



Magical Mystery Tour: The Invention of The Beatles

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Preface: Worlds of Music

*"To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour"*

From *Auguries of Innocence* — William Blake (1803)

At the end of the last series *The Nature of Music*, we were left staring out on an imaginably vast shore of music, each grain of sand a unique piece of music. In this series, we pick up a handful of these grains to understand a little of the beauty that lies within. Throughout this series, we will be using the terms and concepts (from the psychological, cultural, linguistic, dissonance, rhythmic, tuning, harmonic, scalar and structural) first encountered in the *Nature of Music* series. Referring back to these may be useful, but they will be briefly recapped here when needed.

The choice of what music to share from this practical infinity of choices can be fraught with anxiety: should we choose music that the listener knows and loves already or the entirely novel, should we triangulate a distance in cultural and historical space, or remedy the under-represented? I would like forever to address all of these, but within the limits of this series, I've opted for the general themes of **illumination** and **discovery** by explaining *why* the music we already enjoy creates such a rich experience, and *how* this music and ideas interlink with styles and artists we don't yet know and to music in general. There is some consolidation in that no one musical piece, artist or genre can teach us everything, but *everything* can teach us *something* about music. Every piece, artist and style is in itself a musical world, with its own language, rules, biases, idiosyncrasies and brilliance so complex as to allow a lifetime of study and pleasure. I've selected six such worlds which I hope serve to explain their particular power but also illustrate some of the staggering potential of the wider musical universe in which they inhabit.

With this preparation done, let us embark on our first journey with the magical musical world of The Beatles.

Magical Mystery Tour

A Feeling Deep Inside

My first exposure to The Beatles came early, unprecedented and with a deeply transformative force from which I am still reeling. Before knowing anything about the band, its members, their acclaim or their music (and of music in general), I was given an innocuous-looking 90-minute cassette tape. Only the band name, was given. I scribbled down the song titles (as I guessed approximately from the lyrics) and later discovered the tape included the albums *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* followed by *Magical Mystery Tour*, and – strangely – tracks 1—4, 7 and 19 from *The White Album*. What ensued from this strange object was a

series of experiences for which I was ill-prepared. Suckered by the opening concert sounds into believing this was some kind of live recording, then taken on a journey of dream-like segues before returning to the original concert space before the epiphany of *A Day in The Life* left me speechless. The lyrics, all familiar words but placed together in disarmingly strange ways (of glass onions, newspaper taxis and counting holes in the Royal Albert Hall) felt at once, sad, beautiful, silly and consoling. To a shy and bemused eight-year-old, I found at last someone else – complete strangers – articulating how weird and wonderful existence felt. Above all, the music – for which I had little frame of references – cut deep, in countless ways from the strangulated flutes of the mellotron, dreamlike reversed tape loops, to the harmonically unsettled opening of *Blue Jay Way*, echoing exactly how it felt to be scared and lost. This almost terrifying knowledge the music had of my unspoken inner life, even spilled over into life experience. I was dumb-founded to see my primary school poetry and music teacher – Ivor Cutler – appear without warning as the bus conductor in the *Magical Mystery Tour* film, and it felt like just days after knowing that someone called John Lennon was in The Beatles, I heard – on the very hi-fi which delivered his music – the news (oh boy) that he had been killed.

My experiences are of course unique, but it seems that the music hurriedly produced by the Beatles in just seven years has disarmed, connected and resonated with millions of diverse listeners in equally deep ways. The Gresham survey attached to this lecture is a clear testament to that. The music somehow has pop accessibility, a friendliness not shared by the purportedly more rebellious but conservative other bands of the time, but also managed to cut below the surface of the mundane to the profound. This lecture reveals just a few of the ways that The Beatles manage this magic trick of the *strangely familiar*, the subliminally surprising and inventive accessibility in their music.

