



TDT'S COLLEGE OF USELESS KNOWLEDGE

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It was fifty years ago today....

It's [regrettable](#) how cynical our world has become in the years since The Beatles came to America. If you've visited a comment section of just about any website lately you've seen venom laced angry-grams slung back & forth between total strangers for simply having a differing opinion, political viewpoint or using a different smartphone. That same ethos is present in several articles, blogs & editorials on the Interwebs disparaging both the amount & the celebratory nature of media coverage for the 50th anniversary of The Beatles first appearance on Ed Sullivan. The opinion of quite a few of these "journalists" & anonymous commenters boils down to; "they weren't really that special, just lucky to be in the right place, at the right time. Just another boy band, completely irrelevant now," Some poor, misguided hipster by the name of Jon Wiener (I said wiener) actually wrote, "A lot of their songs were really pretty bad." He then listed examples of those "pretty bad" songs including several from 1967's Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, specifically the dazzling montage of circus imagery & sounds commingled with psychedelic exuberance, Being For The Benefit of Mr. Kite. To that I feel I must retort, "Jon you ignorant slut!"

*"For the benefit of Mr. Kite, there will be a show tonight on trampoline. The Hendersons will all be there, late of Pablo Fanque's Fair, what a scene!
Over men & horses hoops & garters lastly through a hogshead of real fire. In this way Mr. K. will challenge the world."*

Sergeant Pepper may not be their finest album solely on the basis of pure musical accomplishments. With over a dozen albums to pick from, released in just a 7 year span, that's certainly debatable. Revolver & Abbey Road stand out almost five decades later as works that are unparalleled in sheer musical genius. However, to summarily dismiss the paradigm shifting Sergeant Pepper, or its impact on our music & culture as inconsequential, is revisionist history. It was a landmark album that changed forever the way popular music is made & enjoyed. Someone once remarked that June 1, 1967 signaled the day popular music ceased to be ritualistic teen dance music & became music to be listened to, appreciated, debated & analyzed like a fine wine, an old master painting or a Beethoven symphony.

In naming it the #1 album in history in 2003, Rolling Stone Magazine called it "the most important rock & roll album ever made, an unsurpassed adventure in concept, sound, songwriting, cover art & studio technology by the greatest rock & roll group of all time." I think I'll go with that opinion over some Debbie downers with access to the internet.

Sergeant Pepper was, is & shall always be a musical masterpiece for the ages.

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On Thursday, June 1, 1967, The Beatles released Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. It was their 9th official album (why does that number seem familiar). As with most new things, it didn't arrive in Cynthiana quite at the same time as New York, Liverpool or Chicago. Amazingly enough though, word had spread through the junior high, despite the lack of Facebook, iPhones & email, that the New Frontier Music Store had scored some of the highly anticipated albums.

We were friends with the store's manager & undoubtedly one of their biggest customers, having purchased tens of dollars worth of drumsticks, guitar picks & strings, so our lead guitarist, Randi Carpenter, called to see if he could hook us up with a little quid pro quo. So there I was, along with two bandmates from the world acclaimed Psychedelic Sounds (or The New Peace or Crosstown Traffic or whatever our name was in June '67) at 8:45am on Saturday, June 3rd, standing impatiently on the Pike Street sidewalk, waiting for the store to open at 9:00.

Eventually the manager showed up with a small package in tow. He quickly unlocked the door, let us in & confirmed our hope of hopes. **YES**, he had indeed received a few copies of the album. Some were spoken for but he was holding two for us. A few minutes later & with two of us \$4.88 less wealthy, we beat a beeline for our lavish complex of rehearsal studios in the rear of Mona Carpenter's beauty parlor, just a block up Pike Street & across the railroad tracks. Years later this same hallowed space would be home to Frieda's Pet Grooming & Meat Locker (don't ask, only in Cynthiana). Ripping off the cellophane cover, carefully sliding the magical black vinyl disc from its decorative sleeve, we placed it reverently on the turntable's rubber matt, blew the collected fuzz-balls off the stylus & gently lowered the tonearm into position on track one, side one.

"It was 20 years ago today, Sergeant Pepper taught the band to play. They've been going in & out of style but they're guaranteed to raise a smile. So may I introduce to you, the act you've known for all these years, Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

The few synapses that remained intact after seeing that first Ed Sullivan appearance three years prior, immediately evacuated my now 14 year old brain. For the next 39 minutes I can't recall that any of the three of us uttered a word. Other than to flip it over at the end of side one, we stood paralyzed, no less than if our shoes had been nailed to the floor. We were as a group transfixed by the strange, magical sounds emanating from the Montgomery Ward portable stereo while we went on a sonic, mind-blowing, far out groovy trip. For those of us trying-like-hell-to-be musicians, & many others in the Baby Boomer generation, after Sergeant Pepper nothing would ever be the same.

There are very few moments in the history of recorded music where you can mark a precise before & after; a then & now; an old & new at which point everything totally changed. In the

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US, it's arguably happened only four times. Elvis, The Beatles on Ed Sullivan, Sergeant Pepper & Thriller. Not too shabby that four lads from Liverpool can lay claim to 50% of those world changing moments & partial credit for a third. It's not too big of a stretch to say that Thriller would never have happened without Sergeant Pepper providing the blueprint.

In just over one half hour the album format became more important than any hit single, the whole intertwined composition more important than any of its individual bits. After this morsel of musical magic, anything was possible, there were no boundaries, no rules, no limits other than those of your own imagination.

