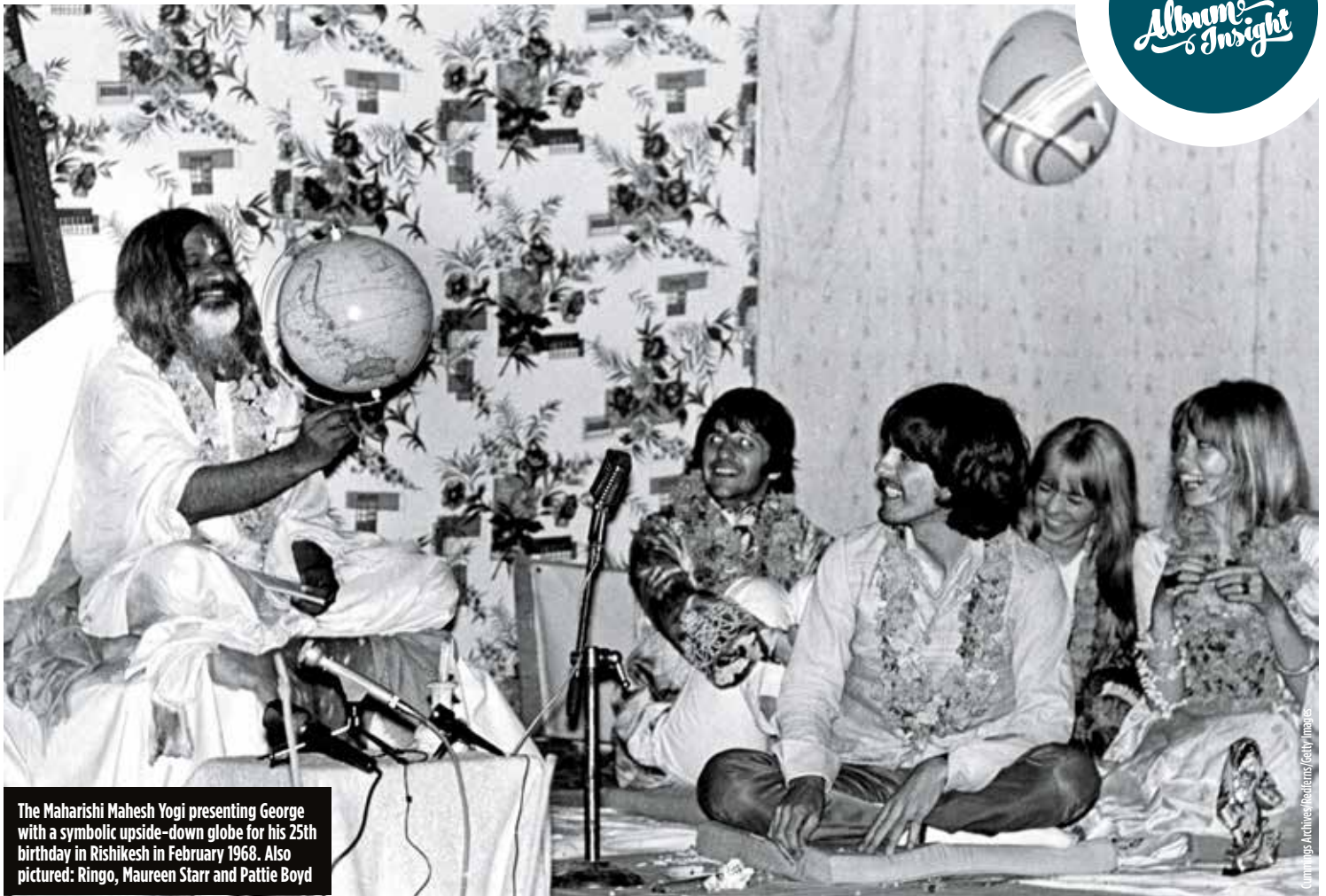


The BEATLES

THE BEATLES

Flaming ashtrays, exotic instrumentation, eight-minute experimental sound montages and, well, monkey sex; what has become known as ‘The White Album’ is Beatle overload in excelsis. [Steve Harnell](#) is overwhelmed



The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi presenting George with a symbolic upside-down globe for his 25th birthday in Rishikesh in February 1968. Also pictured: Ringo, Maureen Starr and Pattie Boyd

The story of the record nicknamed ‘The White Album’ is one of unbridled ambition and of self-indulgence, and also dazzling imagination.

