



Composing The Beatles Songbook: Lennon and McCartney 1957-1965

Cast: Beatles

(2008) Rated: Unrated

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by **Marc Acherman**

For the second week in a row, *American Idol* has asked its aspiring music stars to sing songs drawn from the Beatles songbook. Nothing could be crueller, and I do not necessarily mean for the audience. Covering a Beatles song is a monumental task that asks a performer to compete with a band elevated to a sublime status in popular culture, and every attempt to live up to those kinds of expectations cannot help but fall short.

Yet *American Idol* has also performed a valuable service insofar as a flat, unconvincing and just plain bad cover does nothing else if not remind Beatles fans of the indefinable "something" that eludes the reduction of their music to just a particular tempo, lyric or melody. Indeed, if there is a ghost in the Beatles musical machine, it is the personalities of the original performers themselves, the perceived "something-extra" in their performance that resists transference to others, the sort of quality we fantasize just beyond the identifiable in a merely well-written song that makes it jump out of the speakers.

Putting one's finger on this elusive trait—let alone reproducing it—proves difficult, but has nonetheless inspired a huge industry aiming to explain why generation after generation enjoys the Beatles so much. Judging by the way Beatles music does not always translate well in the performances of other artists, perhaps it is only natural to desire a return to the notion of the personalities of the original performers as the source of our enjoyment.

Composing the Beatles Songbook seeks to fill a niche in this market by concentrating on the relationship between John Lennon and Paul McCartney during the formative years of the Beatles (1957 to 1965). It assembles a variety of performance clips and interviews with biographers, musicologists and band friends to explain how the differing approaches of this songwriting team contributed to the Beatles' success.

As *Composing the Beatles Songbook* illustrates, contrasts abound between the two. Take for instance an analysis provided of their different approaches to the blues. As musicologist Chris Ingram explains, we can easily hear the divergence in the approach McCartney and Lennon had to the form in their respective songs, "Can't Buy Me Love" and "A Hard Day's Night", in which the former integrates the blue notes smoothly into the overall melody while the latter prefers to hit those notes "bang-on".

Consider also the Dylan-inspired phase in which Lennon produced introspective songs like "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" and "I'm A Loser", while McCartney's applied his adept hand at composing less personal songs that could become hits for other artists like Billy J. Cramer and Cilla Black. It's obvious from these and many other examples given in *Composing the Beatles Songbook* that we are dealing with two very different songwriting voices with different sets of skills to offer.

While *Composing the Beatles Songbook* works best when it concentrates on specific sorts of musical difference, it unfortunately spends too little time on how such different musicians actually worked together. Mark Lewison's *The Complete Beatles Chronicle* provides a thorough explanation of what happened in each Beatles studio session at Abbey Road, the Bob Spitz biography *The Beatles* and the autobiography *The Beatles Anthology* have some pieces of information about composition, and Steve Turner's contentious *A Hard Day's Write* attempts to explain the inspirations behind the songs, but the Beatles could still use a practice centered account of how all those songs came into being.

Despite the promise made by the title, *Composing the Beatles Songbook* misses this genuine opportunity to really get into the technical aspects of composition that added so much color and texture to the Beatles' songs. It could have taken us through how a song was built from its initial foundation in the studio. In this way, it could have served as a valuable bridge between the demos and home recordings available on the *Anthology* CD sets (as well as those circulated as bootleg recordings amongst fans) and the finished products created in the collaboration between the band members.

Instead, *Composing the Beatles Songbook* traffics in the same sort of

worn-out truisms about Lennon and McCartney that have become a sort of insidious common place wisdom: Lennon is the hard-nosed cynic with an honesty and integrity that rubbed against the grain of the music industry, while the ever affable McCartney is the professional performer with a gift for melody but a tendency towards "selling-out".

Granted, anyone with the goal of explicating the interaction between two artists must first try and define what makes each one in the pair special, but the problem is in how the typical commonplaces, instead of enabling us to think about the Beatles' music, have relieved us of the duty to do so. They have allowed us to mystify Lennon's and McCartney's composition process under the banners of particular gifts of genius, rather than facilitated understanding of their artistic decisions at the ground level. We don't get Lennon and McCartney the working artists; we do get Lennon and McCartney the abstractions.