Whimsy & mysticism, brass bands, kaleidoscopes, electric guitars, violins, cellos & piccolo trumpets all building movement by movement like whirling dervishes of seemingly discordant sounds & textures until that final never ending majestic E major chord concluded both A Day In The Life & the album. A year that began with the Pre-Fab 4 topping the charts during winter & spring, was suddenly turned on its head. The Summer of Love had officially begun three weeks early & this would be its indelible soundtrack. Before & since Sgt. Pepper there've been many songs that became the song of this or that summer, but never again has an entire album or its imagery & mythology been so intrinsically linked to a single moment in time. So much so that nearly 50 years later, neither can be mentioned or remembered without the other.

After the music ceased, our attention switched to that phenomenal cover, it was eye-opening to say the least! Our bass player was convinced that the Fab Four had actually changed their name to Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band & he argued passionately as we very politely informed him he was in fact, a complete moron. What a peculiar name, what does it mean & who the heck are all these strange looking people behind them? At that point, the only people I could ID were Laurel & Hardy, Dylan & Marilyn Monroe. Later, their names & stories became much more familiar: Lenny Bruce, Oscar Wilde, W. C. Fields, Karl Marx, Marlon Brando, Mae West, Albert Einstein, Ghandi & even The Beatles original bass player, Stuart Sutcliffe.

At the start of the summer of 1967, Sergeant Pepper was a revelation & a revolution! There had never been a record like it before. For the rest of the year, you couldn't avoid it if you tried, it was everywhere, all around the world! It entered the US charts at #1 & remained there for 23 weeks, long past summer, & stayed on the charts until April, 1970. At the country club pool it seemed like Louisville's WAKY, the AM radio station of choice in those days & always blasting from the life guard stand, played something from it every 5th song, frequently in its entirety.

As Johnny Rivers sang in his hit from the summer of 1968, Summer Rain...

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"All summer long we spent grooving in the sand. Everybody kept on playing Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

Sergeant Pepper was a once in a lifetime offering from The Beatles, a frozen in time snapshot of a world at the cusp of revolution. Its songs far different from the lads' previous pop hits like, She Loves You, Please Please Me or Love Me Do, which continue to stand the test of time on their own merit. Sgt. Pepper however stands *for* its time. It was a visceral reaction *to* change & simultaneously a catalyst *for* change; both influenced by & influencing the cultural turmoil of the sixties. That alone makes it an achievement of mythic proportions. Sergeant Pepper single handedly defined the revolutionary optimism of 60's psychedelia & spread the gospel of flower power, peace & love, Eastern spirituality & electric guitars around the globe. In one fell swoop it articulated in song the hopes, dreams & ideals of a coming of age generation.

Even Joan Baez paid homage to the album's influence in her 1981 song, Sgt. Pepper's Band.

*"Now I think I understand, that it was Sgt. Pepper's band,
That put the sixties into song,
Where have all the heroes gone?
Lucy In The Sky with the lads from Liverpool,
Dropped some acid, met the Queen,
Coming out of both eyes of a hurricane,
You sang your music sweet & clean."*

And yet, 47 years later many of the same people who loved that album so much during that long ago summer seem detached from it & its message. Too consumed with the tedium of daily life, or beaten into submission by the constant buzz of rancor all around us today to remember the optimism & hope so many of us shared back then. Maybe listening to this album all these decades later is a painful reminder of all that could have been, all the dreams that were not to be, so denying or ignoring its accomplishments helps to dull the pain.

The world seemed on life support in 1967, a mere 4 1/2 years removed from the brink of disaster of the Cuban missile crisis; with the Cold War at it's white hot peak & the Vietnam war raging on & on. Yet, with the myriad of seemingly hopeless problems facing the nation, there was a very genuine, palpable feeling of hope & change in the air. It was obvious to everyone (even me, young as I was) that the times they were indeed a changin.

*"There's nothing you can do that can't be done, nothing you can sing that can't be sung.
Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game.
It's easy! All you need is love, love is all you need."*

All you need is love? It's easy to succumb to the current mindset that it was all just childish idealism, but most of us passionately believed it in 1967. Some of us still do. And yet it's

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sometimes difficult to listen to Sergeant Pepper in 2014 without a tangible sense of loss. Two of The Beatles are gone & the hope & optimism that was everywhere in 1967 seems moribund 47 years later. The reason Sergeant Pepper sounds quaint & old fashioned to many young & far too many old ears today is because we've become jaded as a people; mean, callous & indifferent to the fellow inhabitants of spaceship earth. Our humor has become excessively cruel, our media & culture crude & vulgar. Throughout Sergeant Pepper are loving, gentle reminders of the joy & wonderment of a cultural innocence, long since lost.

"Follow her down to a bridge by a fountain, where rocking horse people eat marshmallow pies. Everyone smiles as you drift past the flowers, that grow so incredibly high."

That kind of lyrical innocence doesn't even exist in most children's media or literature anymore. Decades of wars, gratuitous violence & political corruption have left us numb. "*Tangerine trees & marmalade skies*" many now view through a filter of cynicism & derision.

In 1995, the day after "Free As a Bird" premiered during The Beatles Anthology documentary (the first new Beatles song in 25 years) a couple of us old timers (aka 40 somethings) were discussing it the next day at work, apparently very enthusiastically. I mentioned that hearing them together again; John, Paul, George & Ringo, just as they'd been during the height of Beatlemania, was a very emotional experience. A young man, born after they'd broken up, noticed my emphatic reaction, laughed & said, "I don't get what the big deal is, they were just a band." I guess no one who didn't live through that turbulent era could possibly understand what this special band & their music meant to its troubled generation.

Is Sergeant Pepper dated? Probably so, but that's not The Beatles' fault, it's ours.

*"We were talking,
About the love that's gone so cold & the people,
Who gain the world and lose their soul.
With our love, we could save the world, if they only knew"...*