‘Their production will be second to none’: an introduction to *Sgt. Pepper*

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San Francisco, Candlestick Park, 29 August 1966: the 25,000 people in the audience do not know it yet, but they are attending the last public concert the Beatles will ever give. During the tour that is ending tonight, the Fab Four did not perform any songs from their latest album, *Revolver*, considering that their usual line-up of two guitars, bass and drums could not possibly reproduce songs like ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ on stage. Their career has just reached a turning point. Four years of intensive touring and three years of Beatlemania have left them dissatisfied and exhausted. Back in August 1964, they had already expressed their dislike of spending their lives in anonymous hotel rooms and television and radio studios. But this time, it is more than mere dislike: this time, in Cincinnati, they have been frightened to the point of being sick when they found themselves in the middle of 35,000 screaming fans who had just been told that the concert had to be postponed for rain; this time, in the Bible Belt, they also faced hostile demonstrations and received death threats following John Lennon’s statement that the Beatles were ‘more popular than Jesus’.[1] As Philip Norman observes in his classic biography: ‘It did not start out as the Beatles’ last tour. It started as their next tour and finished as the one none of them ever wanted to repeat’ (Norman 1981, p. 254). On the plane home to London after the concert, George Harrison will be the first to answer the question that was on everybody’s mind over the past two months by announcing: ‘Well that’s it, I’m not a Beatle anymore’ (quoted in Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 11).

Back in England, the Beatles will do nothing to confirm or deny their intention to give up touring, which will eventually lead to rumours of the band splitting. However, it is obvious that their decision has already been made. In private, Ringo Starr confesses to Hunter Davies:

> We got in a rut, going round the world. It was a different audience each day, but we were doing the same things. There was no satisfaction in it. Nobody could hear … It was wrecking our playing … The noise of the people just drowned anything. Eventually I just used to play the off beat, instead of a constant beat. I couldn’t hear myself half the time, even on the amps, with all the noise. (Quoted in Davies 1992, p. 292)

1 Lennon made this now-famous statement during an interview with Maureen Cleave that was published in the London *Evening Standard* on 4 March 1966. The scandal began after the latter interview was reprinted in an American teenage magazine, *Datebook*, in July 1966. The exact text was: ‘Christianity will go … It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now; I don’t know which will go first – rock ’n’ roll or Christianity’ (reprinted in Thomson and Gutman 1988, p. 72).

As for John Lennon, his view on the matter is even clearer: 'We've had enough of performing forever. I can't imagine any reason which would make us do any sort of tour again' (Ibid.). Even Paul McCartney – who will appear, in years to come, as the most anxious Beatle for the band to take to the road again – is beginning to admit his weariness when reminded of the Cincinnati incident:

> … we had just a little tarpaulin over the thing and it was really unpleasant to play … I remember we all used to run into the back of these big vans they'd hired, and this one was like a silver-lined van, chromium, nothing in it, like a furniture van with nothing in it, just chrome; we were all piled into this after this really miserable gig, and I said, 'Right, that's it, I agree with you now … between the four of us let's give up the gigging up.' (Quoted in Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 11)

Ever since the beginning, touring has been the *raison d'être* of the Beatles. And even though they all agreed on the decision to 'give up the gigging up', they now find themselves at something of a loss. During the following weeks, they take a break and start considering individual projects. In September, George Harrison, whose recent interest in Indian music has turned into a passion, flies to Bombay for six weeks of sitar lessons with Ravi Shankar. That same month, John Lennon flies to Germany to make his acting debut in Richard Lester's *How I Won the War* and then on to Spain to continue filming in Almeria. He also attends private views at London art galleries such as the Indica, where he will meet a conceptual artist named Yoko Ono in early November. Ringo Starr, the most family minded of the four, takes advantage of his new freedom by spending most of his time home with his wife Maureen and their first child Zak. At the other extreme, Paul McCartney helps a friend who owns a gallery to hang a few paintings by Richard Hamilton, moves into the house he has bought on Cavendish Avenue (close to the EMI Studios), becomes a fixture at underground clubs like the UFO, produces a single for the Escorts, composes the soundtrack for the Boulting brothers' film *The Family Way* and goes off on a long trip to Africa with Mal Evans and girlfriend Jane Asher.[2] It is on the flight back to London from Kenya that he first comes up with an idea that will soon develop into a song and, subsequently, into the concept for the next Beatles' album:

> Sipping the first of several in-flight Scotch and Cokes, [he] asked for a pen and paper, opened the tray table in front of him, took another sip, then wrote 'Big Brother Holding Nitty Gritty Quicksilver Fabs' on the sheet of blue airline stationery, drawing a circle round the last word. Just then lunch was served and Evans leant over to ask what [he] was doing.
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> 'We need a freaky name. Like those California bands. Any ideas?'
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> 'Pass the pepper', said Mal.
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> Once more Paul sipped his drink, then took up the pen again. Underneath 'Fabs' he wrote 'Pepper', drawing another circle round the word, which he attached to the first circle by a line. 'I can use that', he said. (Sandford 2005, p. 128)

2 Mal Evans was a friend of the Beatles' since the days of the Cavern Club. He worked for them as their equipment road manager and then as one of their personal assistants after they ceased touring.

A few days later, on 24 November, the Beatles are back in Abbey Road, ready to enter the new phase of their career. They are closing the chapter of Beatlemania and beginning a new chapter: the chapter of the 'studio years'.

The beginning of the 'studio years'

In his autobiography, George Martin remembers the frame of mind in which he and the Beatles met in their usual studio, Studio Two, in late 1966: 'The time had come for experiment. The Beatles knew it, and I knew it. By November 1966, we had had an enormous string of hits, and we had the confidence, even arrogance, to know that we could try anything we wanted' (Martin with Hornsby 1979, p. 199). The tremendous success the Fab Four had achieved in over four years had certainly put them in a position to experiment with new approaches to songwriting and instrumentation (which they had actually begun to do on *Help!* and, more significantly, on *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*). But it had also led them to the point at which they could enjoy almost complete freedom of the EMI Studios. On their first visit to Abbey Road, in June 1962, they had discovered a very formal place: studio time, for instance, was limited to three three-hour sessions per day (10.00am–1.00pm, 2.30–5.30pm and 7.00–10.00pm); engineers wore white coats, producers wore a collar and tie and a suit and all those people stood very pompously in the control room where artists were not allowed to touch anything. In those days, as Paul McCartney recalls, 'you just went in, sang your stuff and went to the pub. And then *they* mixed it, and *they* rang you up if they thought there was a single, you'd just ring them up "Have we got a hit?" – that's all you wanted to know' (Lewisohn 1988a, p. 10).

Yet it was not long before the Beatles' interest in the recording process of their songs had become apparent. As early as late 1963, in the very early days of Beatlemania, Paul McCartney had declared in the first annual Official Beatles Fan Club Christmas message:

> Lots of people have asked us what we enjoy best, concert, television, or recording. We like doing stage shows, 'cos, you know, it's great to hear an audience enjoying themselves. But the thing we like best is going into the recording studio to make new records … What we like to hear most is one of our songs taking shape in the recording studio, one of the ones that John and I have written, and then listening to the tapes afterwards to see how it all worked out. (Quoted in Riley 1989, p. 3)

The way those songs had been taking shape in the studio during the first two years of the Beatles' recording career had been basically determined by George Martin's desire to 'give the fans on record what they [could] hear on stage – as quickly as possible' (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 77). There was just no time for sophisticated arrangements or experiments of any kind:

> My time with the Beatles was issued to me in little driblets, little sealed packages. I could have an afternoon with them there, an evening with them here … I never really got much time with them. And in order to talk about records, I had to go and chase them, and see them wherever they were. (Martin 2004)

This situation, however, had begun to evolve in 1965–66, as the Beatles, according to Paul McCartney, had 'started to take over things' (quoted in Southall, Vince and Rouse 1997, p. 109). By featuring a string quartet on 'Yesterday', *Help!* had marked their first major departure from their usual live-oriented approach to arrangements; while confirming the latter trend, *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver* had then seen them experimenting with new approaches to the recording studio. Those new approaches were probably the most obvious signs of the freedom that they were beginning to enjoy in Abbey Road. As George Martin puts it, 'We were given very much *carte blanche* with Studio Two' (Ibid., p. 77).