You Can't Do That: Pop Invention

A paradox of 'creative' and 'original' musicians is that they are often the ones *most influenced* by others. Rather than destroying originality, a rich set of influences allows an artist to more freely choose from a wide palette of options, expressing themselves more uniquely and through synthesis, making a contribution to the field. The eight hours a day of performing in Hamburg bars (including a 97-day marathon with no day off) not only sharpened their ensemble but obliged an absorption and engagement with a large and diverse repertoire. In a pop environment where most artists stayed in their convenient stylistic lanes, the Beatles' influences and explorations were extraordinarily eclectic from skiffle, rock and roll from Holly, Haley, Elvis to Little Richard, jazz-pop-latin show-tunes, British 'music hall' and comedy songs, early blues, rock and roll, country, folk, orchestral, experimental electroacoustic, Hindustani, *psy-rock*, brass and military band, soul and early blues among others, allowed them not only to switch styles from song to song but to blend and juxtapose them within the same track. The contrapuntal 'harpsichord' interlude of the otherwise pop balladic *In My Life*, the pastoral folk sensibilities of *Norwegian Wood*, the blend of Hindustani drone, electroacoustic tape manipulations and rock soloing on *Tomorrow Never Knows*, the extended pure 'musique concrète' of *Revolution 9*, the deep country flavours of *Don't Pass Me By*, the guitar and drum-less 'chamber pop' of *Eleanor Rigby*, the dated-for-its-day 'honky tonk' of *When I'm Sixty Four* the sunshine 60s pop of *She Said She Said*, the uncompromising earthy blues of *Yer Blues*, Hendrix-level whammy-and-guitar-feedback sculpting in *It's All Too Much*, throwaway novelty songs are just a handful of this continually blending river of stylistic influence, that keeps the listener surprised and unsettled. As the influences merged more deeply, a Beatles style – or at least a unique voice – became more apparent, but till their final recording, the stylistic context was never stable, complacent, or limited. Rehearsals and workshopping involved stylistic recasting as well as a stylistic parody (perhaps an influence from music hall novelty songs). They even managed to detach and parody elements of their own style in *It's Only a Northern Song*.

Each of these styles came with its own set of harmonic objects and progressions, song structures, instruments and timbres but as the stylistic pot was stirred these musical parameters became divorced from their stylistic parents, and when these core elements of style recombined, they created a strange, wonderful and deeply effective music.

This lecture provides a quick but uncompromising tour of how The Beatles adopted, adapted and often transformed significantly the core elements of popular music during a short but staggeringly productive and revolutionary few years. From the 'glass onion' layers of piece, artist, production, object, listener and the outside world; to lyrics, structure, meter, harmony, melody, pitch, technology and timbre, The Beatles found opportunity for individualism and invention. This is why their music has had such a profound and lasting effect, it is disarming on most aspects of popular music, even when you are unconscious of its mechanics.

However deep the subjective experience, there are objective *reasons why* it works so effectively. Their music is *magical*, not magic.

All Together Now: A Day In The Life

We can analyse and build models of all manner of fascinating aesthetic, harmonic, rhythmic, stylistic, formal, melodic, lyrical and technological inventions, but that still does not represent the complete experience. It is the *combination* of these entangled threads – more complex than the sum of the parts – which creates the tapestry of the listener experience. Take *A Day In The Life* the last track on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*. As revealed directly in the opening live, Lennon's lyrics hovering between wakefulness and dreaming, the everyday mundane and magical, are inspired by genuine news stories of the day, melded with his personal recollections conflating personal and public narratives. Again this piece also happens to cut through to my personal life (as the way Beatles music tends to feel more than a coincidence for many people): The cited news stories of 'lucky man' Guinness heir Tara Browne fatal car-crash, and the 'holey' Albert Hall are minutes from my childhood London home, local real events and places that feel somehow dreamlike.

The track's placement on the album – occurring after the start and end of Sgt. Pepper's meta concert and crystallising from the remnants of the final applause – is itself a form of *thematically independent coda*. An *extra piece*, not just a coda section. The track itself is a complex tapestry of big and subtle disruptions. The semiquavers in the bass in the thematic opening (emerging from the ashes of the fake applause) switch from straight to swung as the voice enters. The opening chord sequence ("I read the news today.."), although nominally in the 'happy' key of G major, hides constantly a descending lament with the chord voices: through G Bm Em Em7 C CΔ7 Am9 G we subliminally hear an endlessly descending G-F#-E-D-C-B-A-G inner melodic line. The voice with a prominent 'slapback' delay floats above it all. It is not only this descending lament which makes the verse 'rather sad', despite it being completely diatonic, there is no V chord (D or D7) to mark this as comfortably major, nor is there a B7 to define this clearly as the relative minor. This leaves the key in a sort of limbo, reflecting the ambiguous indifference of the lyrics. When a non-diatonic chord appears (F major on "I just *had* to laugh")) it might be interpreted as a confident swaggering bVII but it falls a semitone with a hint of Phrygian darkness with the dark humour. The extra two-bar tag "I saw the photograph" breaks the binary expectation forming a 10-bar phrase. On the verse's repeat, it is cut one bar further – time is running out – as mysterious non-diatonic #4 intervals are added to the melody (A#s on the Em) – "*nobo-dy was real-ly...*". This time the verse ends on a C chord – again suspending a sense of home. This C chord becomes the persistently uncomfortable centre key at the end of the third verse "I'd love to turn you on", which becomes the epicentre of an electronic and orchestral glissando cluster with chromatic piano notes sprinkled above. This section involving a 41-piece orchestra was initially marked out as a 24-bar section to be filled later (24 bars to reflect the hours in a day -another hidden concert). These – to help cohesion – were counted out by roadie Mal Evans who also set an alarm on the 24th bar. This studio chatter and scaffolding was left in, as the countdown (well up) and alarm matched the 'woke up' lyric perfectly.

