recorded with uncredited musicians from the Asian Music Centre, Harrison is the only Beatle on the song and, like *Taxman*, it shows his tendency for sanctimonious finger-wagging.

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. McCartney 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. The comedy of George Formby casts a shadow here, as do the saucy seaside postcards of Donald McGill.

McCartney had kept the melody in his songwriting locker since the very early days of the band's life; he played it as an instrumental on occasions at club gigs when the PA gave up the ghost and finally wrote the lyrics when his father turned 64 in July 1966.

This section of the album is *Sgt. Pepper's* least convincing. It's difficult to conclude that *Lovely Rita* figures among the band's best work. McCartney's winning way with a melody once again gets him over the line and he pulls something out of the fire with the surprisingly psychedelic coda, but could this be *Sgt. Pepper's* weak link? Lennon certainly thought so, pointing out: "These stories about boring people doing boring things – being postmen and secretaries and writing home. I'm not interested in third-party songs. I like to write about me, 'cos I know me."

CRITICS... WHO NEEDS 'EM?

No other album in rock history has elicited such an extraordinary range of critical response as *Sgt. Pepper*. After all, the nigh-on 40 minutes of music contained herein has variously been described by Kenneth Tynan of *The Times* as "a decisive moment in the history of Western civilisation" and voted the worst record ever made in a

poll of pop stars published in a 1998 issue of *Melody Maker*.

The record's status as a cultural sacred cow has long been assured – *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll compared its lyrics to literary figures including Edith Sitwell, Harold Pinter and even TS Eliot – but over the years the odd dissenting voice has appeared.

KLF provocateur Bill Drummond went as far as to say that the album was "the worst thing that ever happened to music", while Rolling Stone Keith Richards lumped it in with his own band's psychedelic folly *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, labelling *Pepper* nothing more than "a mishmash of rubbish".

The facts and figures speak for themselves, though. Despite no singles being issued to coincide with its release, *Sgt. Pepper* topped the charts in the UK for an astonishing 27 consecutive weeks and 15 weeks in the US. On home soil, it sold 250,000 copies in its first week. Pipe down Keef, the people have spoken.

GROOVE IS IN THE ART

The Beatles' attention to sonic detail on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* even went as far as an audio snippet that isn't strictly on the record itself. The infinite run-out groove which kicks in after the epochal final chord of *A Day In The Life* has (it was ever thus) been the subject of endless conjecture by fans.

Lennon added a 15kHz high-frequency tone to annoy dogs, and the band spent hours recording speech which was cut up, re-spliced and reversed to create a montage of gibberish.

After completing final mixes of the album on 21 April 1967, the band reconvened for their final bit of audio trickery. Ending at 4am

the next morning, they spent nine hours huddled around two microphones recording what amounted to only a handful of seconds' worth of material. Depending on the pressing of the vinyl you have, there are at least four different versions of the groove. Can we make out anything from the confusion? Perhaps a line

that says "never could be any other way". One notorious interpretation is that when played backwards, a band member can be heard saying "We will f*** you like Superman". It's fair to say that the jury is still out on this one and even those involved are unlikely to furnish us with definitive answers.

Lennon is not above criticism himself, though. Once again looking for a quick hit of inspiration, *Good Morning Good Morning* came from the kind of mundane starting point he would have hammered McCartney for using – the jingle of a Kellogg's Corn Flakes advert. Perhaps he knew it, too, and ultimately dismissed it as "throwaway, a piece of garbage".

In its favour, it does inject the back end of the album with a much-needed shot of adrenaline, with McCartney and Harrison both competing against each other on lead guitar. And if any proof was needed that The Beatles' eye (or ear) for detail was fully focussed at the sessions then consider the fact that even the sound effects colouring the end of the song were ordered so that each successive animal heard was large enough to eat the previous one.

After the blink-and-you-miss-it Sgt. Pepper band reprise to provide some form and shape to the preceding 11 songs comes what is possibly the greatest pop song ever committed to tape – if you could call the epochal *A Day In The Life* 'pop'...

It took an unprecedented 34 hours of studio time to perfect the track, and not a moment was wasted. Recording began on the song just two days after the band finished *Penny Lane*. It became so important to the impact of *Sgt. Pepper* that it sits outside the framing structure of the fictional band, but when work first began on it, few realised just what they had on their hands. As with ...*Mr Kite*, there's a reportage element to Lennon's lyric with allusions to newspaper articles about the suicide of a young millionaire friend of theirs, Tara Browne, that appeared in the pages of the *Daily Mail*

and another story about a Lancashire potholes survey – the perfect contrast of the significant and mundane. Browne was a London scenester who drove his Lotus Elan at high speed through red lights in South Kensington, hitting a parked van and killing himself. It's not known if he was under the influence of LSD at the time of the crash, but it's thought John wrote the lyrics with that in mind. Lennon's narrator is oddly changeable in tone throughout the piece, particularly in the Browne section: "And though the news was rather sad/ Well I just had to laugh".

So what is the message of one of the most analysed five minutes in music history? Perhaps it's an investigation into existential crisis, the futility of existence where life gives equal prominence to tragedy, war and mundanity. Does the "I'd love to turn you on" section allude to the transportational power of drugs and the imagination to lift us out of our everyday worries?

Although McCartney's breezy mid-section contribution to the track, like *Getting Better*, appears in microcosm to show the bitter and sweet contrast of the two major songwriters' contrasting styles, that's too superficial an understanding of the band dynamic. *A Day In The Life* is most acclaimed for its two extraordinary experimental 'end of the world' orchestral interludes, yet the man behind the idea wasn't Lennon, as

many would expect, but Paul, the admirer of avant garde composers John Cage and Luciano Berio.

When the original framework of the song included a 24-bar gap, the ever-ambitious McCartney suggested they commission a 90-piece orchestra to fill the hole. In the event, George Martin corralled 40 members of the Royal Philharmonic and London Symphony Orchestra. When recording took place, famous friends including Mick Jagger and Marianne Faithfull, Keith Richards, Donovan and Michael Nesmith from The Monkees looked on in the studio. Adding to the fun (and irritation of the assembled sessioneers), the orchestra was asked to wear evening dress and put on fake noses, comedy hats, false eyes and bald wigs, much to the amusement of the assembled celebrity throng, with McCartney playing the role of conductor, baton in hand.

Lennon's request to Martin was for an orchestral section that was "a tremendous build-up, from nothing to something absolutely like the end of the world." Martin instructed the orchestra to create a blitzkrieg of organised chaos: "It's every man for himself. Don't listen to the fellow next to you. If he's a third away from you, let him go. Just do your own slide up, your own way."

All that was left was the final E chord played by all four Beatles. An apocalyptic end of the world, but the start of a new one for rock music. ★

LENNON'S REQUEST TO GEORGE MARTIN WAS "A TREMENDOUS BUILD-UP, FROM NOTHING TO ABSOLUTELY THE END OF THE WORLD"