The Beatles Movies

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Sergeant Pepper Goes to the Movies: *Yellow Submarine*

Of all the official Beatles movies of the sixties, the animated feature, *Yellow Submarine*, is perhaps the one with the strangest production genesis. Unlike their previous television feature, the Beatles personally had very little involvement in its production history. However, the labyrinthine twists and turns that led to the film's eventual production pre-date the *Magical Mystery Tour* episode by a considerable period, and to trace the film's origins we must briefly backtrack to 1964.

During that year, Epstein had been approached by an ambitious Hungarian-American cartoon producer, Al Brodax, whose company, King Features, had been responsible for the evergreen *Popeye* series. With the outbreak of Beatlemania, Brodax wanted to produce an American cartoon series starring the group and their songs. Epstein, although slightly reluctant to have his increasingly stoical assets trivialized into cartoon characters, saw no far-reaching or harmful consequences in the venture and struck a deal with Brodax. Thus began, in September 1965, a series of cartoon shorts starring the group in around sixty short animated adventures in which the 'moptop' Beatles were chased around (*Help!*-style) by an assortment of weird and wonderful characters and fans. The series, which based its episode titles on their songs, was networked on US television by ABC, but not shown on British television until much later, and then only in one TV region.[1] Despite this, it proved extremely popular internationally, eventually running for two years and earning the Beatles and Epstein 50 per cent of the project's profits.[2]

In their initial dealings Epstein had promised Brodax the group's cooperation for a feature film if the series turned out to be successful. In 1966, Brodax reminded Epstein of his promise and succeeded in getting him to agree to endorse the project with the Beatles' names and four new original songs for the soundtrack. Neither Epstein nor the Beatles

had been particularly keen on the idea but, according to McCabe and Schonfeld, they saw the film as 'a means of fulfilling their obligation to provide United Artists with a third film'.[3] This, as we shall see in the next chapter, turned out to be a misplaced judgement.

Production began in 1967 and was initially envisaged by Brodax to be a kind of *Fantasia*-style production which, like the cartoon series, would be heavily based on the imagery and allusions of the group's contemporary recordings. As Brodax later commented, 'We derived a lot from the *Sergeant Pepper* album. We took the word "pepper", which is positive, spicy, and created a place called Pepperland which is full of colour and music. But in the hills around live Blue Meanies, who hate colour, hate everything positive.'[4] The production itself was financed by Brodax's American company and produced (for $1million[5]) through TVC (TV Cartoons) in London. The director was the Canadian animator, George Dunning, and the writing credits were shared by Brodax, Lee Minoff, Jack Mendelsohn and Erich Segal, a professor of Greek and Latin at Yale, who later wrote the hugely successful *Love Story* (1970). In some ways, the employment of Dunning as director mirrored that of Lester some years earlier for *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* Like Lester, Dunning had worked in commercials during the fifties and, again like the American director, his approach to film-making married commercial instinct with avant-garde sensibilities. As well as having worked on avant-garde shorts like *Cadet Rouselle* (1945), Dunning had also gained invaluable experience with more commercial ventures (in the early fifties he had worked in America at UPA on *The Gerald McBoing Boing Show*), and by the time he moved to London and set up TVC in 1956 his experience and aptitude for stylistic breadth took in a breathtaking range of influences derived from experience gleaned from living and working in Canada, Paris and America. Five years before *Yellow Submarine*, his short film *The Flying Man* (1962) had won the Grand Prix at the Annecy International Animation Festival.

The fantasy story of the feature was based on an idea by Lee Minoff, in turn derived from the Lennon and McCartney title track which, as well as appearing as one half of the highly successful 'Eleanor Rigby' double A-side single, was also a hugely popular album track from the 1966 album release, *Revolver*. Although the Beatles were not closely involved with the making of the film, which included work by two

hundred animators worldwide, McCartney gave his blessing to Minoff's first screenplay outline which, according to Lewisohn, is dated November 1966 and states the following objective: 'The goal should be nothing less than to take animation beyond anything seen before in style, class and tone, but avoiding the precious and pretentious.'[6] However, achieving this objective proved no small task and, according to actor Paul Angelis, the script underwent fourteen re-writes before it was finally completed.[7] Moreover, it has been suggested that other uncredited writers were involved in the project, most notably Roger McGough, the Mersey poet and member of the pop group the Scaffold, who, according to Angelis, 'wrote a lot of the Beatles' dialogue'.[8]

What is certain is that neither Apple nor the Beatles had much involvement in the film's production. Indeed, although the film credits state the film to be an Apple Presentation (which Denis O'Dell negotiated to 'make it more official',[9]) the Beatles' contribution was limited to the four contractually enforced original songs, a few minor script ideas, and a brief appearance at the film's closure, again negotiated by O'Dell, who also tried (albeit unsuccessfully) to get the Beatles to lend their own voices to the project.[10] In the end, the Beatles' voices were dubbed by actors and even the idea of producing four original songs was treated with marginal disdain by the group. As George Martin explains, 'Their reaction was, "OK, we've got to supply them with these bloody songs, but we're not going to fall over backwards providing them. We'll let them have them whenever we feel like it, and we'll give them whatever we think is all right."'[11] In the event, the Beatles grudgingly honoured Epstein's commitment and provided the film soundtrack with four new numbers, 'It's All Too Much', 'Only a Northern Song', 'Hey Bulldog' and 'All Together Now'. While I shall discuss later what I consider to be the frequently overlooked merits of this material, it must be conceded that the songs were, at least in part, culled from sources external to the film itself. The second number (a Harrison composition) had been a left-over from the *Sergeant Pepper* LP, and 'It's All Too Much', another Harrison number, dated from May 1967. However, although the group were initially sceptical about the film, thinking that it would put their newly acquired 'intellectual' image back several years, they had a massive change of heart when they saw the film in its almost finished state and were, in

