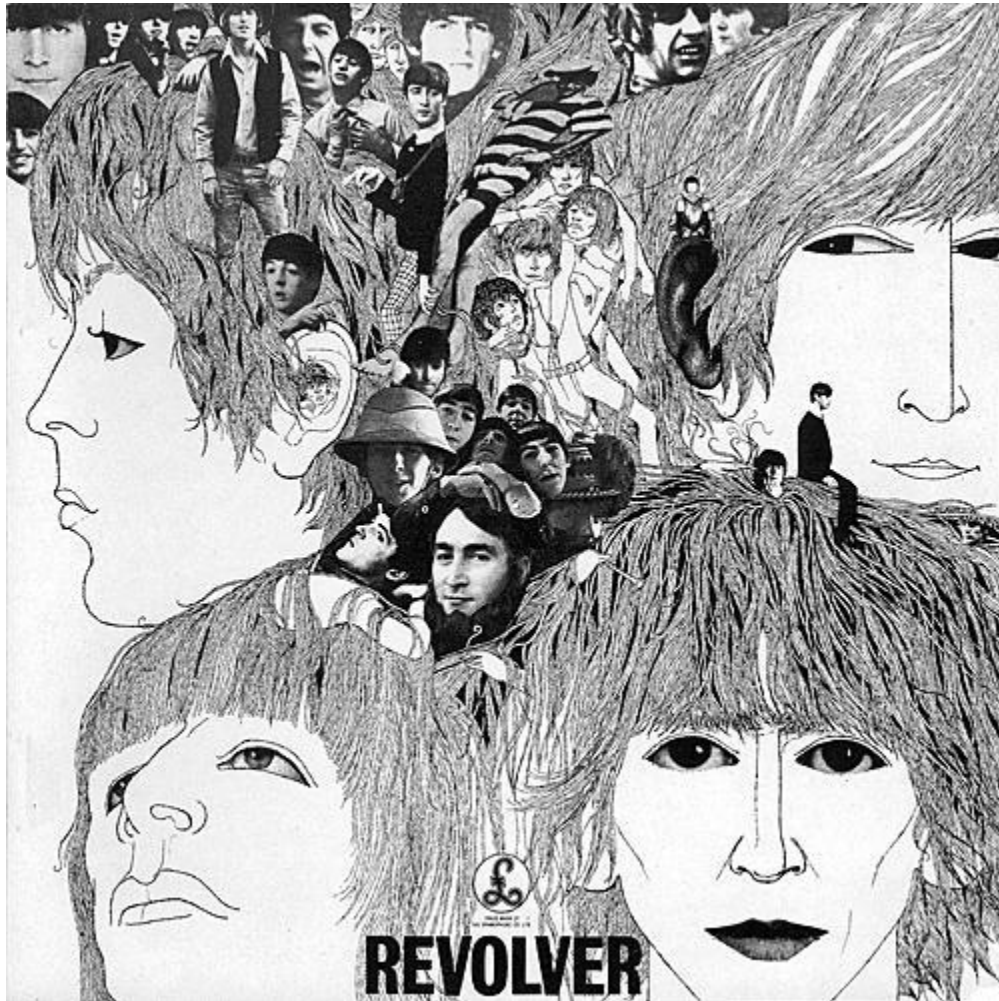


## “The Beatles Raise the Bar-Yet Again” by Christopher Parker



I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *Parker*, everyone knows that 1967's *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is the Beatles' greatest album and in fact the greatest album of all time.

Nope. No way. I beg to differ.

In my humble opinion, 1966's *Revolver*, the Beatles album released the year *before Sgt. Pepper*, is the greatest. Why, you ask?