By 1968, the rock music landscape had been irrevocably changed by the impact of *Sgt. Pepper*. Pop and rock’n’roll – in the right hands – was now considered proper art and not a poor relation of literature, ballet, opera and classical music.

Hoping to build on the psychedelic adventure of *Sgt. Pepper* but without the guiding hand of manager Brian Epstein to rein in their excesses, the foursome over-reached themselves with the *Magical Mystery Tour* BBC TV special. When broadcast on Boxing Day, it was considered by many to be a formless mess. As a psychedelic curio, *Mystery Tour* has its charms – but the long-player that soundtracked it found them on surer footing.

Many bands would have been chastened by the criticism of the *Magical Mystery Tour* project but The Beatles pushed ahead undaunted with their most expansive vision to date – sessions that would yield the 30-track double LP, *The Beatles* – aka, and for purposes of clarity here, known henceforth as ‘The White Album’.

Post-*Pepper*, the band and their peers had grown in confidence. They demanded to be taken seriously and followed their muse wherever it took them. As Paul McCartney pertinently pointed out in Tony Palmer’s 1968 TV documentary *All My Loving*: “Pop music is the classical music of now”.

The double album concept as a fully-formed representation of a wide-reaching artistic vision was nothing particularly new by this point – Dylan had released *Blonde On Blonde* a full two years earlier, and the influential Frank Zappa had audaciously made his debut with the *Mothers Of Invention* from the same year another double-length affair.

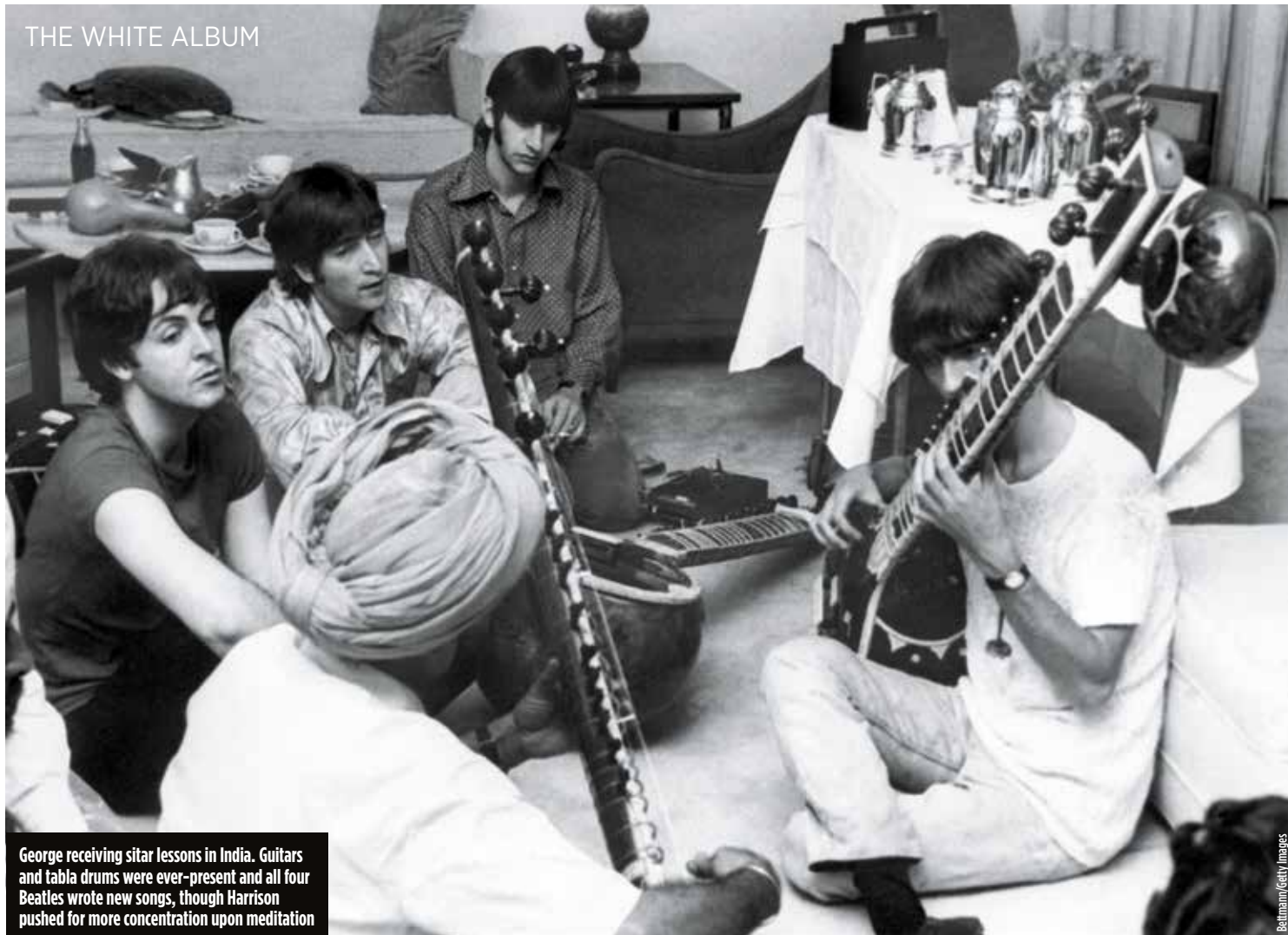
The autumn and winter of 1968 was a particularly fertile time for the double LP, though. ‘The White Album’ was released on 22 November of that year, three weeks after the arrival of Jimi Hendrix’s groundbreaking *Electric Ladyland*. Canned Heat’s *Living The Blues*, Pentangle’s *Sweet Child* and The Incredible String Band’s *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* were all released the same month as ‘The White Album’, with Joan Baez’s Dylan covers album *Any Day Now* following the next month. Across pop, heavy rock, psychedelia and folk, the canvas was

