

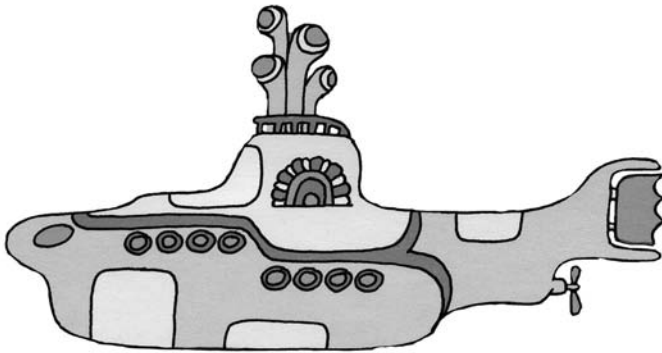
The Beatles’ Yellow Submarine

Yellow *Submarine* epitomized the 60s flower power, free love and hippie ideals. Heinz Edelmann’s designs woven into the psychedelic tale of good versus bad lightened the collective psyche and contributed to the zeitgeist of the time. A society straitjacketed since the war and the ’50s was liberalised with ‘the pill’ and sexual freedom that went with it. A freeing of attitude that filtered through every aspect of society but particularly manifest in clothing and music. John Coates got swept along with the tide: “girls’ mini skirts were so short, they were like belts”, he says. *Yellow Submarine* may have bought him kudos from his peers, but on a personal level, it led to the breakdown of his marriage to Bettina, and, professionally, saw TVC nosedive perilously close to bankruptcy. Yet for all that, he has no regrets being involved in something with such a ready-made buzz. It didn’t come much cooler than this!

The success of The Beatles’ series had inspired Al Brodax to make a feature film, but his vision stopped at an extended version of the TV show, which George and John wouldn’t countenance. If they were going to make a film at all, it had to be something far superior, as they explained to him in no uncertain terms.

By the summer of 1967 talk was rife about the film, then just a nebulous notion. The pressure was on to get cameras rolling, but George Dunning felt unhappy because TVC would not be able to do anything worthwhile, yet. The turning point came when Beatles producer George Martin

invited the TVC team over to Abbey Road Studios without saying why. John, George and Jack Stokes were asked to sit in the studio control room, mystified why they were there. From their vantage point they could see the 'Fab Four' in the studio, "fiddling about with their girlfriends", as John puts it. He and the rest of the TVC crew didn't realize they were there to listen to a very special event ... Then, at ear-popping decibels, George Martin played the new Beatles LP *Sergeant Pepper* from beginning to end without a break. For Jack, John and George Dunning it was an epiphany! They were all blown away, and slowly but surely George got the idea for the feature out of the music. The Beatles promised TVC the use of any songs on the album, plus they were to write four new songs for the film – massive cachet, and hugely inspiring for TVC.



*The most iconic image
from the film, the
Yellow Submarine itself.
[© Apple Corp.]*

Hearing the music pinpointed the visual style, but it was difficult to capture a 'soundscape' in a look. The search was on but no director of the day, including Jimmy Murakami and Fred Wolf, flown in from America, seemed able to translate the music into image – "all they seemed to be getting was more sophisticated caricatures", says John. In the end, Charlie Jenkins, a former TVC runner who had progressed to be special effects director on the film, discovered the work of art director Heinz Edelmann by fluke. Jenkins was recently married to a German girl and read trendy art magazine, *TWEN*. One day, he bought in a copy of the mag and pointed out the designs to George Dunning. The images were so fresh and different from anything George or John had seen and soon the cutting edge

designer was on a London bound plane to talk about the film. TVC briefed him about the concept and he heard the songs of *Sergeant Pepper*. About ten days later, the designs arrived in a brown envelope with a German postmark. John and Alan Ball, one of the staff animators, were spreading the images out on George's desk, when he walked in and said "fantastic", and everyone knew instantly they had found their man.

The discovery of Heinz Edelmann gave George Dunning renewed vigour and suddenly more people were getting involved in the film. Al Brodax was the sticking point because he was reluctant to go for anything more creative than the TV show. John and George eventually won him round by shooting a *Sergeant Pepper* test, using Heinz's characters, which turned out so well it was used in the actual film. They screened the piece at a fancy Mayfair cinema, together with lobster and champagne lunch. Mr Brodax arrived, the lights went down, and TVC looked on nervously while the animated Beatles illuminated the screen. "We had no idea what he would make of it, he didn't know he was going to see anything and bless him, he loved it and said that was the way he thought George should go", says John.

