

= Only a Northern Song =

" Only a Northern Song " is a song by the English rock group the Beatles from their 1969 album Yellow Submarine . Written by George Harrison , it was recorded mainly in February 1967 during the sessions for Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band but the Beatles chose not to include it on that album . Instead , it was one of the four new songs that the band provided for the 1968 animated film Yellow Submarine , to meet their contractual obligations to United Artists .

Harrison wrote " Only a Northern Song " out of dissatisfaction with his status as a junior songwriter with the Beatles ' publishing company , Northern Songs . The lyrics and music convey his disenchantment at how the company retained the copyright for the songs it published , and at how , following its public listing in 1965 , the major shareholders profited more from his compositions than he did . The recording features Hammond organ , played by Harrison , and an overdubbed montage of assorted sounds including trumpet blasts and spoken voices , anticipating John Lennon 's 1968 sound collage " Revolution 9 " . Due to the difficulty in assembling the completed track from two tape sources , " Only a Northern Song " remained a rare song from the Beatles ' post @-@ 1963 catalogue that was unavailable in true stereo until 1999 . That year , it was remixed for inclusion on the album Yellow Submarine Songtrack .

The song has received a varied response from reviewers ; while Ian MacDonald dismisses the track as a " self @-@ indulgent dirge " , the website Ultimate Classic Rock identifies it as one of the Beatles ' best works in the psychedelic rock genre . A version of the song with a different vocal part , and omitting the sound collage overdubs , was issued on the Beatles ' 1996 outtakes compilation Anthology 2 . Gravenhurst and Yonder Mountain String Band are among the artists who have covered " Only a Northern Song " .

= = Background and inspiration = =

George Harrison said that the subject matter for " Only a Northern Song " related to both his city of birth , Liverpool , in Merseyside , and the fact that the copyright for the composition belonged to the Beatles ' publishing company , Northern Songs . The company was floated on the London Stock Exchange in February 1965 , as a means of saving John Lennon and Paul McCartney , the Beatles ' principal songwriters , the tax liability generated through the international success of their catalogue . Harrison had formed his own publishing company , Harrisongs , in late 1964 ; despite the financial advantages offered by his 80 per cent stake in that company , he agreed to remain with Northern Songs , to aid the flotation scheme . Among the four Beatles , Lennon and McCartney were major shareholders in Northern Songs , each owning 15 per cent of the public company 's shares , and the pair earned considerable wealth over the first year of the flotation . Harrison and Ringo Starr , as contracted songwriters , owned 0 @-@ 8 per cent each . This arrangement ensured that , in addition to the company retaining the copyright of all its published songs , Lennon and McCartney profited more from Harrison 's compositions than he did .

Author Brian Southall describes " Only a Northern Song " as Harrison 's " personal denunciation of the Beatles ' music publishing business " . When discussing the song in two late 1990s interviews with Billboard editor @-@ in @-@ chief Timothy White , Harrison commented that the main target of his complaints was Dick James , the managing director of Northern Songs . Having been signed by James in 1963 , at the age of twenty , Harrison said that the publisher had failed to explain that by signing the contract , he was also signing away the ownership of his compositions . Harrison added that he only understood the consequences after the 1965 flotation , when the major shareholders were " making all this money out of this catalog " . With reference to the Rutles ' 1978 parody of the Beatles ' history , All You Need Is Cash , he also told White : " I think [ the message behind ' Only a Northern Song ' ] was put better in the make @-@ believe TV documentary ? where it said , ' Dick Jaws , an out @-@ of @-@ work music publisher of no fixed ability ' signed them up for the rest of their lives . "

In author Ian MacDonald 's estimation , " Only a Northern Song " suggests that Harrison " had yet to recover his enthusiasm for being a Beatle " after he had threatened to leave the group following their

final concert tour , in August 1966 . Before the band regrouped in November that year to begin recording their album Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band , Harrison spent six weeks in India with his sitar teacher , Ravi Shankar , a visit that heightened his disinterest in the Beatles ' project . MacDonald considers that Harrison 's link with northern England in " Only a Northern Song " was influenced by the Beatles working on songs about growing up in Liverpool , which was the concept under consideration at the start of the Sgt. Pepper sessions .