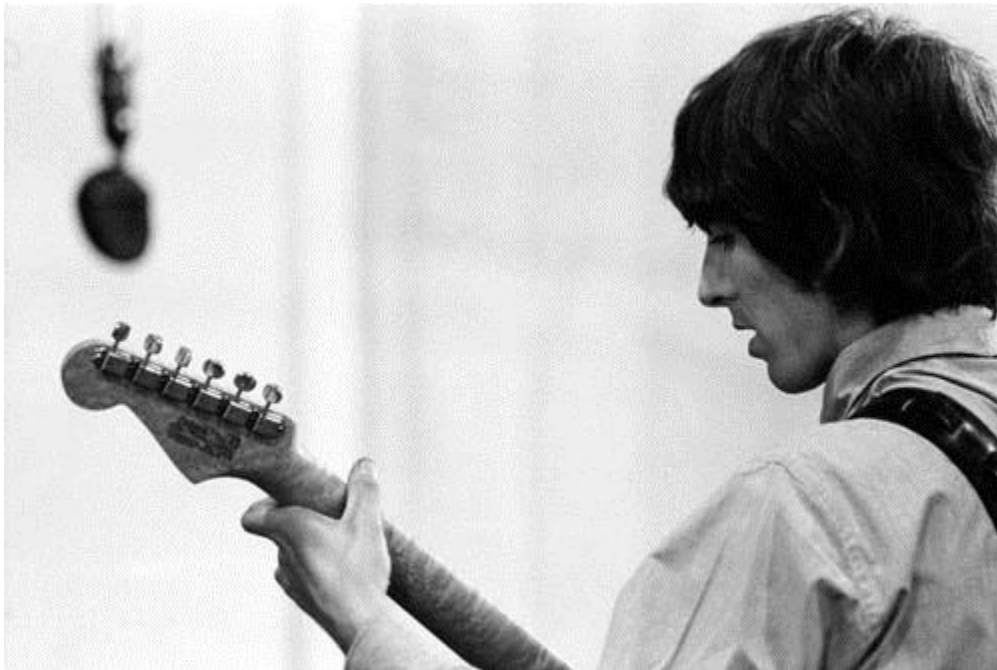
In many ways, *Revolver* was the beginning of a new era, not only in the career of the Beatles, but in the ever-changing world of rock & roll. The world's greatest rock band was beginning to tire of the endless touring amidst the chaos of Beatlemania. The constant battling against hordes of screaming fans, and a life lived being jostled and shoved from one hotel room to another were becoming more than tiresome.

In addition, during a concert, the volume of screams often exceeded 120 decibels-approximately the same noise level as one would be exposed to if he were standing beside a Boeing 747 during takeoff. No one was *listening* to their music, and consequently, they were beginning to feel like, as John Lennon would later say, 'waxworks' or 'performing fleas.'

*Revolver* signals a change from the 'She Loves You' era-relatively simple songs of love and relationships-to a new era of songs designed to be *listened to*. These were songs that could never be played at a live concert. They were creations-works of art-songs that were created to be appreciated and discussed-not to elicit screams from teenage girls. Studio innovations and revolutionary recording techniques were used effectively on the album. Varispeeding, voice multitracking, use of rotating speakers, tape loops, and backwards vocals and instruments help to create an often surreal and otherworldly sound-foreshadowing the psychedelic era just on the horizon.

On a song-by-song basis, *Revolver* is a much stronger album than *Sgt. Pepper*, or any other Beatles album. It also contains some major breakthrough songs for a Beatle who perhaps had been suffering in the shadow of the Lennon-McCartney songwriting juggernaut-George Harrison.

In fact, Harrison was given the coveted opening track position for perhaps his finest composition-"Taxman."



"Taxman" opens with a distorted '1-2-3-4' count-in, which in fact harkens back to the Beatles' *first* song on their *first* album-"I Saw Her Standing There," which features McCartney's energetic 'One , two, three, FAH!' So symbolically, the count-in represents not only a new album, but also a new stage in the Beatles' career.

“Taxman” is Harrison’s venomous attack on Britain’s brutal taxation laws, as the band’s profits, since they were in the highest tax bracket, were at one point subject to a 95% taxation fee (referred to as a ‘supertax’). Yes, you read that right. For every one dollar the Beatles made, the band took home five cents, while the government took home ninety-five cents. Harrison, who was the most money-conscious of the four, attacks both of Britain’s political party leaders in the song, calling out both Harold Wilson and Edward Heath.

The speaker in the song is, in fact, the taxman himself, and Harrison’s lyrics are clever, and biting (“Should five per cent appear too small/ Be thankful I don't take it all”).....( If you drive a car, I'll tax the street/ If you try to sit, I'll tax your seat/ If you get too cold I'll tax the heat/If you take a walk, I'll tax your feet.)

The song includes a viciously powerful guitar solo played by Paul McCartney who, as a favour to his friend George, included an Indian-inspired flourish—seeing as Harrison had over the previous year become fascinated with the culture, religion, and musical instruments of India.



The second track is perhaps my favourite Beatles song. “Eleanor Rigby” is Paul at his finest, writing a rather bleak song about loneliness. Two characters, the title character, a lonely spinster, and Father McKenzie, lead lives of loneliness, isolation, and despair. Perhaps to mask her true self, or perhaps to protect herself from rejection or heartache, Eleanor Rigby “waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door,” indicating a daily façade she maintains. The song is packed with beautiful imagery suggesting a much darker world than the band would have written about only a year or two earlier.

