

Abbey Road: The Beatles



As we approach the 50th anniversary of the album *Abbey Road*, it is worth looking at the making of what turned out to be the final album recorded by the Fab Four. *Let it Be* was the last album to be released (May 1970) but it had been recorded over a year before.

Following the *Let it Be* sessions, The Beatles as a group were directionless. Paul McCartney had taken on a manager-like role following the death of Brian Epstein in August 1967 but by late January 1969 the band were in chaos. John Lennon wanted to bring in Allen Klein to manage the group and Apple. Apple had been losing money rapidly and John was quoted in the press: "If it carries on like this we will be broke in weeks". Paul wanted to bring in his future father-in-law, New York lawyer Lee Eastman, to manage the group's affairs. George Harrison and Ringo Starr sided with John, believing Klein to be the better option and slighting Paul. McCartney refused to sign with Klein.

The Beatles' music making was still strong, despite their personal disagreements. The singles 'Get Back' and 'The Ballad of John and Yoko' both reached Number 1. With *Let it Be* temporarily shelved, The Beatles needed a new album. It was Paul who approached George Martin, asking if he would produce the next Beatles album. Martin was sceptical. His response was "I will produce it only if you let me produce it the way we used to". Paul told Martin we will. His response was "John included?". Paul assured him that all four Beatles wanted him. Martin had been annoyed with his relatively small role in *The Beatles* (The White Album) and his exclusion from *Let it Be* sessions. With George Martin on board, The Beatles commenced work on what was to be their final album.

The first track recorded was 'I Want You (She's So Heavy)' on 22 February at Trident Studios. The recording of the track had been delayed because George had his tonsils out on 7 February. George went into EMI on the 25th on his own to record demos for 'Old Brown Shoe' with engineer Ken Scott. This would be the B-side of 'The Ballad of John and Yoko'. However, recording was further delayed until April due to Ringo's commitments with filming the *The Magic Christian*, based on the book by Terry Southern and starring Ringo and the great Peter Sellers. Spike Milligan also appears in the movie as a traffic warden. Ringo couldn't turn down the opportunity of working with two of the legendary Goons. Recording recommenced on 16 April with 'Old Brown Shoe' and 'Something', both written by George. On 26 April sessions

began for 'Octopus's Garden', the first composition solely by Ringo Starr. In the film *Let it Be* we can see him getting some help composing the song from George. 'Oh Darling' was recorded by early May and the concept of the 'Abbey Road medley' was starting to form after sessions at Olympic Studios, London. It is interesting to note that during this period Glyn Johns was still working on the 'Get Back' tapes which would eventually become the *Let it Be* album. That project was officially shelved on 28 May. On 1 July Paul entered Abbey Road Studios to record 'You Never Give Me Your Money' and the objective was now to get *Abbey Road* completed. Many tracks were recorded in early July that would eventually become part of the medley on side two. Both 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' and 'Here Comes the Sun' were completed in July. John had kept a relatively low profile up to this point but by late July had recorded 'Mean Mr. Mustard', 'Polythene Pam' and 'Sun King'. On 1 August recording started on 'Because', probably John's best composition on the album. George Martin played the beautiful harpsichord part of the song and on 4 August the wonderful harmonies (John, Paul and George) were completed. After this George moved to studio three to work on 'Something' and 'Here Comes the Sun'. It was at this point George found 'Something' needed more work and gave the acetate to George Martin to arrange the orchestral score to the track.

The Beatles turned their attention to the album cover and on 8 August at 11.35 they were photographed by Iain Macmillan, perched on a step ladder in the middle of the road, as they crossed the now famous zebra crossing. Macmillan took just six photographs that day. The album photo has become, probably, the most iconic of all The Beatles' album sleeves, even more so than *Sgt. Pepper*. Thousands of fans come to Abbey every year to recreate that photo, much to the annoyance of the local car drivers. Paul McCartney, in a parody of *Abbey Road*, used a photo of him and his sheep dog, Arrow, on the zebra crossing for his 1993 *Paul is Live* album.



Abbey Road was released in September and it was at that time rumours were spreading in the United States that Paul McCartney had died in an accident in 1966. It was said that clues to Paul's death and the cover-up were evident on the *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour* album sleeves. The *Abbey Road* sleeve revealed many more so-called clues. The Beatles' clothing suggested John's role as the minister, Ringo as an undertaker, George the gravedigger and Paul was definitely the corpse because he was bare-footed! Also, Paul was out of step with the other three and is holding a cigarette in his right hand, when everyone knew Paul was left handed. The Volkswagen Beetle pictured on the left has the registration plate 281F. Many saw this as Paul's age IF he was still alive at the time of the photograph. In fact, he was only 27 at the time! RUMOUR QUASHED!

'Something' was released as a single in the UK on 6 October. It only reached number four in the UK charts and many saw this as a failure. It was great that George at long last had been given an A-side but it was the first time The Beatles issued an album track as a single, after the album's release. Consequently, fans already owned the track as part of *Abbey Road*. ('Eleanor Rigby' had been released as a single on the same day as its album, *Revolver*). George Harrison was blossoming as a song writer, something that would be even more apparent with the release of his triple album *All Things Must Pass* in 1970.

Abbey Road is a fitting finale to the greatest band that has ever existed and was the last body of work The Beatles did together. It shows them at their best. Great rockers 'Come Together' and 'the medley'; George at his best with 'Here Comes the Sun' and 'Something' and beautiful ballads 'Because' and 'You Never Give Me Your Money'.

Happy 50th Abbey Road.