Heinz was to art direct the entire thing, but in the end, the entire thing was on rather a grand scale, so Heinz chose a number two – the late John Cramer who worked for TVC and whom John recalls "as a lovely man and a wonderful talent". He designed the submarine both inside and out.

On the writing side, in the summer of '67, Al Brodax brought an initial treatment penned by an American, Lee Minoff. The writer's attempt was ok but rather Hollywood cutesy, so Al Brodax flew in another American writer, Erich Segal, a professor of Classics at Yale, who later wrote *Love Story*, and installed him in the Dorchester Hotel. Heinz Edelmann and the film's creative team began working with him and were able over long periods of time to produce an acceptable script, although in fact Liverpool poet Roger McGough wrote a lot of the wittier material. He was paid a modest fee but didn't get a credit, which John calls "an absolute disgrace". Al also flew in Abe Goodman as their production supervisor. In the autumn, as production began, Bettina invited the Americans for a dinner party and did

*George Dunning
focuses on his creative
vision for The Yellow
Submarine.
[© 2010 TV Cartoons
Ltd./John Coates.]*



John proud by serving grouse; the Americans had never eaten it.

There never was a full script or storyboard for the film, but somehow the thing evolved. The essential theme of odyssey historically well mined in the works of Jules Verne, James Joyce and even Herman Melville in *Moby Dick*, was kicked into the 1960s and spun on its head for a new generation. This particular journey of Old Fred, a sailor who travels in a yellow submarine to get help against the Blue Meanies, proffered a rich backdrop for The Beatles mod tones. Rather than being the long-nurtured creative vision of one man, the film was, said Edelmann himself “white noise” a patchwork of different talents and artists with no one person responsible for all.

The band could never make recording sessions at the same time, so actors voiced The Beatles. Variety magazine was unaware of this and when they reviewed the film said their voices were all instantly recognizable. The TVC team really wanted to use the “lads” own voices and kept postponing recording sessions to that end, but eventually they gave up trying and used worthy “sound-alikes”. The Beatles didn’t

like their own ‘voices’ in the film, although they liked each other’s. George Harrison was the trickiest to get right, and is actually played by Peter Batten, not an actor at all, who George Dunning discovered in a pub when he heard a Liverpool accent that was spot on for the film. Jack Stokes went over to the owner and offered him a voice test, and that is how they got their George Harrison. He didn’t seem to do a job and hung around the studio, chatting up all the trace and paint girls, and fell for the assistant editor, Jo, who took him in. Months later when the film was almost complete, John remembers she arrived at work in tears. “It’s Peter. He was an army deserter. The Military Police came in and took him away.” Paul Angelis, who voiced Ringo, recorded the rest of Peter’s part, and did it very well.

In the autumn of ’67 the storyline began to take place and TVC started to film quite long sections of story and link the songs together. There were two animation teams, one under Jack and one under Bob Balser, who had come to George’s attention when his animated short, *The Hat*, won the jury award at Annecy. Storyboarding was taking place as *Yellow Submarine* was being written; and within a few months TVC had rented sizeable additional premises in Soho Square and had well over 100 people working there. A film that still had no finished script or storyboard and was really put together bit by bit was something of a miraculous achievement. “How can you make a picture when you don’t know what the story is?”, asks John. The crew grew from a small team to 209, and TVC had to build desks, find cutting rooms and buy all the equipment needed for a large-scale production. A skeleton-staff managed everything, which suited John, never a fan of over administration.

They plunged into it, and by January/February had hired every tracer and painter in London, and there was no way they could meet the deadline: the premiere was July 17th at the London Pavilion Cinema. Luckily, George had the idea to enlist the help of London art students. A few phone calls around the local art schools did the job. The students, all paid the “proper rate”, were bussed in for the evening and would work through to 4 or 5 in the morning. Mid shift, they got “meals on wheels”, bangers and mash. “I think they had terrific fun. All they needed to do was to be able to paint accurately, even under the influence of ‘pot’, which was readily available.”

The team worked around the clock but at least they were catching up.

John remembers an extract from his journal: "I never seem to go to bed". It was an intense period for him both professionally and personally. He was falling in love with Chris, the woman he eventually left his wife Bettina for, married, and still lives with to this day. "I used to wait in reception in the morning for her to come in. I used to find some excuse to gossip in the reception area – she'd step out of the lift in her mini and boots."