broadening and the realisation that music fans could absorb this amount of information as the album era established itself was taking hold.

The explosive political climate of 1968 including the student riots in Paris, the assassinations of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr, civil rights unrest in the US and the Vietnam War meant that world’s youth was becoming politicised in increasing numbers and looking for their musical heroes to make grand artistic statements about the times they lived in. The Beatles touched upon these issues throughout ‘The White Album’, sometimes obliquely, at others in more obvious ways.

Arguments still continue to this day whether or not this giant-sized portion of Beatleness was overblown or a fine summation of their prolific songwriting in 1968. In the *Anthology* TV series, Ringo said: “We should

**“WE SHOULD HAVE
PUT IT OUT AS TWO
SEPARATE ALBUMS
– ‘WHITE’ AND
‘WHITER’”
RINGO STARR**



George receiving sitar lessons in India. Guitars and tabla drums were ever-present and all four Beatles wrote new songs, though Harrison pushed for more concentration upon meditation

Bealman/Getty Images

have put it out as two separate albums – the ‘White’ and the ‘Whiter’ album. There was a lot of information on a double album.” George added that it was a clearing house for their work: “What do you do when you’ve got all of them [sic] songs and you want to get rid of them so that you can do more? There was a lot of ego in that band and a lot of songs that should have been elbowed or made into B-sides.”

Paul, meanwhile, remains staunchly unrepentant. “I think it’s a fine little album and the fact that it’s got so much on it is one of the things that’s cool about it,” he said. “It’s very varied stuff, *Rocky Raccoon*, *Piggies*, *Happiness Is A Warm Gun*... I’m not a big one for that kind of ‘maybe it was too many’ [songs]. What do you mean? It was great. It sold. It was the bloody Beatles’ ‘White Album’. Shut up!”

With ‘The White Album’ earmarked as the first release for Apple Records, the band worked to a deadline for the first time in years. However, they still enjoyed unlimited studio access and had by now settled into jamming songs rather than employing the more disciplined structure of their earlier work. A new working style was developed where they’d record all of the rehearsals and subsequent jam

PERSONNEL

JOHN LENNON – lead, harmony and background vocals, acoustic, lead, rhythm and bass guitars; piano, Hammond organ, Mellotron; harmonica, tenor saxophone; extra drums and assorted percussion, tape loops and sound effects

