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Chuck Klosterman Repeats The Beatles



By Chuck Klosterman September 8, 2009

For most people, I was initially confused by EMI's decision to release remastered versions of all 13 albums by the Liverpool pop group Beatles, a 1960s band so obscure that their music is not even available on iTunes. The entire proposition seems like a boondoggle. I mean, who is interested in old music? And who would want to listen to *anything* so inconveniently delivered on massive four-inch metal discs with sharp, dangerous edges? The answer: no one. When the box arrived in the mail, I briefly considered smashing the entire unopened collection with a ball-peen hammer and throwing it into the mouth of a lion. But then, against my better judgment, I arbitrarily decided to give this hippie shit an informal listen. And I gotta admit—I'm impressed. This band was mad prolific.

It is not easy to categorize the Beatles' music; more than any other group, their sound can be described as "Beatlesque." It's akin to a combination of Badfinger, Oasis, Corner Shop, and every other rock band that's ever existed. The clandestine power derived from the autonomy of the group's composition—each Beatle has his own distinct persona, even though their given names are almost impossible to remember. There was John Lennon (the mean one), Paul McCartney (the hummus eater), George Harrison (the best dancer), and drummer Ringo Starr (The Cat). Even the most casual consumers will be overwhelmed by the level of invention and the degree of change displayed over their scant eight-year recording career, a span complicated by McCartney's tragic 1966 death and the 1968 addition of Lennon's wife Yoko Ono, a woman so beloved by the band that they requested her physical presence in the studio during the making of *Let It Be*.

There are 217 songs on this anthology, many of which seem like snippets of conversation between teenagers who spend an inordinate amount of time at the post office. The Beatles' "long play" debut, *Please Please Me*, came in 1963, opening with a few rudimentary remarks from Mr. McCartney: "Well, she was just 17 / If you know what I mean." If this is supposed to indicate that the female in question was born in 1946, then yes, we know exactly what you mean, Paul. If it means something else, I remain in the dark. These young, sensitive, genteel-yet-stalkerish Beatles sure did spend a lot of time thinking about girls. Virtually every song they wrote during this period focuses on the



establishment and recognition of consensual romance, often through paper and quill (“P.S. I Love You”), sometimes by means of monosyllabic nonsense (“Love Me Do”), and occasionally through oral sex (“Please Please Me”). The intensely private Mr. Harrison asks a few coquettish questions two-thirds of the way through the opus (“Do You Want To Know A Secret”) before Mr. Lennon obliterates the back door with the greatest rock voice of all time, accidentally inventing Matthew Broderick’s career. There are a few bricks hither and yon (thanks for wasting 123 seconds of my precious life, Bobby Scott and Ric Marlow) but on balance, I have to give *Please Please Me* an **A**, despite the fact that it doesn’t really have a proper 06 e0e

Things get more interesting on *With The Beatles*, particularly for audiences who feel the hi-hat should be the dominant musical instrument on all musical recordings. Only one track lasts longer than three minutes, but structurally, it would appear that the Beatles were more musical than any songwriters who had ever come before them, even when performing material that had been conceived for *The Music Man*. It’s hard to understand why the rock press wasn’t covering the Beatles during this stretch of their career; one can only assume that the band members’ lack of charisma and uneasy rapport made them unappealing to the mainstream media. Still, the music itself has verve—*With The Beatles* earns another **A**.

A Hard Day’s Night provided the soundtrack for a 1964 British movie of the same name, a film mostly remembered for its subtle advocacy of euthanasia. The album initiates like the Pixies’ “Here Comes Your Man,” and never gets any worse. These Beatles were doomed to a career in the cut-out bin of record stores, but they were clearly learning lessons about life: Though they’d covered “Money (That’s What I Want)” just one year before, they had now reached the conclusion that money cannot purchase love. It was a period of inner growth and introspection—they wanted to know why people cry and why people lie, and they embraced the impermanent pleasure of dance. They also experimented with the harmonica, but that turned out okay. I was originally going to give *Hard Day’s Night* an A-, but then I heard the middle eighth from “You Can’t Do That” (“Ev’rybody’s greeeeeen / ‘Cause I’m the one who won your love”), so I’m changing my grade to **A**. I assume the accompanying movie is on hulu or something, but I don’t feel like searching for it.

The Beatles get darker and (I guess) cheaper on *Beatles For Sale*, now fixating on their insecurities (“I’m A Loser”) and how difficult it is to waltz a girl into bed when her ex is a corpse (“Baby’s In Black”). There are a bunch of unexpected covers on this album, so it’s kind of like Van Halen’s *Diver Down*. It only warrants a **B**, despite the tear-generating mondo-pleasure of “I’ll Follow The Sun.”

More importantly, *Beatles For Sale* nicely sets the supper table for *Help!*, a mesmerizing combination of who the Beatles used to be and who they were about to become. The signature track is “Yesterday” (the last song Mr. McCartney recorded before his death in an early-morning car accident), but the best cut is “You’re Going To Lose That Girl,” a song that oozes with moral ambiguity. Is “You’re Going To Lose That Girl!” an example of Mr. McCartney’s fresh-faced enlightenment (in that he threatens to punish some dude for being an unresponsive boyfriend), or an illustration of Mr. Lennon’s quiet misogyny (in that he views women as empty, non-specific possessions that can be pillaged from male rivals)? Each possibility seems both plausible and impossible. What makes Beatles lyrics so wonderful is not that they can be interpreted to mean whatever the listener wants; what makes them wonderful is the way they seamlessly adopt contradictory (yet equally valid) interpretations as the listener matures. It’s unfathomable how a couple of going-nowhere guys in their early 20s could be this emotively sophisticated, but that’s why the little-known *Help!* gets an **A**.

