PART TWO

# Works


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# 3 Rock and roll music

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George Martin, in many ways, birthed the Beatles as we know them. We know them through their records, not their performances. They arrived on his step as a nightclub-hardened beat group with virtually no studio experience and, under his tutelage, they became the musical group that personified the studio as an instrument. The Beatles' first three long-playing records, *Please Please Me*, *With the Beatles*, and *A Hard Day's Night*, were a short ramp leading up to a colossal cultural shift. Astonishingly, they were all recorded and released in a twenty-two-month period. To examine those cornerstone recordings, we must first see how they arrived there.

The first experience any of the Beatles had with recording was in 1958, when the Quarrymen, with John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Colin Hanton, and Duff Lowe, cut a shellac disc of two songs at a home studio in Liverpool. One was Buddy Holly and the Crickets' "That'll Be the Day," a highly appropriate choice considering Holly's pervasive influence on the band. The other was "In Spite of All the Danger," a McCartney-Harrison composition characterized by McCartney as "very influenced by Elvis."[1] To the participants, the event had a magical feel, as they now could return to their homes and play an actual performance of their own. Still, a professional studio seemed an unattainable dream, and they were barely beyond being just a scruffy little skiffle group.

The evolution of the Quarrymen into the Beatles was a path forged on the streets and in the rank nightclubs of Hamburg, Germany. As Lennon said, "I grew up in Hamburg, not Liverpool." During the Beatles' second stay in Hamburg, they were recruited by independent producer Bert Kaempfert, who would have a substantial career of his own, to back fellow English performer Tony Sheridan. The Beatles and Sheridan were appearing together at the Top Ten Club. The results were musically unspectacular. Sheridan's vocal performance is a pale amalgam of Elvis Presley, Jack Scott, and Gene Vincent. The Beatles' instrumental backing shows competence, but little more. During the sessions, the Beatles cut a few songs not featuring Sheridan, the well-worn chestnut "Ain't She Sweet," sung by Lennon, and another original instrumental, "Cry for a Shadow." When the record of "My Bonnie" was released, Sheridan got top billing, and the Beatles were renamed the Beat Brothers. It was very anticlimactic for the Beatles.




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The Kaempfert sessions, however, resulted in a profound event in the Beatles' career. Legend has it that on October 28, 1961, a young man named Raymond Jones came into NEMS Music Store in Liverpool and asked its proprietor, Brian Epstein, if they had "My Bonnie" by the Beatles in stock. Within two weeks, Epstein witnessed the Beatles for the first time, and was managing them by December. His goal was to procure a recording contract. As the proprietor of a successful record shop, and possessed of a well-groomed manner, Epstein could open doors for his new clients. In 1961, there were, essentially, four major record companies in England: EMI, Pye, Philips, and Decca. Epstein arranged for the Beatles to audition for Decca Records in London on January 1, 1962.

The Beatles' session at Decca began at 11:00 a.m. There is little evidence to suggest the session lasted much longer than the combined duration of the fifteen songs. John Lennon recalled: "We virtually recorded our Cavern show, with a few omissions."[2] As in their live performances, and typical of many of the groups on their circuit, the Beatles covered a wide spectrum of material: R&B ("Money [That's What I Want]," "Three Cool Cats"), standards ("Bésame Mucho," "The Sheik of Araby") show tunes ("Till There Was You") and rock and roll ("Memphis," "Crying, Waiting, Hoping"). Three Lennon-McCartney compositions ("Hello Little Girl," "Love of the Loved," "Like Dreamers Do") were also performed. The resulting recording is not much more than a mere transcription of the event. Decca certainly had no incentive to make it more than that. Essentially, the Beatles set up their gear and the engineer rolled tape. There were no overdubs and the only effect used is a uniform echo. You can hear a nervous tightening in all of their voices. The playing is steady and tight, but clipped. Epstein had high hopes that the originals would be recognized as a sign of the Beatles' exceptional talent. The previous two years of near constant performing made the foursome, with Pete Best still on drums, a respectable unit, but Decca was unimpressed. They passed on the group.

Despite this disappointment, Epstein was allowed by Decca to use the tape to shop the band. Pye soon declined to sign the Beatles, too. Epstein's confidence, as well as the band's, was wavering. Epstein continued to beat a path between Liverpool and London. A series of fortunate events placed Epstein in a meeting with Parlophone Records' label head, George Martin.