PAUL McCARTNEY – lead, harmony and background vocals; bass, acoustic, lead and rhythm guitars; acoustic and electric pianos, Hammond organ; assorted percussion; drums (on *Back in the U.S.S.R.*, *Dear Prudence*, *Wild Honey Pie* and *Martha My Dear*); recorder and flugelhorn

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

guitars; Hammond organ (on *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*); extra drums and assorted percussion and sound effects

RINGO STARR – drums and assorted percussion; piano and sleigh bell (on *Don’t Pass Me By*); lead vocals (on *Don’t Pass Me By* and *Good Night*) and backing vocals (on *The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill*)

NOTABLE GUESTS

ERIC CLAPTON – lead guitar on *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*

JACK FALLON – violin on *Don’t Pass Me By*

YOKO ONO – backing vocals, lead vocals and

handclaps on *The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill*, backing vocals on *Birthday*, speech, tapes and sound effects on *Revolution 9*

PRODUCTION

GEORGE MARTIN – producer, executive producer, string, brass, clarinet, orchestral arrangements and conducting; piano on *Rocky Raccoon*

GEOFF EMERICK – engineer, speech on *Revolution 9*

KEN SCOTT – engineer and mixer

BARRY SHEFFIELD – engineer (Trident Studio)

CHRIS THOMAS – producer; Mellotron on *The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill*, harpsichord on *Piggies*, piano on *Long, Long, Long*, electric piano, organ and saxophone arrangement on *Savoy Truffle*

sessions then add overdubs and ‘found sounds’ to the best takes. But such was the sheer weight of material intended for the double LP that the procrastination found on the *Sgt. Pepper* sessions was limited. A more pragmatic approach had to be used, although this also fitted in with the band’s approach that ‘The White Album’ would be a back-to-basics affair dispensing with much of the psychedelic studio trickery they favoured the previous year.

LOOKING AT THE WORLD

The groundwork for ‘The White Album’ was laid during the band’s extended stay in Rishikesh, India, where they took part in a Transcendental Meditation training course hosted by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Lennon seemed

the dubiously-qualified Alexis Mardas, aka ‘Magic Alex’. Adding to the melee was John’s by-now constant companion Yoko Ono, who would be an almost permanent fixture at Beatle recording sessions from ‘The White Album’ onwards.

While the diversity of material on show across the 30 tracks is at times dazzling, in truth this was undoubtedly the beginning of the end for the band. Occasional arguments and friction had been a feature for years, but ‘The White Album’ shows a preponderance of material where only one or two band members feature on individual tracks. McCartney, in particular, was often happy to plough his own furrow unaided. Separate studios were run simultaneously to keep the band on deadline and diffuse tension between members. In the end, only 16 of the 30

JOHN DESCRIBED PAUL’S CONTRIBUTIONS AS CLOYINGLY SWEET AND BLAND WHILE PAUL SAW LENNON’S WORK AS HARSH AND PROVOCATIVE

particularly focused by the Rishikesh sojourn, writing 14 songs, with the lion’s share making it onto ‘The White Album’ and *Abbey Road*. In fact, John’s contributions are amongst the most consistent of his career, with *Dear Prudence*, *Happiness Is a Warm Gun* and *Cry Baby Cry* being the equal of anything he ever wrote. While much of 1966 and the following year had been spent in an LSD-assisted reverie, hard drugs were banned from Rishikesh – although the band did manage to sneak in enough marijuana to keep them happy. After two years of studying sitar, ironically enough, the Indian trip saw George fall back in love with the guitar, and his major contribution, *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, is one of the record’s high-points.

As was typical of the band’s environment post-Epstein, outside interests and problems kept them from total immersion in the recording process. The formation of their multi-media organisation Apple Corps – essentially a way to fritter away cash and keep it out of the taxman’s grasp – saw them dabble in starting their own record company, open a boutique, and carry out research into electronics with

songs featured all four members of the band together on the same track.

Sadly, it seems the symbiotic link between Lennon and McCartney was now little but a memory. John described Paul’s contributions to the record as “cloyingly sweet and bland”, while the bassist, in turn, saw his former partner’s work as “harsh, unmelodious and deliberately provocative”. The parting of the ways was by now almost complete.