= = Composition and musical structure = =

Harrison wrote " Only a Northern Song " on a Hammond organ , which became his preferred instrument for songwriting during 1967 , replacing the guitar . The song is in the key of A major , although MacDonald gives B minor as a secondary key . The opening organ part ends with a preview of the melody over which the song title appears in the song proper . After this short introduction , the composition is structured into two portions consisting of two verses and a chorus each , which are followed by a single verse , a final chorus and an outro , with some of these sections rendered as instrumental passages .

The composition is a meta @-@ song , in that its subject is the work itself . While commenting on the pointlessness of writing for Northern Songs , Harrison employs musical dissonance to express his dissatisfaction with the company , through the use of what musicologist Walter Everett terms " ill @-@ behaved tones " and " wrong @-@ mode " chords .

From the verse 's opening A major chord , the melody moves to a ii minor voicing , rendered as B minor 7 / 11 through the inclusion of a low @-@ register E note . In his lyrics , Harrison acknowledges the apparent awkwardness of such a change , singing " You may think the chords are going wrong " and , in the final verse , that the harmony might be " a little dark and out of key " . Musicologist Alan Pollack considers the song 's music and lyrical message to be " uncannily in tune " with one another , a combination that is accentuated by surprising and irregular phrase @-@ lengths in the verses .

Contrasting with the drawn @-@ out melody over the verses , the choruses present a fast progression of chords ? specifically , E major , B minor 7 , G major , C ? 7 and F ? 7 . In the first chorus , Harrison comments that , given the inadequacy of his publishing arrangement , " It doesn 't really matter what chords I play " . Author Ian Inglis interprets this line as mirroring the singer 's complaint to Beatles biographer Hunter Davies in the late 1960s , regarding the futility of the band 's live performances when their screaming fans never listened to the music the Beatles were playing . Harrison biographer Simon Leng describes " Only a Northern Song " as the first example of its composer " pushing back at the Beatles as an organization he found wanting " , a theme Harrison returned to in 1968 with " Not Guilty " , with his comments on the group 's internal discord .

= = Production = =

= = = Recording = = =

The Beatles taped the basic track for " Only a Northern Song " at EMI 's Abbey Road Studios on 13 February 1967 , during the sessions for Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band . As was typical with his new compositions , Harrison had yet to give the song a title , so it was instead referred to as " Not Known " . The line @-@ up on the track comprised Harrison on organ , Lennon on tambourine , McCartney on bass and Starr on drums . The band recorded nine takes of the song before selecting take 3 for further work . The following day , after the studio engineers had carried out a reduction mix , Harrison added two tracks of lead vocals .

The song was disliked by the Beatles ' producer , George Martin , and the band elected to omit it from the album . As his sole writing contribution to Sgt. Pepper , Harrison instead offered the Indian @-@ styled " Within You Without You " , which , in Martin 's recollection , was welcomed with " a bit of a relief all round " . " Only a Northern Song " then became the first track the group provided for

the soundtrack to the Yellow Submarine animated film ( 1968 ) , in line with their contractual obligation to United Artists to supply four new songs . Described by Beatles historian Mark Lewisohn as a " myth " , a story later circulated that Harrison had rush @-@ written the composition for United Artists in early 1968 , after Al Brodax , the film 's producer , approached the band for a final song .

= = = Overdubbing = = =

The group returned to " Only a Northern Song " on 20 April 1967 , within an hour of completing the final mixing on Sgt. Pepper . In addition to replacing the original bass guitar and vocal parts , the overdubs carried out that day included trumpet and piano , played by McCartney and Lennon , respectively , together with glockenspiel and percussion . A second 4 @-@ track tape recorder was used for the song , so allowing the various instrumental parts and studio effects to be spread across eight available channels .

The Beatles performed much of the overdubs in a seemingly haphazard manner ; MacDonald describes the result as " a consciously sloven piece of work " . Tom Maginnis of AllMusic finds the recording " heavily steeped in the psychedelic sounds of the period , using liberal amounts of loose instrumentation " , particularly " chaotic bursts of trumpet " . In Pollack 's description , these later additions constitute a " noise track " , which further heightens the theme of discordance and is used to fill the song 's instrumental sections , becoming especially prominent during the outro . With its inclusion of reversed tape loops and spoken voices , Inglis has cited the sound collage effect as a precedent for Lennon 's 1968 avant @-@ garde track " Revolution 9 " and an early example of the electronic music genre .