Barrow's words, 'So pleased with the way the whole production had been put together that they were only too happy to associate themselves with it more closely from then on.'[12]

Formally, the film is rooted in a range of sixties pop styles, and the eclecticism of its colour imagery (designed largely by German poster artist Heinz Edelmann) is derived from a vast range of popular contemporary styles, including imagery culled from the pop art paintings, prints and designs of artists such as Peter Blake and Andy Warhol, the 'op' art of Bridget Riley, surrealist and expressionist art, the psychedelic graphics of British and American underground poster designers such as Martin Sharp and Rick Griffin, and the work of popular illustrators such as Alan Aldridge, who was apparently initially involved with creating some of the draft drawings for the animation.[13] Looking at *Yellow Submarine* with the benefit of almost thirty years hindsight, the cutting-edge, contemporaneous, 'now' aesthetic of its imagery inevitably makes it appear as something of a museum piece to the modern eye, yet in its day the animation was accurately described by Joel W. Finler as a 'remarkable summation and integration of the best in British and American pop design of the sixties'.[14]

Considering the imagery and allusions of the Beatles' music of this period, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most pronounced styles to be absorbed into the film's animation is that of British and American psychedelic poster art. In the mid-sixties, the cheap disposability of affordable, mass-produced psychedelic posters became heavily absorbed into pop culture through the work of such artists as Nigel Waymouth (of 'Haphash') and Martin Sharp, one of the key designers of *Oz*. Although such a-commercial posters and magazine pullouts sometimes had quasi-political or overtly propagandist purposes (such as 'Legalize Pot' or 'Plant a Flower Child'), their central purpose seemed to be more concerned with celebrating, through a combination of photo-montage, reworked fine art and original cartoon-style graphics, the spiritual benefits of different kinds of mind expansion, their hallucinatory aesthetic obviating the need for their copious colourful typography to be totally legible or conventionally 'understandable'. The psychedelic poster art of the aforementioned designers (and indeed the literary illustrations of Alan Aldridge and the psychedelic photography of Richard Avedon[15]) popularized the use of bright primary colours and surreal imagery derived from the urge to

produce art which simulated the LSD experience. The animation style of *Yellow Submarine* is also heavily influenced by the psychedelic aesthetic and, beyond the story itself, the film boasts iconography which, in its use of colour and patently psychedelic imagery, mimics that of the underground press and American West Coast poster design. Perhaps the best example of this can be seen in the simulated 'trip' sequence which accompanies Harrison's 'Only a Northern Song'. Here, bright strobes of alternating primary colour and close-ups of the Beatles' ears attached to frequency monitors emphasize a higher reality than that of the objective world and, in the employment of irrational imagery and a visceral onslaught of 'mind-blowing' colour, attempt to simulate a hypnotic 'psych-out' of epic proportions.

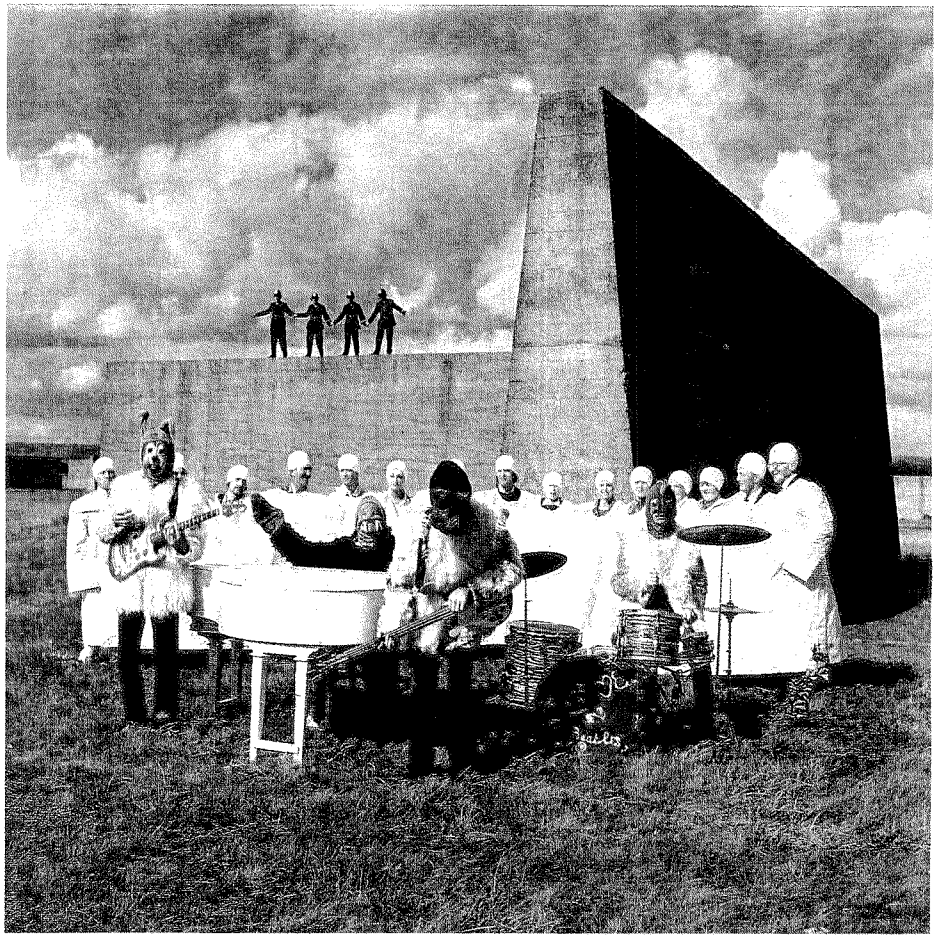
Like psychedelic poster art, the animation also invests in elaborate and fluorescent 'Disney-style' typography, although unlike so many West Coast designs, the lettering is never so elaborately transformed that it becomes illegible. Although often hypnotically multiplied *à la* Warhol, the lettering never ceases to have an implicitly rational meaning within the narrative's fantasy discourse. Indeed, so important is the meaning of lettering within the narrative that it actually becomes integrated causally into the dramatic action. Such is the case in the 'All You Need Is Love' sequence towards the end, when the terrifying and deadly 'Glove' is kept at bay by John, who physically bombards it with the word 'Love' whilst simultaneously delivering the song.

