

1967

A FATAL BLOW

The new year kicked off with the Beatles’ still locked into the studio. In fact, right up until Friday, April 21 they virtually had a free run of Studio 2 at Abbey Road. Throughout this time they worked and reworked the same material with meticulous precision, ending up with what is without doubt the most influential album in the history of popular music — *Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. So much has been written about this album in the past 30 years that, like the Beatles themselves, it is difficult to review the work with any objectivity. Its musical and cultural significance simply shoot off the scale.

1. Ringo Starr, George Harrison and John Lennon, in Bangor, North Wales. After being informed of the death of their former mentor and manager Brian Epstein.



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As with their previous effort, *Revolver*, the Lennon/McCartney team were still pulling in very different directions. John’s desire to experiment with sound made huge demands on George Martin, and helped to create a whole new genre of psychedelic music. In contrast, Paul’s work was straightforward, and his musician-ship that shines through track after track. *Sgt Pepper* was received, by the public and critics alike, like no other record before. It topped the charts all over the world, and still sees massive attention every time a notable release anniversary comes around.

The Death of Brian

In his element organizing the minutia of the Beatles’ working lives during the past five years — and still only in his early 30s — Brian was beginning to feel like an unnecessary part of a machine. While the Beatles unquestionably loved and respected him, they now had firm opinions of their own. As

George Martin said during *Sgt Pepper* recordings: “When John had finished singing, he [Brian] switched on the studio intercom and said, ‘I don’t think that sounded quite right, John.’ John looked up at him and said in his most cutting voice: ‘You stick to your percentages, Brian. We’ll look after the music’.”

Other areas of Brian’s life were in complete disarray. Merseybeat was history, and few of the NEMS acts were still successful. Brian’s personal life was as turbulent as ever, and almost certainly involved ‘silence’ payments to sexual extortionists. At the end of 1966, desperately depressed, he took an overdose of pills. Despite psychiatric help, he tried again early in 1967. Even a return to his beloved theatre production didn’t help.

On Thursday August 24, Patti persuaded the Beatles to go and listen to an Indian guru talk about attaining peace through meditation. They were impressed, and when Maharishi Mahesh Yogi then invited the group to attend that weekend’s course at Bangor University in Wales, they

Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band

The album was conclusive proof that the development shown before and after *Revolver* was no freak occurrence. It also showed beyond doubt that George Martin had not only mastered the craft of pop production, he was quietly re-writing the user manual with each passing year. In fact, he got such praise for the album that it caused some resentment in one quarter of the band. Paul later said, slightly overstating his case: “One of the reviews said, ‘This is George Martin’s finest album’... we don’t mind him helping us... it’s a great help, but it’s not his album, folks, you know.”

Sgt Pepper started life as a concept album of songs that related the Beatles’ childhood memories of Liverpool — ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’ and ‘Penny Lane’, for instance. But the Liverpool theme fizzled in favour of Paul’s idea of creating a mythical band. “Why don’t we make the whole album as though the Pepper band really existed, as though Sgt Pepper was doing the record?”

The entire album took a total of five months and 700 hours of studio time to record, and reveals a complexity never before heard on a pop album. It was also perhaps the first successful pop album where much thought had been put into creating an overall structure. The traditional silence between tracks having been cut down to almost nothing, songs are segued, running into one another.

leapt at the chance. Brian, who had plans to meet friends at his country home on Friday, turned down the invitation. But something obviously went awry, and on Friday evening, Brian left to return to London. He was found dead in his bed on Sunday morning, having not surfaced since his Friday return. The cause was an overdose of sleeping pills.

There is still some controversy over the death. It was registered as accidental, although very few believed that. However, some researchers have suggested that it may have been murder, linked to intrigue relating to Beatles merchandising. Support is claimed from the death a year later of David Jacobs, who had signed the merchandising deal, and who begged for police protection in the weeks leading up to his death.

The Magical Mystery Tour

Brian’s death made the Beatles, if anything, even more resolute about controlling their own affairs. After the triple triumph of ‘Strawberry Fields Forever’, *Sgt Pepper* and the rave reception of ‘All You Need Is Love’ debuted as part of the world’s first live global TV broadcast, the Beatles could be forgiven for thinking that they were invincible. The project they had just begun as Brian died was a television musical, *The Magical Mystery Tour*. They launched into it like a bunch of first-year film-school students with an unfeasibly large budget, doing everything themselves. It was a shambles.

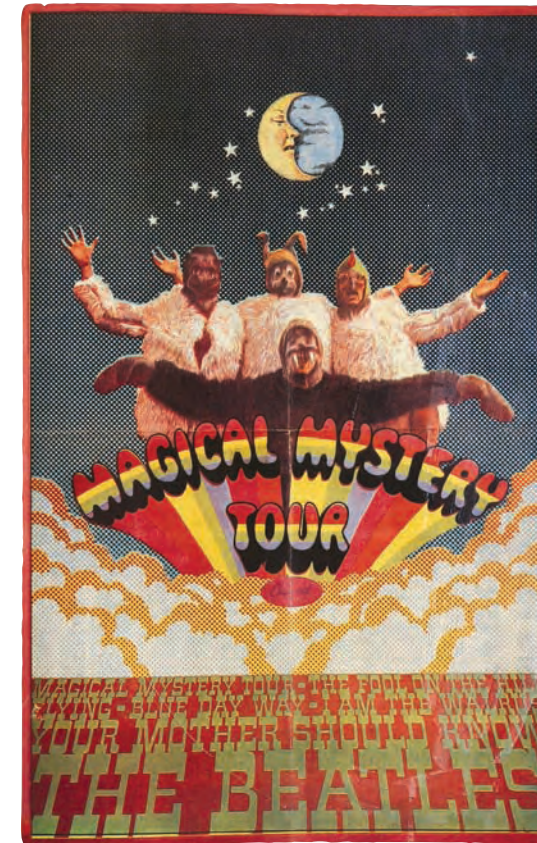
The main problem was simply the logistics of organizing such a project — precisely the type of thing at which Brian had always excelled. The filming was a fiasco. Viewing the project as if it were an English working-class seaside outing, Paul populated a tour bus with sideshow freaks and renegades from the musical hall era to travel around with the Beatles and experience the magic of the English countryside. With no itinerary, no permissions and no advance bookings for catering, accommodation or facilities, the whole thing was ridiculous. It took the band 11 weeks to edit it down to an hour-long programme.

The soundtrack, a pair of EPs, received reasonable interest, but critics weren’t wowed. The stand-out track was John’s ‘I Am The Walrus’, which eventually became massively influential. The nonsense lyrics were written, at least in part, to cock a snook at the hordes of critics who insisted on analysing the band’s every word. But if the soundtrack was met lukewarmly, the film itself found outright hostility. It’s less reviled now, something of a quirky Beatles home movie, but it served as nasty punctuation for what had been a hard four months.

2. The Beatles travel by coach to the West Country, for some location work on ‘The Magical Mystery Tour’ film.



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3. Film poster for Magical Mystery Tour.