The Beatles passed the audition with George Martin and Parlophone. That session, June 1962, yielded only confirmation that Martin was willing to take a shot at the group. Later, he recalled saying: "I've got nothing to lose."[3] I could go on and on with the minutiae of historical details, but the key thing here is the Beatles got the break they desperately needed. George Martin certainly found the band that changed the fortunes of his label (and all of Great Britain, for that matter). But what he didn't yet know was that

he was about to begin the most seamless and symbiotic artist–producer relationship in the history of recorded music.

At the time, an artist's success was based entirely on the sale of singles. Martin's first choice for a single was "How Do You Do It," a song by Mitch Murray and Barry Mason that had been on Martin's desk for several months. In the June audition, the Beatles recorded "Love Me Do." After they signed, Martin pitched the group "How Do You Do It" and they dutifully learned and recorded the song in their first fully fledged Abbey Road session on September 4, 1962. They also cut "Love Me Do," this time with Ringo Starr on drums, replacing Pete Best, who had been fired three weeks earlier. Martin and his lieutenant, Ron Richards, heard potential in "Love Me Do," but were not convinced. The following week, the Beatles, with session drummer Andy White behind the kit and Starr on tambourine, cut a usable master. Martin conceded to the Beatles, and their own composition became their debut single. "Love Me Do"/"P.S. I Love You" was released on October 5.

It's a misconception that the Beatles' first release wasn't much of a hit. The peak of "Love Me Do" at number seventeen was a solid foothold for the band. It had an eighteen-week chart run that was mirrored by their follow-up single, "Please Please Me." Cut while "Love Me Do" was climbing the charts, "Please Please Me," with its upbeat R&B tempo and sweet harmonica hook, started life as a mid-tempo song in the Roy Orbison mold. George Martin's advice to bring up the tempo yielded the group's first chart-topper.

In between the sessions with Martin, the Beatles were working virtually every day, with two gigs in one day a common event. The day before the September 4 session, they played a lunchtime set at their hometown club, the Cavern, and an evening show in Widnes, Lancashire. The day after the session, they were back at the Cavern. This pace continued unabated for the next four years. As the Beatles' successes mounted, the level of pressure related to their performances, writing, and recording grew exponentially.

"Please Please Me" shone a light on a new type of pop group in Britain. The record business was still running on a decades-old business model predicated on a hierarchy of song, publisher, record company, and performer. Songwriters wrote the material on contract to publishers. The publishers then pushed the song to record companies and producers who could match the song with a performer. The publisher was the main money-generator and beneficiary through the licensing and royalty income. A song could, and often did, have several competing versions vying for the public's attention. The one that hit would also be a boon to the particular label that released it. As for the artists, they were lucky to be paid at all. Prior to the Beatles, pop/rock music in the UK adhered to a tight formula; bands had a named lead singer with a backing band (Cliff Richard and the Shadows,

Shane Fenton and the Fentones) that often performed steps in unison, or a lead singer with a dynamic stage name (Billy Fury, Marty Wilde, Adam Faith). Impresario Larry Parnes, who had passed on the Beatles early in their career, managed many of the latter. Both of these types of performers were just another extension of the old model, beholden to publishers and producers for material. The Beatles were self-contained in the truest sense. They wrote and performed their own music and, by design, did not stick one sole member into the limelight.

With two hit singles to their credit, the Beatles now had to create an album. George Martin said: "I asked them what they had that we could record quickly, and the answer was their stage act."[4] It was finely honed and well rehearsed. A session was scheduled for Monday, February 11, 1963. As Mark Lewisohn, in his essential book *The Complete Beatles Recording Sessions*, wrote of this day: "There can scarcely have been 585 more productive minutes in the history of recorded music."[5] It is a bold yet undeniable statement. Between 10:00 a.m. and 10:45 p.m., the Beatles cut thirteen songs, twelve of which, along with "Please Please Me" and its B side "Ask Me Why," became their entire first long-playing record.

Released in the first week of April 1963, *Please Please Me* promptly installed itself at number one and remained in the album charts for seventy weeks. Oddly enough, the album bore a resemblance to the Beatles' Decca audition. It contained R&B ("Twist and Shout," "Chains") pop ("A Taste of Honey") and original rock and roll.

The addition of those McCartney/Lennon originals (as they were billed on the record) changed the landscape dramatically. The eight originals on *Please Please Me*, compared to the three found on the Decca audition, reveal significant artistic growth. Kicking off the record was "I Saw Her Standing There," a fiery original rocker. This track served as a declaration that there should be no question about the legitimacy of the Beatles. "I Saw Her Standing There" was a *bona fide* rock and roll song, joining the rare company of "Move It" by Cliff Richard and the Shadows and "Shakin' All Over" by Johnny Kidd and the Pirates as genuine UK rock songs. It sounded like it could have been stolen from a Little Richard Specialty Records session.