The film's iconography also shares psychedelic art's nostalgic celebration of all things Edwardian. Indeed, just as the sinewy art nouveau imagery of Aubrey Beardsley became integrated into many designers' work (see, for example, Martin Sharp's Bob Dylan poster of 1967, 'Blowing in the Mind'), so it finds its place in *Yellow Submarine*, and it is interesting to note that the inhabitants of Pepperland (grandfathers on penny-farthings, servants, maids and colourfully uniformed soldiers) are almost uniformly pseudo-Edwardian in appearance. Indeed, what could be more fundamentally Edwardian than *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* itself? Interestingly, much of the Beatles' music from this period was also deeply rooted in a desire for historical pastiche. While songs such as 'When I'm Sixty Four' were, as we noted in the last chapter, essentially attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the music hall, 'Being for the Benefit of Mr Kite', for all its psychedelic allusions, is fundamentally

Victorian in essence, inspired as it was by a real Victorian circus poster picked up at an antiques shop in Kent by Lennon. As George Melly maintains in *Revolt into Style*, 'Alone in pop, with the possible exception of the Kinks, the Beatles are at their happiest when celebrating the past. They display little enthusiasm for the way we live now.'[16]

Elsewhere, the film integrates the styles of other forms of popular posters and contemporary pop art, most specifically through the fascination with famous images of icons from contemporary and historical stage, screen and comic-book art. Indeed, while the images of non-psychedelic contemporary poster art employed huge blow-ups of such vintage icons as Charlie Chaplin, Humphrey Bogart and Laurel and Hardy, the pop art paintings and graphic designs of Peter Blake and the screen prints of Andy Warhol became preoccupied with images of contemporary stars such as Elvis Presley and the Beatles themselves. These contemporary obsessions are constantly present in *Yellow Submarine*, although perhaps the best example is the sequence in which Ringo and Old Fred are searching for the other Beatles and move into a vast anti-chamber populated solely by historical figures (General Custer), screen stars (Monroe, Astaire), and comic-book heroes. Tellingly, their collage-style presentation closely resembles Blake's layout for that most enduring image of sixties pop graphics, the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper* cover.

Finally, the film also manages to employ imagery from a number of more exclusively 'fine' art disciplines, and the influence of Warhol's pop art is never far away. However, perhaps the most obvious homage to his style is present in the extraordinary 'Eleanor Rigby' sequence and, although the sad characters which populate the desolate Liverpool cityscape are the thematic antithesis of his own glamorous subjects, their execution bears startling iconographical and textural resemblance to his mid to late sixties polymer paint and silk screen prints. Equally obvious is the influence of Bridget Riley's op art; the bedazzling black-and-white imagery in the 'Sea of Holes' sequence shares the same disorienting geometric distortion of space and perspective as much of her playful mid-sixties work. Elsewhere, the film also manages to integrate images from less contemporary art. Indeed, while the semi-abstract colours and shapes of the 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' sequence might be tentatively described as a kind of animated



8) 'I Am the Walrus'. The Beatles shooting *Magical Mystery Tour*. ©Apple Corps Ltd.

12) Passing the audition: The final concert for *Let It Be*. ©Apple Corps Ltd.

Kandinsky on acid, the pulsing, melting clocks which appear in the 'Sea of Time' scenes are directly lifted from Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931).

In his astonishing survey of pop art culture, George Melly analyses the eclectic form of sixties iconography. In his discussion of psychedelic poster art (and specifically the notorious 'Haphash' design group) he draws the following conclusion:

> ... when it comes to imagery there is no attempt to conceal a magpie approach to any artist past or present who seems to strike the right psychedelic note. As a result the 'Haphash' posters are almost a collage of other men's hard-won visions: Mucha, Ernst, Magritte, Bosch, William Blake, comic books, engravings of Red Indians, Disney, Dulac, ancient illustrations of treatises on alchemy; everything is boiled down to make a visionary and hallucinatory bouillabaisse.[17]

He could have been discussing the visual approach of *Yellow Submarine*. Although, as we have seen, the film occasionally absorbs its imagery from different sources, the iconoclastic approach to imagery is fundamentally identical. Not only does the film absorb the inherent and exclusive properties of psychedelic art, it also applies the same selectively eclectic approach, and it is clearly no coincidence that the styles which it tends to absorb (particularly surrealism and op) are fundamentally implicitly 'hallucinatory' by nature. They do indeed strike the 'right note'.