With a double album capacity to stretch into, McCartney used the opportunity to fully indulge his propensity for genre exercise songwriting. He’s at his most diverse here, offering up everything from rock’n’roll, folk and a 1920s pastiche to heavy rock and ska. The album opener *Back In The U.S.S.R.* is a case in point – with a clear nod to The Beach Boys, Paul riffs off two inspirational starting points, the pro-British industry campaign of 1968 ‘I’m Backing The UK’ and the Chuck Berry hit *Back In The USA*. But what began as a rather tongue-in-cheek bit of fun was soon soured; the band was accused in the US of being Communist sympathisers by the John Birch Society as the track

THE BEATLES

1968 • APPLE

Side 1

Back In The U.S.S.R. (Lennon/McCartney)
Dear Prudence (Lennon/McCartney)
Glass Onion (Lennon/McCartney)
Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da (Lennon/McCartney)
Wild Honey Pie (Lennon/McCartney)
The Continuing Story Of Bungalow Bill (Lennon/McCartney)
While My Guitar Gently Weeps (Harrison)
Happiness Is A Warm Gun (Lennon/McCartney)

Side 2

Martha My Dear (Lennon/McCartney)
I’m So Tired (Lennon/McCartney)
Blackbird (Lennon/McCartney)
Piggies (Harrison)
Rocky Raccoon (Lennon/McCartney)
Don’t Pass Me By (Starr)
Why Don’t We Do It In The Road? (Lennon/McCartney)
I Will (Lennon/McCartney)
Julia (Lennon/McCartney)

Side 3

Birthday (Lennon/McCartney)
Yer Blues (Lennon/McCartney)
Mother Nature’s Son (Lennon/McCartney)
Everybody’s Got Something To Hide Except Me And My Monkey (Lennon/McCartney)
Sexy Sadie (Lennon/McCartney)
Helter Skelter (Lennon/McCartney)
Long, Long, Long (Harrison)

Side 4

Revolution 1 (Lennon/McCartney)
Honey Pie (Lennon/McCartney)
Savoy Truffle (Harrison)
Cry Baby Cry (Lennon/McCartney)
Revolution 9 (Lennon/McCartney)
Good Night (Lennon/McCartney)

coincided with Russian tanks being deployed in Czechoslovakia.

On a more immediate level, Ringo walked out on the band after McCartney continually criticised his drumming on the song. In the end, the bassist replaced Starr behind the kit. An impromptu new line-up got the song over the line, with Lennon playing bass. When Ringo was eventually persuaded to rejoin, he was



The stylish interior of Apple Tailoring, a clothing shop at 161 King's Road, London, owned by the Beatles' Apple Corps and run by designer John Crittle

welcomed back into a studio decorated with flowers. The scene was later recreated on the front cover of Oasis' *Don't Look Back In Anger* single.

Ringo was still absent when the remaining trio recorded *Dear Prudence*. Once again, McCartney takes the drum stool on one of Lennon's finest songs. Famously inspired by Mia Farrow's younger sister Prudence who studied with the Maharishi in Rishikesh, *Dear Prudence* was John's simple plea for her to socialise with the rest of the assembled students. He explained: "She'd been locked in for three weeks and was trying to reach God quicker than anyone else."

Lennon's self-aware *Glass Onion* follows, dropping in a number of lyrical

references to previous songs as a joke at the expense of commentators constantly over-analysing and misinterpreting their work. Most pertinently were the words "I told you about the walrus and me, man/ You know that we're as close as can be, man/ Well here's another clue for you all, the walrus was Paul". Could Lennon's overt declaration of closeness with McCartney be an in-joke for George and Ringo in light of their battles, or was it a pre-emptive media strike to the public at large heading off rumours of inter-band disagreements?

The opening tracklisting of 'The White Album', while not, of course, presented in the order that material was recorded, does by coincidence

bundle together songs with a difficult birth. McCartney's ska pastiche *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* was roundly hated by the rest of the band and took more than 42 hours in the studio to complete. A little more harmonious was *The Continuing Story of Bungalow Bill*, which utilised an audio vérité style of presentation that Lennon would return to for his seminal single *Give Peace A Chance*.