Take for instance the choice of quotes on the DVD jacket, where Lennon and McCartney each say something about how they view songwriting. Lennon begins by comparing writing to exercising a demon that simply won't let him sleep until he does so and says the solution lies in switching off the "critical faculties": "So letting go is what the whole game is. Every time you try to put your finger on it, it slips away." McCartney, in contrast, appears to have a far less mystical approach: "Somebody said to me, 'but the Beatles were anti-materialistic.' That's a huge myth. John and I literally used to sit down and say, 'now let's write a swimming pool.'"

Besides the fact that the curious choice of quotes reproduces the tired binary of McCartney the empty and opportunistic songsmith and Lennon the authentic tortured artist—as if what McCartney did could never be counted as art and Lennon's contribution does not have some relationship to commerce—we are given no real indication of how this push and pull between their personalities might manifest in the act of the two working on the same song. The DVD extra focusing on the song "We Can Work It Out" comes the closest, but undoubtedly was omitted from the final feature because it reverses the personality commonplaces, explaining how McCartney has the bitter streak in the lyrics and Lennon has an uncharacteristic air of reconciliation. Songbook reinforces shaky constructions of two mythic personalities, but does not give much insight into their songwriting practice.

Another problem is the silencing of Lennon and McCartney themselves. If you set out to make a documentary about the process of "composing" the Beatles songbook, then it stands on reason that some attention to their own comments on their compositions is necessary and the failure to include them is irresponsible. Outside observers are valuable insofar as they can identify blind-spots and inconsistencies in the convenient memories of artists and contextualize their comments, but cannot replace the knowledge of the only ones who really know anything about the actual composing of these songs: Lennon and McCartney. How exactly did they take an idea for a song from conception to finished product?

Songbook does not however have the time available to go into the degree of depth necessary to answer this question. At a brisk 78 minute length, it rushes through the dozens and dozens of songs written under "Lennon-McCartney", having only time for a few choice "highlights", illustrated in performance clips of thirty-seconds or less. The sad thing is that judging from the meager DVD extras, featuring the tiny interview snippets that did not make the final film, they did not have much more to add. Even though restricted to the years between 1957 and 1965 (sequel anybody?), Songbook requires a vast amount more space to adequately address its topic thoroughly and seriously.

The two other Beatles, as is indicated in an opening sequence in which they fade into the black background of the cover of the *With the Beatles* album, appear to have been casualties of this temporal ruthlessness. Although between them John Lennon and Paul McCartney without question produced the majority of the Beatles' songs in this period, the omission of George Harrison and Ringo Starr is a short-sighted one. They certainly made significant contributions to compositions even if they didn't have the chance or inclination to write many on their own. Treating these others as merely "secondary" marginalizes their contribution to the overall dynamic of the group, although it must have informed the performance of the band at some level. Any narrative of the composition of the Beatles songs should include all the characters exerting influence upon the ultimate outcome.

Perhaps today it would be most productive to question the constant turn to the cult of personality and genius as a means by which to illuminate the Beatles back catalog. The Beatles have a fascinating mythology all their own that certainly delights fans, me included. However, do we really need another explanation amounting to the obvious fact Lennon and McCartney are different people with different influences who wrote different sorts of songs?

Almost 40 years after their last recording session (if you don't count the

"Free As a Bird" and "Real Love" singles for the Anthology project) perhaps a step back is necessary to reassess the legacy of the band as their songs circulate and acquire new meanings that interweave into new eras of listeners. The idea that the success of a work of art can be located exclusively in the "genius" of an artist rather than a more complex process of production, dissemination and reception involving artists, record companies and consumers—amongst many others—is outdated and fails to account for what the Beatles are to us now as their myth has adapted, rather than what they are to baby-boomer music editors eager to still identify with them.

Adhering to this old approach renders Songbook at best simply repetitive and at worst entirely unnecessary. Rearticulating their appeal in the generations that follow might be paradoxically the only way to actually remember the Beatles properly. Thus, against the monolithic construction of genius, we should actively intervene into the past, seeking new grounds for comparison and analysis, which will pay the dividend of new enjoyment. Otherwise, we risk losing the Beatles to the tedium of the past with no present or future.

RATING:  4

EXTRAS:  2

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