The Beatles' influences were on clear display throughout the LP. "Misery" and "There's a Place" blend Everly Brothers-type harmonies with a nod to Brill Building composition. The Brill Building is further evident in the two Shirelles covers, "Boys" and "Baby It's You," and the Cookies' "Chains." John Lennon's vocals on the sublime country soul of Arthur Alexander's "Anna (Go To Him)" are a touchstone for virtually everything he ever recorded afterward. Add to that his throat-shredding performance on the Isley Brothers' "Twist and Shout" and Lennon arrives on the scene as one of the most promising white rock vocalists. Considering that Lennon

was suffering from a terrible cold and sore throat, that February day only amplifies its greatness.

Released less than three weeks after *Please Please Me* came the Beatles' third single. Curiously, it was not included on their debut LP. Then again, they were still operating in a world where the single was king. Written on the back of a tour bus while on the road supporting Helen Shapiro and recorded on March 5, 1963, "From Me to You" became the tipping point for the band. The complete session, which surfaced on a bootleg CD in 1994, shows the group running through several takes of the song, complete with Lennon's directions to McCartney to "keep right in with your harmonies." "From Me to You" wasn't a revelatory piece of music. Like its predecessors, it had ringing guitars, vocal harmonies, and a great harmonica hook. This time, however, the Beatles had a feverishly growing audience, and "From Me to You" hit number one on May 4 and remained there for seven weeks. *Please Please Me* followed it to number one on the album chart the following week and remained there for an astounding thirty weeks.

In addition to their tireless live performance schedule, the Beatles had to cut dedicated live sessions of their songs for the BBC to play achieve airplay. It's hard for today's radio audiences to conceive, but in the UK in 1963 most music performances had to be sourced from live sessions. This was a negotiated contract point with the musicians' union to ensure that the broadcasting of records would not take jobs from musicians. Furthermore, pop music, under the name of light programs, was only one small part of the programming spectrum found at the BBC. The biggest pop music program, *Saturday Club*, could have more than 3 million listeners, nearly 7 percent of England's population. A single appearance could make a career; repeated appearances practically ensured it. The power was very similar to the hold the Grand Ole Opry had on country music in the USA. Between April 4 and May 21, 1963, the Beatles recorded no fewer than six different versions of "From Me to You" for broadcast on various BBC programs. With the explosion of Beatlemania, the Beatles actually began hosting their own BBC program, *Pop Go the Beatles*, in June 1963. The sessions for those broadcasts remained officially unreleased until 1994's *Live at the BBC*. For those who wish to hear what the Beatles sounded like as a performing unit, this is the record to play.

The Beatles' star had risen and became fixed at the pinnacle of the UK entertainment world. Conventional wisdom would dictate that they had no place to go but down. Nothing could be more wrong. In August, the Beatles dropped the musical equivalent of the atom bomb. (It wouldn't be the last time that would happen.) "She Loves You" is practically viral in its catchiness. With its explosive tom-tom drum roll and exuberant opening chorus, complete with the indelible "Yeah, yeah, yeah" vocal hook, "She

Loves You" was an unstoppable juggernaut. It spent a total of six weeks at number one and became a hit in several European countries and Australia. "She Loves You" became the biggest-selling single in UK history until 1977, when it was displaced by Paul McCartney's "Mull of Kintyre."

The Beatles had no real competition at this point. Elvis Presley, the first rock and roll deity, was ensconced in Hollywood making mediocre films, and Presley's contemporaries had mostly fallen away in various ignominious ways. The Beatles' immediate predecessors, such as Cliff Richard, seemed irrelevant by comparison (although Richard did maintain a very successful career for decades). The machine of Liverpool-based groups also managed by Brian Epstein, such as Gerry and the Pacemakers, Brian Poole and the Tremeloes, and Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas, were also topping the UK charts, but the Beatles were different. They had more than charisma. They possessed the type of magnetism that made Presley a revolution seven years prior, only multiplied by a factor of four. And where Presley had shrouded his ambition in his polite Southern son persona, the Beatles were openly ambitious. John Lennon often rallied his bandmates by asking, "Where are we going, boys?" "To the toppermost of the poppermost, Johnny!!" they replied. It wasn't a joke. In February 1963, *New Musical Express* ran a page on the Beatles in which they each filled out answers to a questionnaire. It asked for their personal statistics, likes, and hobbies. In the category of "Professional ambition," John Lennon answered, "To be rich and famous."