Beyond its imagery, it is perhaps also productive to apply this theory to the highly eclectic methods of animation technique, which comprise conventional cel animation, rotoscoping (the technique of simulating animated drawings over live-action sequences), and conventional live-action sequences (the final sequence where the real Beatles make a fleeting guest appearance). Although alternating between the first two techniques was not especially new to animated features (it had been used in Disney films since the thirties), *Yellow Submarine* integrates these styles simultaneously rather than interchangeably, using them together to create the disorienting 'trippiness' for which the film has become justly renowned.[18]

If the film's form is heavily influenced by psychedelic principles, then so too is the narrative, albeit in a more subtle manner than in *Magical*

Mystery Tour. Indeed, the cleverness of the story, which pits the Beatles (and/or their alter egos of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band) against the despicable Blue Meanies, is that it is seemingly constructed to be interpretable (to different factions of the audience) on many levels. On one hand, it can be read as a simple, nostalgic children's/family fantasy tale of the forces of good versus the forces of darkness, and, on the other, as an underground parable of how the psychedelic Beatles (symbols of the peaceful and apolitical forces of hippy counter-culture) overcome the forces of state power to establish a new regime of karmic awareness and universal goodwill. In short, the narrative rewards the audience with the limit of its own experience. It is worth considering this second interpretation in greater detail to assess what, beyond the use of the visual style, the narrative had to offer to the underground.

Firstly, the very title of the film held hidden significance for the flourishing drug culture, since a 'Yellow Submarine' (or 'Yellow Sub') was also the elaborate title ascribed to a brand of popular narcotic pill for 'heads'. Although the Beatles have always denied any 'hidden meanings' and claimed it to be nothing more than a 'children's song',[19] it is not unreasonable to question such a simplistic explanation. While their claims would to some degree seem to be consolidated by the use of Starr (the 'children's favourite') as lead vocalist, the identical titles would suggest there is more to the song than meets the ear and, whatever the Beatles' intentions, there is no denying that the song title had loaded implications for some of the audience. Secondly, the film's travelogue narrative, which to children and 'unenlightened' adults is merely an 'innocent' surreal fantasy voyage, is, to underground converts, a simulated hallucinatory 'trip' which, developing the themes of *Magical Mystery Tour*, seems intent on conveying the viewer from one acid-soaked vision of the mind's eye to the next. As the cartoon Beatles repeatedly and knowingly maintain, the world they inhabit is 'all in the mind'.

Within this world live the wicked Blue Meanies, who can be read as simplistic symbols of the ultimate grassroots manifestation of state power, the police. Like the police, they carry weapons, wear blue uniforms, and use ferocious dogs. Revealingly, they remind Paul of another authority figure, his old English teacher. The heroic Beatles, who with their kindly goodwill and affable humour are presented as the antithesis of these characters, speak a self-referential language which is riddled with sly

acknowledgements to their most heavily psychedelic songs, including the then recently banned 'A Day in the Life', 'Fixing a Hole', and 'With a Little Help from My Friends'. Indeed, while their dialogue contains drug-oriented references and 'in' jokes ('What day is it?' 'Sitarday.') which could not possibly have had any meaning for a juvenile audience, the chosen soundtrack songs (largely culled from *Sergeant Pepper*) are also almost always those which possess the largest quota of drug-oriented imagery. Whatever Lennon may have subsequently said about the lyrical content of 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (and I see no reason to disbelieve the oft-repeated story of his young son's drawing acting as lyrical inspiration[20]), there is no doubt that it offers itself to be read as a psychedelic 'trip' song, bursting with paranoic tension and sinister metamorphic iconography. Indeed, even the more overtly 'innocent' and 'unenlightened' non-'Pepper' soundtrack songs contain lyrics which can be deciphered to suggest double meanings and references to alternative lifestyles. Such is the case in McCartney's 'All Together Now', which, with its lyrical marriage of childlike, nursery rhyme naivety and risque references to promiscuity, creates an ambiguity which could only have been intentional.

The final narrative equilibrium, in which the Beatles' defeat of the Blue Meanies restores the harmonious karmic order of Pepperland, is also open to an 'underground' reading, although not perhaps one which would have been so universally welcomed by its more radical and politicized factions, who, by 1968 and the film's release, were beginning to feel that the group's 'flower power' philosophies of meditation, drugs, love and peace ('inner' revolution) were no longer a viable substitute for 'outward' protest and occasionally 'justified' violent activism.[21] Indeed, in many ways the presentation of the Beatles' spiritual vision of counter-culture is, for all its Leary-like undertones, essentially closer to the more populist 'alternative' doctrines of Christianity or Hinduism (central to different strands of counter-culture during 1967) than to certain transatlantic and European strands of the movement which, since the Tet offensive of February 1968 in Vietnam and the French student uprising (May 1968) were becoming increasingly absorbed into strands of Trotskyism, Maoism and anarchism. While such militant factions would possibly have welcomed the fact that the Beatles, in *Yellow Submarine*, instigate a symbolic social revolution by establishing a new world order in Pepperland, it is

clearly symptomatic of both the film's 1967 genesis and the Beatles' unwillingness to relinquish their advocacy of 1967's peace-oriented philosophies, that the 'revolution' is achieved more through the redemptive consciousness-raising powers of music and nature than by violent retribution. Significantly, the group's 'army' can only ultimately 'defeat' the Meanies by changing their ideals, and this is achieved by magically making flowers spring up on to their bodies, literally equating the forces of revolution and change with 'flower power'.

Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that *Yellow Submarine* is the cinematic cousin of one of the most famous and enduring images of hippy counter-culture, the photograph of the flower being inserted into the barrel of a gun. At no point in the film do the Beatles take punitive action against the Meanies; they merely want to re-establish the utopian peace of Pepperland. While a brutal resolution would obviously have been unsuitable for a family audience (and therefore in direct opposition to the film's populist commercial aspirations), it is clearly salient that the revolution is, to quote MacDonald's well-chosen book title, 'in the head'. In essence, then, the underlying message of the film's climax (that love conquers everything) is not dissimilar to Lennon's controversial message to disaffected sixties youth, 'Revolution 1', recorded for *The Beatles* (aka *The White Album*) in the month of the film's release: do not exchange the principles of love and spirituality for violent retribution – real change can only be instigated by the shifting of consciousness.[22] In this sense the film perfectly mirrors the holistic ideas which pervaded many of the other, more overtly spiritual and psychedelic songs of the 1967/68 period. Indeed, it is perhaps no coincidence that Lennon's stirring and sentimental 'All You Need Is Love' was later deployed to pad out the soundtrack LP: besides its spiritual themes of anti-materialism, temperance and tolerance, the title itself forms as neat a poetic summation of the film's ideology as one is likely to find.

Although their involvement in the film was small, *Yellow Submarine* crystallized the real Beatles vision of counter-culture with a dexterity and accessibility that far surpassed that of *Magical Mystery Tour*. With the possible exception of the 'militant' youth, it really was 'all-inclusive' in its attempt to attain cross-cultural appeal, and its projected vision of a utopian hippydom subtle enough to appeal only to those who searched for or expected it. With its undertones of pacifism and

spirituality, it was fundamentally populistic enough to be acceptable to those adults who found the more radical and militant ideals of the underground's more materialist strands to be objectionable or threatening. Indeed, as *Variety* wisely noted upon the film's release, 'The pic should be a sure click with Beatles' fans and youthful "pop" audiences and also intrigue those who sometimes tut tut the remarkable combo's more wayout activities.'[23]

The film was premiered at the London Pavilion on 17 July 1968. Again the Beatles attended personally and the traffic around Piccadilly Circus once more came to a standstill as thousands of fans swarmed across central London. Outside the theatre, costumed characters from the film entertained the crowds, and fans also caught glimpses of contemporary celebrities, including members of the Rolling Stones and Cream, James Taylor and Twiggy. All had been requested by the group to wear something yellow, and after the screening around 200 VIP guests made their way to the Royal Lancaster Hotel on Bayswater Road, where the hotel's newly built disco, 'The Yellow Submarine', had just opened.

The film was of course accompanied by a soundtrack album, although there were two important differences from the Beatles' other film-oriented material. First, it was the first British-issued film soundtrack album to include material which was not performed or written by the group. Although side one of the LP comprised the four 'new' songs mentioned earlier (plus the previously released title track and 'All You Need Is Love'), the second side contained nothing but extracts from George Martin's powerful instrumental score. Secondly, the album was not concurrently released with the film; it was released on 13 January 1969, seven months after the premiere, possibly because the group felt that the film soundtrack should not coincide with their most ambitious *White Album* project, which was released in Britain on 22 November 1968. On a more practical level, Mark Lewisohn, in his authoratitive *Complete Beatles Recording Sessions*, notes that George Martin wanted to re-record his instrumental side of the album, which he did (with the aid of a forty-one piece orchestra) in two three-hour sessions at Abbey Road on 22 and 23 October 1968.[24]

The critics were by and large kind to the film, their reception in marked contrast to the venomous response which greeted *Magical Mystery Tour* just seven months earlier. However, before they had

actually seen the film, many reviewers were no more enamoured of the idea of a full-length cartoon film than the group themselves. Indeed, just three days after the first broadcast of *Magical Mystery Tour*, the *Daily Mail* ran an article titled 'After That Flop the Cartoon Beatles', which complained that 'the Beatles stubbornly continue to experiment'.[25] Despite these fears, the film received generally positive reviews. The tabloids were generally ecstatic, with the *Daily Mail*'s Cecil Wilson running a headline which simply stated 'Dazzled by That Yellow Submarine', his review enthusiastically comparing the character of Jeremy Hilary Boob (the 'Nowhere Man') with Disney characters.[26] The quality press were also impressed, with reviews from Patrick Gibb and John Russell Taylor respectively describing the film as 'brilliantly inventive' and proudly announcing the arrival of 'a British cartoon film that's sure to please everyone'.[27] Nigel Gosling of the *Observer* was also enthusiastic, maintaining that the film 'packs in more stimulation, sly art-references and pure joy into ninety minutes than a mile of exhibitions of op and pop and all the mod cons'.[28] Specialist film magazines were no less enthralled, with Gavin Millar of *Sight and Sound* picking up on the scope of the film's formal eclecticism and describing it as both a 'pleasure and surprise'.[29] More importantly for the Beatles' underground following, Joel W. Finler of *IT* also gave the film a very favourable notice.[30] However, there were some minor complaints about the film's drug-induced imagery in certain British and American publications. While *Esquire* referred to the iconography as an 'LSD zoo',[31] Felix Barker of the *Evening News* wrote an extremely scathing piece which maintained that 'you won't be able to get near the box office for hippies, flower people, Beatle-crushers, love-inners and sit-downers. And in every ten thousand teenagers, one elderly person of over twenty-five will join in vaguely hoping to keep with it. Others I predict will hate every five thousand two hundred and twenty seconds of this cartoon.'[32] Fortunately for the Beatles, Felix Barker was wrong, although this did not stop the film from undergoing some very unfortunate complications in Britain.