= = = Mixing = = =

The Beatles completed a final mix of the song on 21 April 1967 . Due to the difficulty in getting the two 4 @-@ track machines to play at exactly the same time , only a mono mix was attempted . In October 1968 , while preparing the Yellow Submarine soundtrack album for release , EMI 's engineers created a mock @-@ stereo ( duophonic ) mix from this mono mix , instead of returning to the master tapes . For the monaural version of the album , originally available only in the UK , the engineers combined the two channels from the duophonic mix , rather than using the April 1967 mono mix .

= = Appearance in Yellow Submarine film = =

In the Yellow Submarine film , the song appears during a scene when the submarine carrying the Beatles travels through the Sea of Science , one of the seven seas around Pepperland . Referring to the psychedelic imagery in the animation , author Stephen Glynn considers that this segment " only ' makes sense ' when read as attempting an audio @-@ visual recreation of the hallucinogenic state " . Jeremiah Massengale , an academic in the field of visual communication , highlights the sequence as one of many technical innovations introduced by the 1968 film , saying : " accompanying multi @-@ colored , square portrait paintings of the Beatles during ' Only a Northern Song ' , there 's a creative use of an oscillator picking out the sound waves of the track . " Glynn cites the drug @-@ inspired imagery of this and two other song sequences as the true reason that Rank pulled Yellow Submarine from its UK cinema run , rather than the company 's official reasoning that the film had performed poorly at the box office .

The " Only a Northern Song " segment was the only clip shown in a feature about Yellow Submarine on the television show How It Is . Produced by Tony Palmer and including portions of the stage play based on Lennon 's book In His Own Write , the show was broadcast on BBC1 two days after the film 's world premiere in London , on 19 July 1968 .

= = Release = =

In January 1969 , " Only a Northern Song " was issued as the second track on side one of the Yellow Submarine LP , with George Martin 's orchestral score for the film occupying the whole of side two . The soundtrack was viewed as a secondary release by the Beatles , who delayed its release to allow for their 1968 self @-@ titled double album , also known as " the White Album " . Although Harrison 's contract with James had expired in March 1968 , the copyright for " Only a Northern Song " and his second contribution to the film , " It 's All Too Much " , remained with Northern Songs rather than being assigned to Harrisongs as his four White Album compositions had been . The song 's release coincided with a period of acrimony between James and the Beatles , particularly Lennon and McCartney , about whom Lewisohn writes : " If John and Paul still thought they owned their songs [ following the flotation of Northern Songs ] they were deluding themselves . " In March 1969 , wary of the disharmony within the band and the problems affecting their Apple Corps business empire , James sold his majority shareholding in Northern Songs to Lew Grade 's ATV Music , thereby selling on the ownership of the Beatles catalogue .

In a contemporary review of Yellow Submarine , Beat Instrumental lamented that it offered little new material by the band , but described " Only a Northern Song " and " It 's All Too Much " as " superb pieces " that " redeem " side one . Recalling the release in his 1977 book The Beatles Forever , however , Nicholas Schaffner dismissed the track as one of the " trifling baubles " the Beatles provided for a film project they had little interest in originally . While adhering to Brodax 's account of the song 's creation , NME critic Bob Woffinden found " considerable merit " in " Only a Northern Song " , and suggested that Harrison 's divergence from his usual , methodical approach to songwriting was one he should pursue more often .

In January 1996 , the song was issued as the B @-@ side to " It 's All Too Much " on a blue @-@ vinyl jukebox single , as part of a series of Beatles releases by Capitol Records ' CEMA Special Markets division . By 1999 , " Only a Northern Song " remained one of only two post @-@ 1963 Beatles songs not to have been made unavailable in true stereo ( the other being " You Know My Name ( Look Up the Number ) " ) . That year , a stereo version became available when the track was remixed for inclusion on the album Yellow Submarine Songtrack .

= = Retrospective assessment and legacy = =

Among more recent reviews of the Yellow Submarine album , David Gassman of PopMatters admires the song for its " mordant humor " and interprets the lyrics as a possible " dig " at Lennon and McCartney . Gassman adds , with reference to the superior " It 's All Too Much " : " as long as songs like this were being relegated to throwaway projects , George could be excused for sniping at John and Paul in ' Only a Northern Song ' . " Discussing the same two tracks , Pitchfork Media 's Mark Richardson writes that they offer little of interest aside from their " swirling " psychedelic effects , although he considers that " Only a Northern Song " " at least has a good joke going for it , simultaneously alluding to the North of England and the Beatles ' Lennon @-@ McCartney @-@ dominated publishing company " .