But the opening side of 'The White Album's first slab of vinyl is dominated by George's glorious I Ching-referencing *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, with a solo from super-sub axe hero Eric Clapton, and Lennon's ominous, surrealistic *Happiness Is A Warm Gun*. Harrison's original version of the former was a simple acoustic fingerpicked affair, perhaps influenced by the style that folk singer Donovan taught to Lennon and McCartney in Rishikesh, and had a substantial impact on the sound of the more introspective material on 'The White Album'. Clapton was worried at being the first star name to feature on a Beatles track but in keeping with the combative nature of the sessions, George argued it was "nothing to do with [the rest of the band]. It's my song."

If *Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da* was laboured over to little reward, at least the 95 takes needed to finish Lennon's *Happiness Is A Warm Gun* resulted in one of The Beatles' very best songs. A catalogue of surreal couplets that were seamlessly stitched into a coherent whole, but among the non-sequiturs was an odd real-world fact. "The man

THERE COULD HAVE BEEN MORE...

Buoyed by the breathing space afforded to them by their educational sojourn in Rishikesh, 1968 found The Beatles at their most prolific and generating a huge swathe of new material. So

much so, in fact, that as well as furnishing the 'White Album', a surplus made it onto both the *Abbey Road* and *Let It Be* albums as well as emerging in their resulting solo careers.

Inspired by the same Maharishi lecture that prompted Paul to write *Mother Nature's Son*, Lennon's *Child Of Nature* eventually resurfaced with new lyrics as *Jealous Guy*, a standout on his 1971 solo album *Imagine*. John's nutty *What's The New Mary Jane* almost made it onto the running order of 'The White

Album' but fell at the last hurdle. Its first official release came on *Anthology 3*. It's hardly an essential listen, though.

That year, Paul laid down takes of *Etcetera* (written for Marianne Faithfull), *The Long And Winding Road* and the pretty *Junk*, the latter saw the light of day on McCartney's eponymous solo LP of 1970, and you can hear an early sketch of it on *Anthology 3*.

George may have felt hard done by that more than 100 takes of *Not Guilty* failed to get the song over the line of official acceptance.

Arguably the best unreleased track in the Beatles' back catalogue along with Paul's perky demo of *Come And Get It*, Harrison later revisited *Not Guilty* for his self-titled solo album of 1978 featuring Steve Winwood; however, this jazzy, shuffling retread lacks the bite of the earlier Beatles version. It's one of the band's few missteps when choosing masters for release. Harrison also rescued the original organ-led demo of another Rishikesh song, *Circles*, for his *Gone Troppo* album in 1982.

in the crowd with the multicoloured mirrors on his hobnail boots” referred to a newspaper report of a Manchester City football fan who’d been arrested for inserting mirrors into the toes of his shoes to see up the skirts of women during matches.

McCartney’s balladry is at its best on ‘The White Album’; the pretty ode to his sheepdog, *Martha My Dear*, kicks off Side 2 in bucolic mode but his fingerpicked *Blackbird* would be amongst the bassist’s very best work.

Should we at this point name and shame the weakest entry into The Beatles’ estimable back catalogue? Ringo’s mid-paced country hoedown *Don’t Pass Me By* is the most obvious example of the open door policy in terms of songwriting on ‘The White Album’. The first of Starr’s self-penned compositions to be included on a Beatles long-player, it includes arguably the worst couplet the band ever signed off on: “I’m sorry that I doubted you, I was so unfair/ You were in a car crash, and you lost your hair”. Never was John and Paul’s big red editor’s pen more needed.