Although the film was a critical triumph, its potential commercial success in Britain was hampered by problems of exhibition. Rank, the film's British exhibitors, refused to screen the movie at all their 200 cinemas; contemporary reports show that the film was dropped from about half their outlets shortly after its release. On 6 August 1968 the

Daily Express ran an article titled 'Beatles Yellow Submarine Dropped by Cinemas', in which a spokesman for Rank maintained that the film's takings in the first three weeks of exhibition had been lower than expected and it would therefore receive only a limited release.[33] According to Bill Harry, the box-office receipts showed that this had been a miscalculation by Rank, but by then 'the damage had been done and Rank's decision to withdraw the film from more than half of their cinemas drastically affected its potential box office income in Britain'.[34] Despite this setback, the film is still regarded by Peter Brown and Steven Gaines as a commercial success[35] and, as Bill Harry notes, no such problems occurred with the American release, where the cartoon did exceptionally good business.[36]

However, the soundtrack album shifted fewer units than previous Beatle albums, no doubt because of its delayed release and lack of original material. Indeed, as Mark Lewisohn maintains, the Beatles were 'mildly criticized'[37] at the time for providing fans with less than their usual good value, and for the first time in Britain an 'original' Beatles album failed to make the number one spot, peaking at number three in the *Record Retailer* charts and faring little better in America. Interestingly, Lewisohn notes that the group probably also felt that fans had been somewhat 'cheated' by the lack of original material on the album release, noting that the EMI library contains a master tape for a seven-inch mono EP of the group's four original compositions for the film (plus an early mix of Lennon's haunting 'Across the Universe') which dates back to 13 March 1969.[38] This 33⅓ rpm EP, which was no doubt intended to restore goodwill amongst fans was of course never released, and Lewisohn suggests that the group, who weren't particularly pleased with their musical contribution to the film, simply decided upon 'washing their hands of the whole affair'.[39]

Yet despite the Beatles' relative unhappiness and ambivalent attitude to their musical numbers for the film's score, there can be no doubting its quality. Although the *Yellow Submarine* album was much criticized by fans for its poor value, George Martin's soundtrack still retains an extraordinary freshness and, whatever their production history, the Beatles' contributions to the record are never less than first-class. Indeed, although fans had every right to complain about the inclusion of two pre-released numbers, the two Harrison numbers alone are worth the admission price. Although continually disregarded by the

majority of critics, 'It's All Too Much' must surely be the most underrated song in the Beatles' psychedelic canon. With its extraordinary tape loops and dense barrage of background effects, the song's production took the psychedelic aesthetic to its logical conclusion, and the integration of classical music (trumpets lifted from Jeramiah Clarke's 'Prince of Denmark's March') and contemporary pop (the use of a verse from the Merseys' 1966 hit 'Sorrow') anticipated the age of sampling with a far greater vengeance than anything they had previously committed to disc. Add to this Harrison's wonderfully mysterious 'Only a Northern Song' (one can only speculate as to why it was discarded from *Sergeant Pepper*) and one of Lennon's most powerful acid-rock songs to date ('Hey Bulldog'), and one begins to wonder why the album performed less well than its predecessors.

There is, however, another possible reason for the album's comparatively poor performance in the marketplace. Prior to its release, in November and December 1968, the first two solo Beatles projects, Harrison's brilliant *Wonderwall Music* film soundtrack and Lennon and Yoko Ono's avant-garde sound collages, *Unfinished Music No.1 – Two Virgins*, had been released to hostile reviews from the British and American music press and extremely poor sales, the latter record causing furore in some corners because of its provocative cover, which showed Lennon and his new lover/collaborator glaring at the camera in full-frontal nudity.[40] Although agreeing to manufacture the record, EMI refused to distribute it, the job finally being given to the Who's label, Track, who ensured against legal liabilities by packaging the original cover in plain brown wrappers before distributing it. Whilst doubtless appealing to underground factions, neither the cover (which was perceived by many to be pornographic), nor the material it contained impressed the Beatles' mainstream followers, and it is quite possible that the *Yellow Submarine* soundtrack suffered as a result of the hostility generated by these releases. As if this weren't enough, the period between the film and album release was also marked by Lennon's arrest on 18 October 1968 for possession of marijuana. He was released on bail, and in November he was fined £150 at Marylebone Magistrates Court. Although he claimed the incident to have been a set-up, it again fuelled the establishment's disenchantment with the Beatles, who seemed, in the heady months following the film's release, to have destroyed forever their relationship with mainstream followers. As

Lennon himself maintained, 'The trouble is, I suppose, I've spoiled my image. People want me to stay in their own bag. They want me to be loveable. But I was never that. Even at school I was just "Lennon". Nobody ever thought of me as cuddly.'[41]