The instrumentation in “Eleanor Rigby” is significant, as no Beatle actually plays an instrument on the track. The song employs a classical string ensemble—in this case an octet, or eight, studio musicians, including four violins, two cellos, and two violas. It has been said that there has never been a more perfect match between music and lyrics as crafted in this song. I agree.



John Lennon's "I'm Only Sleeping" detailed not only a biographical look at Lennon's infamous laziness and lethargy, but included the first use of backwards guitar recording. Varispeeding the recording and recording the guitar solo only to then transfer it backwards gives this track the sluggish, dreamy quality Lennon was after. Apparently, Harrison worked for hours to work out a solo, then work it out backwards, after which it was recorded and then reversed. This gives the solo a warped, warbly sound-psychedelia at its finest.

In addition, on this song and throughout the album, McCartney's background vocals are stunning, as his incredibly high harmony, as usual, blends effortlessly with John's melody lines. They were simply made to sing together.

If you love ballads, and you love melody, then Paul's dreamy "Here, There, and Everywhere" is tailor-made for you. Inspired by a song deemed by many to be the greatest pop melody of all time, The Beach Boys' "God Only Knows," this classic by McCartney floats along effortlessly - on the one hand, a simple love song, but on the other, a song that was so obviously shaped and molded in painstaking fashion, complete with gentle background vocals from John and George.



Everyone knows that Ringo would be given a number to perform somewhere - often a number written by Paul specifically for Ringo and his limited vocal range. On *Revolver*, it turned out to be one of Ringo's finest-a children's song in the English tradition of a sing-along-"Yellow Submarine." According to Paul, both the idea and the melody came to him just before falling asleep one night. After developing the song, he realized it would be ideal for Ringo, seeing as, in Paul's words, the Beatles' drummer "wasn't too keen on singing." The sound effects produced for the song included whistles, bells, chains, and buckets of water with submerged microphones to produce an underwater sound. The distorted, echo-laden voices shouting nautical commands were those of Ringo and John, obviously amused and having fun during recording. Try *not* to sing along to it. Just try.

Inspired by a comment made by a famous actor, "She Said, She Said" is a marked contrast to the previous lighthearted "Yellow Submarine." At a Los Angeles party in 1965, actor Peter Fonda kept annoying Lennon by telling him the story of a near-death experience and how he "knew what it was like to be dead." Lennon became so bothered by the 'bad vibes' and sombre tone Fonda was creating that he asked the actor to leave. The song is noteworthy as a 'typical' Lennon song in contrast to one by McCartney. "She Said, She Said" is a messy wash of jangling, distorted guitars, which, in fact, sound fantastic. The opening guitar riff is loud, brash, and harsh. It's awesome. Whereas McCartney loved 'clean' sounds, Lennon was an impatient rocker, who liked to record quickly, and then move on to the next song. Lennon also liked unusual sounds, so he would often distort not only instruments, but his own voice whenever possible. Starr's drumming is particularly effective on this track, as he switches tempos, smashes symbols, and hammers the backbeat with a power not often shown by the humble drummer.

The third track on side two, "Doctor Robert," continues in the same mood and feel of "She Said, She Said." "Doctor Robert," co-authored by John and Paul, was a satirical stab at a real-life New York doctor who would prescribe, and often over-prescribe, drugs such as tranquilizers and amphetamines to the New York upper class. Rumoured to be about Dr. Robert Freymann, who would prescribe drugs to Jackie Kennedy, wife of the recently assassinated President John F. Kennedy, the song comes crashing in with double-tracked and multilayered guitars, and a vocal track that was recorded at a slower speed, then sped up and layered several times over to give it a distorted, dreamy, and surreal quality. In addition, Paul and John's harmonizing in their best Everly Brothers style is magnificent on this track.

The final two tracks are two of the band's finest, and yet are complete opposites. Paul's "Got To Get You Into My Life" and the final track, John's "Tomorrow Never Knows," demonstrate the incredible talent, creativity, and yet utterly opposite styles of the band's two main composers.

