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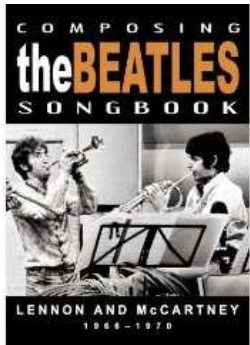
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Music on DVD: Composing The Beatles Songbook: Lennon And McCartney 1966-1970

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Composing the Beatles has a rough job ahead of it- the DVD purports to examine the early works John Lennon and Paul McCartney (arguably the most popular and influential pop songwriters of the 20th century), solely through the filters of talking-head style interviews. And while they've managed to scour up an impressive roster of speakers (all unauthorized by either McCartney or Lennon's estate), the only fascinating thing about this documentary is the subject, not the delivery or the insights.

Perhaps it's unfair to judge *Composing the Beatles* by the merits of its legendary topic; but even if we removed that, the film itself is about as staid as it comes. A dry, BBC-style narration ponders generic (sometimes bordering on sanctimonious) statements about the Beatles and their place in pop history, frequently pausing for snippets from the likes of music journalists Johnny Rogan and Robert Christgau, and a few Beatles compatriots like Klaus Voorman and Maureen Cleeve. Even if the filmmakers (and I could not for the life of me find, either on the packaging or web, someone owning up to the directorial chair) wisely eschewed biography or unnecessary historical explanations, the whole comes off with the improbable result of making the Beatles boring.

I admit that I'm a Beatles fanatic and so most of the "rare footage" and song details were already known to me, but if a documentary bases its importance on those qualities, they had better be damn obscure. After a while, the varying opinions bandied about (1965 Lennon was envious of avant-garde leaning McCartney, McCartney struggled with legacy as a writer of "granny songs") became more interesting for their inconsistencies and contradictions than for their observation. While everyone seemed to agree that the early works like "She Loves You" or *Rubber Soul* could be applied to particular authors and had distinct strengths, by the end, Rogan was asserting that *Abbey Road* was nearly a McCartney solo record while another critic upheld it as Lennon's attempt to sell himself as a heavy rocker a la Led Zeppelin.

One has to ask a world as saturated with Beatles anthologies, collections, archaeologies and albums of every color, what this actually says that is new about either the Beatles as a group or Lennon and McCartney as songwriters (or people). The answer? Not much. Too much of the commentary devolves into bland praise and too much of the critique delves into mythological clichés of Lennon as a disengaged acid-eater and McCartney as a megalomaniac dance hall enthusiast. Most of what is intended to illuminate only serves to illustrate how much was created from such simple backgrounds and ideas. While there were a few moments of perspicuity (in particular, that the duo simply realized at their level of popularity, they had no constraints and acted accordingly), *Composing the Beatles* has the strange effect of making the most well-known songwriters of a century seem even more mystifying.

by Nathan Kamal



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