Despite the LP fiasco, the film spawned a wave of other film-related merchandise in Britain and America with a range of goods which far surpassed the records and novelizations released to coincide with their previous screen incarnations. These products were largely targeted at younger children and, according to Richard Buskin, were launched by over twenty-five licensed merchandisers.[42] As Buskin's book *Beatle Crazy!* illustrates, there was a vast range of children's products, including jigsaws, snowdomes, Halloween costumes, alarm clocks, mobiles, watches and badges.[43] Indeed, on the day of the film's British premiere, the *Evening News* carried an advertisement feature (presumably financed through King Features) titled 'How the Beatles Brought Love Back into Our Funny World', which, as well as advertising the film itself, also contained publicity for Marshall Dee's official *Yellow Submarine* T-shirts (for adults and children) and the New English Library's paperback novelization-cum-picture book, which was proudly proclaimed to be the world's first ever full-colour paperback.[44] Interestingly, the accompanying article claimed that 'John Lennon and Paul McCartney made sizeable contributions to the script of *Yellow Submarine*,'[45] which, while a gross exaggeration, supports Barrow's earlier comments that, upon seeing the finished product, the Beatles were happy not only to publicize the film by attending its premiere, but also to put their creative reputations on the line by lending their names to the project.

Beyond its commercial implications, the critical success of *Yellow Submarine* was of great importance to the group since, for all its drug-induced imagery, it presented the public with the cosy, safe and affable Beatles they knew and loved, deflecting, albeit briefly, the hostility garnered by *Magical Mystery Tour*, the LSD controversy of 1967, and the derision which, in the month of the film's release, had met Lennon and Ono's 'You Are Here' exhibition at the Robert Fraser gallery.[46] As the *Daily Telegraph* nostalgically proclaimed, 'The Beatles spirit is here if not the flesh – their good-natured gusto, their kindly curiosity, their sympathy with their fellow men and their lack of pretentiousness are all summed up here with gaiety.'[47] Although, as I mentioned earlier, this

goodwill was somewhat shortlived, *Yellow Submarine* was important to the group's increasingly controversial late sixties image in that it pacified the mainstream press and public by providing a tonic for the group's increasingly bewildering and erratic output and behaviour. 1968 had been the strangest year to date in the Beatles' increasingly diverse career, full of huge peaks and sharp inclines. Though the year began badly with the negative response to *Magical Mystery Tour* still ringing in their ears, they had clawed their way back to mass popularity with the massive-selling 'Hey Jude' and 'Lady Madonna' singles and had reconciled this success with the *Yellow Submarine* movie, only to find the year ending on similar bittersweet notes as the winter of 1967.

Despite the commercial and critical success which heralded the release of their eclectic if rather patchy double album, *The Beatles*, Lennon's arrest and solo activities meant that the year also ended with more artistic, drug-related and (a first for the Beatles) sexual controversy. Worse still, the group's own personal and musical relationships (perhaps compounded by Yoko's constant presence in the recording studio) were beginning to deteriorate beyond repair. During the recording of *The Beatles* LP, Ringo quit the group for two weeks following arguments with the other members. While he was away the group simply went on with the recording sessions, with McCartney effortlessly providing the rhythm tracks for 'Back in the USSR' and 'Dear Prudence'.[48] Following Lennon's inauguration into the experimental styles of Cage and Stockhausen, McCartney desperately tried to keep Lennon and Ono's avant-garde sound collage, 'Revolution 9', off the album, only to meet with Lennon's equally dogged determination for it to remain there. Producer George Martin had recommended that the LP be scaled down to a single but was overruled by the group, and despite the sheer enormity of its eclectic pastiche (hardly a single musical style, contemporary or modern, went unnoticed), the album was essentially the work of four separate musicians working on their own solo numbers. Despite the tally of thirty songs, the recording sessions were frequently conducted in the absence of a complete line-up and, although largely unnoticed at the time, Lennon and McCartney's waning collaborative urge had all but disappeared.

In this sense, *The Beatles* can be seen as something of a watershed album for the group, the first album which contained no collaborative

equivalent to 'A Day in the Life' or 'With a Little Help from My Friends', and which highlighted the increasing differences of style of two songwriters who had effectively outgrown the healthy competition which had previously driven them. Whilst Lennon's songs had become increasingly lyrical, personal, and, in the case of 'Revolution 9', avant-garde, McCartney retained and developed his extraordinary melodic skills and uncanny aptitude for musical pastiche. Indeed, while the album's eclecticism and emphasis on the personal and the avant-garde justly won the approval of critics and consumers, there can be little doubt that many of the songs on *The Beatles* lacked the melodic polish they had come to love. Indeed, although the album was a fascinating scrapbook of material (in some ways the group's most 'interesting' piece), many of the numbers lacked the stirring middle-eights and meticulously crafted arrangements so apparent in their more collaborative work, giving credence to George Martin's belief that the record would have been more memorable if scaled down to single-album length.

Worse still, many of the divisions of their recently founded Apple Corps. business were in a mess. Apart from its record division (which, besides the Beatles, had under its supervision such profitable artists as Mary Hopkin), the company's multiplicity of other sections had produced virtually nothing of serious financial worth, and the openhanded ideals to which it aspired were being increasingly exploited from inside and out. On 31 July 1968, just seven months after its opening, the Apple boutique on Baker Street closed down, and its remaining stock was given away to the public. *Magical Mystery Tour* had met with vehement criticism, and Apple Electronics, headed by Lennon's Greek inventor friend 'magic' Alexis Mardas, had failed to produce any viable prototypes, despite the fact that the Beatles had channelled thousands of pounds into providing a working laboratory for the eccentric inventor. Indeed, by the end of the year, Mardas had designed nothing more than an electronic apple which pulsated to light and sound, and a 'nothing box', a construction which, equipped with twelve lights programmed to flash randomly for five years, did – as its name suggested – absolutely nothing of any practical purpose.