John's domestic situation was to come to a head, eventually, but meanwhile he had a film to finish so he focused on that and kept the lid on his affair. Around this time, there were ripples of problems to come. TVC's big model of the *Yellow Submarine* went missing. Normally it sat next to the TVC receptionist, "an amazing Norwegian blonde lady who Jack fancied", says John. "Luckily she was well built or he would have squeezed her to death." Not long afterwards, about April, Brodax said King Features were not paying the staff because the film was behind schedule, which John says was tenuous as what film is ever dead on time? Given Brodax's decision, he explained that TVC didn't have the resources to pay the crew so production was going to have to stop, and then the troubles really started.

George and John had a meeting; at that point, they had two of the seven reels "negative cut" at Rank Labs and until delivery of the film everything was in TVC's name. They phoned the night supervisor, drove down to Rank Labs, arriving there a bit after midnight, and took delivery of the negs. Next morning, they took them into George's bank, the Bank of Montreal. "It's the only time I've seen those big steel bank doors", and put them into the vault, where they couldn't be removed without the signatures of both men. There were all sorts of wild stories that George had hidden them in the bottom of his garden but the truth was far less dramatic, though still very effective.

The two men had mini vans for their wives, because there was no purchase tax on them. That night they decided with the wives and their vans to go round to Knightway House to take the artwork that matched the negatives so they could not be re-shot. Maggie Geddes, a girl John fancied, was in charge of the nightshift. He explained to her that everyone



*John Coates stands behind Beatles drummer, Ringo Starr, for the live action shoot at the end of the film.
[© 2010 TV Cartoons Ltd./ John Coates.]*

had to leave the premises there and then, but could not say why. Maggie was distraught; she was overloaded with work and didn't want to go anywhere until she had scenes ready for camera the next day. John reassured her not to worry and told her to go. She burst into tears; the team was under that much pressure. When the girls had gone, George, John and wives carried the boxes that matched the two reels, loaded them into the two mini vans, and hid them in the basement of George's house in Pembroke Square. By then it was half past four or five and getting light, and they decided to go for eggs and bacon at the Londonderry Hotel. No one knew anything was amiss and it was ages before the boxes were missed.

Yellow Submarine came to a standstill, with the papers saying it was a strike, supported by the union, ACTT (Association of Cinema and Television Technicians). Jack Stokes carried on story boarding regardless as he knew if they fell behind they would have a hard job to catch up when the mess was sorted out. Having reached an impasse, John and George were advised to see counsel, who suggested TVC's only way out was to say they could not pay the staff and therefore had no choice but to put the studio into voluntary liquidation. After that meeting, they staggered out in to Lincoln's Inn square in a state of shock: their "lovely company" might have to close, but bearing in mind the cost of seeing counsel they thought it would be best to take his advice!

The lawyers for TVC and King Features gathered for a showdown, embarrassing as King Features' UK legal team also acted for John's mum. TVC's lawyer reiterated what counsel had suggested: if King Features didn't continue the payroll, production would be brought to an end and TVC closed. Just in case they were unsure about English law, the home team lawyers politely spelt it out: the unfinished *Yellow Submarine* would be taken as TVC's only major asset, and it could be three or four years before the legal side was sorted out. The Americans had not expected such a turn of events and the news struck Al Brodax like a gong. "While he composed himself, the lawyers gathered up their papers and briefcases, and said, we don't think we should continue this meeting." It broke up. Al Brodax had little choice after that but to immediately start to fund the production, but that put a chasm between the two camps and they never spoke again. Throughout the rest of the film, the US and UK teams were very separate. "We (TVC) viewed the answer print at Rank Labs in the morning and they in the afternoon. And though we were both at the premiere we were carefully not seated together or at the party afterwards", says John.

The premiere is engraved on John's heart: "17 July 1968, I've never seen anything like it ...". Held at the old London Pavilion, Piccadilly Circus, it was fancy dress, on the theme of *Yellow Submarine*. Bettina and John went to the premiere as a couple, though they were already on the rocks so it was really about keeping up appearances. Dennis Abey, the live action director who shot the real scene of The Beatles at the end of the film, gave them a lift in his yellow Morgan, but could not get near to the Pavilion because the whole of

Piccadilly Circus was blocked off – in those days you could leave a car on the pavement. The Party afterwards was at the Yellow Submarine nightclub, specially opened at the Lancaster hotel in Bayswater, and John to this day cannot remember getting home: “I think we stayed up all night”. Jack Stokes recalls the chaos of the night, worst for him, as he had to set up the screening then dash over to the premiere.