In concrete terms, this '*carte blanche*' meant that the Beatles now had priority access to the EMI Studios; they came and went as they pleased, spent the time they wanted in Studio Two and did not hesitate to demand studios that had already been booked by other artists:

> As the success story of the Beatles unfolded, a new chapter was being written with every new release, so their every whim and fancy was catered for and when it came to recording schedules at Abbey Road there was never any question of them being kept waiting for a studio. People, perhaps unkindly, suggested that the wealthy young men from Liverpool would have bought the studios had they been refused a session or a particular studio. (Ibid., p. 109)

They also enjoyed an almost unlimited studio budget, using extra musicians whenever they needed to, choosing the technicians they wanted to work with and affording themselves the luxury of encouraging those technicians to try and 'abuse the equipment [they] had to achieve a certain sound' (Chris Thomas, quoted in Cunningham 1996, p. 143). The dedication of a house technical engineer named Ken Townsend and the arrival of Geoff Emerick as their regular sound engineer in April 1966 had certainly been among the reasons that led them to explore the latter option throughout the recording of *Revolver*.[3] On several occasions, Townsend and Emerick had even got themselves into trouble with the studios managers for breaking the unwritten studio rules or damaging microphones. But Sir Joseph Lockwood (Chairman of EMI from 1954 to 1974) had never pursued it. As he later admitted:

> I had a pretty close relationship with the Beatles, largely because they were so successful. I knew them better than I did most of the pop artists, and the situation developed that where they were refused something by EMI's management, which was quite often – some disagreement about a minor thing maybe – Lennon and McCartney would come to me. (Quoted in Taylor 1987, p. 36)

Virtually unlimited studio time, a nearly unlimited studio budget: such were the conditions the Beatles faced on the eve of recording their eighth album. Once again,

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3 Ken Townsend is known for having invented Automatic Double-Tracking (ADT) and the 'frequency changer', which the Beatles used extensively throughout the *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver* and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* recording sessions. Even though Geoff Emerick only worked as their regular sound engineer from April 1966 through July 1968, the contribution of his close-miking techniques to the Beatles' sound was as important as that of Townsend's inventions during that period (see Julien 1999; McDonald and Hudson Kaufman 2002).

they had already begun enjoying such conditions before they stopped performing live; but now that they had actually retired from touring, they found themselves in a situation where they could, at last, make the most of them. And this was exactly what they were about to do: make the most of their unlimited studio time and studio budget. As an example, their first album, *Please Please Me*, had been recorded in less than 20 hours from start to finish and cost about £400; by comparison, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* would take no fewer than 700 hours to record and would cost over £25,000 – according to George Martin, 'a fortune in 1967' (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 168).

From 'Strawberry Fields' to 'All You Need Is Love'

The song that inaugurated the *Sgt. Pepper* recording sessions was a song John Lennon had written during his stay in Spain about a Liverpool Salvation Army house named Strawberry Fields. And even though this song would ultimately be released separately, George Martin gives it a special place in his account of the making of the album:

> It is impossible for me to talk about *Sgt. Pepper* without mentioning two crucial songs that neatly bracket it: 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and 'All You Need Is Love'. If 'All You Need Is Love' says everything about where the Beatles were in terms of popularity and success, 'Strawberry Fields Forever' shows us where they were musically. Destined originally to be on *Pepper*, it set the agenda for the whole album. (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 13)

If 'Strawberry Fields Forever' must be regarded as a groundbreaking track in the Beatles' recording career, it is firstly because it represents an unprecedented 55 hours of studio time spread out over five weeks. Furthermore, the band spent most of those 55 hours experimenting with different instruments and different sound treatment techniques, literally building the structure and the sound of the song as they advanced. On 24 November, the recording began with an arrangement featuring a rhythm track and a Mellotron; it then underwent additional changes and overdubs on 28 and 29 November, but the latter session was only nine days before Lennon decided to record a remake with extra musicians. This new series of recording sessions led to a second version with a much heavier drum sound and a four-trumpet and three-cello arrangement that was completed with new overdubs on 21 December. And yet, on 22 December, Lennon was still uncertain about which of the two versions he liked best. So he asked Martin to try and combine them by splicing the beginning of the first one and the end of the second one together. It so happened that both versions were in different keys and different tempos; but as chance had it, the faster version also happened to be the one whose key was about a semitone higher.[4] With the help of Ken Townsend's 'frequency changer', Martin took advantage of those slight