The Beatles had initially intended the Apple venture to be a form of 'western communism' in which the 'bosses aren't in it for profit',[49] and on 11 May 1968 Lennon and McCartney had gone to New York to

appear on the *Johnny Carson Show*, where they announced their plans to patronize artists from all cultural disciplines. As McCartney had maintained at an American press conference, 'If you come to me and say, "I've had such and such a dream," I will say, "Here's so much money. Go away and do it." We've already bought all our dreams, so now we want to share that possibility with others.'[50] Two weeks earlier, full-page advertisements had appeared in the British music press, urging would-be recording artists to send in tapes to the Apple Music offices, and within days the London offices were flooded by a tidal wave of tapes, poems, film scripts and novels. At one point Denis O'Dell had five full-time readers wading through piles of unsolicited film scripts,[51] and, despite the best efforts of managing director Neil Aspinall and press officer Derek Taylor it was impossible to deal with the endless onslaught of applications for funding. As Taylor remembers, 'We tried to do what we promised, to help people realize their dreams, but it was impossible. There weren't sufficient hours in the day or sufficient resources.'[52] The Beatles, for all their extraordinary mastery of musical genres, were not businessmen, and it showed. The Apple was beginning to rot.

Notes

1. Harry, 1984, p. 164. According to Harry, the cartoons were shown only on Granada television.
2. Percentage from Barrow, 1993b, p. 10.
3. McCabe and Schonfeld, 1972, p. 92.
4. Harry, 1984, p. 37.
5. Canemaker, 1986/7, p. 27. According to the author, $200,000 of this figure went to the Beatles 'for the use of their songs'.
6. Lewisohn, 1992, p. 276.
7. Paul Angelis, 'The Real McCartney – Eddie Yates', *Observer*, 4 September 1988.
8. Ibid.
9. Denis O'Dell, interviewed by author, 30 April 1996.
10. Ibid.
11. Martin, 1979, p. 226.
12. Barrow, 1993b, p. 13.
13. Evans, 1984, p. 84.
14. Joel W. Finler, *IT*, 26 July 1968.
15. Avedon produced a set of psychedelic Beatles posters in 1968. According to Evans, 1984, p. 76, they were marketed in Britain through a special offer in the *Daily Express*.
16. Melly, 1970, p. 115.
17. Ibid., p. 137.
18. This eclectic mixture of styles is discussed by Sharman, 1994, pp. 14–15.
19. Miles, 1978, pp. 83–4.
20. Ibid., p. 89.
21. For a fascinating discussion of the Beatles' (and especially Lennon's) relationship to these developments, see MacDonald, 1994, pp. 225–8.
22. Ibid. According to the author, the song's lyric brought the group considerable controversy with radical bodies such as the controversy with New Left groups, many of whom regarded the pacifistic lyrics as a 'betrayal'.
23. *Variety* review, 23 July 1968.
24. Lewisohn, 1989, p. 164.
25. Trudi Pacter, *Daily Mail*, 29 December 1967.
26. Cecil Wilson, *Daily Mail*, 17 July 1968. Referring to the character of Jeremy, Wilson states: 'He exerts so much charm with his blue face, green eyelids, purple ears and prissy voice that you wonder why Disney never invented him.'
27. Patrick Gibb, *Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 1968; John Russell Taylor, *The Times*, 18 July 1968.
28. 'Lessons at the Movies', Nigel Gosling, *Observer*, 28 July 1968.
29. Gavin Millar, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 37, no. 4, p. 204.
30. Joel W. Finler, *IT*, 26 July 1968.
31. *Esquire*, December 1968.
32. Felix Barker, 'Beatles, Meanies and Stark Raving Bonkers', *Evening News*, 18 July 1968.
33. Judith Simons, *Daily Express*, 6 August 1968.
34. Harry, 1984, p. 46.
35. Brown and Gaines, 1984, p. 191.
36. Harry, 1984, p. 46.
37. Lewisohn, 1989, p. 164.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. The Harrison LP, the soundtrack for a pychedelic art movie directed by Joe Massot, was the first record to be released on the Apple label. The vehement critical response to the cover of the Lennon/Ono collaboration was not helped by the hostile and frequently racist press reaction to Lennon and Ono's relationship. Although Lennon and the Japanese concept artist had been lovers since early 1968, Lennon was still married to his first wife, Cynthia, and Ono was labelled as the monster responsible for destroying Lennon's happy marriage.
41. Connolly, 1981, p. 109.
42. Buskin, 1994, p. 84.
43. Ibid.
44. *Evening News*, 17 July 1968.
45. Ibid.
46. This exhibition was essentially a collection of conceptual art produced by Lennon, in collaboration with Yoko Ono. For more information, see Evans, 1984, pp. 92–4.
47. 'Beatles Find Their Film Feet in Weird and Witty Fantasy', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 July 1968.
48. This is not to say that the other Beatles did not miss Starr. When he returned to the studios, he found his drums garlanded with flowers.
49. Giuliano and Giuliano, 1995, p. 87.
50. Ibid.
51. Denis O'Dell, interviewed by author. According to O'Dell, most of these scripts were unreadable.
52. Lawrence Donegan, 'Another Bite at the Apple', *Guardian*, 21 November 1995.