Genres

Originating as a skiffle group, the Beatles quickly embraced 1950s rock and roll and helped pioneer the Merseybeat genre,[410] and their repertoire ultimately expanded to include a broad variety of pop music.[411] Reflecting the range of styles they explored, Lennon said of Beatles for Sale, "You could call our new one a Beatles country-and-western LP",[412] while Gould credits Rubber Soul as "the instrument by which legions of folk-music enthusiasts were coaxed into the camp of pop".[413]

Two electric guitars, a light brown violin-shaped bass and a darker brown guitar resting against a Vox amplifier

A Höfner "violin" bass guitar and Gretsch Country Gentleman guitar, models played by McCartney and Harrison, respectively; the Vox AC30 amplifier behind them is the model the Beatles used during performances in the early 1960s.

Although the 1965 song "Yesterday" was not the first pop record to employ orchestral strings, it marked the group's first recorded use of classical music elements. Gould observes, "The more traditional sound of strings allowed for a fresh appreciation of their talent as composers by listeners who were otherwise allergic to the din of drums and electric guitars."[414] They continued to experiment with string arrangements to various effect; Sgt. Pepper's "She's Leaving Home", for instance, is "cast in the mold of a sentimental Victorian ballad", Gould writes, "its words and music filled with the clichés of musical melodrama".[415]

The band's stylistic range expanded in another direction with their 1966 B-side "Rain", described by Martin Strong as "the first overtly psychedelic Beatles record".[416] Other psychedelic numbers followed, such as "Tomorrow Never Knows" (recorded before "Rain"), "Strawberry Fields Forever", "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds", and "I Am the Walrus". The influence of Indian classical music was evident in Harrison's "The Inner Light", "Love You To", and "Within You Without You" – Gould describes the latter two as attempts "to replicate the raga form in miniature".[417]

Innovation was the most striking feature of their creative evolution, according to music historian and pianist Michael Campbell: "'A Day in the Life' encapsulates the art and achievement of the Beatles as well as any single track can. It highlights key features of their music: the sound imagination, the persistence of tuneful melody, and the close coordination between words and music. It represents a new category of song – more sophisticated than pop ... and uniquely innovative. There literally had never before been a song – classical or vernacular – that had blended so many disparate elements so imaginatively."[418] Philosophy professor Bruce Ellis Benson agrees: "The Beatles ... give us a wonderful example of how such far-ranging influences as Celtic music, rhythm and blues, and country and western could be put together in a new way."[419]

Author Dominic Pedler describes the way they crossed musical styles: "Far from moving sequentially from one genre to another (as is sometimes conveniently suggested) the group maintained in parallel their mastery of the traditional, catchy chart hit while simultaneously forging rock and dabbling with a wide range of peripheral influences from country to vaudeville. One of these threads was their take on folk music, which would form such essential groundwork for their later collisions with Indian music and philosophy."[420] As the personal relationships between the band members grew increasingly strained, their individual tastes became more apparent. The minimalistic cover artwork for the White Album contrasted with the complexity and diversity of its music, which encompassed Lennon's "Revolution 9" (whose musique concrète approach was influenced by Yoko Ono), Starr's country song "Don't Pass Me By", Harrison's rock ballad "While My Guitar Gently Weeps", and the "proto-metal roar" of McCartney's "Helter Skelter".[421]

Contribution of George Martin

The Beatles with George Martin in the studio in the mid-1960s

George Martin (second from right) in the studio with the Beatles in the mid-1960s

George Martin's close involvement in his role as producer made him one of the leading candidates for the informal title of the "fifth Beatle".[422] He applied his classical musical training in various ways, and functioned as "an informal music teacher" to the progressing songwriters, according to Gould.[423] Martin suggested to a sceptical McCartney that the arrangement of "Yesterday" should feature a string quartet accompaniment, thereby introducing the Beatles to a "hitherto unsuspected world of classical instrumental colour", in MacDonald's description.[424] Their creative development was also facilitated by Martin's willingness to experiment in response to their suggestions, such as adding "something baroque" to a particular recording.[425] In addition to scoring orchestral arrangements for recordings, Martin often performed on them, playing instruments including piano, organ and brass.[426]

