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Song Analysis Paper #2: The Beatles’ “A Day In The Life”

“A Day In The Life” was the closing track in The Beatles’ legendary 1967 album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band”. The Sgt. Pepper album is often listed among the greatest rock albums ever created and as, one of, if not the best album The Beatles ever released. Moreover in 2020, “Rolling Stone” even named the song the ‘Greatest Beatles Song’ ever. The album was considered highly experimental and inspired by the Beach Boys’ “Pet Sounds”. “A Day in the Life” differs from their other songs like “Hey Jude,” which is essentially a beautiful children’s lullaby, or "In My Life," which is a staple at weddings and funerals. Unlike many of the Beatles' works, "A Day in the Life" is not driven by melody. It's a complex production with clever musical tricks like distortion, echo, dubbing, and reverb by George Martin and Geoff Emerick.

The song was mainly written by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. The majority of the verses were by Lennon and McCartney’s contribution was significant in the song's middle portion. However, the song, like most of the tracks on Sgt. Pepper, was put together gradually, fusing many sources, structures, and genres into a timeless masterpiece. A collection of disjointed occurrences that John Lennon read about in the newspaper served as the inspiration for "A Day In The Life" which included an article about 4,000 holes in the road in Blackburn, Lancashire. There’s been debate and speculation about the inspiration behind Lennon's opening line, about a man who "blew out his mind in a car," whether or not it was based on Tara Browne, who had passed away in a car accident on December 18, 1966, and was a close friend of the Beatles. These incidents coupled with a lot of references to drugs, (McCartney once even said in an interview when asked what caused this album, “In one word, drugs.”), essentially formed the song. Paul McCartney's unfinished song fragment "Woke up, fell out of bed" is used as the song's middle part. Its practical earthiness served as the ideal juxtaposition to Lennon's idle daydreaming. He also suggested the line ‘I’d love to turn you on,’ which he’d had floating around in his head and didn't know where to use. While at first, this line sounds sexual it was actually a reference to drugs as before getting started on this album McCartney had tried LSD for the first time. Deemed inappropriate at that time, this line was the reason the song was banned by the BBC.

One of the most unique parts of the song is the instrumentation used. Lennon and McCartney asked their producer George Martin to help them create something grand and avant-garde and Martin delivered. They assembled a 40-piece orchestra of leading classical musicians at the time at Abbey Road Studios and asked them to play their respective instruments from the lowest note to highest, at their own pace. While the musicians were confused they did as told and this resulted in the piece's last minute and 47 seconds creating an environment that feels like the end of the world as it builds quickly and powerfully to a chaotic crescendo. Until the resolution of a single accented note, each section of the orchestra performs its own discordant and obstreperous sections, thereby creating a deep and audible crescendo. For the final note of the song, they brought three Steinway pianos and a harmonium into play. Everyone on the keyboard was asked to play the same chord in the key of E major on each keyboard simultaneously and forcefully while pressing the sustain foot pedal to allow it last as long as possible resulting in a tone so expansive, capacious, and resonant that it seemed like the perfect way to end this chaotic masterpiece of a song.