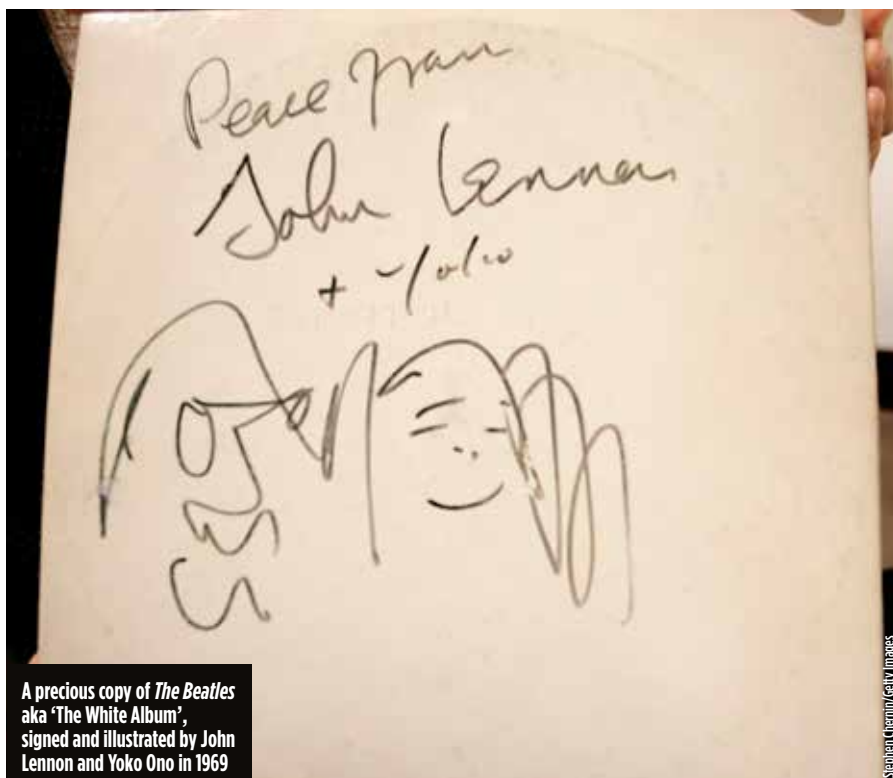
On the face of it, *Why Don’t We Do It In The Road?* could have been McCartney’s attempt to write a *We Shall Overcome* protest anthem, but it was actually inspired by him seeing monkeys copulating in an Indian street, leading to him pondering why mankind was too uptight to consider doing the same.

ANOTHER SIDE OF THE BEATLES

Side 3 finds the band at their heaviest. The improvised knock-off fun of *Birthday*, the grinding heaviness of John’s *Yer Blues* (a dig at the over-serious likes of Cream who were dominating the music press at the time) and McCartney’s extraordinary heavy metal precursor *Helter Skelter*, which saw chaotic scenes at Abbey Road as George ran around the



The late Ian MacDonald’s song-by-song *Fabology*, published by Pimlico, is essential for all Beatles fans



A precious copy of *The Beatles* aka ‘The White Album’, signed and illustrated by John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1969

Stephen Cramm/Getty Images

studio with a flaming ashtray on top of his head, aping the controversial singer Arthur Brown, whose hit *Fire* lit up the charts in the summer of 1968. *Helter Skelter* would form the primary strand of a prophecy by Charles Manson, who believed The Beatles were using coded references in their music to predict a

emphasises the doo-wop backing vocals and is radically at odds with the upbeat single version. Meanwhile, *Revolution 9* was The Beatles’ most radical adventure into the avant garde (saving perhaps McCartney’s still-unreleased *Carnival Of Light*) since *Tomorrow Never Knows*. Typical of the

HELTER SKELTER SAW CHAOTIC SCENES AT ABBEY ROAD AS GEORGE RAN AROUND THE STUDIO WITH A FLAMING ASHTRAY ON HIS HEAD

race war in the United States.

After the storm comes the calm. Side 3 ends with Harrison’s elegant *Long, Long, Long*. In *Revolution In The Head*, Ian MacDonald describes it as George’s finest moment as a songwriter and a “touching token of exhausted, relieved, reconciliation with God... simple, direct and in its sighing coda, devastatingly expressive.” A happy accident in the studio added to its legend as a wine bottle rattled on top of McCartney’s Hammond organ during the song’s eerie climax.

No less than three versions of *Revolution* were finished by the band in 1968, the rocking B-side to *Hey Jude* and the two vastly differing incarnations that feature on Side 4. *Revolution 1*’s laid-back groove

tit-for-tat nature of collaborations on the LP, McCartney did not feature on the track, despite his expertise in the style. The eight-minute *Revolution 9* – the longest song ever issued by the band – was assembled by John and Yoko with some help by George as a homage to the musique concrète works of the likes of Edgard Varese and, in particular, Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Classical music loops were merged with snippets of *A Day In The Life* and pertinently *Tomorrow Never Knows* amid manic scenes in the studio as Lennon yelled and Yoko threw in oddball interjections. At the end, we even hear American football chants – “Hold that line! Block that kick!”, a fitting metaphor for the album’s combative genesis. ★