4 In *Summer of Love*, George Martin recalls the two versions being a whole tone apart (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 22), but he mentions a semitone in *All you Need Is Ears* (Martin with Hornsby 1979, p. 201). Geoff Emerick confirms the latter interval in *Here, There and Everywhere* (Emerick and Massey 2006, p. 139).

differences to achieve, on a memorable four-and-a-half-hour session, what he calls 'the edit of the century' (Ibid., p. 22).

Beyond technical prowess, the determination of the overall sound and structure of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' by this manipulation of the phonographic medium clearly shows that by the time they had completed that song, the Beatles were no longer concerned with the performability of their music. To quote the words of George Martin again, '… that was going to be what became *Pepper*. It wasn't *Pepper* – no one heard of *Sgt. Pepper* [yet] –, but it was gonna be a record that was gonna be made in the studio … [with] songs which they had written which couldn't be performed live: they were designed to be studio productions. And that was the difference' (Beatles 2003b). Paul McCartney says nothing else when he remembers the Beatles starting to get 'full-time into the studio and saying, at the time: "Now our performance *is* that record"' (Ibid.).

Nevertheless, with the completion of 'Strawberry Fields Forever' came Christmas time and then the 1966 Christmas market, for which EMI and the Beatles' manager, Brian Epstein, needed a brand-new single. Having finally resigned himself to formally announcing that the Fab Four were through with touring a few weeks earlier, Epstein was all the more desperate for a hit that would help to bolster their declining popularity. In addition to 'Strawberry Fields Forever', they had almost completed two tracks so far: 'Penny Lane' and 'When I'm Sixty-Four'. In many ways, the first song appeared as McCartney's answer to Lennon's 'Strawberry Fields Forever': both titles referred to areas of Liverpool close to where the Beatles had been brought up and both recordings had seen them experimenting with abandon for over 50 hours.[5] Determined to provide Epstein with a strong combination, Martin decided to let him have a double-A-sided single.

'Strawberry Fields Forever'/'Penny Lane' came out on 17 February 1967 in the United States and four days later in the United Kingdom. It was the Beatles' third double-A side in a four consecutive British releases;[6] and quite ironically, considering it was to become 'what many still regard as the greatest coupling ever' (Cunningham 1996, p. 130), it was also the Beatles' first single to fail to reach number one in the United Kingdom since 'Please Please Me' had topped the charts in January 1963 – 'Strawberry Fields Forever'/'Penny Lane' actually stalled at number two, being outstripped by Engelbert Humperdinck's 'Release Me'. Naturally, the press began suggesting that the band was finished: '… to *Melody Maker*, for one, it seemed as if the dream would be over before you could say "Bee Gees"' (Sandford 2005, p. 130). But the Beatles did not seem to worry so much; during an interview on the British radio, Paul McCartney was even heard commenting: 'It's fine if you're kept sort of from being number one

5 As an example, the distinctive keyboard sound of 'Penny Lane' resulted of the combination of six piano tracks that were superimposed onto each other between 29 December 1966 and 6 January 1967 – one of those tracks consisted of a piano played through a Vox guitar amplifier with added reverberation and another one of a piano recorded at half speed and then sped up on replay.