What lies at the end of this transformation of the C chord? An E major chord (and key) - an elongated uncanny *honey* chord transformation. As we awake in this new world of E major (penned and sung by Paul and brought to the composition in characteristic last-minute happy coincidence) we are hurried along with a bright tempo, and a sense of time running out with partial 2/4 bars and a mix of the bright (B9) and dark sides (D) of the cycle of 5ths (as in *Lovely Rita*). The dream sequence connects C to E again but this time not directly but a series of four plagal 'trust-fall' cadences. This C G D A E chord sequence is identical to Jimi Hendrix's version of *Hey Joe*, however rather than hanging around on the E to create an 8-bar phrase, The Beatles disorientate the listener with a 5-bar cycle, pulling the 'hypermetric' rug from under us.

The final orchestral aleatoric swell, supported by strange tape manipulations that are only clearly heard with modern processing of the original tapes, leads to a final E chord, played by overdubbing 3 pianos (played by four players) three times. But we are not yet done, Lennon's idea was to hide a 15kHz tone in the following seconds, inaudible to most adults, but an act of 'meta-creativity' and mischief "to annoy the dog". Any listeners who let the vinyl run on to its final endless 'tun-off' groove would also hear a never-ending moment of strange mutterings ("never could be any other way" perhaps). A final surreal touch as a hidden coda to a hidden coda of the coda song.

And In The End, It is Knowing

'And In the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make'

A frequent question whenever a theoretical analysis of The Beatles is presented, is whether the band – particularly given they didn't use standard notation – 'knew what they were doing'. The Beatles' creativity and success are even used as an argument against music education. Such questions I suggest are often simplistic on the nature of musical knowledge. First of all, there is far more to 'knowing music' than 'reading notation', and they were aware of, and had deeply absorbed a huge range of music; and readily identified chord sequences and musical moments which they enjoyed, re-used and adapted for their own music. They knew when things worked, and crucially when a new musical device was found: both Lennon and McCartney recognised that the Gm7 on the bridge of *From Me to You* was special and a discovery. Here it was a route to modulate to F, but in isolation, this move to the 'Vminor' chord would be used to extraordinary effect in tunes like *She's Leaving Home* and *Strawberry Fields Forever*. They understood chord names (McCartney calls out all the chords of *Let It Be* to his bandmates larger systems (what might be called 'latent music structures') which allowed a range of music to be generated (McCartney spoke very clearly about the "chord patterns" from which many "old tunes" were derived). All three guitarists in the band collected and shared chord shapes learned from guitar shop owners and other musicians (Paul hunted across Liverpool for someone to show him what he was missing – the B7 chord).

They also had an idea of what they *didn't* know: When presented with the Eaug chord on the piano at the beginning of *Oh! Darling*, Harrison remarked "An E with a C? I've had an E with an F" [this is from *I Me Mine* incidentally] "but what's an E with a C?". Where their lack of knowledge (or literacy) was apparent they collaborated effectively, George Martin was the essential translator to the 'classical' world of notation and thematic orchestration, and he and others spoke 'electronic music' setting up tools for intuitive use by the Beatles. It may also indeed be that their lack of terminology helped – knowing the amount of 'irregular' sequences and structures used might have paralysed a more 'learned' musician with self-awareness. In addition, there was a form of artificial selection at play, if pitches and rhythms weren't notated then only the most memorable and 'sticky' would survive the journey from noodling to the other band members, the studio and on our ears. The reality, however, is that the standard notation and terminologies of music are limited: in some contexts, they can be very useful, even essential, ways to store and communicate musical ideas, but they are never a substitute for a deeper musical 'knowing'.

The Beatles were able to hear beauty in the wide range of music they encountered, knew how to use and combine devices, and how to compose, perform and create music that would communicate it effectively. This is the important 'knowing': to recognise musical beauty, and to be able to create and communicate it in a way that is both familiar and instils wonder in listeners of any age.

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Recommended viewing:

Get Back & Let It Be Documentaries (2024) available on Disney+

Hrab, G. (2020) *The Genius of Ringo* Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CB8xToC-CU>

For supporting material see:

Mermikides, M. (2024) *The Nature of Music*. 6-part Gresham lecture series available at: <https://www.gresham.ac.uk/watch-now/series/nature-music>

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