As with most of the Beatles ' post @-@ Sgt. Pepper 1967 recordings , their contributions to Yellow Submarine have traditionally been held in low regard by the band 's biographers . Lewisohn describes the group 's 20 April overdubs on " Only a Northern Song " as " a curious session " and writes that their work over this period " display [ s ] a startling lack of cohesion and enthusiasm " . Mark Hertsgaard considers that " Only a Northern Song " was " understandably ? rejected as not good enough for Sgt Pepper " , while MacDonald dismisses the track as " dismal " and a " self @-@ indulgent dirge " .

More impressed , Alex Young of Consequence of Sound identifies the song as " lyrically the [ album 's ] quintessential track , as it perfectly defines Yellow Submarine in two verses alone , while coming out sonically like a Pink Floyd b @-@ side from the Obscured By Clouds sessions " . In a 2003 review , in Mojo , Peter Doggett said that Harrison 's two contributions " did much to rescue the album from oblivion " , and he described " Only a Northern Song " as " gloriously ironic " . Writing for Ultimate Classic Rock in 2013 , Dave Swanson ranked the track third on his list of the " Top 10 Beatles Psychedelic Songs " ( following " Tomorrow Never Knows " and " I Am the Walrus " ) and

concluded : " Would ' Sgt. Pepper ' have been even greater had this mind @-@ melter been included in favor of , say , ' When I 'm Sixty Four ? ' All signs point to a positive affirmation . " In 2006 , " Only a Northern Song " was ranked 75th in Mojo 's list " The 101 Greatest Beatles Songs " , where Glenn Tilbrook described it as " a wonderfully unexpected tune " and suggested that Harrison 's " lovely and sardonic lyric ? could be the inspiration for a thousand Rutles songs " .

While noting Yellow Submarine 's status as the Beatles ' only " inessential " album , Bruce Eder of AllMusic describes " Only a Northern Song " as " an odd piece of psychedelic ersatz , mixing trippiness and some personal comments " . Referring to the revelations offered in the song , Eder adds : " they present Harrison 's vision of how music and recording sounded , from the inside @-@ out and the outside @-@ in , during the psychedelic era ? the song thus provided a rare glimpse inside the doors of perception of being a Beatle ( or , at least , one aspect of being this particular Beatle ) circa 1967 . " Writing for Billboard in 2001 , Bill Holland grouped " Only a Northern Song " with the Byrds ' " So You Want to Be a Rock ' n ' Roll Star " and early @-@ 1970s releases by the Kinks and Joni Mitchell , as songs that constitute the first wave of musical statements in which artists " accuse or indict their industry 's business policies " . Inglis views " Only a Northern Song " as the Beatles ' " first ' postmodern ' song " , due to the " deliberate ironic intent " evident in the subject matter and in the use of tape effects and scattered conversation .

= = Other versions = =

An alternative edit of the song appeared on the Beatles ' Anthology 2 out @-@ takes compilation in 1996 . Slightly sped up , and mixed in stereo , this version comprises the song 's basic track without most of the April 1967 overdubs , and with a vocal take that contains some changes to the lyrics .

Coinciding with the popularity of " It 's All Too Much " among acid @-@ rock bands of the early 1990s , Sun Dial released a cover of " Only a Northern Song " as the B @-@ side of their 1991 single " Fireball " . In 2009 , Greg Davis and jazz singer @-@ songwriter Chris Weisman named their psychedelic folk partnership , Northern Songs , after the Beatles track . Their 2010 album Northern Songs similarly honoured the song , as well as including a cover version of " It 's All Too Much " .

When Mojo released the CD Yellow Submarine Resurfaces in July 2012 , " Only a Northern Song " was covered by Gravenhurst . Yonder Mountain String Band included the song in their live performances during 2013 and 2015 .

= = Personnel = =

According to Ian MacDonald :

George Harrison ? vocals , Hammond organ , tape effects , noises

John Lennon ? piano , glockenspiel , tape effects , noises

Paul McCartney ? bass guitar , trumpet , tape effects , noises

Ringo Starr ? drums