

Introducing the Beatles

KENNETH WOMACK

If the artist could explain in words what he has made, he would not have had to create it.

ALFRED STIEGLITZ

This book is about the Beatles' musical art. It is about the songwriting and recording processes that brought it to fruition, while also studying their recording career as an evolving text that can be interpreted as a body of work. But how, then, do we trace the contours of the Beatles' art? If we understand a work of art to be both the expression or exploration of a creative impulse and the process of creating a material object – whether that object be a novel, a painting, a sculpture, or a song – then we also implicitly recognize the art work to be the result of an indelibly human drive to communicate a set of ideas, to draw upon a sustained sense of aesthetics or ethos in order to establish beauty, and to engage in acts of storytelling in order to generate an emotional reaction. These latter elements enable the art object to function as a symbolic vehicle of cultural expression. If we accept the notion of the Beatles as recording *artists*, how, then, do we define the principal aesthetic and literary-musicological elements that inform John, Paul, George, and Ringo's enduring "body of work"? In order to comprehend their art as the result of a creative synthesis, we must work from a set of principles that assists us in understanding the range of their artistic pursuits as they are made manifest in the recording studio. With the Beatles, there was a genuine sense of wonder – a desire, even, for the primitive feel and muscularity of rock and roll, yet there was also a deeply felt nostalgia that developed throughout their career, a reverence for the awesome weight of the past, and a blunt recognition of the creative possibilities and rewards of authorship.

But we're getting way ahead of ourselves here. Long before Sgt. Pepper taught the band to play – long before the pressures of real life had reached their fever-pitch – there were two boys in love with music, gazing upon a brave new world, and upon each other's imaginations, under the blue suburban skies of a Liverpool churchyard. In many ways, the narrative of the Beatles is – and always will be – their story.

In his classic biography, *James Joyce* (1959), Richard Ellmann observes that his volume "enters Joyce's life to reflect his complex, incessant joining of event and composition." In short, Ellmann seeks to understand "the life of the artist" in order to interpret the great sweep of the novelist's

[1]

accomplishment (3). As an artistic fusion, the Beatles merit this same depth and scope of treatment. The essayists in this volume trace the group's creative arc from the band's earliest recordings through *Abbey Road* and the twilight of their career. In so doing, it is my sincere hope that the *Cambridge Companion to the Beatles* will reflect the complexity of the Beatles' work, while also communicating the nature and power of their remarkable artistic achievement – both during their heyday and beyond.

In addition to Anthony DeCurtis's prescient Foreword, this anthology features a Beatles chronology, as well as such resources as a "General discography" of the band's UK and US recordings through 1970 and a "Select bibliography" of book-length biographical and critical studies of the Beatles. In the *Companion's* first section, two contributors address the Beatles' background, including their early years and their emergence as innovative songwriters and recording artists. In "Six boys, six beatles: the formative years, 1950–1962," Dave Laing traces the early years of the Beatles during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Laing takes particular care to demonstrate the future bandmates as express products of the historical process in 1950s-era England. In addition to documenting their passage from childhood and adolescence through young adulthood, Laing examines the musical influences that came together in the personnel of the Quarrymen, Lennon's skiffle group, and the early Beatles. In "The Beatles as recording artists," Jerry Zolten investigates the technological aspects of the group, as well as the role of studio wizardry in the formulation of their art. In addition to discussing the producers and technicians who assisted the Beatles during their studio years, Zolten identifies the key moments of electronic innovation that propelled the band's music to new and uncharted sonic heights. In so doing, Zolten reveals the manner in which the Beatles' art has not only weathered but trumped the music of the ages.

In the *Companion's* second section, which is devoted to the group's album-length productions, the essayists trace the band's output from *Please Please Me* through their solo careers. Howard Kramer's "Rock and roll music" traces the Beatles' growth from their first album, which they recorded within the space of a single day, through *With the Beatles*. In addition to addressing the recording and release of such landmark singles as "She Loves You" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand," Kramer discusses the manner in which the Beatles consolidated their fame at a breakneck, frenzied speed. Kramer also affords attention to the ways in which the group employed the sounds of "first generation rock and roll" in the gestation of their own innovative musical foundations. In "'Try thinking more': *Rubber Soul* and the Beatles' transformation of pop," James M. Decker examines *Rubber Soul* as the Beatles' "transitional" album, as the long-playing record in which they dispensed with high-octane rock and roll in favor of a new sound that

embraces studio technology and the lyricism of pop poetry. Decker devotes considerable emphasis to the group's expanding experimental nature in their work, as well as to their increasing sense of edginess and ambiguity in their music. With the release of *Rubber Soul*, Decker argues, the Beatles began to transcend the creative boundaries of individual tracks in favor of the more nuanced expression inherent in the album as musical construct. In "Magical mystery tours, and other trips: yellow submarines, newspaper taxis, and the Beatles' psychedelic years," Russell Reising and Jim LeBlanc explore the groundbreaking musical accomplishments of the Beatles' psychedelic era from *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* through the *Magical Mystery Tour* project. Beginning with the spring of 1966, Reising and LeBlanc trace the group's experimentation with psychedelic themes, sounds, and insights in both their words and their music. In so doing, Reising and LeBlanc map out the musical dimension of the Beatles' output during this period, while also identifying the nature of the musical direction that would define their latter efforts in the studio.