The task of a second album was at hand. Success brought with it the luxury of more time to record. For *With the Beatles*, the group spread out the recording sessions to seven days over the course of four months. Luxury is a relative term, as the group continued to work virtually every day either in performance, in session for the BBC, or making television appearances. (They also bade farewell to their hometown haunt of the Cavern on August 3 after nearly 300 appearances there.)

*With the Beatles* contained eight new originals, including George Harrison's first solo composition, "Don't Bother Me." The six non-originals heavily favored contemporary American rhythm and blues, notably three from the blossoming Motown stable. The Beatles hadn't quite shaken show tunes, and included "Till There Was You" from *The Music Man*, a song they had performed at their Decca audition. Again, it was the Lennon-McCartney originals that set them apart. Pick any tune: "Hold Me Tight," "It Won't Be Long," or "All My Loving" are all joyous and steady rocking songs with fantastically emotive lead vocals and harmonies, sharp guitars, and swinging drums. Even Ringo's spotlight, "I Wanna Be Your Man," a song initially given to the Rolling Stones and thought by Lennon and McCartney to be substandard, was a kicking rave-up awash with tremolo-laden guitars. If "She Loves You" was a statement about the pop craftsmanship abilities

of the Beatles and the Lennon-McCartney team, *With the Beatles* said there was a lot more where that came from. *With the Beatles* did not need the inclusion of "She Loves You" to make it a hit. It entered the album chart on December 7, posted itself at number one for twenty-one weeks, and was the best-selling album of 1963.

EMI, the parent corporation of Parlophone, was suddenly awash with money. They acted as any self-respecting, profit-driven record company would in that situation; they immediately saw repackaging opportunities with the Beatles' limited output. Between July and November, EMI released three EPs, four-song, 7-inch extended play records, of existing hits and album tracks. Why release a record only once when you can release and sell it twice?

No discussion of *With the Beatles* can be contemplated without considering the album cover. On *Please Please Me*, the band assembled above the entrance to EMI's Manchester Square headquarters, where photographer Angus McBean framed the four Beatles in color as vibrant and youthful extensions of the contemporary architecture, a new band for a new era in Britain. They were smiling, besuited and clean cut, if you excuse Ringo's Teddy boy hair. The cover of *With the Beatles* created an iconography comparable only to Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 photos of Elvis Presley. Like Wertheimer's photos, it was stark yet filled with energy. It was shot by photographer Robert Freeman in black and white at the Palace Court Hotel in Bournemouth, the Beatles posing tightly in black turtlenecks with the light from a window half illuminating their still and fixed facial expressions. It's dark and nearly brooding, but the image transmits a message that change is here. Rock and roll is not dead. The eyes of the four are deep and knowing. The millions who bought this record, and its North American equivalent, understood. This image permitted all who connected with it to declare: "This is new. This is mine. This is not like what came before." If the visual wasn't enough of a cultural demarcation, *With the Beatles* was released on November 22, 1963, the day John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Beatlemania was in full-blown effect in England. The Beatles sometimes had to dress as policemen to sneak into theatres where they performed. Hordes of screaming fans drowned out the meager PA systems of the day, leaving the Beatles to lipread one another just to follow a song in performance. Outside of the UK, they were the hottest thing throughout Scandinavia and Australia. In the United States, the birthplace of the Beatles' musical heroes, they were virtually unknown. Capitol Records, EMI's partner in the USA, passed on the Beatles, and their first few records were released on a smattering of independent labels. Frustrated with the lack of cooperation, Brian Epstein called Capitol Records president, Alan Livingston, and convinced him to release the records. As this chapter must

restrict itself to the first three UK albums, I highly recommend any and all of Bruce Spizer's books to those who wish to learn more about the Beatles' records in America.

Hard on the heels of *With the Beatles* came yet another irresistible free-standing single. One might say that the Beatles could have put out a record of them making animal noises and it would have hit number one, just based on the mass hysteria enveloping them. Whether that is true or not, the Beatles dropped yet another indelible piece of pop perfection. Britain's *New Musical Express* described "I Want to Hold Your Hand" as "repetitious almost to the point of hypnosis . . . [a] power-packer disc." Perhaps the venerable music magazine was looking for an excuse to account for the Beatles' hold on the public. Cut in October during the recording of *With the Beatles*, "I Want to Hold Your Hand" rocketed to number one for a five-week run as 1963 closed.