6 'We Can Work It Out'/'Day Tripper' (issued on 3 December 1965 in the United Kingdom and 6 December 1965 in the United States) was the Beatles' first single officially released as a double-A side. Eight months later, 'Eleanor Rigby'/'Yellow Submarine' (issued on 5 August in the United Kingdom and 8 August in the United States) was the second.

by … a record like "Release Me", 'cos you're not trying to do the same kind of thing as "Release Me"'s trying to do … So that's a completely different scene altogether … it doesn't really matter, anyway' (Beatles 2003b). Such a diplomatic statement was obviously the least one might have expected from 'the most cautious and image-conscious Beatle' (Norman 1981, p. 289). Still, there was more than diplomacy behind those words; beyond caution and possible calculation, they revealed first and foremost an incredible self-confidence as the Beatles had just embarked upon a project that was going to revolutionize the concept of an album: '… a month or two earlier the press and the music papers had been saying, "What are the Beatles up to? Drying up, I suppose." So it was nice, making an album like *Pepper* and thinking, "Yeah, drying up, I suppose. That's right"' (Beatles 2000, p. 252).

By 1 February 1967, the idea of a fictitious band whose name would be inspired by the Californian psychedelic scene had finally developed into a song: 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'. And just around the time the Beatles had started recording that song, it had begun evolving into a more ambitious scheme that consisted of extending the concept of a fictitious band to the Beatles themselves and to the whole album that they were working on. As Mark Lewisohn points out:

> It wasn't going to be *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* until 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band' had come along. That is, the album was not 'The Sgt. Pepper Project' until the recording of this Paul McCartney's song and Paul's realization soon afterwards that the Beatles could actually pretend they were Sgt. Pepper's band, the remaining songs on the LP forming a part of a show given by the fictitious band. (Lewisohn 1988b, p. 95)

It would take a little less than three additional months for the Beatles to see the 'Sgt. Pepper Project' through. The recording, properly speaking, was completed on 21 April 1967, with the taping of nonsense gibberish that they had decided to cut into pieces, stick together at random and play backwards before putting it in the concentric run-out groove of side two of their new album. At John Lennon's request, a high-pitch whistle of 15 kHz especially intended for dogs was also inserted across the spiral of the run-out groove – that is, between the final chord of 'A Day in the Life' and the concentric nonsense. As the recording had been progressing, this type of experimentation for art's sake had become one of the most characteristic features of what was now known as *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*; on certain sessions, it had gone to such extremes that George Martin had even been led to wonder whether he and the Beatles were going too far:

> Five per cent of me was thinking, 'This is never going to work, we've been too pretentious, it's all too complicated and uncommercial, far too different from what the Beatles have done before.' The other ninety-five per cent of me were thinking, 'This is brilliant! They're going to love it!' (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 151)

A few weeks later, as the release date was coming closer, he simply found himself in a true state of uncertainty: 'With the "failure" of "Strawberry Fields Forever" and "Penny Lane" … fresh in our minds, we all held our breath to see what the reaction to it would be. Would it sell? Would the critics savage it?' (Ibid.). Needless to say, he worried for no reason.

The toppermost of the poppermost

If 'Strawberry Fields Forever' set the agenda for the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* recording sessions, 'All You Need Is Love' does say everything about where the Beatles were in terms of popularity as the 'Summer of Love' was blossoming. They had begun recording this new song on 14 June 1967, as a commission for the BBC who had invited them to appear on a live television programme to be broadcast worldwide during the evening of 25 June. This programme, *Our World*, was the first global television satellite link-up; it was to be seen by a potential audience of 400 million people across five continents and the British contribution to this world premiere was a performance by the Beatles from Abbey Road's Studio One.

In *Shout!*, Philip Norman concludes the short paragraph he spares for the event with the following remark: 'So, on 25 June 1967, was registered the ultimate statistic of [the Beatles'] career' (Norman 1981, p. 290). In *Summer of Love*, George Martin's analysis of the broadcast is quite a similar one:

> The huge success of the Beatles' live performance of 'All You Need Is Love' on that show is important. It shows that they had become, in the words of a little rhyme John [Lennon] had long ago composed to keep up group morale on those endless drives to dreary dance halls, 'the toppermost of the poppermost'.
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> JOHN: 'Where are we going, fellas?'
>
> CHORUS: 'To the top, Johnny, to the TOP!'
>
> JOHN: 'And where is the top, fellas?'
>
> CHORUS: 'To the toppermost of the poppermost!'
>
> Important, too, is the fact that the Beatles were the automatic choice to represent Britain worldwide. (Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 160)