Ian Inglis's "Revolution" offers a shrewd reading of the convoluted historical and cultural context inherent in the labyrinthine recording sessions for *The Beatles* (the White Album). Inglis establishes a complex level of acclaim and uncertainty for the Beatles at the dawn of 1968, ranging from the spell-binding success of *Sgt. Pepper* to the critical disdain for *Magical Mystery Tour* – not to mention the traumatizing specter of war and assassination on the international front. Inglis reads the resulting album as a strident contrast with the careful sense of direction and purpose that marked their earlier efforts, with the White Album sporting disunity, fragmentation, and disillusionment as its primary – if not primal – characteristics. In "On their way home: the Beatles in 1969 and 1970," Steve Hamelman provides an expansive analysis of the Beatles' last recordings, including the *Get Back* project and *Abbey Road*. For Hamelman, the group's final spate of music – recorded, for the most part, as the backdrop for the bandmates' impending "divorce" – finds the Beatles reaching new artistic heights in terms of lyricism, and, ironic as it may seem, musical unity. In addition to affording particular attention to the symphonic suite that closes their career, Hamelman addresses the remarkable music synergy that sees the *Get Back* project establishing the musical foundation for the Beatles' swan song on *Abbey Road*. In so doing, writes Hamelman, the band "ends with a benediction ('And in the end, the love you take / Is equal to the love you make') sung sweetly and sincerely to a cushion of strings. The Beatles end the record, their career in fact, with a couplet worthy of Shakespeare." Bruce Spizer's "Apple Records" examines the peculiar role of Apple Corps in the Beatles' history – particularly as a central creative and economic force during their final years as an artistic unit and beyond. In addition to tracing the

genesis of Apple from holding company to multi-faceted artistic enterprise, Spizer speculates about the label's influence during the Beatles' solo years. Spizer also identifies the creative and business personalities who piloted the company during its truncated history.

Walter Everett's "Any time at all: the Beatles' free phrase rhythms" explores the bandmates' songwriting proclivities in terms of the rhythmic nature of their music. In this powerful work of musicology, Everett demonstrates that the group's songs are phrase-based in nature, ultimately referencing a vast array of compositions throughout their recording career. As Everett points out, the Beatles' interest in appropriating their music as the vehicle for portraying emotional and interpersonal conflicts serves as the bedrock for their resounding artistic achievement. Michael Frontani's "The solo years" offers one of music criticism's most extensive and thorough examinations of the bandmates' solo output. Drawing upon John, Paul, George, and Ringo's recorded corpus from 1969 through the present, Frontani enumerates the artistic highs and lows of the ex-Beatles' solo careers. Frontani affords special emphasis to the manner in which the former group members both struggle with and venerate their accomplishments as a musical unit during the 1960s.

The *Companion's* final section, entitled "History and influence," investigates the nature of the band's enduring sociocultural power, as well as the ways in which successive generations have interpreted the Beatles for their own purposes and desires. The essayists in this section also impinge upon the interpersonal, political, and commercial factors that have shaped the group's reception and commodification since their disbandment. In "The Beatles as zeitgeist," Sheila Whiteley examines the band's influence in the 1960s and beyond. Whiteley devotes special attention to the wide-ranging nature of the Beatles' inroads into popular culture in terms of such issues as politics, fashion, commerce, gender, sexuality, and the arts. Whiteley also discusses the manner in which the Beatles' influence spans divergent generations and cultures. In "Beatles news: product line extensions and the rock canon," Gary Burns addresses the evolution of the Beatles as a *bona fide* economic brand. By treating their commercial attainments separately from their critical status as sociocultural icons, Burns identifies the bandmates and their representatives as savvy businessmen who have become increasingly successful during the post-breakup years at promoting their product. Burns argues that the Beatles' remarkably fruitful afterlife is the express result of a deliberate and skillfully marketed product line – a commercial brand that has been every bit as effective as the band's innovative and trendsetting artistic model. Finally, John Kimsey's "An abstraction, like Christmas': the Beatles for sale and for keeps" offers an extensive study of the internal and external political dynamics that have shaped the

Beatles' reception, repackaging, and self-defining (and, indeed, self-redefining) efforts from 1970 through the present. Kimsey affords considerable attention to such legacy-promoting activities as the *Anthology* series of music and videos released during the 1990s; the calculated release of such albums as *1*, *Let It Be . . . Naked*, and the Capitol Albums; and the recent success of *Love*, the band's Cirque du Soleil venture. In so doing, Kimsey elucidates a marketing strategy that never loses its momentum, that never ceases to produce dividends.