The session for "I Want to Hold Your Hand" also marked the first time the Beatles cut a session with a four-track recorder. Despite the fact that this technology had been in use in the US for several years, EMI was slow to adopt it. Once it was done, though, the Beatles took to it immediately. With the additional tracks available, overdubbing became easier and allowed for a more expansive sonic canvas. In the next four years, the Beatles' mastery of this medium would be revealed.

The new year saw Beatlemania reach an unstoppable pitch around the world. As they became an international commodity, the Beatles expanded their touring. In January 1964, they were in residency at the Paris Olympia, supporting French singer Sylvie Vartan and American singer-guitarist Trini Lopez. Odeon Records, EMI's licensee in Germany, felt that the only way to sell large quantities of records there was for the Beatles to sing in German. The session at EMI's Pathé Marconi studios was meant to cut German-language versions of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "She Loves You." After they cut "Komm, Gib Mir Diene Hand" and "Sie Lieb Dich," ample time remained to record another Lennon-McCartney original, "Can't Buy Me Love." It was the only session recorded by the Beatles outside of the UK.

To fill the time between singles, EMI continued to release EPs. "All My Loving," a track from *With the Beatles* so strong that Paul McCartney opened his shows on his 2002 US tour with it, was coupled with "Money (That's What I Want)" and the now thrice-released "Ask Me Why" and "P.S. I Love You."

It opens with a cold-start vocal, and immediately the Beatles are off to the races. "Can't Buy Me Love" is yet another gem steeped in first-generation rock and roll. The subject of money and riches has a strong tradition in all pop music, and "Can't Buy Me Love" fitted the bill like an answer record

to the Drifters' classic "Money Honey." In light of the Beatles' immense popularity and imminent wealth, it also possesses the makings of a classic British "piss-take," at least one with self-deprecating overtones. "Can't Buy Me Love" spent three weeks at number one and was the UK's best-selling single of 1964.

If a three-week run at number one for "Can't Buy Me Love" seems puny by comparison to previous hits, there is a solid economic reason. Although the Beatles were firmly seated at the mountaintop of pop music in 1964, in their wake came a flood of performers who now jockeyed with the Fab Four for chart-toppers. By the end of 1964, the list of fellow British bands to bag a number one hit reads like a *Who's Who* of British rock: the Dave Clark Five, the Animals, the Rolling Stones, Manfred Mann, the Kinks, and Herman's Hermits. So complete was British domination that only two American acts, Roy Orbison and the Supremes, hit the top in 1964. On the album side of the business, the Beatles' dominance was nearly complete. Their albums clocked a total of forty weeks at number one that year.

Another EP hit the streets in June 1964. The *Long Tall Sally* EP was full of covers of American songs and one original. "I Call Your Name" was a castoff that Lennon gave to Billy J. Kramer and the Dakotas a year earlier, but had now deemed worthy of recording. The covers of Carl Perkins, Larry Williams, and Little Richard were straight from the Beatles' stage repertoire.

The path from the top of the charts to the silver screen was well worn when the Beatles cut their four-picture deal with United Artists. The first film was *A Hard Day's Night*, a black and white "documentary" of a couple of days in the life of the Beatles. Written by Alun Owen and directed by Richard Lester, it proved to be a splendid platform for the group and a remarkably enduring film. The film was shot over March and April with recording sessions spread out between February and June.

The soundtrack marked the first time a Beatles album comprised entirely Lennon-McCartney compositions, thirteen in total, and *A Hard Day's Night* shows them truly blossoming as songwriters. There was collaboration, but the die was cast with the primary songwriter taking lead vocals. In his *New Musical Express* review of July 3, 1963, Allan Evans wrote: "I don't think this album has the uninhibited joyous drive of the former Beatles' LPs, but it is still way out ahead of rivals." While there is no question that the Beatles had no creative rivals, Evans's perception of a lack of joy missed a key point. In the face of inconceivable tumult, they found a way to grow, both as individuals and as artists. Two songs in particular, McCartney's "Things We Said Today" and Lennon's "I'll Be Back," ring slightly of melancholy but point to a style that would develop into the songs that filled *Rubber Soul* eighteen months later. Released on July 10, 1964, *A Hard Day's Night* sat at

number one for twenty-one consecutive weeks. It was displaced by *Beatles For Sale*.

We look back now and see a lifetime of work. In truth, the Beatles would be over and done as a working group in little more than five years from this point. Their first two years as a recording entity were frenzied and prolific, and truly changed much of the world. This was merely the first step.