Indeed, the Beatles' participation in *Our World* says everything about the position they had achieved in popular music and British culture a few weeks after *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* had come out. In the United Kingdom, the album had been an immediate popular sensation: it had been released on 1 June 1967 and had sold 250,000 copies in the first week; within one month, sales would exceed half a million copies (they would eventually mount to one million by April 1973). In the United States, it had been issued a day later: advance sales had been one million and, within the first three months, it would sell two and a half million copies while occupying the top slot on the *Billboard* album chart for 15 weeks – a position it would hold in the United Kingdom Album Chart for 27 weeks as well. In other words, on 25 June 1967, *Sgt. Pepper* was already on its way to becoming the most successful British album of all times.

On the critical front, the record had also received significant acclaim. In the *New Musical Express*, Allen Evans ended his review by noting: 'No one can deny that the Beatles have provided us with more musical entertainment which will both please the ear and get the brain working a bit too!' (quoted in Taylor 1987, p. 42). In *Melody Maker*, Chris Welch had written: 'The lads have brought forth yet another saga of entertainment and achievement that will keep the British pop industry ticking over securely for another six months at least' (Ibid., pp. 41–2). By 1967, the Beatles were certainly used to (or at least prepared for) such reviews. But this time, the difference was that the most spectacular comments had come from the most unexpected

critics. For example, in the 29 May issue of *The Times*, William Mann had called *Sgt. Pepper* a 'pop music master-class' (reprinted in Thomson and Gutman 1988, p. 93); in *Newsweek*, Jack Kroll had compared its lyrics with T.S. Eliot, while the *Times Literary Supplement* had called them 'a barometer of our times' (quoted in Norman 1981, p. 287); the *New York Times Review of Books* had announced that *Sgt. Pepper* heralded 'a new and golden Renaissance of Song' (Ibid.) and the *New Statesman*'s Wilfrid Mellers had summed it all up by stating: '… though it starts from the conventions of pop it becomes "art" – and art of an increasingly subtle kind' (quoted in Martin with Pearson 1994, p. 153).

Referring to William Mann's review in *The Times*, Philip Norman observes:

> Tunes that made little boys jig up and down were, at the same moment, receiving praise … for their 'sweeping bass figures and hurricane glissandos'. Elsewhere, the practice begun by that paper's music critic, of burying something direct and enjoyable under tormented technical gibberish, was greatly assisted by the provision of the lyrics in full. (Norman 1981, p. 287)

As a matter of fact, Mann did not mention 'sweeping bass figures' but the 'shapely bass line of "With a Little Help from My Friends"' (reprinted in Thomson and Gutman 1988, pp. 92–3) and, more generally, bass lines that were more 'vivid' (Ibid., p. 92) than they used to be in beat music. What is more, those lines were not even the ones that contained the most technical jargon: among such examples, the critic also evoked 'the Alberti string figuration in … "Eleanor Rigby"' (Ibid., p. 91), a music that needed no more 'to be harmonized entirely diatonically in root positions' (Ibid., p. 92) and the 'recognisably mixolydian' (Ibid.) tune of George Harrison's 'Within You Without You'. This quite unusual way of approaching a popular work reveals another important feature of *Sgt. Pepper*: it was, finally, the album that achieved the 'cultural legitimization of popular music' (Moore 1997, p. 62). To put it differently, those reviews, whatever the true motivations of their authors, represented the final steps in a process that was pointing towards the emergence of popular music as a worthy field of research for scholars in disciplines like musicology, sociology, literature, history or cultural theory (to name but a few).[7] As for illustrating the appropriateness of such disciplines to explain the position *Sgt. Pepper* has held over the past 40 years in the Beatles' discography, in the history of songwriting, in the history of record production, in the history of popular music and, why not say it, in the history of Western music, it is, precisely, the aim of the chapters that follow.

7 The very origins of this process may be traced back to the publication of an article entitled 'What songs the Beatles sang…' in the 27 December 1963 issue of *The Times* (reprinted in Thomson and Gutman 1988, pp. 27–9). Although the latter article was printed unsigned, it has since been attributed to William Mann.