



COME TOGETHER: THE LUCKY PARTNERSHIP OF GEORGE MARTIN AND THE BEATLES

SHANE WILSON ([HTTP://BROJACKSON.COM/AUTHOR/SHANE-WILSON](http://brojackson.com/author/shane-wilson)) ✕ MAR 10, 2016

George Martin had a problem. Everyone recognized that **John Lennon's** new song, "Strawberry Fields Forever," was an exceptional piece of songcraft, and Martin suspected it might become one of the finest records **The Beatles** had yet produced. Unfortunately, they hadn't been able to put together a version of the track that met with its author's satisfaction. An early take, in which **Paul McCartney** introduced the strange sound of a proto-synthesizer called a Mellotron, was dismissed by John as too raucous. So Martin duly crafted an orchestral score for a new recording, hoping to conjure a dreamier atmosphere. But this take fared no better, and the whole thing was stuck until John came up with what he felt was a perfect solution: use them both.

Martin was aghast. It can't be done, he explained. The two versions are in different keys, performed at different speeds. They're incompatible, he said. It can't be done.

John was undeterred. You can fix it, he said.

All you really need to know about George Martin is that he *could* fix it. And he did. After wracking his brain, he finally determined that the two takes were a semitone apart. By speeding up one and slowing down the other, he could just get them in sync. Having done that, he took half of each version and spliced them together. Thus did he Frankenstein one of John Lennon's most personal songs into its final form. (Listen for the edit at the 1:00 mark, right between "Let me take you down, cause I'm" and "going to Strawberry Fields." And then be prepared to never un-hear it again.)

The Beatles "Strawberry Fields Forever" 1967 Parlophone U.K 45 RPM Single Stereo Version





George Martin, who died on Tuesday at the age of 90, achieved fame and glory far beyond that of most music producers, including multiple Grammys, an Oscar nomination, induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and even a knighthood. But you can throw all that out and boil it down to one essential sentence: George Martin produced the Beatles. He was the personal Mr. Fixit for the greatest band in the history of recorded music. The Beatles might have succeeded with any producer at the console. But this producer gave them the leeway to succeed on their own terms, and then opened up the doors for greater artistic achievement than any rock act had ever envisioned. George Martin helped the Beatles become the Beatles.

It's hard to calculate how lucky both sides of the Beatles-George Martin partnership turned out to be. The band was riding high on a live sound that electrified the Liverpool music scene, and John and Paul had only just begun to dabble with writing their own songs. They were a talent looking for an opportunity to grow. Meanwhile, Martin was managing one of the lesser labels in the EMI empire, lavishing his recording expertise on comedy and novelty acts, but hoping to discover an act that would sell records and demand the respect of the higher-ups. An opportunity looking for talent.

Once he recognized the Beatles' potential, he provided perhaps the greatest contribution to their growth: restraint. More than a decade their senior, a trained oboist and practiced orchestrator, it would have been very easy to trumpet his experience and demand they follow his instructions. In fact, early on he presented the group with the work of a professional songwriter, practically guaranteeing them a hit record. The

boys rejected the tune as trite, but Martin riposted by challenging them to come up with something as good. Their response was “Please Please Me,” which would top the British charts. Martin quickly divined that this was an act for whom you let out the leash.

Now that he knew what he was dealing with, Martin took on his next crucial role: nurturer. Most early Beatle tracks feature the Fab Four alone, showcasing the 2 guitar-bass-drum lineup, with the occasional blues harp from John. (He himself occasionally stepped in to play piano, until they mastered the instrument themselves.) Martin prodded the Beatles to be more expansive in their musical imagination. He brought in recording tricks to change their sound. He welcomed unusual instrumentation, introducing pop music to the French horn, the piccolo trumpet, and of course George Harrison’s beloved sitar. He pushed the equipment beyond the studio’s acceptable limits, cranking up the bass and introducing intentional feedback. By the time of *Revolver*, the Beatles were making albums where not a single track could be performed live by the band’s four members alone.

He told them to “think symphonically,” to expand their sonic palette, and they took to the challenge with gusto. He urged a very reluctant Paul to at least try the accompaniment of a string quartet on “Yesterday.” Only two albums later, Paul was eager to try the stark atmospherics of an octet on “Eleanor Rigby,” and from there it was a short walk to the full orchestra that punctuates “A Day in the Life.” Everyone thrived on the give and take, with Lennon and McCartney seeking increasingly outlandish sounds, and Martin striving to fulfill their requests.

It’s clear that John was the most vexing of musical partners. Plagued by aural visions which he struggled to translate into the real world, determined to alter his voice, and gleefully ignorant of the difficulties inherent in modern musical production, he would come to Martin with requests that seem almost defiantly unhinged: “I want to smell the sawdust when I hear the song.” “Make me sound like the Dalai Lama speaking from a hilltop to a chorus of a thousand chanting Tibetan monks.” It’s a tribute to Martin’s inventiveness and unending patience that he consistently devised solutions that approximated John’s wishes. The pinnacle of this marriage of innovation and insanity must be “I Am the Walrus.” A mélange of rock band, demented chanting, bombastic horns and sarcastic strings, and even stolen excerpts from a live BBC performance of *King Lear*, “Walrus” is a fever dream of a song, the ultimate kitchen sink production. And it’s Martin who is overseeing the whole glorious mess.

I Am The Walrus With Lyrics





This was George Martin's ongoing contribution to the musical legacy of the Beatles. He was their great interpreter. He made it possible for the band to make the music they wanted to make, and then he encouraged them to want even more. The Beatles were lucky to have many champions who contributed to their success, but in the realm of their music, there could be no greater friend than George Martin. They were great; he made them fab.

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