The whole thing had been exhausting, says John. “George (Dunning) and I didn’t know whether we’d made something good or not. It seemed so frenetic, but at the end everyone said they enjoyed it – and that’s what it’s all about.” In retrospect, he thinks The Beatles never committed much, not even to the voices. “Funny enough, they all thought the voiceovers were great, except for their own.” In recent history, with the re-release, George and Ringo said they really loved the film. John (Lennon) said in his statement that he liked it, particularly the design, but accused TVC of plagiarism. “Totally untrue!”, counters John. Paul McCartney had envisioned more of a children’s film and said of *Yellow Submarine*, in his book, *Many Years from Now* (co-authored by Barry Miles): “and there’s a nice twilight zone just as you’re drifting into sleep ... I remember thinking that a children’s song would be quite a good idea and I thought of images, and the color yellow came to me, and a submarine came to me, and I thought, ‘Well, that’s kind of nice, like a toy, very childish yellow submarine’.”

Al Brodax and John finally met again when MGM UA made a surround sound edition of the film, and polished up any shaky bits in the original. The new version premiered and the old crew was invited to a screening at Philharmonic Court, Liverpool. Heinz Edelmann and Bob Balser came over and Al Brodax got to hear about it and appeared out of the blue. Geoffrey Hughes, the actor who voiced Ringo was there and said, “I thought Al Brodax was dead”, just as he walked in. “He must have felt a bit out of place, although the TVC people were perfectly nice to him”, says John. “It was strange to meet face to face again after all those years. George would have probably turned in his grave, but I’m not one to bear grudges.”

On the credits John is simply listed as production supervisor, though he was more of the real producer than

Al Brodax, who has the producer credit, but was more of an executive producer who did all the major deals with The Beatles, George Martin and United Artists. Despite the critical acclaim of the film, TVC didn't make a penny from it: they made it as a studio for hire and never took a percentage of the film's gross. Unfortunately, *Yellow Submarine* went over-budget and they lost money making it. King Features gave them their last cheque when the film got final approval and that was that.

"How the film ever got made is a bloody miracle", says John. It was an amazing stroke of luck that brought together all that talent and the crew forged a special bond that still holds today. A debt is owed to art director Heinz Edelmann, a man of immense determination, charm and gentle ways. Jack Stokes, animation director, with not such gentle ways – George had a special door built to Jack's office, which was covered in rubber and spring loaded both ways so he wouldn't kick the walls down! He is still one of my best friends. Bob Balser, animation director, whose devotion and loyalty to the production and TVC has lived on, and who also remains a really good friend. Ellen Hall, company secretary to TVC, who, stood like the rock of Gibraltar in the face of King Features skullduggery, and me asking for five pounds from petty cash to buy a round of drinks for the workers in the Dog and Duck, says John. And who could forget Norman Kauffman, who came to TVC age 16 and grew up as general dogs body on *Yellow Submarine* and is now co-director of the company."

Yellow Submarine was full on and all the team had to work, hard. Nearing the end of it all, John showed his support for Norman when he gave him permission to take his honeymoon, against the wishes of Al Brodax. John advised him: "Norman, hopefully you'll only have one honeymoon in your life, so for heaven's sake go on it!" which is just what happened in the end. Norman was grateful for John's support at that crucial time and also for his salary, which was then a fortune, £25.00 a week, now probably equivalent to £50,000 a year.

No summing up of the history of *Yellow Submarine* is complete without John's "very special mention" of George Dunning, overall director and the late co-owner of TVC. "George was a very gentle man and it says much for his

courage that the look and integrity of the film is as a result of his determination to do something a whole lot more adventurous than The Beatles' series that had preceded it. In spite of his failing health, he stayed hands on with the whole production to the bitter end." It says a lot for the *bonhomie* of the whole TVC crew that many years later George Martin, music director, said to John that *Yellow Submarine* was "the happiest film he'd ever worked on".

There is a misconception that the film was made in America. An article in *Time Magazine*, which is owned by Hearst Newspapers who in turn owned King Features, about the *Yellow Submarine* mentions Canadian director George Dunning and German art director, Heinz Edelmann, and otherwise infers it's an American Production. There was no mention it was made in London! A final curiosity! It became the Queen of England's favourite film.