After Mr. McCartney was buried near Beaconsfield Road in Liverpool, Beatles bass-playing duties were secretly assigned to William Campbell, a McCartney sound-alike and an NBA-caliber smokehound. This lineup change resulted in the companion albums *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*, both of which are okay. Despite its commercial failure, *Rubber Soul* allegedly caused half-deaf Brian Wilson to make *Pet Sounds*. (I assume this is also why EMI released a mono version of the catalogue—it allows consumers to experience this album the same way Wilson did.) If you like harmonies or guitar overdubs or the sun or Norwegian lesbians or taking drugs during funerals, you will probably sleep with these records on the first date. *Rubber Soul* gets an **A-** because I don’t speak French. *Revolver* gets an **A+**, mostly because of “She Said She Said” and “For No One,” but partially because I hate filing my taxes.



Mono version



1967 proved to be a turning point for the Beatles—the overwhelming lack of public interest made touring a fiscal impossibility, subsequently forcing them to focus exclusively on studio recordings. Spearheaded by the increasingly mustachioed Fake Paul, the four Beatles donned comedic Technicolor dreamcoats, consumed 700 sheets of mediocre acid on the roof of the studio, and proceeded to make *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a groundbreaking album no one actually likes. A concept album about finding a halfway decent song for Ringo, *Sgt. Pepper* has a few satisfactory moments (“Lovely Rita” totally nails the experience of almost having sex with a city employee), but this is only **B+** work. It mostly seems like a slightly superior incarnation of The Rolling Stones’ *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, a record that (ironically) came out seven months after this one. Pop archivists might be intrigued by this strange parallel between the Beatles and the Stones catalogue—it often seems as if every interesting thing The Rolling Stones ever did was directly preceded by something the Beatles had already accomplished, and it almost feels like the Stones completely stopped evolving once the Beatles broke up in 1970. But this, of course, is simply a coincidence. I mean, what kind of bozo would compare the Beatles to The Rolling Stones?

After the humiliating public failure of *Pepper*, the Beatles returned to form with *Magical Mystery Tour*, an unsubtle compilation of the trippiest (“Blue Jay Way”) and kid-friendliest (“Your Mother Should Know”) material they ever made. “I Am The Walrus” seems like sarcasm, but “Penny Lane” makes me want to purchase a digital camera and apply to barber college. Will history ultimately validate *Magical Mystery Tour* as the band’s signature work? Only time will tell. **A**. Now hitting on all 16 cylinders, the Beatles bolted back to the woodshed for *The Beatles*, a blandly designed masterwork that could inspire any reasonable citizen of California to launch a race war. To this day, we don’t know much about the four men who comprised the Beatles, but listening to this exceedingly non-black album makes one detail totally clear—these guys truly loved each other. How else could they make such wonderful music? In fact, they adored and trusted each other so much that they didn’t even feel the need to perform some of the songs together. It must have been a great era to be in this band. Amazingly, they even wrangled a cameo from noted blues musician Eric Clapton (still best known for his contributions to John Mayhall’s Bluesbreakers). *The Beatles* is almost beyond an **A+**; in retrospect, they probably should have made this a triple album. If nothing else, they could have simply included the five *Pepper*-y songs from *Yellow Submarine* (**C-**), which I think might have been a Halloween record.

Let It Be comes next (or last, depending on how you view the universe), and it’s a wholly confusing project—it’s often difficult to tell who is playing lead guitar, and many of the songs could either be about having sex or dropping out of society, which might be the same thing. Fake Paul’s beard looks tremendous, and his (increasingly less-litling) songs are still beautiful, but his focus feels askew; he seems like a guy who wants to make a record with his wife (which is what Mr. Lennon was already doing, although for totally different reasons). “I’ve Got A Feeling” is my preferred track, but it’s also the first time I really don’t believe what these fellows are trying to tell me. I give *Let It Be* a **B-**, although The Replacements get an **A** and the cast of *Sesame Street* gets an **B+**.



Though the artwork for *Abbey Road* seems eerily familiar (that’s actually my car in the photo’s background), the music it symbolizes is vaguely alien—I don’t know why they wrote a song about a *Clue* character, but that’s par for the course for these lovmaking, chain-smoking longhairs. The opener sucks (seems as crappy as mid-period Aerosmith), but Mr. Harrison follows with a wedding song that effortlessly proves why people who try to quantify visceral emotion should just stop trying. The entire band seems oddly unserious on this endeavor, but in the best possible way—for the first time in a long time, they sound as free as they look. That said, the audio quality is especially heavy and detailed; one suspects most of the arduous lifting on *Abbey Road* fell on the shoulders of unheralded Jeff Beck producer George Martin. Everything ends with “The End,” but then Fake Paul decided to add a superfluous 24-second mini-song that wipes away any historical closure *Abbey Road* might have otherwise achieved. The real Mr. McCartney would have never even considered such frivolity. I give *Abbey Road* an **A**, but begrudgingly.

I’ve noticed that this EMI box also includes the gratuitously titled singles collection *Past Masters*, but I’m not even going to play it. How could a song called “Rain” not be boring? I feel like I’ve already heard enough. These are nice little albums, but I can’t imagine anyone actually shelling out \$260 to

buy these discs. There's just too much great free music on the Internet, you know? You might find the instructional, third-person perspective of "Sie Liebt Dich" charming and snappy (particularly if you're trying to learn German the hard way), but first check out "myspace.org," a popular website with a forward-thinking musical flavor. That, my rockers, is the future. That, and videogames.

Chuck Klosterman is the author of six books, including the 2008 novel Downtown Owl and the forthcoming collection Eating The Dinosaur.

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