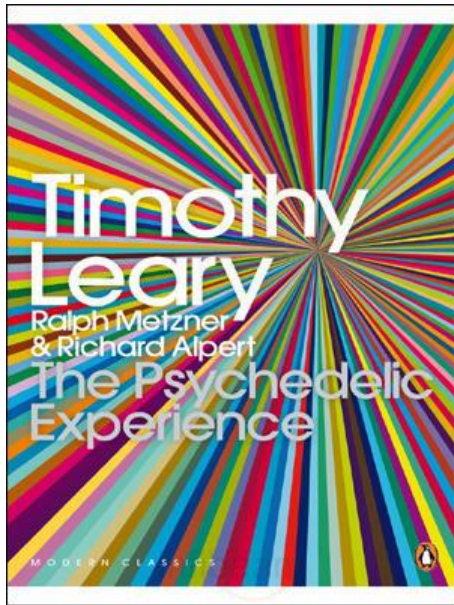


McCartney's "Got to Get You into My Life" is simply put, 'Paul doing Motown.' Inspired by the soulful sounds of Berry Gordy's Detroit-based Motown Records, Paul gives one of his finest vocal performances—a stunningly powerful, soulful, and passionate delivery. Complimenting this is a horn section that is bright and vibrant, and in the outro, Paul turns up the soul, as he belts out the final verse in a Little Richard voice, but with a Ray Charles feel. Magical.



And the final track, perhaps only surpassed by "A Day in the Life" on *Sgt. Pepper* as the greatest closing track on any rock album, is John's "Tomorrow Never Knows."

Lyrical, musical, and spiritually, a masterpiece, "Tomorrow Never Knows" began with a few working titles, but was, according to John, given its eventual title, one of Ringo's malapropisms ( 'word jumbles'), much like "Hard Day's Night," to "take the edge of the heavy philosophical lyrics."



The lyrics were inspired by a book John had read called *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. The author, Timothy Leary, had gained recognition for advocating the benefits of psychedelic drugs such as LSD. Lennon lifted several phrases from the book, which would later become mantras for many in the youth counterculture who decided to 'tune in, turn on, and drop out,' as was Leary's catchphrase. The song includes lines such as "Turn off your mind, relax, and float downstream" and "Lay down all thought, surrender to the void." Whoah.....deep.

Lennon wrote the song on his acoustic guitar, but all on one chord-Cmajor. Like Harrison, Lennon was greatly influenced by Indian music, which is often based on one chord or has few changes. This creates a 'drone' effect, much like a chant-which was exactly what Lennon wanted.

In fact, Lennon had told the Beatles' producer George Martin that he "wanted to sound like the Dalai Lama chanting from a Tibetan mountaintop." Martin was by this point used to Lennon's bizarre requests and said to him "Well, John. Going to Tibet is a bit expensive. Can we make do here?"

Not to be dissuaded, John decided he wanted to be suspended by a rope from the ceiling and record his vocal while the others would intermittently give him a good push. Again, Martin promised he would find an alternate method to capture the sound John wanted.

In fact, it was recording engineer Geoff Emerick who decided to run Lennon's vocal track through a rotating speaker called a 'Leslie cabinet.' This produced the effect of a wobbly, distorted, otherworldly sounding Lennon-something he would have enjoyed as he apparently never liked his voice and was always looking for ways to alter it.

Regarding the track's musical elements, the drone effect established by the single chord structure is enhanced by the use of Indian instruments, including a tambura (see below) and a sitar.



Ringo also shines on this track, as his insistent, slightly delayed, and characteristic drum pattern serves as a propulsive force, and many argue it is Starr's finest performance.

In addition, a backwards guitar solo adds to the surreal, psychedelic quality of the sound. In fact, it is actually McCartney's solo from "Taxman" recorded backwards.

A slice of the avant-garde music in which Paul had become interested is featured in the tape loops that band members and several studio technicians had manually fed into the mixing desk while recording. McCartney had recorded several tracks of guitars and vocals, and then sped them up and cut into smaller sections, each about six seconds in duration. The result is not only a messy, background wash of sound, but also some jarring individual sound bytes that were faded in and out during recording.





The result is that the mixing desk (see above) had become an instrument in itself. The other result is that neither in 1966, nor for many years thereafter, could "Tomorrow Never Knows" be performed live. It is a masterpiece, but a studio masterpiece. It is like a painting or a sculpture, crafted by several artists and captured on tape over a period of several days, but never to be replicated. Fortunately for us, that performance, as will the rest of this brilliant album, survive forever, whether digitally, on vinyl, or in our minds and consciousness.

*Revolver* is simply the best rock band at their best. It is a towering accomplishment that still resonates today. It just sounds different than any other album before or since. The incredible creativity and talent of the band members and their relentless desire to improve, try new things, and to do something *different* from their previous album are key factors. The magic that those four lads from Liverpool created when they came together still endures today.

Although I have not discussed every song on *Revolver*, I encourage you to do something few choose to do today: listen to the entire album, from start to finish, with no interruptions. Take thirty-five minutes out of your busy life. Put your headphones on. Turn off the lights. Push 'play.' Enjoy for a half hour the greatest rock band of all time and their masterpiece. Trust me, it will change your life.