Collaborating with Lennon and McCartney required Martin to adapt to their different approaches to songwriting and recording. MacDonald comments, "while [he] worked more naturally with the conventionally articulate McCartney, the challenge of catering to Lennon's intuitive approach generally spurred him to his more original arrangements, of which "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" is an outstanding example."[427] Martin said of the two composers' distinct songwriting styles and his stabilising influence:

Compared with Paul's songs, all of which seemed to keep in some sort of touch with reality, John's had a psychedelic, almost mystical quality ... John's imagery is one of the best things about his work – 'tangerine trees', 'marmalade skies', 'cellophane flowers' ... I always saw him as an aural Salvador Dalí, rather than some drug-ridden record artist. On the other hand, I would be stupid to pretend that drugs didn't figure quite heavily in the Beatles' lives at that time ... they knew that I, in my schoolmasterly role, didn't approve ... Not only was I not into it myself, I couldn't see the need for it; and there's no doubt that, if I too had been on dope, Pepper would never have been the album it was. Perhaps it was the combination of dope and no dope that worked, who knows?[428]

Harrison echoed Martin's description of his stabilising role: "I think we just grew through those years together, him as the straight man and us as the loonies; but he was always there for us to interpret our madness – we used to be slightly avant-garde on certain days of the week, and he would be there as the anchor person, to communicate that through the engineers and on to the tape."[429]

In the studio

See also: Recording practices of the Beatles

Making innovative use of technology while expanding the possibilities of recorded music, the Beatles urged experimentation by Martin and his recording engineers. Seeking ways to put chance occurrences to creative use, accidental guitar feedback, a resonating glass bottle, a tape loaded the wrong way round so that it played backwards – any of these might be incorporated into their music.[430] Their desire to create new sounds on every new recording, combined with Martin's arranging abilities and the studio expertise of EMI staff engineers Norman Smith, Ken Townsend and Geoff Emerick, all contributed significantly to their records from Rubber Soul and, especially, Revolver onwards.[430]

Along with innovative studio techniques such as sound effects, unconventional microphone placements, tape loops, double tracking, and vari-speed recording, the Beatles augmented their songs with instruments that were unconventional in rock music at the time. These included string and brass ensembles as well as Indian instruments such as the sitar in "Norwegian Wood" and the swarmandal in "Strawberry Fields Forever".[431] They also used novel electronic instruments such as the Mellotron, with which McCartney supplied the flute voices on the "Strawberry Fields Forever" intro,[432] and the clavioline, an electronic keyboard that created the unusual oboe-like sound on "Baby, You're a Rich Man".[433]

Legacy

Main article: Cultural impact of the Beatles

Statue in Liverpool

The Beatles statue at Pier Head in Liverpool, their home city

Road crossing in London

Abbey Road crossing in London is a popular destination for Beatles fans. In December 2010 it was given grade II listed status for its "cultural and historical importance"; the Abbey Road studios themselves had been given similar status earlier in the year.[434]

Former Rolling Stone magazine associate editor Robert Greenfield compared the Beatles to Picasso, as "artists who broke through the constraints of their time period to come up with something that was unique and original ... [I]n the form of popular music, no one will ever be more revolutionary, more creative and more distinctive ..."[357] The British poet Philip Larkin described their work as "an enchanting and intoxicating hybrid of Negro rock-and-roll with their own adolescent romanticism" and "the first advance in popular music since the War".[435]

In 1964, the Beatles' arrival in the U.S. is credited with initiating the album era;[436] the music historian Joel Whitburn says that LP sales soon "exploded and eventually outpaced the sales and releases of singles" in the music industry.[437] They not only sparked the British Invasion of the US,[438] they became a globally influential phenomenon as well.[439] From the 1920s, the US had dominated popular entertainment culture throughout much of the world, via Hollywood films, jazz, the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, and later, the rock and roll that first emerged in Memphis, Tennessee.[343] The Beatles are regarded as British cultural icons, with young adults from abroad naming the band among a group of people whom they most associated with UK culture.[440][441]